

## Neighbourhood Shock

The flames that engulfed Nepal's Parliament and other prominent buildings this week have cast long shadows across South Asia. For India, the sudden resignation of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli after violent protests left more than 20 dead is not just a crisis next door, but a reminder of how fragile its neighbourhood has become.

The trigger may have been a clumsy social media ban, but the protests rapidly grew into an anti-corruption uprising, tapping into deep generational anger.

Parliament was stormed, government buildings and politicians' homes set alight, and nearly a thousand prisoners freed in the chaos. By the time the ban was hastily lifted, the government had already lost control. Mr Oli's departure has left a vacuum at the top, with no clear leadership and little sign of an organised opposition capable of steering the country out of turmoil.

For Delhi, the shock is twofold. First, Nepal's crisis echoes the convulsions that rocked Sri Lanka in 2022 and Bangladesh last year. Once again, a neighbour has seen a popular uprising topple a government with little warning. Secondly, the unrest came barely a week before Mr Oli was due in Delhi for talks - a visit that could have offered India an opportunity to mend frayed ties after years of mistrust over border disputes and China's growing footprint.

The stakes are unusually high. Nepal is not just another neighbour: it shares an open border with five Indian states, a centuries-old flow of people, and an economic relationship that makes Kathmandu heavily dependent on Indian exports.

Over three million Nepalis live or work in India, and 32,000 Gorkhas serve in the Indian army under a unique arrangement. Instability in Nepal reverberates instantly in Indian towns and villages across the border, where families are interlinked and trade flows daily.

Delhi also cannot ignore the strategic dimension. With the Western Theatre Command of China just across the Himalayas, and Beijing already competing for influence in Kathmandu, the political vacuum in Nepal opens another avenue for geopolitical friction. India's challenge will be to safeguard its equities without appearing heavy-handed or opportunistic, a balance it has not always managed well in the past.

The crisis exposes another vulnerability: New Delhi's tendency to be caught off guard by sudden upheavals in its neighbourhood.

From Colombo to Dhaka and now Kathmandu, India has been reactive rather than proactive, scrambling to respond after the streets have spoken.

Yet great power aspirations cannot rest on an unstable backyard. South Asia's political fires, if left unattended, will continue to singe India's regional ambitions.

For now, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for peace and his expression of anguish are the right notes. But the hard part lies ahead.

India must reach out to Nepal's youth, offer avenues for education and employment, and rebuild trust with all political actors. Otherwise, the message from Kathmandu will be sobering: when neighbours burn, India cannot remain untouched.

## When bullets speak

The killing of conservative activist Charlie Kirk on a university campus in Utah is a chilling reminder of how violence has seeped into the bloodstream of American politics. What should have been an afternoon of debate and dissent among students ended in chaos, with thousands fleeing in terror as a single bullet cut through the noise.

Kirk's death is not just the silencing of one controversial figure. It is the latest symptom of a political culture where rhetoric is so overheated, grievances so entrenched, and firearms so readily available that disagreement increasingly risks crossing the line into bloodshed.

The FBI has now released images of a young man described as a person of interest, believed to be of college age. A six-figure reward has been announced, underscoring the urgency with which authorities are pursuing the case.

But no amount of money or security footage can undo the damage already done. For the students who witnessed the killing, the image of civic debate interrupted by gunfire will remain seared into memory.

The symbolism of the attack is striking. Kirk had built his reputation on being willing to enter spaces where his brand of politics was unwelcome, challenging liberal orthodoxy on campuses that leaned the other way.

He embraced confrontation, often warning that critics might resort to violence. In death, his warnings have become prophecy, and his followers are already casting him as a martyr for their cause.

The risk now is that his assassination becomes another accelerant in America's cycle of rage. Already, the reaction from political leaders has been predictable: one side blaming ideological opponents, the other side counter-blaming, both sides amplifying the very divisions that create the conditions for violence.

The shouting match that followed a Congressional moment of silence spoke louder than any official statement about how fractured America truly is.

The deeper problem is structural. A country awash with firearms, locked in the grip of polarised media echo chambers, and governed by leaders who profit politically from outrage, is primed for tragedy.

To describe public life as a "blood sport" no longer feels like metaphor. Politicians, activists, and ordinary citizens alike now wonder whether attending a rally, hosting a town hall, or even engaging in protest might make them a target.

As America nears 250 years of independence, the question is not whether violence will shape its politics, but how deeply it will corrode democratic life.

If assassination attempts and shootings become the expected cost of civic engagement, then the very foundation of free exchange is at risk.

Kirk's murder must, therefore, be seen not just as the loss of one voice, but as a brutal warning. A democracy that cannot guarantee safety in its public spaces cannot endure indefinitely. Unless America reins in its rhetoric and its weapons, politics itself will remain hostage to the gun.

# Deprived Cities

*The urban poor are more vulnerable to the incidences of high level of pollution and extreme weather events. Most of the big cities face heavy flooding due to precipitation and landslides during monsoon are common in the hill towns. With typically poor access to basic amenities and dilapidated built environment, the urban poor cannot simply cope with loss of income and livelihood opportunities and illnesses. So, appropriation of SDGs' call for 'leave no one behind' is extremely crucial for India's quest towards urban equality and more sustainable futures*

According to the Sustainable Development Report (SDR) 2025, India has ranked 99th out of 167 countries. This is an improvement over the ranks of 112 and 109 in 2023 and 2024 respectively. However, India's progress has not been uniform across the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). Major challenges remain in achieving seven goals with SDG 11 featuring prominently among them. As part of the '2030 Agenda', SDG 11 envisions cities that are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

The SDR 2025 considers four major indicators under SDG 11 and they are ~ (i) proportion of urban population living in slums (percentage); (ii) annual mean concentration of PM<sub>2.5</sub> (µm<sup>3</sup>); (iii) proportion of urban population with access to improved piped water sources (percentage) and (iv) proportion of urban population with convenient access to public transport. For the first two indicators, India's scores have stagnated while there has been a decrease in the score for the third indicator in 2025.

Contrary to the SDG 11 benchmark of universal water coverage, only about 65 per cent of urban households in India have access to improved water through pipes in 2022. Use of water is determined by peoples' access to water from unpredictable daily supply. For example, as per the PRAJA's report on 'The Status of Civic Issues in Mumbai' (2024), water is available on average for 5.37 hours. Even the available water is of questionable quality. The NSSO (2019) report indicates that almost half of the urban households had to treat drinking water received from all sources.

Challenges of achieving SDGs by 2030 is perhaps nowhere more evident than for those living in slums. Slums in general have the worst living conditions with inadequate access to basic services and housing and



are also home to large number of informal residents with insecure tenure. Compared to the Government of India's water availability norms of 135 litres per capita per day (lpcd), slums in Mumbai receive on average 45 lpcd of water. Such inadequacy entails huge cost burden on the slum residents as they depend on water tankers that are almost thirty times costlier than the metered water supply.

A 2020 report of the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations reveals that almost 44 per cent of slum households live in inadequate houses that are non-pucca and either obsolete or congested. Unplanned urbanization coupled with the commodification of land and housing, have generated deep social and spatial inequalities. Further, these inequalities intersect with gender, religion, ability or similar other dimensions to produce different layers of social as well as economic marginalization in the cities.

In addition, the urban poor are more vulnerable to the incidences of high level of pollution and extreme weather events. Most of the big cities face heavy flooding due to precipitation and landslides during monsoon are common in the hill towns.

With typically poor access to basic amenities and dilapidated built environment, the urban poor cannot simply cope with loss of income and livelihood opportunities and illnesses. So, appropriation of SDGs' call for 'leave no one behind' is extremely crucial for India's quest towards urban equality and more sustainable futures.

In India, urban development is a state subject. State governments exercise their discretion over implementation of urban policies outlined by the central government. Funds from the central and state governments continue to be the major source of financing urban infrastructure. Of late, there has been increase in the budgetary provisions for urban development.

Yet, the incidence of deficient urban services persists or even deepens. All the central flagship urban programmes in last two decades emphasize full cost recovery and building financially sustainable urban

infrastructure. While these narratives are crucial but they have exacerbated the existing socio-spatial inequalities in access to basic urban services like water.

India's two largest urban programs ~ JNNURM and Smart City Mission (SCM) ~ have prioritized larger cities and their commercially viable zones. Under the SCM, projects related to water, sanitation and health account for only 18 per cent of the

total completed projects while the corresponding share for "smart mobility" is 20 per cent and only 2 per cent of the entire transportation budget is focused on buses.

In the case of housing, affordability remains a key issue for the low-income group/economically weaker section (LIG/EWS) households in the cities. PMAY (U) provides for interest subsidy on home loans taken by eligible LIG/EWS beneficiaries. However, eligibility is linked to creditworthiness that a majority of these people lack, resulting in their exclusion. On a positive note, the PMAY-U 2.0 has attempted to better programme inclusiveness through increasing EWS specific amount of financial assistances and providing for credit risk guarantee to the urban poor taking housing loans under the credit risk guarantee trust fund (CRGFT).

There is considerable overlap between SDG 11 targets and constitutionally mandated functional domain of the cities. However, in most states, the state government agencies continue to exercise strong operational control over urban services that are either not devolved or partially devolved to the cities.

Cities are bereft of revenue generation power and even lack incentives to generate funds for provisioning of basic services over which they have little control. Sustainable provision of urban services is linked to cities' ability to match their revenue capacity and their expenditure responsibilities.

As per the RBI (2024) report on municipal



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The Daily Star

## The economic price of delaying the election

At first glance, the country has shown remarkable resilience. Despite the weight of global inflation, it has managed, against the odds, to keep prices more or less stable during the current interim administration. Though food and energy costs remain a worry for many households, a mix of subsidies, fiscal steps, and strict monetary policies taken by the interim government over the past year has helped prevent the kind of runaway inflation Sri Lanka and Pakistan experienced in 2022. Foreign exchange reserves have slowly improved, and the ready-made garment industry continues to play its part, keeping export earnings steady and supporting the balance of payments.

These are no small feats, and the government does deserve recognition for them. Officials will, in the coming months, understandably showcase these achievements as evidence of sound stewardship. A

polycymaker I spoke with confidently remarked that Bangladesh has "done better than its peers," and in a narrow

sense, he is right. In an unstable global economy, maintaining macroeconomic steadiness does matter.

But here is the catch: macroeconomic steadiness without political stability is a fragile equilibrium. It can buy you time; it cannot buy you certainty. And in economics, certainty is often more valuable than a single quarter of good data.

The political vacuum that Bangladesh finds itself in is not just a constitutional or moral problem. It carries a price tag. Unfortunately, the rhetoric of our political parties is often about who should rule. The economic costs of the election delays are not given much thought.

Yet, the ordinary people feel it. Investors,

both local and foreign, feel it. Businesses feel it. When elections are postponed or democratic clarity is absent, the economy

pays. Many believe that so long as inflation is managed and exports continue, the economy is "safe." But this overlooks the less visible, longer-term damage caused by uncertainty.

Numbers alone don't persuade investors. Capital has a political memory. It recalls past instability, delays, and voids. And it reacts accordingly.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) into Bangladesh has been sluggish in recent years, despite global companies showing interest. I have spoken with representatives of major multinationals and hospitality groups who have slowed their projects here. Some luxury hotels that already laid foundations have deliberately held back on opening. The reason is simple: they do not know what direction the

country will take, or whether political stability will hold.

This hesitation trickles down. Local entrepreneurs also pause their plans. Friends of mine in the restaurant business, hardly the sector most tied to politics, are reluctant to open new branches. "Let's wait until we know where the country is headed," is the common refrain. That hesitation is itself an economic cost, invisible in today's inflation numbers but corrosive over time.

Why does this matter so much? Because long-term investments are rarely based on present figures alone. They depend on the trajectory. Investors want to know if Bangladesh is moving towards being a digitally focused economy that prioritises tech, or a manufacturing powerhouse offering stability, or a services hub. They want to understand the ethos of the political leadership. Without that clarity, their capital stays frozen.

other "mitigation measures" will not undo the damage that the massive project will inevitably cause.

They serve no purpose other than salving our conscience.

Yours, etc., G. David Milton, Maruthancode, 12 September.

### Building walls

Sir, There was a time when cinema in India listened. To the street, to the silence, to the stories people carried in their bones. Today, it speaks. Loudly, confidently, and often, carelessly. In recent years, a certain kind of film has begun to dominate our screens - not cinema, but spectacle.

Not stories, but state-approved scripts. These films do not explore history. They patrol it. Complex lives are reduced to slogans. Entire communities become villains.

Patriotism is packaged, sold, and shouted. And somewhere along the way, we stopped asking questions.

Certainty is dangerous when it comes dressed as entertainment. These films offer it in plenty. They tell you what to think, who to fear, and what to believe. You're either on the "right" side, or you're the problem.

Meanwhile, the real questions - about jobs, food, health, justice - are drowned beneath chants and special effects. A country as layered and plural as India is being taught to view itself in black and white.

Worse still, these films are not a reflection of society - they are instructions to it. They reshape how we see each other. They reward anger. They manufacture enemies.

Cinema should open windows. These films build walls.

Yours, etc., Noopur Baruah, Tezpur, 10 September.





# New identity for a football league

CHAITANYA K PRASAD

The architecture for the new season of English Premier League has hogged headlines for multiple reasons. Stardom equated with players has truly been the constant pull factor. This year EPL has created a unique brand upheaval in its ecosystem. The push factors are the story of competitive bidding for new transfer window protocols with ensuing season. This has triggered a chain reaction with other football leagues i.e. LaLiga, Serie A, Bundesliga and Ligue.

Big bucks, synchronized targeting of players and a windfall for stakeholders has become the guiding mantra and outreach strategy for the English Premier League (EPL) season 2025-26. Media platforms, television studios and football commentators are in a state of shock and disbelief on the amount being spent on individual players by clubs this season. The 2025-26 season has created new records, templates and new models of buying and selling players before the transfer deadline on 2 September.

Keeping this background in mind, the moot question remains, was this good for the game and players? Has EPL overshoot the runway of player branding this season? Is there a dire need to regulate the tug-of-war between buying and selling equations in the run up to the transfer melee? The kick-start point this season has been a windfall for certain players and teams including managers. Truly, it has been a different mind game being played out in the pre-season transfer rush to attract players. To top it all, social media has been a catalyst in positioning the brand equity of prominent clubs in the EPL.

It is surprising that every transfer bid, process and success has led to a tsunami of undiluted aspirations within the ecosystem. It has created a ripple effect on the strategies related to branding, outreach, promotion and football popularity through the EPL institutional process. For analysts, the parameters of financial investment and book accounting management has assumed new proportions.

These changes serve as an apt case study for management schools globally to understand the growing importance of sports and their relationship with financial modeling to generate revenue and resources. The experience this year has shown that a debate needs to be conducted between critical inputs that decide and decipher the relationship between the competitive parameters and landscape of EPL.

EPL as a league has leapfrogged in the last decade and a half; the key catalyst in this change has been the style of play, power and skill that has been the USP of each of the clubs involved. As a league, it has captured the imagination for scouting talent, player identification through price modelling and financial protocols. This has established a windfall effect for players and clubs simultaneously.

The transfer season has succeeded in creating "Superstar protocols for players who have been catapulted into an exotic zone of prominence, fame and stardom." The Reds, "Liverpool", have created a tsunami with high-profile acquisitions. The new age superstars are led by Alexander Isak, Florian Wirtz, Hugo Ekitike, Jeremie Frimpong, Milo Kerkez. This has been unprecedented in the club's history.

Chelsea have taken João Pedro and Liam Delap. Arsenal continue to

build and brand through Eberechi Eze and Viktor Gyokeres. Manchester United have redrawn their search for talent through Matheus Cunha, Benjamin Šeško, Bryan Mbeumo, while Newcastle United focused on Benjamin Šeško.

The financial implications have been mind-blowing. Strategists have perhaps lost track of the expenditure matrix of each of the clubs. While Arsenal, Liverpool, Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspur have had deep pocket investments, smaller clubs in terms of stature, profile and ranking too competed in the transfer season craze. These included West Ham United, Crystal Palace, Leeds United and Nottingham Forest.

The English Premier League has become a brand for global appeal, support, collaboration, and a platform for converging sports with marketing mantras, innovation, and strategies. The impact is being felt globally with unprecedented influence over Gen Next/Gen Z, global fan clubs and communities. This has led to a unique identity both for individuals and community-supported ecosystems for the premier league.

EPL has brought in a new category of influencers called Agents on behalf of the players during negotiations. They have become the pitch points for enticing a unique tug-of-war between clubs pitching for high-profile players. New methods of player assessment have become the institutionalized mechanism in the transfer season. Predictive analysis using data to assess players is at the cutting edge for crucial decisions, including market value analysis. Technology through fan experience and engagement has led to new initiatives



being played out through social media platforms.

EPL in the 2025-26 season has reinvented the architecture of attracting players from across the globe. It is a combination of innovations such as regional hubs globally, social media branding by a sharper focus on reach, impact and brand building that has global appeal, and a seamless mix of traditional and model symbolism to engage with audiences.

EPL is truly aspirational and inclusive in its institutional framework; the powerful visualization has a consistent brand appeal and identity globally. For an enthusiast the introduction is mind boggling due to the variety and rich content bouquet offered for viewing.

The operational dynamics have also been reinforced through a powerful

message 'No Room for Racism'. This has brought about a unique sense of inclusiveness for a sporting ecosystem. At the same time, it has strengthened marketing outreach campaigns in different parts of the world. This diversity has led to positive perceptions that are reinforced through a unique position and focused identity for the brand value of EPL globally.

In essence, the EPL 2025-26 season is not just about football; it is about redefining the business of sport. The league has become a global classroom on economics, marketing, and identity-building, while still keeping alive the passion of the game that unites millions under one banner.

(The writer is a former civil servant who writes on cinema and strategic communication. Inputs were provided by Zoya Ahmad and Vaishnavie Srinivasan. Views are personal.)

# Back to the 1930s war economy

ANDREW SHENG

American author Mark Twain quipped that history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes. With European economies promising to up their defense expenditure to 5 per cent of GDP, are we repeating the 1930s, when the Western powers used defense spending to pull themselves out of the Great Depression?

The inter-war years were dominated by Western (including Japan) powers, with the rest of the world under colonial yoke. The First World War between the European powers did not settle old scores, with Germany bitter about war reparations, which caused hyperinflation that devastated the German society.

After the Roaring 1920s, which ended with the Great Crash of 1929, the 1930s were years of global slowdown. By 1934, President Franklin Roosevelt was elected on the promise of his New Deal to revive the American economy. In Japan and Germany, right-wing factions rose on the back of militarism. In 1934, Hitler came to power with Nazi nationalism to revive and revenge German humiliation in the First World War and loss of territory.

German military spending went from 1-2 per cent of GDP in 1933 to 13 per cent by 1936 and nearly 100 per cent of GDP by 1945. Japan went from 3-4 per cent to 9-10 per cent by 1937-1938, when the Sino-Japanese War broke out. The United States were slow to react, with an average spending of 1-2 per cent of GDP between 1930-1938, but rapidly ramped up to as much as 40 per cent by 1945.

The United States has always taken care of European security after World War Two, mostly through the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but the Trump Administration has

decided that Europe should bear the burden of its own security, particularly to raise defense expenditure to 5 per cent of GDP. Europe must also take care of the Ukraine mess, whilst America concentrates on its rising rival, China.

After the humiliating 2025 Munich Security Conference, in which the Trump Administration basically told the Europeans that they were on their own, new German Chancellor Merz announced a doubling of military expenditure. This was a signal that Europe is now beginning to re-arm.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimated global military expenditure rose by 6.8 per cent in 2023, to surpass \$2.4 trillion, equivalent to 2.3 per cent of world GDP. On average, military spending was 6.9 per cent of fiscal budgets, which increased across all five geographical regions, with the most in Africa (by 22 per cent in 2023), while it was lowest in the Americas (2.2 per cent).

Nevertheless, the United States remained the largest military spender in the world, with \$916 billion - larger than the combined spending of nine other top spending countries, and 3.1 times as large as China, the number 2 spender. 39 of the 43 countries in Europe increased military spending with an average 16 per cent surge, of which Ukraine spending increased 51 per cent, whilst Russia increased 24 per cent.

How will European re-armament impact growth?

The peace-loving layman's view is that military expenditure is a waste of money. But the influential German think-tank, Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW) report on "Guns and Growth: The Economic Consequences Defense Buildups" argues that Europe-wide GDP may grow by 0.9

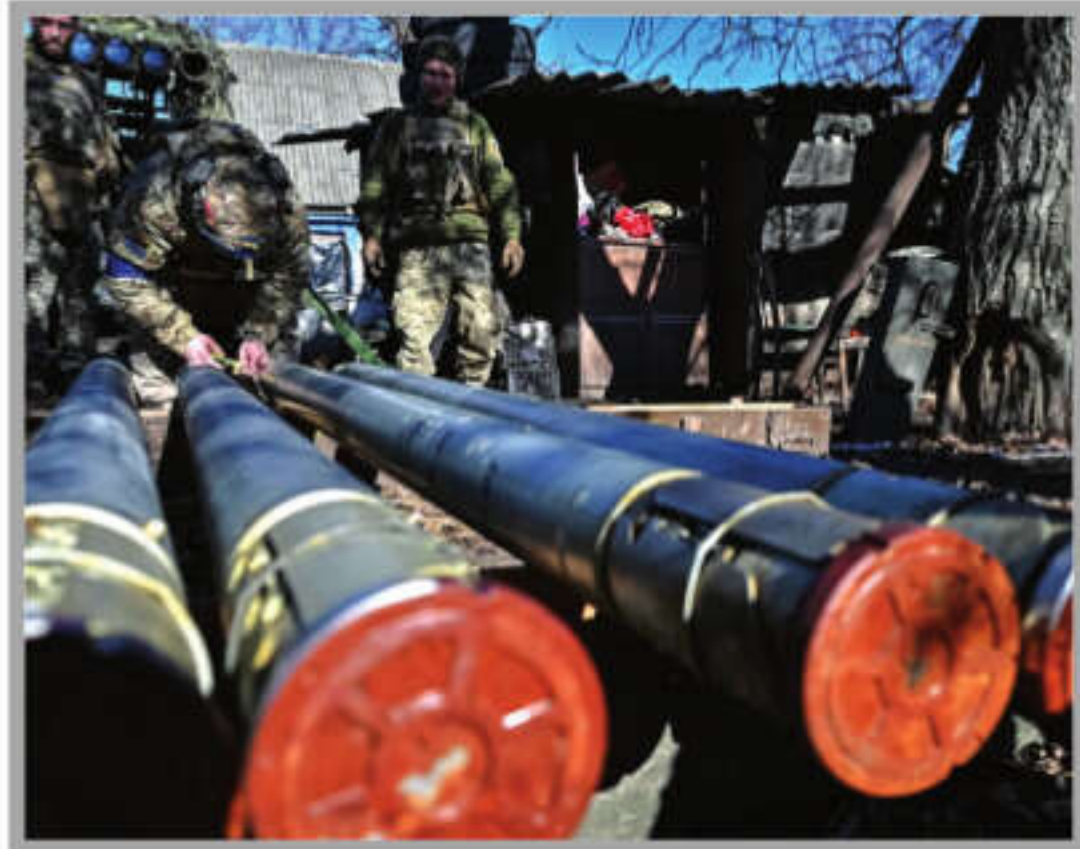
to 1.5 per cent if defense spending increases from 2 to 3.5 per cent of GDP. It further argued that the long-run productivity gains from military spending may be substantial, with examples of public research and development for military applications giving spill-overs to the private sector, such as the symbiotic relationship between Silicon Valley tech companies and US defense spending. "A transient 1 per cent of GDP increase in military spending could increase long-run productivity by a quarter of percent both through learning-by-doing and R&D."

Since nearly 80 per cent of European defense procurement is from the US and outside EU, more spending on defense procured domestically would help European industries to revive. A Goldman Sachs report estimated that additional spending on European defense will have an escalating multiplier of 0.5 over two years. That means every €100 spent on defense would boost GDP by around €50.

What are the trade-offs between a war economy (which would ultimately lead to wanton human and natural destruction) and an economy dedicated to peace and co-development?

This week, the United Nations issued a report called "The Security We Need: Rebalancing Military Spending for a Sustainable and Peaceful Future", which highlighted that global military spending has surged to an all-time high of \$2.7 trillion in 2024. Meanwhile, less than 20 per cent of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are on track to be achieved by 2030, with the annual financing gap at \$4 trillion.

The UN argues that heightened military expenditure does not necessarily lead to greater peace or stability, but instead, exacerbates geopolitical tensions, fuels arms races and increases



risks of conflict, particularly when coupled with weak governance, rising inequality and systemic mistrust. We risk military expenditure today crowding out essential resources addressing social and ecological imbalances, with the negative impact mostly on low-income and fragile states.

What is the alternative?

The UN calls for a fundamental shift from defining security narrowly in terms of military capability into security as a human-centred, multidimensional approach rooted in dignity, human rights and sustainable development. We see a widening chasm between a march to war, or a path to peace and common prosperity.

The UN has a five-point agenda for action. First, prioritize diplomacy, peaceful settlement of disputes, and addressing underlying causes of growing military expenditure. Second, bring military expenditure to top agenda on disarmament discussions, arms control and development. Third,

promote transparency and accountability around military expenditure, including better domestic fiscal accountability. Fourth, reinvigorate multilateral finance for development, and fifth, advance a human-centred approach to security and sustainable development.

Will we get these aspirations? Not if you make more money investing in arms manufacturer stocks. As long as central banks are willing to finance fiscal deficits to use on military expenditure, the world will not veer away from the foolish march to war. Our problem is never Artificial Intelligence, but Human Folly and Ego. Our greatest hope is that wise leaders will rise above egos to look towards a peaceful future for next generations. The security we need is to survive as a species, not to fight to our mutual annihilation.

(The writer is Distinguished Fellow of Asia Global Institute, University of Hong Kong; and Chairman of George Town Institute of Open and Advanced Studies, Wawasan Open University, Penang, Malaysia.) Special to ANN.

## NOW AND AGAIN

### COMMUNING WITH DIANA

SWAPAN K BANERJEE

I have always been a rooftop lover. Like the narrator in V S Naipaul's autobiographical novel The Enigma of Arrival, who always wanted to be alone while on a walk, I also prefer to be in my own company, watching the tide of incoming darkness from the rooftop at dusk. If I happen to be in a hotel or at home at sundown, I try not to miss a glimpse of the twilight-toned sky from the roof. The aching beauty of dissolving daylight is intensified when the wind carries a muffled voice from far out as if someone were uttering sacred mantras at the day's passing on.

That day (10 Aug 2025), when the showers let up a bit, the clusters of cloud still swirling all over the vaulted dome, I found through a crack in the curtain a little bruise of salmon-pink on the western horizon which presently disappeared. My knees protesting, I reached the roof in a huff. It was past 6 p.m. From the south, bluish white smoke was curling out of a factory chimney like a twisted rope. The sound of conch shells could be heard from households all around.

As I was strolling, my eyes fell on a space hugging a high-rise in the east. A dull, very faint pallor of light seemed to light up the cloud from underneath. The clouds were moving constantly. Soon it was all the same, thinning to white, thickening to grey. After another round of strolling, my eyes were drawn again to the same spot. This time, the disc of a round moon slowly emerged from the cloud, its outer edges ringed by a halo, smiling softly at me.

The moon goddess and I have always been great friends. There were times when I forgot about the date of her rise in full splendour. But she did not forget me! Either out the window, through the plants in the balcony, or over the top of the concrete jungle, she invariably caught my eye. If I were on a train, a bus, or on the road, I sometimes felt a pull - like when somebody looks at you intently without your knowing, and you automatically look back - and my body swerved at an angle where she waited for me to lock eyes with her! At such times, the burdens that often weigh upon the heart melt away. You feel blessed and protected. You realise that if your journey goes off course, it will be brought back on the rails by the Divine.

The colour of the extra-large moon gradually changed from deep orange to golden yellow. The moonlight shone on the roof, creating a gleaming, misty veil like the one you often find in a Guy de Maupassant story. It seemed as if the moon broke through the layer of clouds to illuminate for a few minutes the little patch I was standing on before she went behind the clouds again.

I wanted to celebrate this rare moment, but did not know how. Just then, I heard a popping sound from the northeast corner of the sky miles away, where a fireworks display had just begun. By nature, I'm scared of loud crackers. But this firework, its sound worn very thin by distance, kept shooting up into the sky one shell at a time, and then burst, scattering sparkling tiny stars of myriad hues. The show went on for a little while, casting fantastic light upon the dark patches of the sky like flashes of lightning. I wondered if perhaps some people were celebrating the appearance of the Sturgeon Moon.

## News Items

### HIGHER EDUCATION

### INDIAN WOMEN'S REQUEST TO SENATE

Evidence of how Indian women are now seeking for higher education was forthcoming at yesterday's meeting of the Senate of the Calcutta University. Syeda Khawer Sultan Mumayyidada, a Mohammedan lady, who passed the B.A. examination in 1923, was granted permission to appear at the M.A. examination in History in 1927 as a non-collegiate student. The Senate also permitted Miss Bhagyabati Das, who had failed at the last Bachelor of Teaching examination (theoretical portion), to appear at the next B.T. examination as a non-collegiate student. A similar application to the Senate was that of Miss J. Helen Rowlands, who has been engaged as a missionary in Sylhet since 1916. It was stated that Miss Rowlands passed the B.A. examination of the University of Wales with Honours in French in 1911, and afterwards held a Research Scholarship at Newnham College, Cambridge. She now asked for permission to appear at the next M.A. examination in Indian vernacular as a non-collegiate student. Permission was granted.

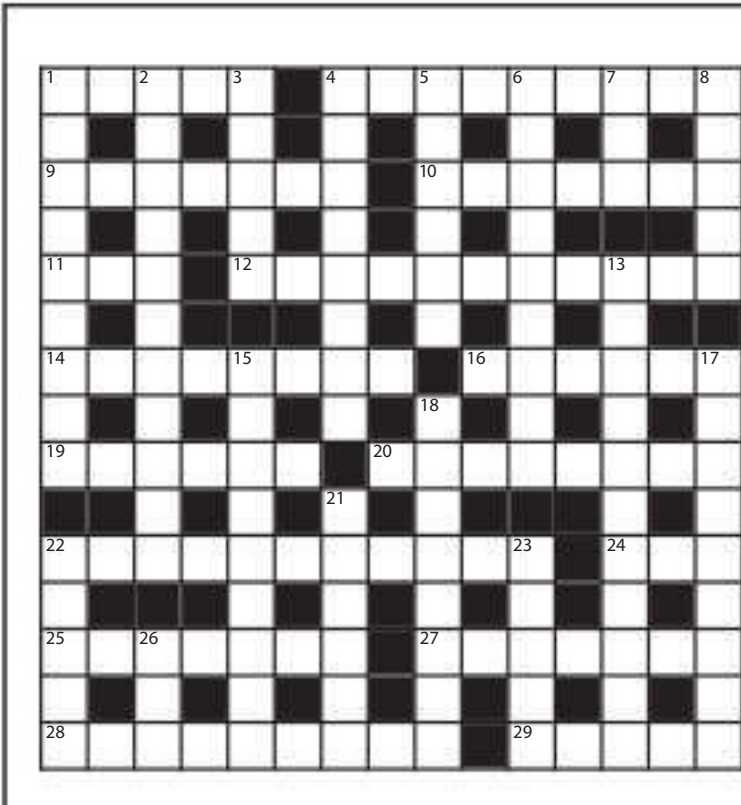
### VILLAGES SUBMERGED

### CYCLONIC WEATHER AT CHITTAGONG

*Chittagong, Sept.*

There has been an abnormal rise of river water. The river side portion of the town and many low-lying villages on both sides of the river Karnafull are partially submerged. The weather is cloudy and cyclonic. A further rise of water is apprehended.

Crossword | No. 293234



#### Last Sunday's Solution

ANIMATED ED CARTOON  
UB V N H O D U  
T A S K I N G I M P E D E D  
O E A I D E J G  
P E N I T E N C E D R O V E  
I T O E  
L U G G E R E R G O N O M I C  
O U R A  
T H E O R I S E R H E N N A  
R A R I T Y  
L Y R I C P A U L P O G B A  
O T K Y L S R T  
O I L W E L L O U T C A S T  
T L T O U E S S A  
S T A R I S A N D I S T R I P I E S

#### ACROSS

- Basket case's fee beginning to feel senses wobble (5)
- Adaptation of Dune left many without excitement (9)
- Scenery material recalled character in Hamlet (7)
- No ball carried by university rugby forward, that's clear (7)
- Wrong indicator? Not good (3)
- 12/22 Museum to fashion youngster - Scots boy - with instant education I promoted (11,11)
- Absolutely guaranteed college boy can join club (8)
- Lot of team taken aback, with member put on the back foot (6)
- Adding warmth to connection lacking heart (6)
- Live movement capturing a couple of lines related to dance (8)
- See 12
- What follows a do, back in time (3)
- Better money required to secure a team leader (7)

- Italian car designer upset at odd bits of trim (7)
- Prepared in advance to study old article about crackpot (5-4)
- Endless source of devastation in place (5)
- DOWN
- 1/17 Bodies in motion in lively callisthenics came with added energy (9,9)
- None mute sex when active? Everyone clear off (6,5)
- See spades perhaps I dropped after

- turning over flower (5)
- My staff reduced almost everything - that's obscure (8)
- Restraining expression of disgust is not nothing (6)
- Amended moral bias is detectable (9)
- European with energy and self-confidence (3)
- Large part of Canada that may accommodate European country (5)
- Fake misattributed in the auction, not old (11)

- Frank and Bill with yen for standing for office (9)
- See 1
- Algebraic quantity that may work to contain two bits of arithmetic (8)
- Appointed grandma to dismiss a chaperone (6)
- Be charged in court, wasting time, nothing less (5)
- Conan Doyle hero - name set to enthrall one (5)
- Small amount of coal? It's a lot of fuel (3)

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





# The Pioneer AGENDA

Those who make  
peaceful revolution  
impossible will make  
violent revolution  
inevitable  
— John F Kennedy



## Bangladesh: The Fall of Sheikh Hasina and after

### Background & Triggers (Before Summer 2024)

- The controversial quota system for government jobs sparks protests.
- In 2018, Sheikh Hasina's government abolished all such job quotas in civil service positions, after student protests.
- In June 2024, the High Court reinstated the quota system, following petitions by descendants of freedom fighters.
- That decision triggers renewed student protests starting in mid-July 2024.

### Escalation & Collapse of Government

- As protests grew, the government's acts with force.
- The supreme court intervenes; says that around 93 per cent jobs should be based on merit.
- The protests continue.
- The army/military refuses orders to use more force. This seems to have been a turning point.

### Early August 2024

- On August 5, 2024, after weeks of growing protests and mounting violence, Sheikh Hasina resigns as Prime Minister and takes shelter in India.
- The President of Bangladesh, Mohammed Shahabuddin, dissolves the Parliament the next day (August 6 2024), clearing the way for new elections.
- An interim government formed under Muhammad Yunus, chosen with the backing of the army, student leaders, and civil society groups.

### Subsequent Developments

- Investigations and legal cases initiated against Hasina and her close associates.
- Student organisations that led the protests becomes influential
- The Awami League, Hasina's party, banned from political activities under some interim laws and faces numerous legal challenges.
- Changes in symbols.
- The Parliament dissolved, election roadmap discussions.
- Changes in diplomatic positions: Envoys recalled etc.

# The anchor in the storm India's role amid regional chaos



VIKAS SWARUP  
Ambassador

As smoke billows from Nepal's parliament building and protesters storm the streets of Kathmandu, South Asia finds itself once again grappling with the familiar spectre of political upheaval. The resignation of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli on September 9, 2025, following violent Gen Z-led protests against social media bans, marks yet another chapter in the region's troubling narrative of regime collapse and institutional breakdown. In a neighbourhood where political stability has become increasingly elusive, India stands as the sole beacon of democratic continuity amid a sea of turbulence.

### NEPAL:

#### The Poster Child of Political Dysfunction

Nepal's current turmoil cannot be understood without examining the underlying economic and demographic pressures that have created a powder keg of youth frustration. The Himalayan nation faces a stark reality: Approximately 8 million Nepalese — nearly one-fourth of the population — live and work outside the country, driven by limited job opportunities at home. This massive exodus reflects the government's failure to create meaningful jobs, with the unemployment rate for youth aged 15-24 reaching 20.8 per cent in 2024, according to the World Bank.

The remittance economy has become Nepal's lifeline and its curse. Money sent home by overseas workers contributes nearly 33 per cent of the nation's GDP, making Nepal dangerously dependent on external labour markets. While these funds have helped families survive, they have also masked the government's inability to develop domestic industries and create local employment opportunities. The result is a hollowed-out economy where political leaders have little incentive to pursue genuine development policies. This economic dysfunction is compounded by Nepal's notorious political instability. Since the end of the

monarchy in 2008, the country has witnessed a relentless game of musical chairs among the same familiar faces. Leaders like KP Sharma Oli, Sher Bahadur Deuba, and Pushpa Kamal Dahal have rotated through the prime minister's office multiple times, forming and breaking coalitions with bewildering frequency. Between 2008 and 2025, Nepal has had 14 different governments, with the average tenure lasting barely 18 months. The current generation of Nepalese youth — educated, connected, and increasingly frustrated — has grown up watching this political theatre while facing bleak employment prospects. Unlike previous generations who accepted political instability as inevitable, Gen Z Nepalese have begun demanding accountability. The recent protests that began over social media bans quickly transformed into a broader uprising against corruption, nepotism, and the political establishment's failure to address fundamental economic challenges.

The violence that erupted on September 8, claiming 20 lives, represented a breaking point. When protesters stormed and burned the parliament building, they were symbolically rejecting a political system that has failed to represent their interests or provide opportunities for their future.

### THE DOMINO EFFECT: A Pattern of Collapse

The current crisis in Nepal is not an isolated incident but part of a disturbing pattern that has swept across South Asia over the past few years. The region has witnessed an unprecedented wave of popular uprisings that have toppled governments and destabilised entire nations, creating what experts now describe as "the new politics of instability in South Asia." The sequence began with Sri Lanka's dramatic collapse in 2022, when economic mismanagement and corruption sparked mass protests that forced President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country. The images of protesters swimming in the presidential pool became symbolic of a people's fury against failed governance.

The island nation, once considered a middle-income success story, plunged into its worst economic crisis since independence, with severe shortages of fuel, medicine, and food. Bangladesh followed suit in August 2024, when student-led protests initially focused on quota system reforms transformed into a broader movement against Sheikh Hasina's increasingly authoritarian rule. After 15 years in power, Hasina was forced to resign and flee to

India, leaving behind a nation struggling with political polarisation and economic challenges. The interim government under Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus has struggled to maintain stability, with political parties bickering over election dates while mob violence and attacks on minorities surge. Now Nepal joins this unfortunate club, with the army effectively in charge for now, till an interim government begins the task of restoring constitutional order.

### PAKISTAN, MYANMAR & AFGHANISTAN: Perpetual Instability

While Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have experienced dramatic regime changes, Pakistan continues its familiar cycle of political and economic turbulence. Civilian governments in Islamabad are often little more than façades for military power, with real authority residing in Rawalpindi. This pattern of alternating between direct military rule and nominal civilian administrations has prevented any sustainable democratic consolidation. The recent political turmoil caused by the arrest of Imran Khan, compounded by severe economic dislocation and persistent security threats, keeps Pakistan locked in a state of perpetual uncertainty.

Afghanistan presents perhaps the starkest case of instability in the region. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the country has plunged into international isolation, economic collapse, and a humanitarian crisis of staggering proportions. The systematic suppression of human rights — particularly women's rights — has not only deepened internal despair but also heightened regional anxieties. Refugee flows, cross-border militancy, and narcotics trafficking emanating from Afghanistan continue to reverberate across South and Central Asia, underscoring the dangers of a governance model that rests solely on coercion and ideological absolutism.

CONTINUED  
ON >> P11



NEPAL

## Nepal: KP Sharma Oli quits, Gen Z rules

### SEPTEMBER 4-6, 2025:

- Govt blocks 26 social media platforms.

### SEPTEMBER 8:

- Protests begin in Kathmandu, largely led by Gen Z, over the social media ban plus longstanding grievances: corruption, nepotism, economic stagnation.
- Clashes escalate between protesters and security forces resulting in at least 19 deaths.
- Protesters force entry into Parliament complex. Curfews imposed in Kathmandu.

### SEPTEMBER 9:

- Government lifts the ban on social media platforms after widespread protests.
- The backlash spreads across other cities.
- FOLLOWING DAYS (SEPTEMBER 11-12):
- Death toll crosses 50 across the country; clashes, unrest, and jail breaks reported.
- Government buildings, political offices including Parliament are set on fire. Residences of political leaders targeted.
- KP Sharma Oli resigns as Prime Minister. Interim arrangements begin.
- President dissolves Parliament and calls for new elections in March 2026.
- Sushila Karki, former chief justice, appointed as interim Prime Minister - Nepal's first female PM.



BANGLADESH



MYANMAR

## The South Asian Domino Effect

From political upheavals in Bangladesh to unrest in Nepal and economic fragility in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, South Asia finds itself caught in a cycle of instability. One by one, nations in the region are grappling with protests, collapsing governance, and rising discontent. Amid this turbulence, India stands as a rare pillar of stability, its democratic institutions and economic momentum offering a stark contrast to the anarchy unfolding around it.

BY ASHOKE RAJ

India's immediate neighbourhood is undergoing a period of profound political turmoil. From the Himalayan foothills of Nepal to the conflict-ridden plains of Myanmar, regime changes, military coups, civil unrest, and economic collapse are rapidly redefining the South Asian political map. What once appeared to be stable governments are crumbling under the weight of corruption, mismanagement, and rising youth-led demands for change.

In Nepal, the collapse of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's Government was triggered by a move that outraged the public: the blocking of major social media platforms such as Facebook, X

(formerly Twitter), YouTube, and others. The justification was a new law requiring global tech firms to register locally, but citizens viewed it as an attempt to stifle dissent. What followed was a series of "Gen Z" protests—youth-led, tech-driven, and focused not only on free speech but on deeper issues such as unemployment, inequality, and endemic corruption. Though Oli resigned, Nepal's history of political instability—with thirteen governments since 2008—has made many citizens wary of yet another leadership shuffle.

However, hope has flickered anew. Former Chief Justice Sushila Karki has been appointed as

the head of Nepal's interim government—the first woman to hold such a position. With Indian roots and an academic background from Banaras Hindu University (BHU), her appointment has been warmly welcomed in India. Many Nepalese now look to her leadership as a chance to rebuild political trust and chart a new democratic path.

In Bangladesh, similar frustration boiled over in 2024. Years of allegations against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's administration—corruption, suppression of opposition, and authoritarianism—reached a tipping point. Protests led by university and college students

pushed the regime to collapse. Today, the country is led by an interim administration under Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, but challenges remain. Political uncertainty, communal tensions, and rising Islamist influence threaten to derail any progress. India and the world are also keeping their eyes on upcoming Bangladesh elections. Sri Lanka continues to grapple with the aftershocks of its 2022 collapse. The fall of the Rajapaksa regime amid economic collapse and fuel shortages left the island in crisis. A large-scale IMF bailout provided temporary relief, but the painful process of tax hikes and austerity has

tested public patience. President (AKD) now leads a fragile recovery effort, but with inflation still high and trust in institutions low, renewed unrest is a constant threat.

Pakistan, too, has not been spared. In April 2022, Prime Minister Imran Khan was ousted via a no-confidence vote after clashing with the powerful military establishment. His arrest in 2023 over corruption charges led to widespread protests—many driven by disillusioned youth. The state cracked down hard, and Khan's party, PTI, has since been largely suppressed. The country's economy is sinking under debt, inflation is soaring, and relations with India remain tense after a series of cross-border attacks.

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## The fall of regimes in India's neighbourhood



# Is systemic overload and criminal negligence compromising urban sanitation?

*“Cleanliness is next to Godliness — John Wesley 1791”*

My late father used to say, “If everyone cleans their own courtyard, the whole village will get cleaned.”

I have observed that a great majority of common folks also seem to believe



in this wise dictum-but only partially. They do clean their own courtyards but dump their refuse in front of their neighbour’s courtyard-and if they are careful to avoid conflict, in a public place! There is a pathetic display of this mentality around us, and as helpless citizens, we tolerate it, overlook it, and walk through its ugly manifestation on the ground-day in and day out!

Having lived in two of the posh localities of Delhi for the last five years (on rent, of course!), I have seen this firsthand. When I go to the market, walk to the sports complex, drive around to meet a friend in another colony across the city, or even just look outside from my balcony, I feel the sanitation system has been overwhelmed. The symptoms are everywhere to see-litter on the roadside, overflowing garbage bins at central collection points, out-of-control foliage, secluded corners being used as toilets, and the lingering stench which follows you for hundreds of metres in every direction!

A feeble attempt is visible to keep the main roads clean by a few skeleton staff and inefficient and infrequent removal of the collected garbage (which leaves more stench than it removes) and umbrella protection enjoyed by the hawkers and food stalls to leave used or unusable items like wrappers, plates, plastic cups/glasses, soft drink cans/bottles, leftover food waste, etc., around for someone else to pick up.

Worse than such eyesores are the drains-covered or not-which make walking around in our concrete jungles the most unpleasant activity despite so much greenery. In fact, mismanagement of that greenery itself is another big problem. Dangerously low-hanging branches on footpaths, uncontrolled growth of plants/weeds blocking views, heaps of fallen leaves and broken branches on road corners and curbs are ubiquitous. We may blame the municipal corporations for neglect of outside thoroughfares and parks, but even the famed residential colonies are no exception to this menace. The RWAs are helpless-or maybe not bothered!

Mention of RWAs brings to mind the owners of these double-digit crore houses. These worthies get out of their swanky cars, get into their million-dollar homes, and forget about the muck outside-on street corners, garbage points across their colonies, and even just outside their gate!

Maybe Delhi is too big, too congested, too overcrowded, too heavily populated, and politically fissiparous. But the moot point is, if Delhi Cantt or Shanti Path area could be kept fairly clean, why not Hauz Khas, Lajpat Nagar, Defence Colony, or even Kalu Sarai for that matter? Back in 1999, my unit got moved to Hyderabad from a field area for a much-awaited peace tenure. We witnessed a refreshing spectacle-first in our living memory: every night from 11 PM till 3 AM the next day, the roads of Hyderabad-Secunderabad twin cities used to be swept clean, and every speck of dirt, every piece of litter used to be collected and removed without fail! Later on, we all have seen the amazing transformation of Indore being adjudged the cleanest city of India for the last eight years straight-year after year! And I am



A PERIODIC INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONAL ASSESSMENT COULD ALSO BE FACTORED IN HENCEFORTH TO ENSURE STEADY PROGRESS AND COURSE CORRECTION AS REQUIRED



not even talking of the transformation of Singapore from a third-world rural city to the “Cleanest City in the World” under the legendary Lee Kuan Yew! We need to identify where we are lagging behind, in Delhi and elsewhere (and everywhere?) in the country, and to put in place time-tested systems to address this malaise. The systems are broken and need to be fixed as of yesterday for the sake of our health, hygiene, and good living, if not for aesthetics alone!

Firstly, and very obviously, there has to be additional allocation of manpower, machines, and vehicles to clear, collect, and haul away all the garbage and waste generated in the city on a daily basis. The supervisory staff should be out on the streets on patrol in three shifts to ensure this. Littering and spitting have to be effectively checked, and heavy fines imposed on the spot and recovered online from the offenders. Stiff penalties on defaulting shops, food joints, and vendors not following the hygiene and sanitation standards should be the norm rather than the exception. This whole cam-

paign has to be supported by efficient and city-wide CCTV coverage managed by a number of control and reporting centres-a city does not become ‘Smart’ otherwise!

I am certain that we have some existing laws covering sanitation. However, we may need to further enact enforceable rules about separation of domestic waste into biodegradable, recyclable, and inorganic categories and empower daily door-to-door collection. Thereafter, it must be hauled away from the city for dumping and further processing/management. The system of establishing garbage collection points in/around residential colonies has to be done away with. Overnight storage of foul-smelling waste at common areas should be discontinued at the earliest. Existing structures could be put to some other use, like building public utilities, or removed altogether.

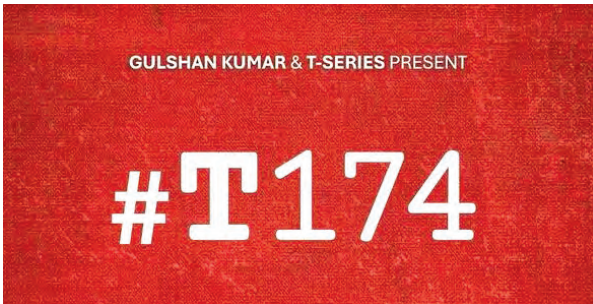
The most important part, though, is ensuring strict monitoring and foolproof control over corrupt practices. The violators need to be dealt with summarily and speedily, with empowered authority to impose and recover

fines on the spot. The ex-serviceman community can be roped in to be efficient, honest, diligent, and bold supervisors who could ensure enforcement of the rules ‘to the T’ and even confront and check the mafia, if any, operating to sabotage ‘The Mission’!

I will also recommend a statutory audit by the CAG to pinpoint wastage/misuse of allocated funds during at least the last five years, as well as bring out shortcomings/causes of the poor state of affairs and lay out a precise roadmap for correcting past mistakes and for future enforcement of modern methods.

A periodic and independent professional assessment could also be factored in henceforth to ensure steady progress and course correction as required. These actions need to be widely publicised and legally enforced for strict compliance. The elected government will have to put in place a suitable legal and administrative structure with an efficient hierarchy and systems to ensure this can be done in a transparent manner over a sustained period of time. Budgetary allocations have to be maintained at more than adequate levels, and committed citizenry will have to be involved to prevent deliberate subversion and sabotage in our ever-changing political landscape.

It is only a matter of determined and honest start and sustained implementation, coupled with monitoring, to ensure our streets and neighbourhoods are immaculately clean, bright, cheerful, and smelling nice. If Indore can do it, then surely Delhi can also do it, and maybe beat Singapore one day! However, let’s start NOW without waiting till 2047!



## Where does Hindi cinema stand today?

BY ABHI SINGHAL

I have been a die-hard admirer of Hindi cinema ever since I first discovered the extraordinary power it holds — the power to inspire, to move, and to shape cultural conversations. Over the years, it has been nothing short of a privilege to immerse myself in the world of films, appreciating both the labour behind them and the emotions they evoke. From revisiting timeless ‘old is gold’ classics to discovering films released fifteen years ago, I have repeatedly found myself falling in love with the art of storytelling.

There was once an era when real cinema reigned supreme, when stories came first and profits followed naturally. Today, however, with shifting cultural landscapes and the rise of aggressive commercialisation, cinema seems to have lost much of its original essence. Out of a hundred commercial releases, perhaps only one leaves a genuine impact. Take, for instance, the much-hyped Saiyaara. A commercial success by the tireless efforts of public relations machinery, the film may have fared well at the box office, but audience conversations tell another story altogether. While its songs struck a chord, the narrative fell flat, leaving many disappointed. A similar one with Ranbir Kapoor’s Animal — a film that dominated headlines, not merely for its content but for the debates it stirred around gender dynamics, representation, and its association with powerful star names. These factors may have guaranteed profits, but they did not necessarily guarantee the essence of cinema. In contrast, South Indian cinema seems to hold on to authenticity with far greater conviction. Films like Baahubali, RRR, KGF and most recently, Pushpa proved that when the foundation is a strong script backed by solid performances, the audience response is electric. These films did not just succeed; they became cultural phenomena, resonating across India and far beyond. The sheer box-office margins between these South Indian blockbusters and many Bollywood releases highlight the divide — where Hindi films often chase spectacle with little substance, the South has consistently shown that storytelling rooted in emotion with commercial returns.



True cinema, in my view, does not require manufactured hype. It speaks for itself through its story, its sincerity, and its ability to forge a deep connection with its audience. It lives not in headlines but in hearts. Recently, T-Series announced: “For those who believe in the power of real cinema... this one’s for you! #TSeries Production No. ‘T174’ arrives on 20th February 2026.” The declaration has reignited hopes among cinephiles — could this be a return to meaningful cinema, or is it yet another commercial game disguised in lofty promises? As admirers of the silver screen, we are left with an enduring question: Will the industry embrace authenticity once more, or will hype continue to overshadow heart?



## The anchor in the storm: India’s role amid...

Myanmar is now engulfed in a civil war, a stark reversal of its tentative democratic transition. The February 2021 coup dismantled years of political opening and accelerated democratic backsliding, as the junta crushed protests, persecuted minorities, and mismanaged the economy. More than 4,500 civilians have been killed and over 2 million displaced, while refugee flows, drug trafficking, and arms smuggling spill into neighbouring countries. With large parts of the country outside military control, Myanmar has fragmented into multiple centres of power, leaving governance fractured and instability entrenched.

### The Common Threads of Collapse

Several factors unite the crises unfolding across South Asia. Corruption stands out as the primary catalyst for popular anger, with citizens increasingly unwilling to tolerate kleptocratic elites enriching themselves at the expense of the public good. Economic mismanagement has compounded these frustrations, producing hardship that falls disproportionately on younger generations. Many countries in the region have relied heavily on remittances as a safety valve, creating the illusion of stability while masking the absence of genuine domestic development. When global downturns affect overseas employment opportunities, or when political regimes restrict communication with diaspora communities, the fragility of this economic model is quickly exposed.

Authoritarian tendencies — manifested

through restrictions on media freedom, curbs on civil society, and intolerance toward political opposition — have further alienated populations already weary of governance failures. Leaders have often chosen to tighten control of information flows rather than confront the structural roots of popular discontent. Finally, demographics are reshaping the political equation. South Asia is home to one of the world’s youngest populations, and these citizens are increasingly connected, informed, and unwilling to accept the status quo. The disconnect between educated youth and entrenched, aging political leadership has created a combustible mix that repeatedly pushes fragile systems toward rupture.

### INDIA: The Democratic Anchor

In this landscape of collapsing institutions and failed governance, India stands distinctly apart. Despite facing its own challenges, the world’s largest democracy has maintained institutional continuity and democratic processes.

India’s economy, too, has shown resilience in comparison to its neighbours. While countries across South Asia have confronted foreign exchange crises, debt defaults, and fiscal breakdowns, India has maintained growth momentum and macroeconomic stability. As the world’s fastest-growing major economy, India has continued to attract investor confidence even amid global uncertainty, underscoring the strength of its diversified economic base.

### Regional Implications and India’s Response

The instability in India’s neighbourhood poses significant challenges. Border security con-

cerns, refugee flows, economic disruption, and the potential for extremist exploitation of chaos all affect Indian interests. The collapse of neighbouring governments creates power vacuums that can be filled by radical elements or external powers seeking to expand their influence.

India’s response has been measured and principled. The country has provided humanitarian assistance while maintaining diplomatic engagement with governments in power as well as key stakeholders on the ground. The policy of “Neighbourhood First” recognises that India’s own development and security are closely linked to regional stability.

However, India cannot single-handedly stabilise the region. The problems in neighbouring countries are fundamentally internal, rooted in governance failures, institutional weaknesses, and social divisions that require domestic solutions. India can offer support, share experiences, and provide a model, but each country must chart its own path toward stability.

As Nepal’s Gen Z protesters demand accountability and a new political contract, India must calibrate its approach with sensitivity. Rather than acting as a domineering elder, New Delhi’s role should be that of a supportive neighbour-listening, engaging, and reaching out to the aspirations of a generation that is digitally connected, politically conscious, and impatient for change. By demonstrating solidarity with the democratic impulses of Nepal’s youth, while respecting the sovereignty of its institutions, India can help nurture stability next door without fuelling suspicions of interference. In doing so, India underscores that regional leadership is not about control, but about partnership rooted in mutual respect.

## The fall of regimes in India’s neighbourhood

The once-promising democratic movement in Pakistan appears weakened, if not entirely derailed.

Afghanistan offers perhaps the starkest picture of regression. The Taliban’s return to power in August 2021 following the US withdrawal has plunged the country into a human rights and governance crisis. Girls have been banned from schools and universities; dissent is brutally silenced.

Meanwhile, in Myanmar, the 2021 military coup that overthrew democratic icon Aung San Suu Kyi plunged the country into civil war. The military misjudged the public’s response — mass protests erupted across the country, met with brutal crackdowns and mass killings. Thousands of civilians, facing state violence, took up arms and formed resistance groups that now operate from the country’s dense jungles. In retaliation, the military has launched indiscriminate bombings and artillery strikes, devastating entire communities to root out insurgents.

Myanmar’s internal war has sparked a serious refugee crisis spilling over into India. According to Reuters, more than 65,000 refugees, primarily from the Chin ethnic group, have fled to India-many seeking asylum in Mizoram. The coup has claimed over 3,000 lives and pushed nearly 17 million people to the brink of starvation, worsening one of the region’s worst humanitarian crises.

Across South Asia, the common theme is

undeniable: discontent with entrenched elites, catalysed by youth anger, rising inequality, and eroded democratic institutions. As Paul Staniland from the University of Chicago notes, the crisis is structural; people no longer see ruling classes as capable of delivering a secure or prosperous future.

However, spontaneous uprisings often lack strong leadership. In Nepal and Bangladesh, interim governments have filled the void, but without long-term reform, the same elite circles may return to power. Fragile coalitions and political vacuums continue to stall progress. **For India, these cascading crises present immediate strategic challenges:**

- Nepal’s open border raises concerns about infiltration and migration.
- Bangladesh’s unrest could empower radical elements in the region.
- Sri Lanka’s ports remain battlegrounds for Indian and Chinese influence.
- Pakistan’s instability threatens regional peace and security.
- Afghanistan and Myanmar present twin threats of terrorism and refugee influxes.

In just a few years, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, and Afghanistan have all witnessed either regime collapses or authoritarian consolidations. Each upheaval represents a turning point not only for those nations but also for India’s regional diplomacy, security posture, and humanitarian engagement.

(The writer is currently engaged as Foreign Affairs Editor with The Pioneer. He has been covering foreign policy for a decade, reporting from over 30 countries. He reported on the fall of Sri Lanka’s Government in 2022 and Bangladesh’s regime change in 2024)





# My driver is like my girlfriend, unpredictable but addictive

FAIRWAY FILES

Rahil Gangjee

**THERE ARE FEW** relationships in a golfer's life that can rival the one we share with our driver. Some players talk about their coach, some about their caddie, and a few even give credit to the gym for keeping their bodies in shape. But for me, nothing defines the highs and lows of my golfing life like that big stick in the bag.

If you ask me, my driver is a lot like a girlfriend—unpredictable, moody, and occasionally the best thing that's ever happened to me. One moment it makes me feel like Rory McIlroy, bombing it down the middle, chest puffed out, smile for the cameras. The next moment, it reminds me that heartbreak is only one swing away. Slice into the trees? Hook into the lake? Oh yes, I've experienced it all.

And yet, I keep coming back. Why? Because, just like love, the driver is addictive. You can't quit it. You promise yourself you'll "just hit 3-wood for safety," but then you stand on the tee, the fairway stretching out in front of you, and that 460cc temptress whispers in your ear: *Go on, big guy. Show them what you've got.*

**The honeymoon phase**

Every golfer knows the honeymoon phase with a new driver. You've been eyeing it online, checking reviews, watching YouTube launch monitor tests at 2 a.m. Finally, you walk into the shop, swipe your card, and the shiny new love of your life is in your hands. The grip feels perfect, the shaft promises extra yards, and the marketing brochure tells you it's "forgiving."

**Every driver-golfer relationship is unique. Some like a low fade, others a towering draw**

**Forgiving?** Ha! That's the biggest lie since "I'll be ready in five minutes."

The first few rounds are magical. You're convinced you've found *the one*. Drives are soaring, your playing partners are impressed, and you even give it a little wipe with your towel after every shot. You treat it better than your car.

But, just like any relationship, reality sets in. One day you block it 30 yards right, and suddenly you're questioning every decision you've ever made. Was it me? Was it the shaft? Did I swing too hard? Maybe she doesn't love me anymore.

**The jealousy factor**

Here's the thing about drivers—they hate competition. The moment you pull out a 3-wood or an iron off the tee, the driver sulks. Next time you give it a chance, it punishes you with a banana slice. It's like saying hello to an ex in front of your girlfriend—dangerous territory.

I've had weeks where I've benched the driver altogether, thinking I was "better off without her." But sure enough, by the back nine, I'm sneaking her out of the bag again, whispering, *This time will be different.* Spoiler: it usually isn't.

**Public displays of affection**

When the driver behaves, though—oh man, the world needs to know. Nothing beats the rush of a 300-yard missile down the center. You pose a little longer than necessary, maybe twirl the club, and pretend it was routine. Inside, though, you're bursting with pride. It's the golfing equivalent of posting a couple selfie with matching sunglasses on Instagram.

And just like relationships, people around you notice. Playing partners start muttering, "He's driving it well today," with a hint of envy. You act casual, but you're already composing a romantic poem in your head: *Roses are red, fairways*

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram

In the last eight years, the government had used multiple GST rates to *exploit* and *extract* the last *paisa* from consumers.

In the first part-year (July 2017 to March 2018), the government collected about ₹11 lakh crore. In 2024-25, it collected about ₹22 lakh crore. Every *paisa* earned by consumers through their hard work was sucked by the government through GST — it was rightly, and derisively, called **Gabbar Singh Tax**

**FINALLY, WISDOM HAS** dawned on the central government. On September 3, 2025, the government rationalised and reduced the GST rates on a wide range of goods and services. The tax structure is now closer to a *good and simple tax* that several political parties, businesspersons, institutions and individuals (including me) had advocated in the last eight years. When the Constitution (122nd Amendment) Bill was debated in Parliament in August 2016, I spoke in the Rajya Sabha. Here are excerpts:

**Consistent stand**

"I am glad that the Finance Minister has acknowledged that it was the UPA government which first officially announced the government's intention to bring about the GST. On 28 February, 2005 it was announced in the Lok Sabha in the course of the budget speech.

"Sir, there are four major issues...

"I now come to the most important part of the Bill... This is about the rate of tax. I will presently read portions from the chief economic advisor's report... please remember we are dealing with an indirect tax. An indirect tax, by definition, is a regressive tax. Any indirect tax falls equally on the rich and poor... The chief economic advisor's report says: 'In high income countries, the average GST rate is 16.8%. In emerging market economies like India, the average is 14.1%.' So, world over, over 190 countries have one form or other of GST. It is between 14.1% and 16.8%...

"We need to keep the taxes low. At the same time, we must protect the existing revenues of the Union government and the state governments... We go about it by discovering what is called 'revenue neutral rate', RNR...

FIFTH COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

**WHAT INTRIGUES ME** about the revolution in Nepal being led by angry, young people is how they have turned *#nepokidz* into a rallying cry. The habit of breeding nepo-babies that nearly all political leaders in this sub-continent embrace makes me personally very angry. So, I have sympathy for all jobless, despairing young people without being an advocate of anarchy. Nepal's 'Gen-Z' seems to have been enraged about nepotism for a long while and have expressed these feelings on social media.

Unsurprisingly, it was the ban on social media that acted as a trigger for the anarchy we saw play out in the streets of Kathmandu and spread slowly into rural districts. A young man from Nepal who works in Mumbai told me that he had an aunt who was a rural politician and she had been advised to go into hiding when they saw how the uncontrollable violence in Kathmandu forced the prime minister to resign.

Since monarchy was abolished in Nepal in 2008, there have been four elections and 14 prime ministers. Most prime ministers came from communist or Leftist political parties. They should have known better than to immediately start behaving like kings in a country



A protest against GST rates in Pune in 2022

EXPRESS FILE PHOTO: OSHWIN KADHAR

# Time for an apology

"The chief economic advisor of the government, working with experts, including state government representatives, arrived at an RNR of 15% to 15.5% and then suggested that the standard rate should be 18%. The Congress party did not pluck 18% from the air. This 18% came out of your report...

"...somebody must speak up for the people. In the name of the people, I ask you to keep this rate at the rate recommended by your CEA, namely, the standard rate should not exceed 18%...

"...just read paragraphs 29, 30, 52 and 53 of the report. It categorically argues ... a standard rate of 18% will protect the revenues of the Centre and states, will be efficient, will be non-inflationary, will avoid tax evasion, and will be acceptable to the people of India... If you are going to charge 24% or 26% on goods and services, why bring a GST Bill at all?...

"Eventually, you have to put a rate in a tax Bill. I, on behalf of my party, loudly and clearly demand that the standard rate of GST, which applies to most of the goods and services, over 70% of the goods and services, should not exceed 18% and the lower rate and the demerit rate can be worked on that 18%."

## 8 years of exploitation

I spoke in the same voice in 2016 as I do today. I am glad that the government has come around to the view that the rates have to be *rationalised* and *reduced*. However, at the inception, the government had argued that a cap of 18% will lead to huge revenue loss, especially to state governments. It was a bugbear. Today, the two slab rates are 5% and 18%! The Centre has various means to raise tax revenue; if the state governments lose revenue, the correct thing to do is to *compensate* the states.

In the last eight years, the government had used the multiple GST rates to *exploit* and *extract* the last paise from the consumers. In the first part-year (July 2017 to March 2018), the government collected about ₹11 lakh crore. In 2024-25, it collected about ₹22 lakh crore. Every *paise* earned by consumers through their hard work was sucked by the government through GST — it was rightly, and derisively, called Gabbar Singh Tax. High GST rates was one of the reasons for low consumption and rising household debt. It is elementary economics that reduction of taxes will boost consumption.

If 5% GST on toothpaste, hair oil, but-

ter, infant napkins, pencils, notebooks, tractors, sprinklers, etc. is good today, why was it bad in the last eight years? Why did people have to pay exorbitant taxes for eight years?

## Not end of road

The reduction of rates is only the beginning. There are many more things that have to be done. The government should —

- prepare the states, producers and consumers for a *single* GST rate (with more exemptions, if necessary);
- scrap the gobbledygook that now passes for sections of the Acts and Rules; re-write them in simple language;
- prescribe simple forms and returns, and drastically reduce the frequency of filings;
- simplify compliance with the law: a small trader or shopkeeper should not need the services of a chartered accountant;
- de-criminalise the GST laws: they are civil laws concerning commerce and any contravention must be punished with appropriate monetary penalties; and
- instill into the tax collectors that producers and traders are *central* to the economy, and they are not enemies to be slain by the tax collector.

There is nothing for the BJP to celebrate. The government should offer an apology to the people. And I hope it will not take *another* eight years to implement the remaining reforms.

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# Revolution in the air

that had got tired of kings. But, just as we in India have found it hard to shake off colonial governance and colonial bureaucracies, it appears that in Nepal, they have found it hard to come to terms with the idea that democracy should not produce rulers, but servants of the people. What happens in Nepal is something that interests me less than what could happen in our own ancient and wondrous land if our political leaders do not correctly read the smoke signals rising from the burned government buildings in Kathmandu.

As someone who has spent most of the years of my life in Lutyens' Delhi, I have had a ringside view of what goes on in the homes of our most powerful political leaders. This has enabled me to witness with my own eyes how political leaders become inexplicably rich as soon as they are ensconced in this most exclusive of India's residential enclaves. When I was a child, almost the only people who lived here were families who technically inherited 'old money' but who in truth lived in genteel poverty. Today, almost the only people who can afford to live here are politicians, high officials and billionaires.

Taxpayers should know how much the homes of our 'humble' politicians cost today. On doing a little research, I learned that Jawaharlal Nehru's one-

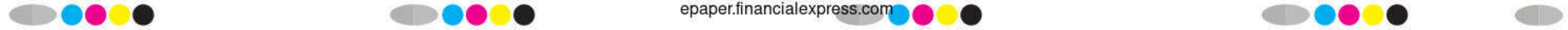
time home on Motilal Nehru Marg, formerly York Road, is to be sold for ₹ 1,100 crore, potentially making it the most expensive residential real estate transaction in India's history. Renting a Lutyens' bungalow costs a minimum of ₹3 lakh a month and could go up to ₹30 lakh a month. Long years ago, when Narendra Modi first became prime minister, I asked Arun Jaitley when Modi was going to start making commercial use of the most valuable real estate in our country and he said, "Not now, in his second term."

He is now in his third term and there is no sign of this happening. It goes without saying that children brought up like royalty in homes that our former Princes can no longer afford will grow up as nepo-babies. And they do. I cannot remember when I last met a senior political leader or bureaucrat whose children did not go to the finest universities in the West. When I have dared ask how they afford spending so much on their children's education, I have nearly always been told that their children got scholarships. What is noteworthy about nepo-babies is that despite their expensive education they somehow never manage to get real jobs and usually wait to inherit Mumyji or Daddyji's political party. It would not be untrue to describe the INDIA coalition as a nepo-

babies private club. Meanwhile, in Modi's team, we have senior ministers in his cabinet who have managed to get their own nepo-babies important (and lucrative) positions in sports bodies and think tanks. All these nepo-babies are doing well. As did those born in socialist, secular times in which most other Indians lived in extreme poverty.

As a 'veteran' political columnist I have watched with growing alarm the way countries around us have exploded ostensibly for different reasons. Sri Lanka's young people revolted against a corrupt political dynasty. Bangladesh exploded because of an autocrat who refused to allow fair elections and Nepal has exploded because young people got fed up with being destitute and desperate while their elected leaders allowed their *#nepokidz* to buy designer clothes and jewels and flaunt them in the riverias of the jet set.

If we do not want this 'revolution in the air' to seep across the border into our own dear Bharat Mata, it is about time that someone at the top starts to pay careful attention to the voices we heard in the streets of Kathmandu last week. Narendra Modi won his first election by promising that he would lead the charge against corruption and nepotism. "*Na khaonga, na khaane doonga*," he used to say at those long-ago rallies when he won the hearts of Indian voters by promising not just an end to corruption, but also change and prosperity. It is time that he rehearsed his old lines and repeated them again.





{ THE BIG PICTURE }

# Towards a new paradigm of urbanism in Himalayas

Their future will not be secured by building faster or higher, but by how wisely we build, and by how much we choose not to build at all

The Himalayas are a living landscape of rivers, forests, glaciers, and communities that have adapted over centuries to the mountain range's fragile environment. Nearly 210 million people across seven countries depend on these landscapes for their livelihoods, with more than 50 million in India alone. Yet, this region is under extraordinary stress.

Over the past few weeks, we have witnessed repeated catastrophes across the Himalayan belt: Uttarkashi's Dharali village devastated by a flash flood, landslides burying parts of Mandi, and heavy rains triggering floods and devastation in parts of Jammu and Kashmir.

These are not isolated events, but warnings that reckless development in fragile terrain can multiply disasters.

They underline a critical truth: The Himalayas are not only ecologically fragile, they are urbanistically vulnerable. Our planning has ignored the terrain, hydrology, and the culture of the mountains. The result is towns expanding without direction, concrete spreading across springs and waterheads, and infrastructure built as if the land beneath were inert. It is clear that the path forward requires a multi-pronged approach, with each aspect demanding urgent attention.

**Terrain-sensitive urban planning:** In the Himalayas, a road is never just a road. It is

a cut across a slope, a change in water flow, and often the first trigger for erosion.

Nearly half of the Indian Himalayan Region is classified as highly susceptible to landslides; yet, large-scale road widening and hotel construction continue without serious geological studies.

Most Himalayan towns have grown without comprehensive planning, resulting in ribbon-like sprawls along highways. When a single road is blocked, entire settlements are paralysed. Many major centres, including Shimla and Nainital, sit on waterheads. With rapid concretisation, rainfall that once soaked into the soil now rushes unchecked over hard surfaces, intensifying floods and landslides.

Urban planning here must account for slope gradient, soil stability, and hydrology. Carrying capacity assessments should guide where and how towns expand, not unchecked demand.

**Building for resilience:** Most Himalayan towns still follow generic building codes designed for the plains. This is an extraordinary oversight in one of the most active seismic zones in the world. Building standards must be specific: Earthquake-resistant structures as outlined in IS 1893 and IS 13920, strict height limits tied to slope angle, and deep foundations for fragile soils.

Local materials such as timber, stone, and lime have been used for centuries because they respond well to the climate and reduce transport costs. Combined with modern techniques, they can create buildings that are both efficient and resilient. Passive solar design, sloping roofs, and natural ventilation are not outdated traditions but design solutions shaped by the moun-

tain climate.

Construction must be prohibited in hazard-prone areas. The National Disaster Management Authority has already mapped sensitive zones. These maps must guide approvals, not gather dust.



Dikshu C Kukreja

**Infrastructure and transport:** The highways authority has identified more than 600 slope failure zones on Himalayan roads. All of them are both an engineering challenge and a human risk. Alternatives exist. Ropeways, funiculars, and electric buses can provide connectivity while reducing slope cutting and soil erosion.

Tourism corridors face the heaviest burden. Himachal Pradesh alone saw more than 50 lakh visitors in the first half of 2024. Infrastructure in such areas should be modular, able to absorb seasonal surges without permanent damage.

Poor connectivity in rural areas also drives migration. Villagers without access to health care, schools, or markets move into already-strained towns. The lack of basic services such as water and sanitation accelerates this shift.

**Waste and water:** Water in the Himalayas is both abundant and scarce at once. Monsoon floods destroy homes, yet summers bring acute shortages. Towns must capture and reuse water through decentralised harvesting, greywater recycling, and permeable pavements. Excessive concretisation worsens the problem, sending rainfall downhill with destructive intensity instead of recharging aquifers.

Waste is now a serious problem. Tourist towns in Uttarakhand generated over 8,000 tonnes of solid waste in 2023, much of it untreated. Landfills on unstable slopes are a recipe for disaster. Composting and



Himalayan towns still follow generic building codes designed for the plains. This is an extraordinary oversight in one of the most active seismic zones in the world.

HT ARCHIVE

decentralised treatment, combined with strict enforcement of plastic bans, are essential.

**Tourism and livelihoods:** Tourism sustains economies, but its current form overwhelms fragile systems. In Uttarakhand, the tourist influx rose by more than 60% between 2022 and 2024. Single-lane roads get jammed with vehicles, hotels draw down scarce groundwater, and waste systems collapse.

Carrying capacity studies must guide development. Visitor and vehicle caps, eco-certification for hotels, and support for cultural and eco-tourism can sustain livelihoods without exhausting the land.

**Governance and coordination:** Governance in the Himalayas is fragmented. Municipal councils, state departments, and

central agencies overlap, leaving gaps in accountability. Few towns have climate vulnerability assessments, despite being exposed to floods, landslides, and droughts. Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh still struggle to integrate geo-hydrological risks into their master plans.

Planning must be decentralised but supported by technical expertise. GIS-based zoning, digital terrain models, and early-warning systems for landslides and floods should be standard. Participatory mapping experiments in Sikkim and Nagaland show how communities themselves can identify risk zones.

The Himalayas cannot be treated as a land bank for construction. They are living systems that demand humility. Their future will not be secured by building

faster or higher, but by how wisely we build, and by how much we choose not to build at all.

If we continue to design as though the mountains were inert stone, they will remind us otherwise. The wiser path is to work with the land rather than against it. Roads, homes, and cities must grow in dialogue with the terrain, the climate, and the culture of the place. Urbanism in the Himalayas must become a language of restraint, resilience, and respect. Only then can the mountains remain both a home and a heritage for generations to come.

Dikshu C Kukreja is managing principal, CP Kukreja Architects, and is honorary consul general, Republic of Albania. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



## A challenging time for Indian diplomacy

Just as the US ambassador-designate Sergio Gor admitted to "minor hiccups" in India-US ties and assured that the two countries are "not that far apart right now on a (trade) deal", one could ask how badly damaged the relationship is. What impact could improving relations between Washington and Beijing have on India's relationship with America? And if India doesn't stop buying Russian oil could we see a second or, even, third phase of additional tariffs?

Former foreign secretary Shyam Saran believes "this is certainly a most challenging time for Indian diplomacy. There is no doubt that we are perhaps in a more vulnerable situation than we've been for quite some time". Meanwhile, there have been positive exchanges between President Trump and Prime Minister Modi on social media. Parallely, Trump is reported to have asked the European Union to impose 100% tariffs on India if Delhi persists with oil purchases from Moscow.

Let's come to developments that could seriously impact Delhi's relationship with Washington. First, Trump continues to talk about his very good relationship with China and his friendship with Xi. He's keen to do a deal with Beijing and he's even talked about visiting China. The question is how far will he go? Could he sacrifice Quad for a big deal with China? *The New York Times* says Trump has no plans to visit India for the Quad Summit. Does this mean the Indo-Pacific strategy is no longer central to the Trump Administration's foreign policy? That would have a markedly deleterious influence on India-US relations. It would push us to the margins from the central position we once had in America's policy vis-à-vis China. Saran puts it pithily: "India is most comfortable when its relations with the US and China are better than their relationship with each other." That's not the case today. The vibes between Washington and Beijing are certainly better than those between Washington and Delhi.

This raises the question: Is there a possibility of some sort of G2 emerging between America and China? If yes, would that "legitimise" China's dominance of the Asian region? India definitely would not want that.

In these circumstances, how much improvement can there be in India's relationship with China? Its rock-solid relations with Pakistan are unlikely to change. The border problem remains unresolved. China wants to dominate Asia which India cannot accept. And when it comes to trade it has considerable leverage in terms of rare earths, fertilizers and tunnel-boring equipment. So despite the smiles and handshake at Tianjin, there's little room for India-China relations to significantly improve.

Let's now focus on Russia and oil. US vice-president JD Vance has said 25% secondary tariffs have been imposed on India as "aggressive economic leverage" on Russia to stop the Ukraine war. But that hasn't worked. So might a frustrated Trump impose additional tariffs on India? We can't be sure. That's the problem.

Meanwhile, India has other questions to face. The truth is the savings by buying Russian oil, around \$2 per barrel, is considerably less than the cost of losing \$48 billion worth of exports to America. So, in economic terms, there's a good case for stopping Russian oil. But do the strategic and political reasons for continuing outweigh the economic? Presumably they do.

As of now India will continue to buy Russian oil. But that means Russia benefits, because it gets the money, whilst India pays the cost, both in terms of exports to America

IN ECONOMIC TERMS, THERE IS A GOOD CASE FOR STOPPING RUSSIAN OIL. BUT DO THE STRATEGIC AND POLITICAL REASONS FOR CONTINUING OUTWEIGH THE ECONOMIC ONES? PRESUMABLY THEY DO.

and the wider relationship with Washington. Does that mean we're at the "bad" end of this arrangement? It does look like it, doesn't it?

Let me end by drawing to the front an issue that's lurked in the background. Our relations with America are at their lowest ebb for three decades. We hardly have a relationship with Pakistan. Even though relations with China are improving we have serious problems that remain untackled. And whilst we have sunny relations with Russia, we're clearly paying a heavy price for them. Meanwhile — and this is the paradox — America's relations with China, Pakistan and Russia are better than under President Biden. These relationships have significantly improved in just nine months. So is this a bad time for Indian diplomacy? I can't help feel the answer is yes, despite Gor's optimism about India-US relations.

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

{ ENGENDERED }

Lalita Panicker



## Impact of floods on women's health care

This monsoon season, there have been severe floods in many parts of India and serious waterlogging in cities and towns. An often-neglected aspect of such floods — is its effect on women and girls. Efforts to beef up water, sanitation/hygiene, and health facilities most often do not factor in climate-resilient infrastructure and services, keeping the specific needs of women in mind.

Health facilities become inaccessible or are ill-equipped for women needing prenatal and post-natal care. The recent floods across several districts in Bihar, for example, have severely disrupted maternal health services. To its credit, the health department did try to provide boat ambulances for pregnant women, but such services are also hit during challenging times. Ante-natal care in many affected villages has been alarmingly poor. In some districts such as Begusarai, medical camps were set up and delivery kits prepared in advance. In addition, in many districts, volunteers have been a support system for ASHAs in locating pregnant women and assisting them to reach the nearest health camp. There is, however, a serious shortage of medical staff and lack of referral for high-risk pregnancies in remote flood-hit areas.

Jaymala Kumari, a resident of Pipariya Diyara village in Lakhisarai, recalled the anxiety she felt during her pregnancy, especially about reaching a health facility for delivery in the middle of the floods. The health camp in her village came as a lifeline. She was examined at the camp and later facilitated to reach the primary health centre, where she safely delivered a healthy baby.

On the other hand, Manju Devi from Simaria village in Begusarai said the floods have made life extremely difficult, and

while they are often called to health camps, services are not consistently available.

Some areas where preparations were made in advance still failed as there were sudden variations in the floodwaters rising. In addition, soil erosion had also made many villages inaccessible. Then there is the problem of out of pocket expenditure which flood affected villagers were not able to bear, thanks to breaks in jobs and inability to access funds from banks.

Sudha Jha, an obstetrician and gynaecologist from Sitamarhi, stresses the need for proper communication with beneficiaries is critical in flood-affected areas. Every pregnant woman should remain in touch with doctors, and when reaching facilities is difficult, teleconsultation must be promoted as a vital option. She says water contamination is one of the biggest risks during floods.

There could be various solutions like increasing the use of mobile health care apps or increasing the number of mobile clinics. But the more permanent and workable solution would be to build flood resistant infrastructure in areas prone to flooding. Health workers should also be trained in the particular challenges they will face in accessing and imparting treatment in flood affected areas.

Women should be allowed to express their own needs before drawing up programmes to deal with their health issues during natural calamities like floods. At present, many plans and schemes do not even factor in gender or gender-specific needs, especially those relating to maternal health. Women have to be made active participants in their own health needs, something that is missing in most states at the moment.

The views expressed are personal

## Is the smartphone, as we know it, set to disappear?

In 1915, Ed Klein, a seller of harnesses, put out an advertisement in *Lawrence Journal World*, a local newspaper in Kansas. It was an appeal to people to not buy this new gadget called the car, and continue buying horses for transportation. It mentioned a horse named Dobbin (added to give the appeal emotional draw, a classic advertising trick) who was very low maintenance, needed no expensive fossil fuels, and didn't



Abhishek Asthana

depreciate as an asset on the balance sheet. The appeal was desperate. Henry Ford had already come up with the concept of assembly line manufacturing in 1913, and by the time of Klein's ad, he could produce a car in 93 minutes flat. He famously said, "If I ask people what they want, they would say faster horses." He was right. Much of the research over the 100 years preceding Ford's statement was on making horses faster, stronger, and, probably, poop less. The stench of horse manure was so bad, cities must have felt like marketing department meeting rooms.

The key issue was that the horses of 1877 were barely distinguishable from the horses of 1876. Four percent faster maybe? One would never know. Hundred years later, the same is happening with smartphones. Apple just launched their latest iteration, iPhone 17, touted as some sort of innovation leap. But the moment it was announced, Apple stock tumbled 3.2%, which is like losing \$10 billion. Markets were clearly unimpressed with incremen-

tal upgrades. Historically, Apple events, which launch the iPhone n-th phone, are a great time to buy the iPhone n-1. But most newer phones just seem to rearrange camera lens placement on the back panel of the previous phone. And that's why I think smartphones have peaked. Any subsequent resolution upgrade, speed upgrade, or camera clarity bump won't be distinguishable to the naked eye. All you get is more and more adjectives. Adjectives don't move your stock price upward, nouns do. Sadly, phones are like a screwdriver now. It's done. Anything more is an overkill.

A common refrain is you can never write off technology, a usual example shared is of the time when Charles H Duel, the US Patent Office commissioner, said in 1899, "Everything that can be invented has been invented." Barely four years later, the Wright brothers achieved the first powered flight. Maybe, a patent officer saying more patents aren't needed could be about them slacking off work. But such statements have been made often. Ken Olsen, founder of Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC), famously said in 1977, "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home." And today, everyone has a computer in their pockets. One good thing is that such articles, such opinions are remembered decades later. I won't be complaining if the clippings of this article are used 40-50 years down the line to prove a point — not at all; such vanity is welcome.



A smartphone is like a screwdriver now. It's done. Anything more is an overkill. REUTERS

As a kid, we had one telephone in the neighbourhood. If you owned anything that had rubberised buttons to press, you were rich — be it a mobile phone, a TV remote, or a computer keyboard. The more buttons your electronic appliance has, the higher your status in society. Phones were something you shouted into, at the top of your voice, so that if the network had an issue, your actual voice would carry to the other side. We have come a long way, from a time when we gave out PP numbers (*padosi ka phone*, or the neighbour's digits), to a time when we are writing obituaries of smartphones.

Experts say phones are yet to use the full power of Artificial Intelligence, most of our interactions with our phone are cumbersome, clicking buttons sequentially to make it do what we want to do. It's a bit painful at times. Running low on phone memory? Here are 76 taps you must make to free up some space. It's not ideal.

To carry a rectangular rock in your pockets all the time, constantly needing to charge it — with a perennial fear of losing it, cracking it, or it being used by your spouse to read your chats — is not sustainable. Something that is such an intrinsic part of you and your personality should be a thing you should be wearing. And slowly it should start shrinking, and eventually disappear — displays before your eyes and commands transmitted via thought. But I guess, there is still a lot of money to be made in releasing these numbered iPhone iterations. Still in its teens, it at least needs to reach marriageable age before it faces the realities of life. Hence, I would advise you to not hold your breath waiting to see if the ones selling horses would be inventing cars. Let's wait for the Henry Ford of this century.

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

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

### Geopolitical unease

This is in reference to "Trumpian jolt to India is debilitating, but not fatal" (Sept 7). With Trump's jolts to the global economy, India may yet be one of the few nations to meet this belligerent unilateralism with our own diplomatic ways, focusing on breaking down tariff barriers and backing more cooperative frameworks.

Ashish Salunke

### Reservation for women in the judiciary

This is with reference to "Why India's Judiciary needs more women" by Namita Bhandare (Sept 7). There is a need for more women judges in the judiciary, to bring nuances of gender to jurisprudence in India. Reservation may just be the need of the hour.

Abhilasha Gupta

II

With only one woman judge in the Supreme Court and barely 13% in the high courts, the principle of inclusive justice is undermined. Women judges bring diverse perspectives shaped by lived experiences, enriching the quality of judicial outcomes.

Sanjay Chopra

Write to us at: [letters@hindustantimes.com](mailto:letters@hindustantimes.com)











Across  
THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM

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FINALLY, WISDOM has dawned on the central government. On September 3, 2025, the government rationalized and reduced the GST rates on a wide range of goods and services. The tax structure is now closer to a *good and simple tax* that several political parties, businesspersons, institutions and individuals (including me) had advocated in the last eight years. When the Constitution (122nd Amendment) Bill was debated in Parliament in August 2016, I spoke in the Rajya Sabha. Here are excerpts:

CONSISTENT STAND

"I am glad that the Finance Minister has acknowledged that it was the UPA government which first officially announced the government's intention to bring about the GST. On 28 February, 2005 it was announced in the Lok Sabha in the course of the budget speech.

"Sir, there are four major issues...

"I now come to the most important part of the Bill... This is about the rate of tax. I will presently read portions from the chief economic advisor's report... please remember we are dealing with an indirect tax. An indirect tax, by definition, is a regressive tax. Any indirect tax falls equally on the rich and poor... The chief economic advisor's report says: 'In high income countries, the average GST rate is 16.8%. In emerging market economies like India, the average is 14.1%.' So, world over, over 190 countries have one form or other

In the last eight years, the government had used the multiple GST rates to *exploit* and *extract* the last *paise* from the consumers. In the first part-year (July 2017 to March 2018), the government collected about Rs 11 lakh crore. In 2024-25, it collected about Rs 22 lakh crore. Every *paise* earned by consumers through their hard work was sucked by the government through GST — it was rightly, and derisively, called Gabbar Singh Tax

# Time for an apology

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"We need to keep the taxes low. At the same time, we must protect the existing revenues of the Union government and the state governments... We go about it by discovering what is called 'revenue neutral rate', RNR...

"The chief economic advisor of the government, working with experts, including state government representatives, arrived at an RNR of 15% to 15.5% and then suggested that the standard rate should be 18%. The Congress party did not pluck 18% from the air. This 18% came out of your report...

"...somebody must speak up for the people. In the name of the people, I ask you to keep this rate at the rate recommended by your CEA, namely, the standard rate should not exceed 18%...

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"Eventually, you have to put a rate in a tax Bill. I, on behalf of my party, loudly and clearly demand that the standard rate of GST, which applies to most of the goods and services, over 70% of the goods and services, should not exceed 18% and the lower rate and the demerit rate can be worked on that 18%."

8 YEARS OF  
EXPLOITATION

I spoke in the same voice in 2016 as I do today. I am glad that the government has come around to the view that the rates have to be *rationalized* and *reduced*. However, at the inception, the government had argued that a cap of 18 per cent will lead to huge revenue loss, especially to state governments. It was a bugbear. Today, the two slab rates are 5 per cent and 18 per cent! The Centre has various means to raise tax revenue; if the state governments lose revenue, the correct thing to do is to *compensate* the states.

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years? Why did people have to pay exorbitant taxes for eight years?

NOT END OF ROAD

The reduction of rates is only the beginning. There are many more things that have to be done. The government should —

■ prepare the states, producers and consumers for a *single* GST rate (with more exemptions, if necessary);

■ scrap the gobbledygook that now passes for sections of the Acts and Rules; re-write them in simple language;

■ prescribe simple forms and returns, and drastically reduce the frequency of filings;

■ simplify compliance with the law: a small trader or shopkeeper should not need the services of a chartered accountant;

■ de-criminalize the GST laws: they are civil laws concerning commerce and any contravention must be punished with appropriate monetary penalties; and

■ instill into the tax collectors that producers and traders are *central* to the economy, and they are not enemies to be slain by the tax collector.

There is nothing for the BJP to celebrate. The government should offer an apology to the people. And I hope it will not take *another* eight years to implement the remaining reforms.

Fifth  
COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

Twitter @tavleen\_singh



# Revolution in the air

WHAT INTRIGUES me about the revolution in Nepal being led by angry, young people is how they have turned #nepokidz into a rallying cry. The habit of breeding nepo-babies that nearly all political leaders in this subcontinent embrace makes me personally very angry. So, I have sympathy for all jobless, despairing young people without being an advocate of anarchy. Nepal's 'Gen-Z' seems to have been enraged about nepotism for a long while and have expressed these feelings on social media.

Unsurprisingly, it was the ban on social media that acted as a trigger for the anarchy we saw play out in the streets of Kathmandu and spread slowly into rural districts. A young man from Nepal who works in Mumbai told me that he had an aunt who was a rural politician and she had been advised to go into hiding when they saw how the uncontrollable violence in Kathmandu forced the prime minister to resign.

Since monarchy was abolished in Nepal in 2008, there have been four elections and 14 prime ministers. Most prime ministers came from communist or Leftist political parties. They should have known better than to immediately start behaving like kings in a country that had got tired of kings. But, just as we in India have found it hard to shake off colonial governance and colonial bureaucracies, it appears that in Nepal, they have found it hard to come to terms with the idea that democracy should not produce rulers, but servants of the people. What happens in Nepal is something that interests me less than what could happen in our own ancient and wondrous land if our political leaders do not correctly read the smoke signals rising from the burned government buildings in Kathmandu.

As someone who has spent most of the years of my life in Lutyens' Delhi, I have had a ringside view of what goes on in the homes of our most powerful political leaders. This has enabled me to witness with my own eyes how political leaders become inexplicably rich as soon as they are ensconced in this most exclusive of India's residential enclaves. When I was a child, almost the only people who lived here were families who technically inherited 'old money' but who in truth lived in genteel poverty. Today, almost the only people who can afford to live here are politicians, high officials and billionaires.

Taxpayers should know how much the homes of our 'humble' politicians cost today. On doing a little research, I learned that Jawaharlal Nehru's one-time home on Motilal Nehru Marg, formerly York Road, is to be sold for Rs 1,100 crore, potentially making it the most expensive residential real estate transaction in India's history. Renting a Lutyens' bungalow costs a minimum of Rs 3 lakh a month and could go up to Rs 30 lakh a month. Long years ago, when Narendra Modi first became prime minister, I asked Arun Jaitley when Modi was going to start making commercial use of the most valuable real estate in our country and he said, "Not now, in his second term."

He is now in his third term and there is no sign of this happening. It goes without saying that children brought up like royalty in homes that our former Princes can no longer afford will grow up as nepo-babies. And they do. I cannot remember when I last met a senior political leader or bureaucrat whose children did not go to the finest universities in the West. When I have dared ask how they afford spending so much on their children's education, I have nearly always been told that their children got scholarships.

What is noteworthy about nepo-babies is that despite their expensive education they somehow never manage to get real jobs and usually wait to inherit Mumukshiji or Daddyyji's political party. It would not be untrue to describe the INDIA coalition as a nepo-babies private club. Meanwhile, in Modi's team, we have senior ministers in his cabinet who have managed to get their own nepo-babies important (and lucrative) positions in sports bodies and think tanks. All these nepo-babies are doing well. As did those born in socialist, secular times in which most other Indians lived in extreme poverty.

As a 'veteran' political columnist I have watched with growing alarm the way countries around us have exploded ostensibly for different reasons. Sri Lanka's young people revolted against a corrupt political dynasty. Bangladesh exploded because of an autocrat who refused to allow fair elections and Nepal has exploded because young people got fed up with being destitute and desperate while their elected leaders allowed their #nepokidz to buy designer clothes and jewels and flaunt them in the rivers of the jet set.

If we do not want this 'revolution in the air' to seep across the border into our own dear Bharat Mata, it is about time that someone at the top starts to pay careful attention to the voices we heard in the streets of Kathmandu last week. Narendra Modi won his first election by promising that he would lead the charge against corruption and nepotism. "*Na khaaonga, na khaane doonga*," he used to say in those long-ago rallies when he won the hearts of Indian voters by promising not just an end to corruption, but also change and prosperity. It is time that he rehearsed his old lines and repeated them again.

# What grandparenting boys taught me about love & play

How to  
RAISE A BOY  
PARO ANAND



BOY-YANT, Boy-sterous... Boys will be boys. Boy oh boy! Today I am talking, not about parenting boys (although I have) or teaching boys (ditto), but grandparenting boys. The role is vastly different. Parents need to discipline. Grandparents need to have fun. The first do the hard jobs like homework and doctor visits. Grandparents are expected to spoil their *grandchillars*, to break a few rules and return to their own childhoods with naughty glee. Break a few rules, yes. But never undermine the parents.

Exactly five years ago, I was blessed with three delightful grandsons. And yes, they are everything that boys can and should be. For me, the first and foremost is to bring up good human beings, whether you're bringing up girls or boys. And initially, I told myself that gender didn't matter. As a modern, liberal woman, I was not going to differentiate.

However, as the babies became toddlers, I realised that there are differences. Firstly, the physicality. Boys can be physical in every way. They move non-stop, they grab, chew, pinch, punch — the whole lot. Even the non-sporty games they enjoy may involve the body. Ah! The body. "Doctor" and "operation" are a favourite and I wonder if it is because these involve some amount of skin exposure on the part of the "patient" — me. Somehow, I often "die" on the operating table. But the physicality actually extends beyond games to hitting out in anger. It is almost a first response. Flinging, breaking, biting — destruction to get a rise out of you. As a parent, my response was to smack back, knowing that this was a bad idea and burning with guilt afterwards. I'd promise not to repeat this. Until I did. As a grandmother, I simply don't. Of course, I lose patience with the endless negotiation. Talking them out of it does not work. Don't raise your hand or voice. Try hugging it out. They struggle, they may try to hurt you, even. A time-out for a brief two minutes will take them off the boil and then just sit with them. Talk to them about something else. Then veer back to the subject of the tantrum. No

long lectures, just a mutual understanding of each other's point of view. Not easy. But it leaves grandma with a feeling of "job well done". Rather than the overriding guilt.

I also see that boys, many boys, are actually cuddlers. They love to cuddle up to you, be touchy-feely. But it has to be on their terms. You cannot grab a boy when you need that hug. They're gone. But let them come to you. And you will get the sweetest hugs and kisses ever. Grandparent hugs have magical healing powers.

Out of sheer exhaustion, I try to have some indoor, sit-down activity. They enjoy the colouring for a bit and then they are DONE. Yes, all caps done. It is like they have been released into the world from months of solitary confinement. They burst out into wider spaces, arms waving wildly, voices loud as foghorns. I read about this. It is a thing and it is called restraint release or ASRC which stands for After School Restraint Collapse. Boys who have been trying to remain within the structured environment of a school are set free as the final bell rings. They rush out, fling themselves at the parent/caregiver with a force that you have to brace for. In the car, you may find them fussy about every tiny, insignificant thing. The world may come crashing down and all is lost in a Noah's Ark-sized flood of tears. You wonder what's happened. You try to reason. Don't. It doesn't work. Those jangling nerves literally need a reset. The brain is firing out of control. They are beyond reason for the moment. Stroking the head and back of the neck actually helps. As a grandparent, you can be the very safest space. And it feels bloody good to be that.

And as soon as the storm is over and the runny nose wiped, they are just so utterly, butterly delicious. Because boys are mostly so clean-hearted and straightforward. They have a strong sense of fair play that we as grandparents and parents must nurture and cherish. How strange that all too often, we ourselves tend to turn our boys into entitled, unempathetic non-listeners. Because we put just so much emphasis on achievement and success — especially on boys that they lose pieces of their softer, kinder selves. If they lose this, then they will never become the man you would want and need them to be.

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(How to Raise a Boy is a fortnightly column)

History  
HEADLINE

MAHESH  
KUSHWAHA



SEPTEMBER 8 and 9 marked two of the darkest days in Nepal's modern political history, which saw a Gen Z-led movement against corruption quickly turn into an unprecedented catastrophe.

The government's crackdown that left 19 protesters dead on the first day led to escalated protests on the second. Rampaging mobs vandalised businesses, attacked leaders, torched their houses and set ablaze some of the most important public offices, including Parliament and the Supreme Court. Thousands escaped prisons from across the country.

By the end of the second day of protests, Nepal was not just under a massive political vacuum, but also under a state of lawlessness, causing widespread uncertainty about the country's future. Marking an end to yet another revolution in Nepal, being referred to as 'Jana Andolan-III' by many, on September 12, former Chief Justice Sushila Karki was appointed as the interim head of the government and the President called for elections on March 5, 2026.

Although this is not the first instance of Nepali youth influencing the country's political trajectory through protests, the 2025 movement featured some stark differences: spontaneity, lack of leaders and digital-age energy. To make sense of how Nepal arrived at this crucial juncture, one needs to look into its cyclical history of popular movements and where the 2025 revolution fits.

Nepal has gone through a series of unfinished revolutions, which included the participation of youth, all seeking to transform the country from the authoritarian Rana regime to a federal democratic republic. In 1951, a "bloodless" revolution deposed the 104-year-old Rana oligarchy, restoring King Tribhuvan to power in an arrangement mediated by India.

Built on the aspirations of Nepali Congress members, who were active in India's anti-colonial movement, and student uprisings like the Jayatu Sanskritam movement of 1947, it was hailed as the "dawn of democracy" in Nepal. However, political instability in subsequent years allowed King Mahendra to consolidate power in his hands.

After three decades of absolute monarchy, in 1990, Nepal's political parties led the first people's movement, the Jana Andolan-I, with an active mobilisation of youth activists. The movement restored multiparty democracy and established constitutional monarchy in Nepal. However, the 1990 Constitution was perceived as a "document

# The many revolutions that have shaped Nepal



Protesters at the Singha Durbar, the seat of Nepal's government, in Kathmandu.  
AP/Niranjan Shrestha

of compromise" that had failed to address the grievances of the marginalised — an inadequacy that the Maoists exploited to launch a decade-long insurgency in 1996.

From 1996 to 2006, Nepali youth performed a dual role — while radicalised rural youth served as Maoist guerrillas, students and youth fronts carried out urban protests. Maoist insurgency culminated in the second people's movement, Jana Andolan-II, in 2006, after political parties joined hands to launch a revolution against monarchy.

Triggered by King Gyanendra's imposition of direct rule, the 19-day protests led to the monarchy being overthrown in 2008 and the declaration of Nepal as a "democratic, secular and inclusive republican nation". However, a perceived sense of exclusion in the post-revolution political settlements saw Madhesh-based parties and leaders launch their own struggles for greater autonomy and representation. When the Second Constituent Assembly promulgated a new Constitution in September 2015, the ongoing demonstrations in Madhesh intensified.

The 2025 revolution, which began on social media platforms and, ironically enough, spilled over into the streets after their ban, must be seen as a continuation of an unfinished agenda. Like earlier movements, it appears to have sprung from the disillusionment that the country's democratic transitions have not delivered fundamental socio-economic changes.

In particular, the aspirations of the population that grew up in the post-2006 transition were shaped by digital media and globalisation, even as the democratic promises of better economic opportunities and improved lifestyle remained unfulfilled across regional and ethnic lines. Instead, rampant corruption, misgovernance and

decades of political stagnation bred a sense of exclusion and injustice, which had made a revolution an inevitability.

Nepal's 2025 Gen-Z revolution that sought to end corruption and increase the youths' representation in Nepali politics, thus, fits the wider pattern of democratic struggles in the nation, albeit with some stark differences. Unlike the past movements, the 2025 revolution featured a generational consciousness, rather than a structured leadership guiding the protests. This caused initial confusion and misguided anger, which likely allowed groups with ulterior motives to exploit the situation.

The 2025 movement also saw extensive use of digital platforms — through the "nepobaby" campaign, widespread live streaming of protests, and live discussions and digital voting to pick Karki to lead the interim government.

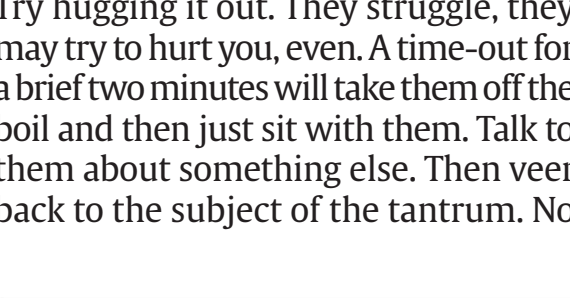
Late on September 12, when Karki was sworn in as the head of the interim government, people not only celebrated Nepal's first woman Prime Minister, but also breathed a sigh of relief at having averted a major political crisis. Within hours however, the Nepal Bar Association issued a statement declaring the parliamentary dissolution as unconstitutional. Some even questioned the exclusionary process and suspicious roles of Gen-Z leaders, the Nepal Army and controversial figures in Karki's appointment as the interim leader.

Given these challenges, the road ahead looks neither easy nor straightforward, but if Karki can lead the country out of this crisis, her contribution to Nepal's democratic journey will be historic.

The writer is a PhD candidate at Dublin City University and former research fellow at CESIF, Nepal

she  
SAID

RADHIKA KUMAR



ASSHE swings her arms from side to side, walking, exercising, she has a certain smile on her face that tells me she is content in her world.

She is oblivious to my presence, except when I scold her and tell her not to exercise in the heat outside.

I know she doesn't like it when I talk to her like that. She defends herself, telling me that she was exercising in the shade. When I insist, she goes inside the house. However, the minute I turn to leave, she is back outside again.

Mother, as I know her, is finally her own person, but she is not the person I knew. I knew her as the person whose sari

# Mother as I knew her, as I know her

*pallu* I would hold on to. Never letting go, lest I lose my way. And she would never shrug me off, not once did she pull away.

She belongs to the generation in the *Midnight's Children*. Since my grandmother had no recollection of her birthday, August 15, 1947, was her unofficial date of birth.

My grandfather was very keen that she train to be a doctor. Even while studying in a school in rural Haryana, he would encourage her to write in English. She struggled through junior college and almost did not make it. But as I said, she was not one to let go.

She tried again and got through medical college in Delhi. The city changed her tremendously. Most importantly, she learnt to be her own person, the one I knew.

A bout of smallpox in childhood had left its scars on her face. This was not considered a feature suitable while seeking a matrimonial alliance. But Mother didn't care. In fact, she ended up marrying quite "a catch", a foreign-returned doctor with an FRCS (Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons) degree.

But Mother didn't let that overwhelm her. In a family full of powerful men, she held her own. She would travel by any means possible to reach the hospital. She would cook fantastic tiffins for us every day, attend all functions and parent-teacher meetings. A super mom you might say. But that's not the person I knew.

For me the person she was, was the one who stood by her children in the

toughest of times. When making career choices, when choosing spouses, when moving to a new country, Mother was the one defending us, arguing on our behalf and supporting us.

Mother, who fasts every Monday, prays every day and remembers God in all her endeavours, had the ability to rise beyond all narrow-mindedness and give her children all the freedom that they needed to find themselves. Her passion to be a good professional meant that she worked long hours. It was a hard life, but Mother took it all in, even after she retired.

She belongs to a generation where women struggled to gain an identity while constantly pushing back against patriarchal structures. How did you do it, Mother? Can I do it again like you did it?

Can I be the Mother I knew? But I don't know whom to ask now.

The Mother I know is gently pulling back, is happier on her own, the way we would all like to be. She forgets how to cook dishes and the complicated daily routines exhaust her. She asks me to teach her how to cook. Kheer, that simplest of desserts, is a mystery to her. As I worry and get anxious about her and wonder about how she will be, she calls out my name and hands me a cup of tea. I know then that she will be fine. The Mother I knew is the Mother I know.

The writer is a Professor, Motilal Nehru College, University of Delhi

National Editor Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column



# Armoring advocates: From rhetoric to reality



**APOLOGIST**

As a former journalist who traded the newsroom for the courtroom a few years ago, I've borne witness to the raw underbelly of India's legal fray. The adrenaline of chasing stories gave way to the solemn duty of defending clients, but the dangers I once reported on as distant headlines soon became personal perils.

None shook me more than the brutal slaying of the advocate couple Gattu Vaman Rao and Nagamani in February 2021. Representing victims of land encroachments and environmental harms, they were killed in broad daylight by those they had challenged legally. Their dying declarations, confirmed by forensic analysis, exposed the threats linked to their professional work. The Supreme Court's 12th August 2025 order transferring the investigation to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) highlights longstanding weaknesses in local law enforcements impartiality and promptness.

This tragic episode is not isolated; it reflects a growing national concern over violence targeting legal professionals and has intensified calls for a dedicated Advocates Protection Act to shield

those who uphold justice. Escalating risks and the demand for dedicated legal safeguards:

In the past decade, violence targeting lawyers has sadly become more frequent—ranging from courtroom chaos and mob attacks to premeditated killings—often because lawyers challenge entrenched political, corporate, or criminal interests.

Bar associations in Telangana and elsewhere have vocally demanded laws explicitly protecting advocates. The All India Lawyers Advocacy Group (AILAJ), following prolonged campaigning, drafted a national Advocates Protection Bill in 2021 proposing stringent penalties for assault and intimidation, fast-track investigations, and victim compensation. Though the Bar Council of India also issued the draft bill the same year, the bill languishes in legislative purgatory.

Skeptics note that existing laws like Sections pertaining to attempt to murder, voluntarily causing hurt, and criminal intimidation of the new Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), or the old Indian Penal Code (IPC), coupled with procedural provisions for prompt FIR registration under the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (old Code of Criminal Procedure), already criminalise violence against any citizen, including advocates. So why insist on a specialized statute?

**Why a specialised advocates' protection law matters?**

General criminal laws do not fully capture the distinct

**General criminal laws do not fully capture the distinct vulnerabilities advocates face, given that threats often arise directly from their professional duties and can be politically or economically motivated**

vulnerabilities advocates face, given that threats often arise directly from their professional duties and can be politically or economically motivated.

A dedicated law could institutionalize:

- Strict timelines for investigation—such as FIR registration or filing of charges within 24 hours of complaint.
- Specialised courts or fast-track tribunals focused exclusively on offenses involving legal practitioners.
- Stronger penalties, including imprisonment up to 10 years, higher fines, and mandatory compensation for victims.
- Preventive protections, including police escorts for advocates facing threats and formal threat assessments.

The 2021 Bill's proposed maximum penalties of up to 10 years' imprisonment and fines up to ₹ two lakh send a crucial zero-tolerance message in a system often marred by delays and political influences. Vaman Rao's case tragically exposes these gaps, where local police hesitated amid political pressure, prompting Supreme Court's

intervention.

However, laws alone, regardless of their strength, will not suffice without committed enforcement. Police must be sensitized to prioritize advocates' security, and bar councils should actively monitor threats to ensure timely action.

**A reflection on professional conduct:**

While the need to shield advocates from external threats remains pressing, there is also a rising concern about integrity within the profession. Reports have highlighted troubling trends, such as advocates entering settlements in motor accident cases without fully informing clients and sometimes pursuing compensation awards primarily for personal gain. Instances where lawyers take on cases with an agreement to receive a percentage of the proceeds further point to challenges around ethical boundaries. Such practices risk eroding client trust and, over time, can contribute to wider unease and distrust toward the justice system.

Another area requiring careful reflection is the in-

creasing recourse by some advocates and Bar Associations to boycotting courts or disrupting court proceedings as forms of protest. While recognizing the right to protest against perceived injustices, such actions can unintentionally affect the very parties lawyers represent—often vulnerable litigants desperate for timely relief. Interruptions and adjournments caused by collective boycotts of courts can cause delays, increase costs, and impede justice delivery.

Courts are not just professional workplaces but institutions foundational to upholding rights and societal order. When proceedings are disrupted or hearings boycotted, it diminishes access to justice and can erode public confidence in the legal system. It is important that any advocacy for reform be balanced with the duty to uphold professional ethics and ensure client interests remain paramount.

Professional bodies and bar councils must continue to encourage dialogue, ethical training, and responsibility within the legal community, ensuring protests do not compromise justice or client welfare.

**Insights from State-level laws:**

Several Indian states have taken pioneering steps to protect advocates, though with mixed results:

- **Rajasthan Advocates Protection Act (2023):** Criminalizes violence against advocates with penalties up to seven years' imprisonment and fines of ₹50,000, along with compensation provisions. Reports show



increased reporting and police engagement but ongoing attacks highlight implementation challenges.

- **Karnataka Prohibition of Violence Against Advocates Act (2023):** Penalizes assaults or obstructions with up to three years' imprisonment and ₹1 lakh fines. Improved FIR registrations are noted, yet rural court violence persists.
- **Telangana Welfare and Protection Bill (2024):** Awaiting enactment amid continuing advocacy.

**From demands to deliverables-Closing the implementation gap:**

Despite unified demands from bar associations, much remains rhetorical as high-profile attacks provoke protests without sustained legislative or executive follow-through. Bills stall in committees, police investigations delay, and public trust suffers.

**Recommendations for meaningful progress-Judiciary's role:**

- Proactively invoke suo motu jurisdiction to expedite cases involving attacks on lawyers.
- Establish fast-track courts dedicated to such cases to ensure timely justice.
- Mandate police oversight and hold officers accountable for delays or lapses.
- Promote structured collaboration with bar councils for intelligence sharing and protection planning.
- Monitor enforcement of protection laws through periodic judicial reviews.

**Role of Advocates Associations:**

- Maintain comprehensive, transparent data on incidents of violence and threats.
- Lead public interest litigations pressing for legislative and enforcement reforms.
- Sustain continuous engagement with lawmakers and police to institutionalize protective measures.
- Form internal safety and counseling cells to support threatened members.
- Conduct regular training on legal rights, threat management, and security.
- Build alliances with national and international human rights and legal professional organizations to amplify advocacy.

**A call beyond catharsis:**

Witnessing Vaman Rao's

empty chambers, now a shrine of unfulfilled justice, I can't dismiss these demands as mere emotion.

An Advocates Protection Act isn't a silver bullet, but in a system where general laws buckle under pressure, it could fortify the frontlines. Yet, true reform hinges on collective resolve: Legislatures to legislate boldly, executives to execute faithfully, and judiciaries to adjudicate swiftly, apart from the legal community's own commitment to ethical conduct and professionalism. Globally, we've seen that protecting lawyers isn't charity—it's self-preservation for democracy.

India must urgently enact enforceable laws, implement police and judicial reforms, and nurture a culture that protects legal defenders without compromising the profession's integrity.

Only through this integrated approach can the rule of law be safeguarded—armoring those who stand as society's sentinels against injustice.

*(The author is former Senior Editor, The Economic Times, and currently practising as an advocate at the Telangana High Court)*

## Literary letters of historical significance: From Gurudev to Maharani of Vizianagaram

NOMULA SRINIVAS RAO

HISTORY often leaves behind timeless imprints in the form of letters, writings and exchanges of ideas. Among them, two remarkable letters stand out—one penned by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore in 1914, and the other by Maharani of Vizianagaram, Vidyavathi Devi, in 1915. Both letters highlight not only the literary connections between Bengal and Andhra but also the compassion and human values of the illustrious Pusapati dynasty of Vizianagaram.

Tagore wrote a deeply personal letter from Ramgarh in the Kumaon Hills on May 24, 1914. Addressed to Gurajada Apparao, one of Andhra's towering literary figures, the letter reflects Tagore's inner struggle and his search for peace.

"Thank you for your kind letter. I had been forced to go through a very great dissipation of mind for a long time—so I have taken shelter here in the solitude of Himalayas to gather my scattered forces and regain my spiritual equilibrium. You can easily understand that this is most important for me and I cannot set my mind to anything else for some time to come. I am sure you will understand and excuse me if I fail to meet your demand, at least for the present."

These words reveal not only Tagore's vulnerability but also his respect for Gurajada's correspondence. The humility with which he seeks pardon for not fulfilling a request illustrates the mutual admiration between two literary stalwarts from different regions of India.



Rabindranath Tagore with Maharani of Vizianagaram Vidyavathi Devi

Barely a year later, another significant letter was written—this time by Maharani Vidyavathi Devi to Dr. Col. Illington, Superintendent of King George Hospital, Visakhapatnam. Dated April 7th, 1915, the letter concerns none other than Gurajada Apparao, who was serving as her private secretary and had fallen ill.

**The Maharani's compassionate concern is evident:**

"Will you be good enough to attend to my Private Secretary Mr. G.V. Apparao who is now staying at Vizagapatnam with P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar. He has been ailing for the past so many months and has just gone to Vizag for a change and better medical treatment. I hope you will give him your very best attention, and better medical treatment. I hope you will give him your very best attention, and better medical treatment. I hope you will give him your very best attention, and better medical treatment."

and inform me of his progress from time to time. Please send your bill to me for payment."

This letter reflects not only the Maharani's deep care for Gurajada Apparao but also the Pusapati dynasty's tradition of treating their associates with dignity and responsibility. Her willingness to personally ensure his medical treatment highlights a humane dimension of royal patronage.

Gurudev's communication with Apparao highlights the cultural bridge between Bengal and Andhra, while Maharani Vidyavathi Devi's letter underscores the benevolence of the Vizianagaram royal family. They are reflections of empathy, mutual respect, and nurturing of intellectual and human values. Since the early 1900s, the Pusapati dynasty has been a beacon of support for literature, music, science, and education. Their contributions have shaped generations of scholars, artists, and reformers. From supporting stalwarts like Apparao to founding educational institutions and encouraging cultural exchange, the dynasty has left an indelible mark on the intellectual and cultural history of Andhra Pradesh.

As the saying goes, "The true measure of royalty lies not in grandeur but in the compassion with which it nurtures the society it leads."

The Pusapati dynasty stands as a shining example of this enduring legacy.

*(The writer is OSD to Ashok Gajapathi Raju, Governor of Goa)*

## Let go of futile baggage, be at ease with life



DR. ACHYUTA SAMANTA

In life, we strive for success, peace and happiness. We aim to achieve stability and comfort, both external and internal. But often, we miss the one fundamental truth and that is the less luggage we carry, the more comfort we experience.

This isn't just about physical luggage. It is about emotional, mental, spiritual and material luggage. The lighter our load, the smoother will be our journey. This principle applies to every stage of life. We just need to pause, reflect and recognise how unnecessary weight, whether physical or guilt, ego, regrets or attachments slows us down, drains our energy and clouds our vision.

Let us begin with what we watch every day. The school-going kid! When children begin their academic journey, they are full of curiosity, innocence and joy. But soon, the weight of the school bag increases and also the expectations and pressure on the child. A nursery child carries only essentials like books, colours and playful things. But as they progress to higher grades, their bags become heavier, symbolising how life burdens them with more than what is necessary.

When children carry less, they feel freer. They walk faster. They think clearly. They enjoy their journey. When they are weighed down, their enthusiasm wanes, their back hurts and their joy fades.

The same principle applies to adults, professionals, leaders and everyone walking the path of life.

Whenever we travel, we realise how much easier it is to move when we carry a few things. More luggage means

more pain. Those who travel light reach faster, adapt better and are less worried about what they might lose.

Similarly, in life, we are all travellers moving from one place to another, one phase to another. Some shift homes. Others shift jobs. Some change cities, while some transition from one relationship to another. In every transition, those who carry less emotional and mental baggage adjust better. When we cling to past mistakes, broken relationships, grudges, or past glories, we prevent ourselves from embracing the present or preparing for the future. Philosopher Seneca said, "He who is everywhere is nowhere." A person divided between past hurts and future fears never lives fully in the present. Forgiveness, therefore, becomes the greatest baggage remover towards others and ourselves. When we forgive, we drop the unnecessary. We free ourselves. The idea of less baggage is central to almost all religious traditions.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna tells Arjuna to act without attachment, ego and expectation. In Buddhism, the path to enlightenment requires letting go of desires and attachments. In Jainism, renunciation and minimalism are the means to spiritual progress. In Islam, Prophet Muhammad said, "Detach from the world, and Allah will love you." The spiritual path in Islam values simplicity (zuhd), humility and trust in divine providence over attachment to possessions or status. Even in the Christian tradition, the teachings of the Desert Fathers and mystics emphasise inner silence, solitude and detachment from worldly distractions. In each tradition, the path to spiritual progress requires us to drop something and not accumulate more.

Mahatma Gandhi embodied this philosophy in his daily life. His belief in non-possession was not merely about material goods. It was about renouncing ego, pride and greed. He famously said, "The world has enough for everyone's need,



but not enough for everyone's greed."

What do we mean when we talk of baggage in this context?

- **Emotional:** Resentment, anger, unresolved trauma.
- **Mental:** Overthinking, guilt, self-doubt.
- **Material:** Hoarding, unnecessary possessions.
- **Spiritual:** Ego, pride, judgment, righteousness.

The more of these we carry, the farther we are from peace. A person who learns to let go becomes lighter, freer and more at ease with life and its uncertainties.

I have lived a life filled with struggle, responsibility and challenges. From my childhood to my journey in public service, I have seen both extreme poverty and the heights of success. But through it all, I have held on to a simple philosophy of carrying less, giving more. Even today, despite heading large institutions and organisations, I strive to keep my personal life simple by having less or no baggage.

I avoid unnecessary materialism, I forgive quickly and I try not to dwell too long on setbacks. That is my path to more comfort.

It is about mental peace. It is about being able to sleep peacefully and maintain a

natural glow in the skin. It is about having clarity in decision-making. When your heart is not clouded with anger or jealousy, and your mind is not heavy with doubt or over-analysis, you work better, lead better and live better.

In today's world, success is often equated with accumulation of wealth, status, recognition, even followers. But true success lies in simplification. The more we accumulate, the more we fear losing. The more we fear, the more anxious we become.

Covid taught us this truth in a harsh but clear way. When everything shut down, we realised how little we actually needed to survive. It was not our wardrobes or luxury cars or TV screens that gave us peace. It was health, family and inner strength. In leadership too, the most effective ones are those who delegate, trust and keep their egos in check. They create teams, empower others and release control. That implies less luggage.

The journey of life is between birth and death. Everything in between is movement - constant, unpredictable and temporary. We come into this world empty-handed. We leave the same way. Whatever we gather is only temporary luggage. What remains is how we lived. Did we live joyfully? Did we forgive? Did we release what no longer served us? Did we lighten our load? If yes, then our journey was comfortable. Peaceful. Spiritual. Today, I encourage every reader, not as a moral instruction, but as a heartfelt invitation to examine these questions. You may find that the path becomes clearer. And your heart finally feels at ease. It is the key to peace, the root of forgiveness and the secret to a life well-lived.

Let us all strive, in our own ways, to carry less, so we may live more.

*(The writer is a former MP and founder of Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology and Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences, Bhubaneswar)*



## POOR RICH G7 AND THEIR THIRD WORLD TROUBLES

EVENTS illustrate the consequences of inaction rather eloquently—be it in the socio-political arena, or in the political economy that informs the social geography of nations. The rise of angst after Charlie Kirk’s murder symbolises the impotence of haplessness. The data is stark. Every hour, two lives are lost in the US to wilful and malicious gun violence—one every 11 minutes, if one includes all shootings. The toll exceeds 10,411 for the 250 days of 2025. Gun violence has claimed over 160,000 lives between 2015 and 2024. Verily the second amendment to the US Constitution, often deemed to guard rights, is overwhelming the first amendment.

Ideally, the data should compel introspection and propel action. But as Immanuel Kant observed, the moral construct of ‘ought to’ is a synthetic proposition; and the expectation of ‘ought to’ does not imply that politics or the state can or will. Not even in the oldest democracy, which is a superpower and the world’s largest economy at \$30 trillion. ‘Ought to’ is a politically expedient construct. Poor rich G7 countries are haunted by their version of third world troubles.

The phenomenon is vividly illustrated by headlines across advanced economies that appear more like emerging markets. On Tuesday, Kemi Badenoch, leader of the opposition in the UK, observed that Britain may have to go ‘cap in hand to the IMF for a bailout’, as it did in 1976 following the sterling crisis. The headline-grabbing observation brought back memories of the lettuce moment from the Liz Truss budget.

The UK economy, which saw zero growth in July, is forecast to grow at 1.2 percent through the year. It borrows around \$540 million a day. Inflation, at 3.8 percent, makes borrowing costlier; the deficit is 4.8 percent of GDP and debt is growing faster (net financial liabilities of the public sector are around \$5.2 trillion over 130 percent of GDP). Chancellor Rachel Reeves must find money to fill the hole in the bucket. Among the ideas on the board is a tax on property ownership!

On Wednesday, France got its fifth prime minister in two years—the seventh in Emmanuel Macron’s presidency. The rapid exits via revolving doors are fuelled by the state of the economy. The exit of François Bayrou was triggered by an attempt to cut \$52 billion in debt amid protests titled ‘Block everything’. The rationale for austerity was the rise in debt to over \$3.8 trillion, of which over 54 percent is held by foreigners. France, it is estimated, borrows over \$510 million a day, has a fiscal deficit of 5.8 percent, and a debt-to-GDP ratio that’s expected to touch 121 percent soon. GDP growth is tepid at 0.6 percent.

On Friday, Fitch Ratings downgraded France to A+ from AA-. The fallout of politics on the economy underlined the rating action. Fitch stated that the fall of governments “illustrates the increased fragmentation and polarisation of domestic politics”. The review cited lower economic growth and sustained increase in government debt, and that chances of improvement are daunted by “the run-up to the presidential election in 2027”. France has a tax-to-GDP ratio of 45.6 percent—the highest in Europe—and this limits its ability to tax its way out of the crisis.

France and the UK represent a larger malaise of falling growth and growing debt afflicting the G7 economies. Take the European Union as an entity. On Thursday, the European Central Bank held rates and forecast inflation would hover at around 2.1 percent, while GDP growth for the Eurozone would be under 1.2 percent for the current year and 1.0 percent for 2026. The EU must now fund its own defence, and much of what the Draghi Report diagnosed as an ‘existential challenge’ is playing out.

The economy across the Atlantic in the US is, *prima facie*, faring better than its G7 peers in terms of growth and worse in terms of deficit and debt, resulting in a downgrade by Moody’s. GDP is set to grow at 1.9 percent as per the IMF and as per the US Federal Open Market Committee at 1.6 percent. Retail inflation is up at 2.9 percent—thanks to uncertainty and tariff tantrums—and forecasters expect it to stay above the 2 percent target and top out at 3.2 percent by the end of 2025.

The dollar is down 11 percent this year—the biggest drop in 50 years. Central banks are weaning off dollar addiction and punting on gold. The US government debt is \$37.4 trillion, deficit \$1.9 trillion—it borrows around \$5.2 billion a day, of which \$2.9 billion goes towards interest payments. Unemployment is inching up to 4.4 percent amid a political pushback on immigration, and the number of unemployed new entrants is over 780,000.

A combination of factors has rendered the G7 countries into high-cost, low-growth economies—GDP growth for five of the economies is forecast at sub-1 percent and six have debt-GDP ratios exceeding 100 percent. This has propelled a binary discourse and protests. Even though theory underlines labour output and consumption as critical for sustaining economic growth, ageing societies across Europe and the US are raging against migration.

The circumstance calls for a new template for global collaboration; yet, isolationism is the new cornerstone. As the confluence of ageing and expansion of artificial intelligence-enabled technology retrenches jobs, the cost of mitigating pain could render the spectre more challenging. And that may worsen social schisms. We are, to paraphrase the Chinese adage, living in interesting times.

## NEPAL’S SEARCH FOR IDEOLOGICAL IDENTITY



### POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

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NEPAL’S rulers have learned a harsh lesson. Power is fleeting when promises are broken and public trust squandered. A furious tide of young Nepalis, armed with the amplifying force of social media, has toppled yet another government, forcing Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli to resign and flee amid violent protests. Fed up with corruption, nepotism, and a political elite that hoards wealth while the nation’s economy crumbles, these tech-savvy youths have exposed the fragility of unchecked power.

In a country battered by political instability and economic paralysis for the past 16 years, the message is clear: leaders who betray the public risk being dethroned by the very voices they ignore. Violence becomes the ultimate voice for change. They replaced an elected government with a better, credible alternative: Sushila Karki, a former chief justice with a clean record was sworn in as the first woman interim prime minister.

This is not a revolution with a clear purpose or a unified vision for the future. It is a raw, leaderless explosion of anger, a cry from a people tired of being betrayed by their leaders. The nation’s ruling coalition crumbled under this pressure, with Oli himself not only resigning but reportedly fleeing to an unknown destination. The scenes were apocalyptic. Ministers were attacked and government buildings set ablaze. This unrest reflected a deeper malaise, a profound disillusionment with a political system that has seen 14 governments in 16 years, each more ineffective than the previous one. Nepal has been struggling to define itself after abandoning its monarchical past for a secular and socialist republic in 2008.

The roots of Nepal’s crisis lie in its turbulent political history. The nation’s transition from monarchy to republic was marked by bloodshed and betrayal. In 2001, the royal family was massacred in a shocking incident that saw Crown Prince Dipendra kill his own family. The tragedy plunged Nepal into a constitutional crisis, paving the way for King Gyanendra Shah to ascend the throne. His rule, however, was marred by his inability to quell the Maoist insurgency that had gripped the country since the 1990s, claiming over 16,000 lives. In 2005, Gyanendra’s decision to dissolve parliament and assume absolute power sparked widespread protests. It culminated in the 2006 people’s movement that forced him to relinquish control.

By 2008, the monarchy was abolished and Nepal declared itself a secular, socialist republic under the leadership of Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, also known as Prachanda. The promise of a new era of stability and progress was intoxicating, but it proved illusory. Since 2008, no government has completed a full term, with coalitions collapsing under the weight of internal rivalries, corruption, and opportunist alliances. The current crisis is fallout of these failures, as the youth, dubbed ‘Gen Z protesters’, took to the streets to demand accountability. The protests began with a seemingly innocuous trigger: a government ban on social media platforms like Facebook, X, and YouTube, ostensibly to curb dissent.

The constant power struggles and lack of a cohesive agenda have paralysed governance, leaving Nepal vulnerable to external influences. More troubling are allegations of interference by China and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence, both of which have strategic interests in countering India’s influence in Nepal. China’s Belt and Road Initiative has poured billions into Nepalese infrastructure, while Pakistan’s ISI is believed to

exploit Nepal’s porous borders to create security challenges for India.

Economically, Nepal is in dire straits. The country’s GDP growth, projected at a meagre 3.3 percent for 2025, is among the lowest in South Asia, trailing India’s 7 percent and Bangladesh’s 5.5 percent. Per capita income stands at a paltry \$1,400, compared to \$2,700 in India and \$2,500 in Bangladesh, making Nepal one of the poorest nations in the region. Unemployment, particularly among the youth, remains at a staggering 19.2 percent. The contrast between the opulent lifestyles of politicians and the grinding poverty of the masses has become a rallying cry for the protesters, who see corruption and nepotism as the root of their suffering.

The unrest in Nepal bears eerie similarities to recent upheavals in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, where economic crises and public discontent toppled governments. In Sri Lanka, the 2022 economic collapse led to mass protests and the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, while in Bangladesh student-led protests in 2024 forced Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to flee. In both cases, allegations of foreign interference and attempts to install military-backed regimes surfaced, raising fears that Nepal could follow a similar path.

The absence of a democratically elected leader or alternative governance model in Nepal’s current protests heightens the risk of a prolonged chaos. Amid this turmoil, a surprising development has emerged: a growing demand for the restoration of the monarchy and a return to Nepal’s identity as a Hindu Rashtra. Pro-monarchy protests, led by supporters of former King Gyanendra gained traction when thousands turned up in Kathmandu on March 9 to welcome him back from Pokhara. These demonstrations reflected nostalgia for the stability and cultural cohesion that the monarchy once represented. The

concept of a Hindu Rashtra resonates with a section of Nepalese, who see the secular republic as having eroded their cultural heritage.

However, the crisis in Nepal poses serious security implications for India. A destabilised Nepal could become a haven for anti-India activities, including cross-border terrorism and smuggling, threatening the security of India’s northern states. The prospect of Nepal slipping into anarchy or falling under a military regime, as seen in Bangladesh and attempted in Sri Lanka, is a nightmare scenario for New Delhi. The first step is to provide massive financial support to stabilise Nepal’s economy, focusing on job creation, infrastructure development, and debt relief. India’s expertise in technology and renewable energy could help modernise Nepal’s crumbling infrastructure, while targeted investments in education and skills training could address the youth unemployment crisis.

Diplomatically, India should engage with all stakeholders including political parties, civil society, and even pro-monarchy groups. Its objective should be to foster a national dialogue aimed at restoring stability. This could include supporting a national unity government that prioritizes governance over political infighting. Cultural diplomacy, emphasising the shared Hindu-Buddhist heritage, could rebuild trust between the two nations.

Nepal stands at a crossroads, with the potential to either forge a new path toward stability or descend into anarchy. By offering financial, technological, and diplomatic support, India can help Nepal emerge from this crisis stronger and more resilient. The alternative, a failed state on India’s doorstep, would have catastrophic consequences for both nations. United by history and culture, India and Nepal must work together to fight external threats and rebuild a nation that has lost its way.

The time for action is now, before the flames of unrest consume the Himalayan republic’s entire political ecosystem. The glacier of democracy is melting and there is no guarantee that the subcontinent will drown in chaos. The only peacekeeper remains India, the guardian of popular will across the peninsula and beyond.



AFP

## GETTING THE FIVE ELEMENTS RIGHT



### OPINION

ANURADHA GOYAL

Author and founder of IndiTales

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VISUALS of floods, landslides, broken bridges, traffic jams, floating cars, garbage piles dominate my screens as I sit down to write this column. As the disaster mode settles, we will again go back to language wars, caste debates and regional pride. We will let our political leadership dictate our debates—each faction working on proving the other more corrupt. What we forget is that all elected leaders are sent there to work for us—at least that’s the promise.

We need to hold our public representatives, the bureaucratic structure that reports to them, and ourselves responsible for cleaning our pancha tattvas—the five basic elements that decide the basic quality of our life. No matter what our economic and social status is, irrespective of how much tax we pay or sub-

sidy we receive, these five elements impact us equally as humans.

Let’s begin with *prithvi* or earth, which we proudly call our mother. This earth is being poisoned with chemicals poured to get the most out of it. Our forests are being cut and converted into concrete jungles. If earth and forests are not healthy, there is no way we can get food that would nurture us. A polluted earth can only give us polluted food. I am not even talking about the chemicals in our processed food, fruits, and vegetables to prolong their shelf life. Can we demand food safety bodies to work on war footing to ensure healthy food? Clean and healthy earth is our fundamental right.

The next element is *jala* or water, the basis of life. Till 2-3 decades back, we could drink water at every railway station across the country without getting sick. Today, we need to filter water using multiple technologies in our own homes. Plastic water bottles are the biggest source of garbage, followed by aluminium packaging. Our rivers are polluted, and no cleaning project has shown much impact. The sacredness of our rivers once maintained their cleanliness, but now industrial, human and tourism waste are playing havoc. Civilisations were built on the banks of rivers that provided water for consumption, but today there is hardly any city that has a clean river flowing past it. All of them look like abandoned

streams that overflow in monsoons. We must demand clean water and yes, it would mean closure or at least downsizing of the bottled water, filtering and tanker industries.

*Agni* or fire is the third tattva. In the external world, this is affecting us through global warming that we are contributing to, through excessive use of heating and cooling equipment—be it the air conditioners we use even in winter, or by excessively using servers



**We can look at the quality of life through the panch tattvas. It holds up a mirror to our own habits that harm the five elements and reminds us of our rights to ask for improvement**

hosting our data. In our internal world, it is our *jatharagni* or digestive fire that has gone haywire with all the processed food, leading to so many lifestyle diseases. Can our architecture go back to being weather-sensitive, the one that does not block the sun completely? Can we consciously eat simple and fresh food?

The fourth tattva—*vayu* or air—is now reported in terms of air quality indices. In many of our large cities, it crosses the limits of measuring at least

once a year. The average AQI is rarely in a healthy zone, except when it rains. Vehicular pollution is one of the biggest contributors, but this is magnified when vehicles are stuck in traffic for hours together. Does the lack of public transport not add to this? Does absence of walking spaces not lead to more use of vehicles? Should we not demand cleaner air to breathe? At our end, we must realise that every time we order a loaf of bread, we are contributing to vehicular pollution as each delivery is a trip.

Finally, *akasha* or the space around us. Our streets are full of garbage. Yes, on the face of it, it is the failure of municipal authorities, but we also need to think before we discard five layers of wrappers to eat our two cookies. It is also our failure to hold authorities responsible in an engaging way. Our roads get washed away in a few hours of rains—why are the people constructing not being held responsible? Our public spaces are shrinking, making way for vehicles that need to be parked. Can we reclaim our public spaces?

Till we work on improving these five basic elements, none of us will live better. The rich and powerful breathe the same air, drink the same water and navigate the same broken streets. This is one light that should bind us all irrespective of religion, region, caste, or language—for our collective health and happiness. Once these basics are in place, we can debate our differences.

### QUOTE CORNER



We have reached a pivotal moment. There must be a response from the entire region to such barbaric actions. This attack we can only describe as state terrorism. It is a message to the entire region: that there is a rogue player. Does the world need a clearer image of who is the bully in the region?

**Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani**, Qatar’s prime minister, after Israel’s missile attack on a few locations in Doha

There’s a lot less shelling in Kyiv when Kellogg is here. He’s better than an air defence system.

**Volodymyr Zelenskyy**, on meeting with Trump’s envoy Keith Kellogg

This reminded us of *Singham*. The tagline is from this story only.

**Justice Sandeep Mehta** of the Supreme Court while hearing a case about a political rivalry leading to a dramatic shootout inside the Ulhasnagar station in Mumbai



### Nepal’s nihilism

Ref: *Gen Z pick Sushila Karki sworn in as Interim PM* (Sep 13). The upheaval in Nepal was born of frustration with chronic political dysfunction and cannot be dismissed as a mere reaction to a single-day crackdown. The Gen Z protests reflect decades of political instability, broken promises, and economic neglect. Bangladesh’s recent turmoil offers another cautionary example. The alternative—allowing violent nihilism to masquerade as democratic renewal—risks destroying the very foundations on which any Naya Nepal must be built.

**Kyamudin Ansari**, Mumbai

### Long-term gain

Ref: *Turning Trump’s taints into opportunity* (Sep 13). The writer has brought out very well the restrained and calibrated, but firm, stand of India against the rants of the US president and his acolytes, who have forgotten that the days of US bul-

lying are gone. Though India may lose in the near future, it will develop itself in the long run.

**Hemanth D Pai**, Bengaluru

### Tech utopia

Ref: *Feasibility tests for Bengaluru satellites* (Sep 13). Ambitious plans for Bengaluru’s satellite cities promise jobs and innovation, but can they withstand reality checks? Massive investments, land acquisition, and infrastructure needs raise questions. With strained budgets and worsening water issues, are we building a tech utopia on shaky ground? Vision is vital, but so is sustainability. Bengaluru’s future deserves more than gloss.

**K Chidanand Kumar**, Bengaluru

### Chhokar’s contribution

Ref: *Relentless reformer who made democracy accountable* (Sep 13). Prof Jagdeep S Chhokar, co-founder of the Association for Democratic Reforms, made an imprint in bringing transparency and accountability in Indian democracy. His fight on the right to know electoral rolls is noteworthy. ADR’s

data is now the gold standard to study the state of Indian democracy as well as the shift from blind allegiance to evidence-based voting.

**H Syed Othuman**, Tirunelveli

### Two-state solution

Ref: *A Palestine state without Hamas gets UNGA backing* (Sep 13). It is at least gratifying that the UN General Assembly backed a resolution for a Palestine state without the involvement of Hamas. The US opposing the resolution was disappointing, but not at all surprising. The voting once again proved that Uncle Sam cannot be considered an honest broker in the two-state solution.

**C G Kuriakose**, Kothamangalam

### Aircraft checks

Ref: *Major scare as plane loses rear wheel, lands safely* (Sep 13). The incident of a SpiceJet aircraft with 75 passengers aboard making an emergency landing in Mumbai after having lost a wheel is coming to public notice only because a passenger took a video that shocked viewers. Regular maintenance

and constant check of aircraft must be done more dedicatedly before takeoff.

**K R Venkata Narasimhan**, Madurai

### Post picks

Ref: *Kerala academics ask CII to review VC search committees* (Sep 12). It’s not proper to appoint non-academics as vice-chancellors. Now the government has appointed a bureaucrat as the acting chairperson of UGC. Such posts should be reserved only for faculty members who have been a full-time member for at least seven years. IAS officers should not be appointed temporarily or permanently at any cost.

**Sunil Pedgaonkar**, Solapur

### Roadside reflector

Ref: *Reflective tapes on all vehicles must in Telangana* (Sep 13). While the insistence on making it an inviolable obligation for vehicle owners and manufacturers is welcome, what about the accountability of the government in maintaining roadsides and medians with effective reflectors?

**U Atreya Sarma**, Hyderabad

### THE NEW SUNDAY EXPRESS

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# Awe & some more



RUMOURS over Apple's new launches had been swirling for weeks — leaked prototypes, speculative price tags and whispers of features that sounded almost too bold to be real. By the time the launch event live-streamed, expectations were sky-high, and the showcase didn't just meet them, it outshone the chatter. What unfolded was less a product launch and more a theatre of technology, where phones shed every unnecessary ounce, watches took up side gigs as health coaches, earbuds flexed new AI brains and even tiny trackers learned to shout louder.

## This year's Apple launches prove creativity and AI now steer everyday technology



The iPhone 17 Air stole the thunder with its impossibly slim 5.6mm frame, making it the thinnest iPhone ever. REUTERS

Apple's "Awe-Dropping" event wasn't about a company patting itself on the back, it was about technology flexing its muscles and showing just how far everyday devices have come. And yes, jaws did drop. Here's a detailed look at everything that unfolded at the Steve Jobs Theatre in Cupertino, California.

**IPHONE AIR, THE SHOWSTOPPER**  
The iPhone 17 Air stole the thunder with its impossibly slim 5.6 mm frame, making it the thinnest iPhone ever built.

Wrapped in titanium and fronted by a 6.5-inch Super Retina XDR OLED display, it feels less like a phone and more like a futuristic design experiment that actually works.

Despite its single 24 MP lens, computational photography ensures results that punch far above its minimalist hardware. This supermodel of smartphones starts at ₹1,19,900, and yes, it is eSIM-only, no SIM tray in sight.

### POWER, POLISH, ENDURANCE

The standard iPhone 17 (from ₹82,900) brings a 6.3-inch 120 Hz ProMotion display, sturdier glass, AI-driven selfie framing and a battery life bump, making it a true everyday upgrade.

The iPhone 17 Pro (from ₹1,34,900) and Pro Max (from ₹1,49,900) flex Apple's new A19 Pro Bionic chip, complete with vapour-chamber cooling for sustained performance. Their triple 48 MP camera array offers up to 8× optical zoom, while the new 18 MP front camera with Centre Stage auto-framing makes video calls look cinematic.

The Pro Max also smashed records with 39 hours of video playback on one charge.

### WATCHES AS HEALTH COACHES

Apple Watch Series 11 landed with a smarter set of health tools, from hypertension alerts to improved sleep tracking. It now feels less like an accessory and more like a low-key medical companion, priced at ₹46,900.

The rugged Watch Ultra 3 comes armed with satellite messaging and longer battery life. Priced at ₹89,900.

Watch SE 3, at ₹25,900, gave budget buyers some sparkle with slimmer bezels and the shiny new Liquid Glass interface, which makes apps and menus shimmer.

### LITTLE PODS, BIG BRAINS

Earbuds are rarely show-stealers, but the AirPods Pro 3 made a case. They ship with five tip sizes for a perfect fit, world-class noise cancellation and sweat resistance that keeps them gym-proof.

The real shocker? A built-in heart-rate sensor and real-time translation, meaning your earbuds can now double as both a fitness tracker and an interpreter. Battery life stretches to 8 hours.

All this at ₹25,900.

### WHEN SOFTWARE SPARKLES

Software updates aren't usually glamorous, but the Liquid Glass design language has changed that. Icons refract and shimmer like they're floating under glass, making swipes and taps feel tactile.

This slick design comes bundled with iOS 26, macOS Tahoe and watchOS 26, rolling out to users in mid-September. Add in Apple Intelligence, the AI framework baked into everything from Siri to widgets, and the operating system now feels less like software and more like a responsive partner.

### AIRTAG 2 — SMALL, BUT SMART

Even the humble tracker has got a glow-up. The AirTag 2, priced at ₹3,490 (single) and ₹11,900 (pack of four), now sports a stronger U2 chip, a louder speaker and more precise location pings. It isn't glamorous, but when you're late for work and can't find your keys, it suddenly feels like a lifesaver.

For potential buyers, the question lingers: will you upgrade or give it a pass? Between a phone so slender it practically slips through fabric, watches moonlighting as pocket doctors, earbuds fluent in more languages than most travellers and software that gleams like digital crystal, the temptation is real.

Wallets might wince, but the tech thrill is undeniable.

This year's lineup dares you to rethink what your everyday devices can do.

'The Secret of Secrets' is perhaps Dan Brown's most ambitious novel and has already been lapped up for a movie. Another bestseller in the making?

# DAN THE DON

MANDIRA NAYAR

ROBERT LANGDON has had sleepless nights for decades (he could be a new mother). He never gets a full night's rest. In 'The Da Vinci Code', he is woken up at 12.32 am, dragged out of bed to view a bloody murder at the Louvre; in 'Angels and Demons', it is at 5.14 am to see a naked corpse branded with Illuminati; in 'The Lost Symbol', his evening begins with him getting involved with a disturbing object that carries a message. In comparison, in 'The Secret of Secrets', his latest book after eight long years, Robert has not had a restless night and his day, readers hope, will be endless and an adrenaline binge fest.

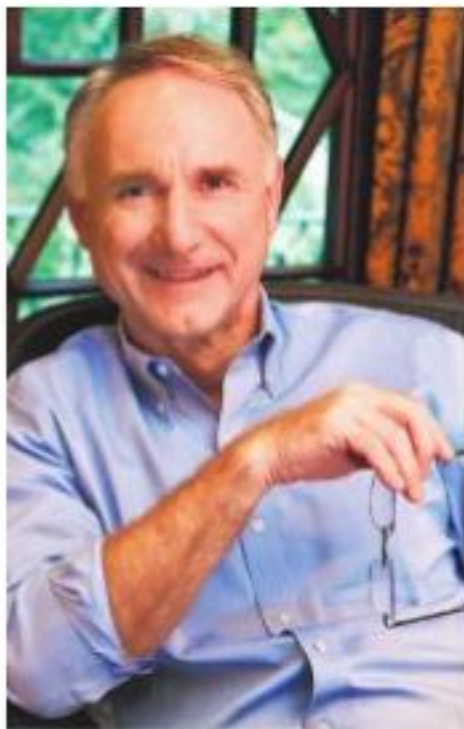
This time he is sleepless in Prague. His lover, Katherine Solomon, had a nightmare and woke him up. He is returning from his morning swim in Prague when all hell breaks loose. The grotesque figure wearing an outlandish tiara with black spikes she dreamt of appears before Robert as he crosses the Charles Bridge. The plot of 'The Secret of Secrets' is wafer-thin. Yet, it begins with a bang. It is a roller-coaster ride where logic isn't in the driver's seat. And that is the only way to enjoy it. If you're looking for anything more, jump off.

Robert has had his share of women. If you're a Harvard professor in Symbolology obsessed with ancient artefacts, the way to find romance is to walk into a conspiracy to destroy the world at night. Vittoria Vetra appeared in 'Angels and Demons'; 'The Da Vinci Code' saw Sophie Neveu and Sienna Brooks was his dalliance in 'Inferno'. Katherine appears in 'The Lost Symbol'. But now Robert is smitten. At 62, four years younger than her, his devotion has all the ardour of a Labrador puppy.

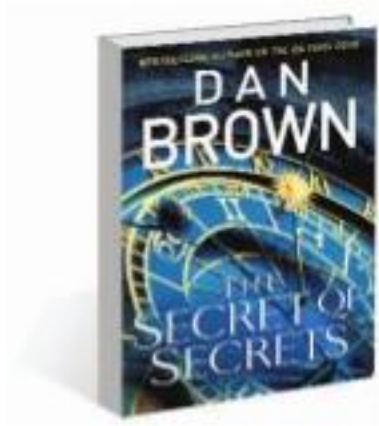
But Katherine has "playful eyes", "mesmerising intellect" and "deepening" laugh lines. She is a noetic scientist — the study of human consciousness, as she puts it — and her ground-breaking new book is due to be out (it could be paradigm-altering like 'A Brief History of Time'). But the powers that be are out to stop it from seeing the light of day. The publisher, no prizes for guessing, is Penguin Random House. Robert's editor is Jonas Faulkman, an anagram for his own editor Jason Kaufman (Robert's last book has not done so well, quite like Dan's last book 'Origin'). It was the only book that did not get turned into a film).

What follows is a race to destroy the book, including hacking the publishing house's server and a plot that is so twisty that it leaves you dazed. Katherine disappears, turning Robert into her saviour. He rushes across Prague, being chased by Czech law enforcers and a rather dodgy American ambassador. There are plots within plots and a mysterious Golem clad in clay and a hood out to kill. And the mysteries of the brain.

'The Secret of Secrets' is perhaps his most ambitious novel. A 671-page heavyweight book to thrill is a huge gamble to take (his other books did cross the 600 mark, but the times were slower. The last 200-odd pages fly by). But Dan is nothing but a gambler. If his earlier books were about secret clubs, this book takes on the realm of what was science fiction, but now is real. This shift, courtesy Katherine — it is her theories that are at the heart of the book



Dan Brown. PHOTO: BEN FLYTHE



THE SECRET OF SECRETS by Dan Brown. Penguin Random House. Pages 704. ₹1,499

— is perhaps the flaw. Robert is out of his depth and is a knight in shining armour but not always as a code-breaker. Many times in the book, you wonder like Robert when he discovers the super-secret on human consciousness. "Is this really happening?"

Instead of art and religion, 'The Secret of Secrets' tackles the questions of what lies beyond, the paranormal, the out-of-body experiences, death, a programme to control not thoughts, but the mind — just enough fact to blend it with fiction, the kind of conspiracy theory of alternate reality that can keep people hooked.

The book starts with the standard fact that all artworks are real, all experiments and scientific results are true to life and all organisations are real too. Throw in Stargate, CIA's secret project that involved employing psychics and people with ESP to "remote view" Russian military installations. It is crammed with the larger questions of human consciousness. In many ways, the book is written for readers who can compress complex ideas into 140 characters simplistically, and are addicted to the hit that an Insta reel gives them. It is junk food in an age of organic quinoa.

The king of horror, Stephen King, described Dan as "the intellectual equivalent of Kraft macaroni and cheese". But the barbs aside, Dan sells. He has made millions with only seven Robert Langdon cases (his current value stands at \$175 million). Unlike other writers, he spends years researching and doesn't trot out a new book each year. This is why any new title by him is not just a book, but a publishing event. It is a creation of myth — carefully crafted by publishers — that spans continents. Translated into 57 languages, including Ughur, Dan is more than just a writer, he represents the possibility of business. Each book comes tailor-made as a guide — as the cities that they are set in form an integral part of the story.

Florence, the golden-lit city, has seen the benefit of 'Inferno' with visitors pouring in. He put Rosslyn Chapel on the tourist map in Scotland. Even snotty Louvre realised the power of an American bestseller and organised a tour, one not focused on its art. This summer, Prague is gearing up for tourists with specially crafted cocktails and tours. The city woke up early to head to Old Town Hall, turned into a pop-up bookstore, where they queued up to buy the book. It is no different in Delhi, where the book is selling briskly. Dan can be relied upon to sell copies. The 'Da Vinci Code' became a cult. In 2009, when there was a worldwide slump, 'The Lost Symbol' sold 8.3 million copies in the first 24 hours.

He emerged in the early 2000s and just like his character Robert, Dan was not glib. He was reclusive, reticent and almost vanilla (he started drinking coffee only when he was 30). His father was a mathematician. His mother was a believer. If his father was a man of science, his mother swore by the Bible. This battle between science and religion — the two most powerful forces — and his own inner tussle fuelled his books.

It was reported that he corresponded with his wife Blythe by email even if they were in the same house. He wanted to be a singer, but became a writer instead. He wore anti-gravity boots to clear his head, and recreated for his readers the boyish thrill that he felt at the treasure hunts his parents set up for him on Christmas.

Eight years is a long wait for a new book. The world has changed. There was Covid, conspiracy theories that Dan offers have occupied mainstream and the average attention span has shrunk to a blink of an eye from when 'Origin' hit the stands. His world has changed too. His divorce has been bitter. Blythe accused him of having multiple affairs, including one with his horse trainer. She was his first reader, and researcher. He now appears on Instagram with his dog Winston as the first reader. Unlike Blythe, Winston is not a natural.

At almost ₹1,500, Dan Brown's 'The Secret of Secrets' is a commitment, and an expensive one. When binge-worthy content is available at a click — the book costs a little less than Netflix for a year on the mobile — will you give it a miss? It doesn't matter to Dan. 'The Secret of Secrets' will soon be a Netflix show, out next May. Dan has already got a winner on his hands. But does his publisher?

— The writer is a literary critic

## CAPTION CONTEST 1527



RAJESH SACHAR

Entries are invited to suggest a caption for the photograph. The caption should only be in English, witty and not exceeding 10 words, and reach Spectrum, The Tribune, Chandigarh, 160030, by Thursday. The best five captions will be published and awarded ₹300, ₹250, ₹200, ₹150 and ₹100, respectively. Each caption must be accompanied by a clipping of the caption contest and its number. Photocopies or scans of the caption photo won't be accepted. Online subscribers may attach an e-paper clipping at captionpics@tribunenews.com or a scanned copy of the e-paper clipping. Please mention the pin code and phone number, along with your address.

### SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1526



SPECTRUM SEPTEMBER 7 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

Auto screening — Manpreet Kaur, Zirakpur

Beyond a shadow of doubt — Balvinder Kaur, Kamal

Transparent job — Gurashish Kaur, Chandigarh

Where professionalism meets clarity — Pawan Kumar, Mohali

Deja view — Mahesh Kumar Bajaj, Sangrur



FOOD TALK  
PUSHPESH PANT

A MERE mention of Goa conjures up visions of a beautiful land on the western coast synonymous with resplendent delicacies. The only trouble is that much of the Goan repertoire comprises meaty fare. We dare not commit sacrilege in the fortnight that goes by the name of Pitripaksha, aka Shradha. This is the time marked in the Hindu calendar to perform rituals, pay respects to departed ancestors. This is when meat is eschewed. Nor is chicken and fish allowed to pollute the plate.

The monsoon has been unusually heavy this year, and though it has been flooding in most of northern India, we have not been able to keep our mind away from Goa. Monsoon makes Goa even more beautiful. The sea turns turbulent and dangerous, but the land is seductively verdant. How tempting is the taste of *cafreal* in the land of its birth!

During our many visits to Goa, we

have been treated to many renderings of chicken and fish *cafreal* by local hosts. Gourmet friend Rocky Mohan has included it along with recipes for *xacuti*, *sorpotel*, *vindaloo* and *balchao* in his mouth-watering cookbook. Let's not linger in the prohibited culinary territory for long lest we stray from the straight and narrow virtuous path.

We spoke to many Goan friends who assured us that Goans enjoy vegetarian dishes, including green leafy ones, like anyone else. They also boosted our confidence that we could try cooking mixed vegetables with a new twist, giving them a *cafreal masala* garb to don. The green *masala* adds exceptional zing to anything cooked with it.

We are pleased to share the results of our experiment with our dear readers. Not only is the dish refreshingly different from pretentious *bawali-deewani handi* and *subz miloni* hyped by the Awadhi *bawarchi*, the veg *cafreal* does mimic meat realistically with ingredients like jackfruit, mushrooms and tofu. The contrasting textures and natural flavours that remained untouched by light stir-frying make this exceptionally satisfying.

The *cafreal masala* is allowed to shine unhindered.

It is ideal for meatless days and monsoon moods alike

# Goa's fiery *cafreal* gets a veggie twist

## VEG CAFREAL

### INGREDIENTS

Potatoes	50 gm
Carrots (orange)	50 gm
Cauliflower	50 gm
Capsicum	50 gm
Jackfruit	50 gm
Paneer/Tofu	50 gm
Button mushrooms	50 gm
Zucchini/bottle gourd	50 gm
Peas	50 gm
Coriander leaves	75 gm
Garlic cloves	10
A piece of ginger	1 x 1/2 inch
Cumin seeds	1 tsp
Cloves	6
Black peppercorns	1 tsp
Cinnamon stick	1x1 inch
Green chillies (tops, tips removed)	4
Malt vinegar	1 tbsp
Refined oil	1/4 cup
Salt	To taste

### METHOD

■ Wash the vegetables. Pat dry and cut into bite-sized pieces.

■ Prepare the marinade by blending coriander leaves, garlic cloves, green chillies, ginger, capsicum, whole spices, vinegar and salt in a mixer to obtain a smooth paste.

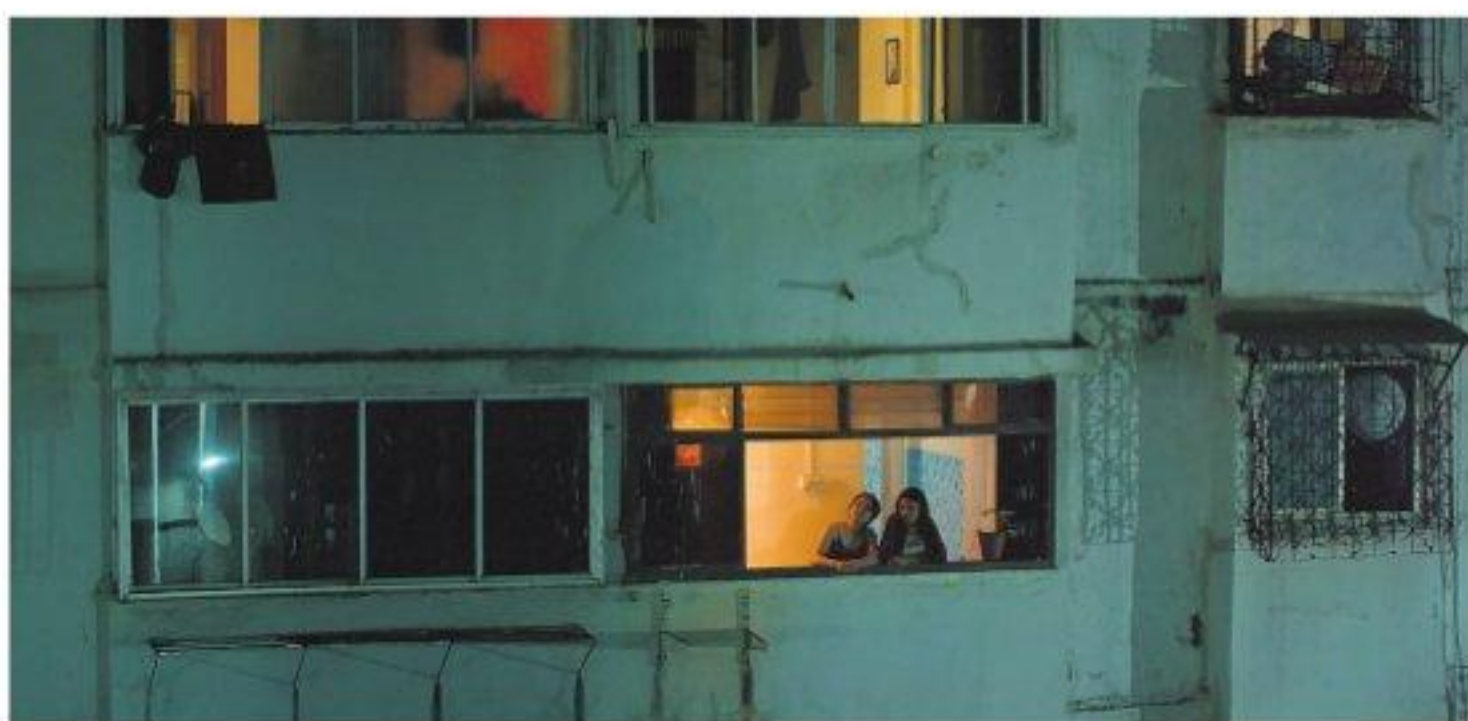
■ Place the vegetables in a bowl. Pour this marinade over them. Mix well and keep aside at least for half an hour.

■ Heat oil in a thick-bottomed pan and stir-fry the marinated vegetables till moisture evaporates and the vegetables appear a bit charred.

■ If a gravy dish is preferred, add a little water. Bring to boil, reduce to low flame and simmer till desired consistency is obtained. Enjoy with steamed rice or bread of choice.







## Fragments of memory

Anupama Roy has won Best Director award at Venice's Orizzonti section

MURTEAZA ALI KHAN

WITH the triumph of her debut feature *Songs of Forgotten Trees*, Anupama Roy has stepped into a space where only a rare few first-timers dare to dream. By winning the Best Director award in Venice Film Festival's prestigious Orizzonti (Horizons) section, Roy now finds herself in the august company of auteurs like Luca Guadagnino, Amir Naderi, Jia Zhangke and Lav Diaz — filmmakers who once used the platform as a springboard to world cinema's loftiest stages.

But Roy is not dazzled by the coronation. "Anurag (Kashyap) Sir told me once that an award doesn't just bring recognition — it brings the responsibility to make better films, even when you are uncomfortable. I am grateful for that advice. The smell of success is nice, but it is also a reminder to stay humble."

Roy's cinematic odyssey has been deeply personal, stitched together with fragments of memory, friendship and loss. *Songs of Forgotten Trees* is not merely a film but an elegy, drawing on her childhood experiences of caste discrimination, rural hardship and fractured bonds. She recalls her Dalit school friend Jhuma, whom her father asked her to abandon. "Back then, I had no idea about casteism. I followed his instructions. But later when I realised, it stayed with me like a wound. Jhuma was married off when we were just kids. The memory haunted me; I knew it would find its way into my stories."

In her film, memories bloom like trees, and songs carry the scent of loss. The film's protagonist, Thooya, played by Naaz Sheikh, hums her late mother's song — an intimate melody that Roy borrowed from Sheikh's own life. "Naaz is a dear friend. I had heard her mother's song so many times that it became part of me. I decided to use it in the film because it felt organic."

For Thooya, it became a motif of happiness and longing for her mother in Bombay."

Roy's filmmaking is steeped in the grammar of images rather than verbose exposition. "My approach was always less expressive in terms of dialogue. I focused on metaphors, motifs, and images more than direct verbal expression. That is how I like to communicate."

It is here that one senses her kinship with this year's recipients of the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement — Werner Herzog, best known for making two of cinema's masterworks, namely *Fitzcarraldo* and *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*; and Kim Novak, the quintessential Hitchcock blonde from *Vertigo*, both of whom she met in Venice. Their encouragement left her overwhelmed. "I have always admired them. To have legends like Herzog and Novak walk up to me and applaud — it was like a dream. I felt so honoured just standing beside them."

It is ironic yet heartening that Roy's woman-centric film was backed entirely by male producers and friends. She recounts their contribution with deep gratitude. But the turning point was when Anurag Kashyap came on board to present the film. "He has a simple rule: if he likes a film, he will present it. If not, he won't. We were fortunate he liked ours. That gave the film its wings."

For Roy, the journey into filmmaking was fraught with challenges — financial, social and institutional. "The gender discrimination I faced was not just from family, but also from institutions. It was very difficult to navigate everything all alone initially. But then I met people who believed in me, and that gave me the courage to continue."

Her advice to aspiring filmmakers is straightforward: "The journey is unpredictable. It requires hard work and patience. It's not hard to make a film, but it's very easy to give up. You have to stick to your idea, and be honest about your storytelling, your craft, your process, and your team."

For Roy, the accolade is the opening act of a global cinematic journey. "I am not just representing Bengal. I am a global citizen. Cinema has the power to cross borders. What begins in a small village can echo in Venice. That's the beauty of it."

— The writer has served on the jury of various film festivals as well as National Film Awards

## Lived realities of Ladakh

SUKANT DEEPAK

THE post-nuclear landscape, that slight numbing of the mind as the oxygen plays hard to get, the peculiar collage of the ancient intersecting with the contemporary... monks blending in with soldiers carrying Kalashnikovs — Ladakh has this unique ability to pause each thought but also shock and awe with a roller coaster of unending visual hits. And in contrast emerges art that may be rooted in regional sensibilities, but never fails to dwell upon universal concerns.

This holds true for Ladakhi artist Skarma Sonam Tashi, who has made history by becoming the first person from his region to win a National Award at the recent 64th National Exhibition of Art.

This 27-year-old's artwork *My Homeland - 3'* is a striking piece that combines aspects of memory, ecology and resilience. He draws inspiration from the area's commanding mountains, unending valleys and sustainable architectural traditions. His usage of native materials, including wood, stone and sun-dried bricks, blends in seamlessly with the surroundings; besides, papier-mache from old books and natural pigments reflect this sustainable philosophy.

The work invites viewers to reflect on ecological balance and the pressing need for sustainability by serving as a metaphor for Ladakh's delicate landscape.

For Tashi, the news about the award was "almost unbelievable". "I was stunned — in every way. *My Homeland - 3'* is not only a personal reflection of belonging, but also an invitation to think about the urgent need for sustainability in our times," he says.

While Tashi stresses that nature has been his closest companion, formal training came at Jammu University (BFA) and an MFA degree from Kala Bhavana in Santiniketan. "A workshop with the Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation set me on a career in art," informs the artist, who received much guidance from local sculptors.

Tashi's practice rejects the postcard image of Ladakh and emphasises the region's lived realities. "Balancing the tourist gaze means shifting the lens from what visitors see to what those who live here feel," says the artist.

Inside his studio in Ladakh, visitors can discover an 'organised chaos', complete with piles of old notebooks, papier-mache, soaked cardboard... Each piece evolves as

a conversation between the artist and the landscape, and the process is instinctive, informed by memory and material.

The emerging art festivals in Ladakh, like the sa Ladakh Biennale, have become important venues for local and foreign artists to interact with the environment and culture of the area. Ask Tashi about it, and he says, "I participated in the first edition in 2023, where I created a site-specific work at Disko valley. My approach was to paint landscapes on mountains without leaving a trace, using recycled and biodegradable materials like old notebooks and local clay. Through it, I wanted to reflect the fragility of glaciers, biodiversity and Ladakh's changing environment."

"Festivals like these are not only platforms for artistic expression but also environmental advocacy. They are vital for nurturing artists and connecting Ladakh to wider artistic conversations," he says.

Even as artists in Ladakh face obstacles owing to the topography and dearth of significant galleries, Tashi advocates

for infrastructure, mentorship, and accessible art education. "Although small projects and organisations have offered vital support, I see more opportunities in the integration of fine arts education at the university and school levels."

Drawing inspiration from everyday rhythms, music, literature and architecture, Tashi sees himself as a link that

draws on Ladakh's traditions, whether it is the indigenous architecture, sustainable ways of living or the deep connection to the land. "These elements are part of our cultural DNA, and I feel a responsibility to carry them forward." At the same time, he works with contemporary materials and forms.

In that sense, he sees his practice as a bridge: rooted in Ladakh's past, yet responsive to the challenges and vocabularies of today. "My hope is that by weaving together history and modernity, I can create art that speaks both to my community and to a wider global audience," he concludes.

— The writer is a freelance contributor



Skarma Sonam Tashi is the first artist from the region to win a National Award

## Patiala Necklace shimmers at London's V&A

SHYAM BHATIA

AFTER drawing more than 250,000 visitors in just five months, the star of the new Cartier exhibition at London's Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) remains the Patiala Necklace, a piece so audacious that even in reproduction it halts visitors mid-stride. Created in 1928 for Maharaja Bhopinder Singh of Patiala, it shimmers in its case with nearly 3,000 diamonds, including the legendary 234-carat De Beers stone. No royal court in Europe could rival its splendour then, and none can now.

The exhibition opened in April and runs until November 16. By all accounts, it is the most popular jewellery show in the museum's history, dwarfing the 39,148 who attended the museum's *'Fubergé in London: Romance to Revolution'* exhibition in 2021-22. In recent years, the V&A has staged only three other dedicated jewellery exhibitions: *'Pearls'* (2013-14), *'Bejewelled Treasures: The Al Thani Collection'* (2015-16), and *'Fubergé in London'* (2021-22). Unlike those earlier shows, which did not have official visitor totals published, the overwhelming demand for Cartier has made its record-breaking scale impossible to ignore.

September weekends sold out by mid-August, and demand for October and November slots is equally intense.

Tickets, priced at £27 on weekdays (about ₹3,230) and £29 on weekends (about ₹3,470), continue to vanish within hours of release.

Bhopinder Singh himself was no ordinary prince. He travelled in Europe in his private train, played polo with British aristocrats, and was renowned for his flamboyance. Photographs show him dripping with jewels at official functions, a ruler who wore dia-

monds as armour in a colonial world that had stripped him of real political power. The Patiala Necklace was his ultimate statement, extravagant, impossible to ignore, and designed to remind the Raj that Indian princes still commanded wealth beyond the imagination of their imperial overlords.

The fate of that necklace is almost as dramatic as its creation. Commissioned by Bhopinder Singh in 1928, it passed to his son Yadavindra Singh in 1938 and was still intact in 1954, as a film shown at the V&A confirms him wearing it on his 40th birthday. In the decades that followed, however, the jewel quietly vanished from Patiala. Its platinum framework resurfaced in a London shop in 1988, stripped of its great diamonds and Burmese rubies. Cartier restored it in 2002, setting replicas in place of the missing stones. The version on display today is part original, part reproduction — dazzling still, but also a ghost of India's lost opulence, its most precious jewels long since scattered.

His splendour, however, rested on a much older and unmistakably Indian story. For centuries, India was the world's only source of diamonds. The Golconda mines of the Deccan produced stones that became global legends: the Kohinoor, the Hope Diamond, and countless others that filled Mughal treasuries before passing into European hands. Only in the 18th century did Brazil and later South Africa begin to challenge India's monopoly.

That deep history hums beneath the Cartier display. Visitors marvelling at the Patiala Necklace are also staring at the afterlife of India's geology, artistry, and lost sovereignty.

The necklace is only one example of Cartier's long courtship of Indian princes. The Maharajas of Nawanagar, Kapurthala, Baro-

Created in 1928, it is the star of Cartier's sold-out exhibition



Patiala Necklace, Cartier Paris, 1928. Vincent Wulverryck, Collection Cartier. © Cartier. Installation view of Cartier at V&A South Kensington.

da and Indore stride through the exhibition in archive photographs, resplendent in silks and jewels. They carried trunks of gems to Paris, including Golconda diamonds, Colombian emeralds and Burmese rubies, which Cartier recast in modern western forms.

Those transformations were breathtaking. Ancient Mughal stones were recut, turban ornaments turned into tiaras, throne jewels transformed into necklaces. The effect remains dazzling. Yet beneath the sparkle lies a sharper truth: Indian rulers, stripped of authority by the Raj, turned to jewellery as their last theatre of sovereignty. Their bodies became their thrones; their ornaments, their proclamations.

Cartier's designers did not only profit from Indian stones. They borrowed Indian design itself. The famous *tutti frutti* style — carved emeralds, rubies, and sapphires set in exuberant clusters — came directly from Mughal ateliers in Jaipur and Delhi.

What once adorned Indian courts re-emerged in Paris as global chic, marketed as modern but rooted in centuries of Indian artistry.

Even the journey of the gems tells a fractured story. Cartier's records trace how Golconda diamonds were split, reset and scattered into multiple modern jewels. Each fragment sparkles still, but the whole has been lost, treasures dismantled to feed European appetites. The exhibition celebrates craftsmanship; Indian viewers may also see cultural dismemberment.

The contrasts are jarring. As Cartier's Maharaja commissions multiplied in Paris, peasants rioted in British-controlled India against famine, taxation and forced labour. Gandhi's spinning wheel offered one vision of India; the Patiala Necklace offered another. Luxury and deprivation stood side by side.

That paradox lingers in the galleries today. Jewels that dazzle in the glass cases are also witness to colonial imbalance, a world where Indian rulers poured fortunes into Parisian luxury while their subjects

fought for freedom.

The echoes reach into the present. In today's India, no Bollywood wedding or awards night is complete without dazzling jewels. What once signalled a Maharaja's splendour would now be the ultimate red-carpet prize. Cinema has, in a sense, inherited the glamour once monopolised by princes: the stage is different, but the jewels play the same role of spectacle and dominance.

This raises questions the exhibition does not ask. Should treasures like the Patiala Necklace, even in reconstructed form, sit in London rather than Punjab? Should Mughal stones recut for western clients be remembered as lost heritage? These doubts hover in the galleries even if the labels remain silent.

Cartier itself now courts Indian buyers directly, with boutiques in Delhi and Mumbai. The circle is complete: what once left India in trunks for Paris returns as luxury marketed back to its source.

The exhibition is not only about India. Grace Kelly's engagement ring, Maria Félix's serpent necklace, and Queen Elizabeth II's pink diamond brooch also feature. But the Indian presence is unusually strong. Without Golconda's mines, Mughal artistry and Maharaja patronage, Cartier's rise would look far less glittering.

Which is why the Patiala Necklace, gleaming under the gallery lights, feels like the show's true heart. It is both spectacle and symbol, a jewel that embodies the brilliance of Indian gems and the contradictions of colonial history. For India, the show is also a reminder of treasures long scattered across the world, now briefly reunited under one roof in London.

— The writer is the London correspondent of The Tribune



BOOKS

Baring invisible wounds of mental health

MOHIT TAKALKAR

**T**HERE are books you finish and neatly shelve. Then there are books that sit with you, staring back. 'Bandaged Moments', edited by Nabanita Sengupta and Nishi Pulugurtha, falls squarely in the second category. A collection of short stories by Indian women writers on mental health, it is not a genteel offering. It is a tear in the fabric of our social pretence. The volume announces itself not merely as a literary project but as a reckoning with pain, silence, stigma and survival. Each story — 26 in all, from 17 Indian languages — is both deeply personal and disturbingly universal, mapping the inner terrains of mental health that remain taboo in Indian society.

Much of Indian literature has been preoccupied with questions of nationhood, gender, caste and memory. Mental health, though present in scattered texts, rarely takes centre stage. We treat madness like we treat electricity failures. As inconvenient, best concealed, a thing to be endured until the lights come back on. We whisper about the neighbour's daughter, the relative who disappeared into a hospital, the woman who stopped eating.

What makes this anthology unique is that it does not fetishise pain, nor does it tidy suffering into neat arcs of redemption. Instead, the stories linger in ambiguity, the messiness of emotional life. They remind us that mental health is not only about diagnoses or hos-

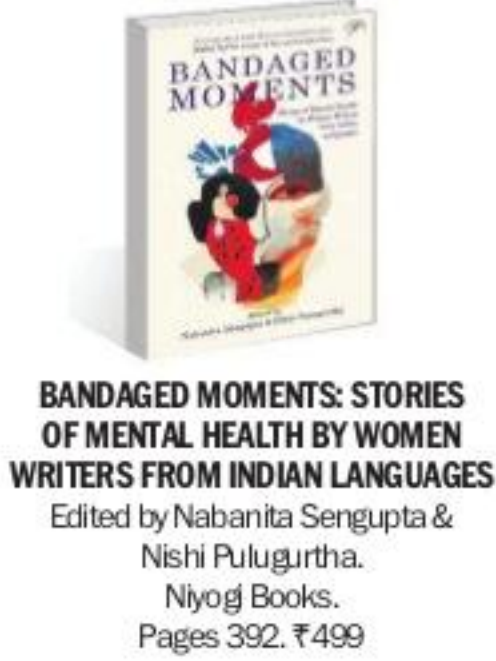
pital wards, but also about everyday negotiations. This anthology insists that madness is not elsewhere. It is here. It is in the corridor where neighbours press their ears against the wall, in the office cubicle where panic attacks masquerade as headaches, in the mother who does not return calls.

The title, 'Bandaged Moments', carries a double wound. A bandage protects, but it also conceals. It is a sign of care, but also of shame. It soaks up blood and silence equally. Every story in this collection is such a bandage pulled away. Some expose scars that have long calcified. Some reveal raw flesh.

The range of the anthology is striking. Some stories trace the jagged edges of depression and anxiety; others capture the tremors of psychosis, the shadows of dementia, or the insidious weight of intergenerational trauma. The narrators are not always patients; they are also caregivers, lovers, bystanders.

What is remarkable is the stylistic variety. Some stories are starkly realist, written with journal-like immediacy. Others veer into allegory, even surrealism, pushing language beyond clinical case histories. The stories do not bend toward the expected arc of "illness-treatment-recovery". They do not offer redemption as consolation. Instead, many end abruptly. A sentence trails off. A character remains unhealed. The illness persists.

It is not incidental that these writers are women. Women in India are taught to silence their inner tremors. Depression is mistaken for laziness, anxiety for fussiness, psychosis



for family shame. "Pull yourself together" is the national anthem of Indian households. Here, the women narrate themselves — not as patients, but as storytellers. In this sense, the book joins a global continuum of feminist writing on madness, from Sylvia Plath and Charlotte Perkins Gilman to contemporary South Asian voices.

What sets the book apart from western anthologies is its claustrophobic social texture. Illness here is never private. It leaks into households, marriages, communities. One story traces the suffocating surveillance of a joint family, where every breakdown is overheard and gossiped about. Another sits inside the fluorescent coldness of a government hospital, where the patient is seen

through layers of caste, gender and bureaucracy before she is seen as human.

The anthology reveals how mental illness in India is not just biological or psychological. It is infrastructural, cultural, linguistic. It is a system of silence pressed onto bodies.

The literary variety in this collection is striking. No single form can contain the complexity of mental illness. Each writer invents her own grammar. There are Confessional Voices. Some stories are intimate, almost whispering. The prose is clipped, private, like a diary someone forgot to hide. There are Fragmented Narratives. Memory collapses, time folds in on itself. In certain pieces, everyday objects tilt into menace, dreams bleed into waking. There is Clinical Realism. A different set anchors itself in sparse, exhausted realism: pill bottles, prescriptions. Their restraint captures the banality of illness, the dull grind of care. There are Allegorical Fables. A few move into mythic register; a madness appearing as a beast, a haunting, a shadow. By drawing from Indian allegorical traditions, they make mental illness both culturally familiar and strangely estranging.

I cannot pretend neutrality here. I live with bipolar disorder. I know the taste of lithium in the morning, the insomnia that unravels thought, the shame of explaining absences, therapy rooms and the weight of stigma. They were not abstractions. They were echoes. They were bandaged moments I recognised in my own life.

So when a story described sleeplessness as

a shadow that refused to lie down, I stopped. Underlined it twice. Last night, I too was awake at 3 am, pacing, looking at my Whoop scores, calculating how much sleep would be enough. When another story spoke of the guilt of caregivers, I thought of my family, exhausted but loyal, pretending to be fine.

To review 'Bandaged Moments' is also to ask: how should one read such a book? With empathy, certainly, but also with the humility that comes from knowing literature cannot be reduced to advocacy alone. Credit must go to Sengupta and Pulugurtha not just for collecting, but for curating with intention.

India's mental health crisis is staggering. Books cannot fix it. But they can force a cultural shift. They can unmake silence. 'Bandaged Moments' takes mental health out of statistics and celebrity anecdotes, and places it in lived, often ordinary, Indian realities. In doing so, it reframes madness not as aberration, but as part of the human spectrum.

Every book leaves behind an aftertaste. The aftertaste of 'Bandaged Moments' is not comfort, but a necessary unease. When I closed the book, I felt scraped raw. That is the point. This book is not a balm. It is not an apophthet. It is not literature seeking approval. It is a wound. It is also dignity. It is Indian women writing their silences into speech, without permission, without apology.

Once you hear those voices, you cannot return to the comfort of ignorance.

— The reviewer is a theatre director and restaurateur

Why Jallianwala took place

HARISH JAIN

**J**AGDISH CHANDER JOSHI, a trained historian and experienced researcher of Punjab's freedom movement, brings both scholarship and sensitivity to this study. His earlier work on biographical sketches of Punjab's freedom fighters has made him conversant with the region's political struggles, and in this book, he addresses the enduring question: why did the savagery of Jallianwala Bagh occur?

As Harish Puri notes in his introduction, this is not a question of recounting the massacre itself — too well known to every Indian — but of probing its historical philosophy. Were the killings the outcome of deep structural forces or the rash decision of one individual? Joshi explores the interplay between historical context, institutional failure, and personal character.

Historians have long debated whether history is driven by vast impersonal currents, as Tolstoy suggested, or by decisive individuals, as Carlyle believed. As per Joshi, both dimensions converged in Amritsar. Punjab was already a cauldron of political discontent, yet General Reginald Dyer's fateful decision to order firing at a peaceful crowd on Baisakhi day in 1919 was not an inevitable unfolding of events. It was a brutal personal choice. His actions reflected rigidity, racial arrogance and a warped belief in fear as a governing tool. It was not military necessity but prejudice, psychology, and rashness magnified into atrocity.

Yet Joshi refuses to reduce the episode to Dyer's madness alone. The district administration had already created chaos by arresting local leaders without reason. Miles Irving, the Deputy Commissioner, panicked and abandoned responsibility, leaving authority in the hands of Dyer, a junior officer acting without sanction from either civil or military command.

By any reckoning, his conduct was *ultra vires*, beyond his authority, and should have

led to court martial and dismissal. Instead, his action was endorsed by Michael O'Dwyer, the Governor of Punjab.

Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy, and his Executive Council bore the ultimate duty to uphold constitutional norms and ensure accountability. They failed. Fearful that punishing Dyer would "encourage sedition", and bound by an unwritten colonial code of closing ranks around their own, they chose evasion. The Hunter Commission was appointed, but its report diffused responsibility. Even Winston Churchill, while calling it "a monstrous event", stopped short of demanding a criminal trial. Dyer was quietly removed, not prosecuted.

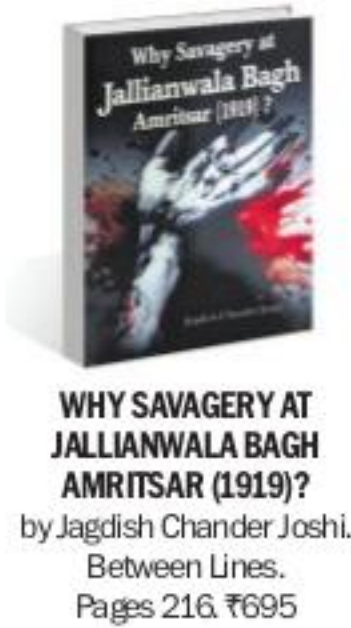
As Gandhi rightly wrote in 'Young India': "It is not General Dyer who is guilty of Amritsar. It is the whole system, the Government that stands condemned." Joshi's analysis underscores this: Jallianwala Bagh was not an aberration but a revelation of the colonial state's logic. Preserving imperial prestige outweighed justice. The Raj exposed itself as incapable of accountability to its subjects.

The aftermath made the wound permanent. Nationalism hardened, moderate faith in British justice collapsed, and the myth of imperial benevolence was shattered. Tagore renounced his knighthood; Gandhi called it "government terrorism"; Bhagat Singh invoked the atrocity in his writings and courtroom statements; and Udhram Singh sought vengeance against O'Dwyer. Yet justice itself never came, leaving the wound open.

The book is a meticulous excavation of this tragedy and its meanings. Except for minor slips — such as the dating of the Lyallpur meeting where Banke Dayal sang '*Pugri Sambhal Jatta*' (correctly March 22-23, 1907, not March 31) — the work is valuable both as a narrative and reference text.

More than a study of one atrocity, the book is a meditation on how individual prejudice, bureaucratic failure, and systemic injustice converged to create a civilisational rupture. It reminds us that the bullets fired in 1919 still echo — not only in Indian memory but in the conscience of history.

— The reviewer is a Chandigarh-based author and publisher



**WHY SAVAGERY AT JALLIANWALA BAGH AMRITSAR (1919)?**  
 by Jagdish Chander Joshi.  
 Between Lines.  
 Pages 216. ₹695

ARADHIKA SHARMA

**N**AMITA DEVIDAYAL'S 'Tangerine' is a thoughtful and introspective memoir that blends personal narrative with philosophical inquiry. Known for her earlier work, 'The Music Room', Devidayal now turns her gaze inward, exploring the spiritual dimensions of life through Hindu philosophy, especially the 'Upanishads'.

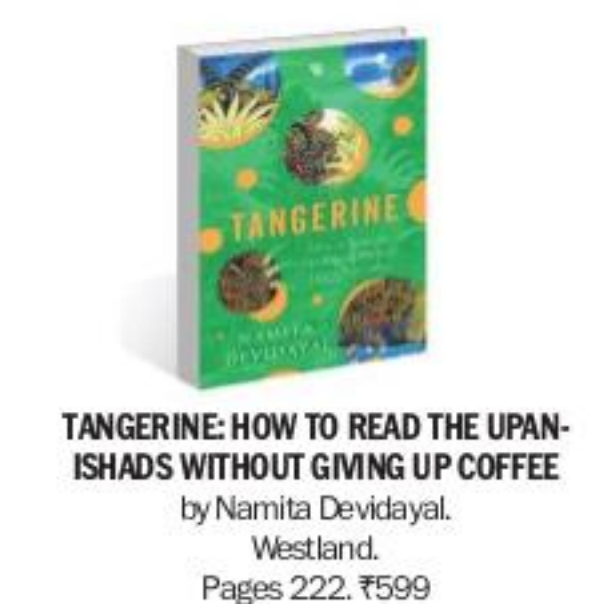
We meet her at a turning point: a life that looks perfect on paper but feels emotionally disconnected. Her candid reflection — "I should have been happy, but I was not" — sets the tone for a journey of self-discovery. She speaks openly about her mental state, including what she calls an "almost-depression", and the quiet ways in which it shaped her daily life. This honesty becomes the foundation for a deeper engagement with herself and the world around her.

Initially sceptical of religion, Devidayal begins to reassess her views as she immerses herself in spiritual texts and visits places like Rishikesh and Banaras. Rather than presenting these scriptures academically, she allows their wisdom to surface naturally through lived experience. The result is a narrative that feels personal, intuitive and accessible, even to those unfamiliar with Hindu philosophy.

Themes of identity, suffering, impermanence and inner peace run through the book. She explores the tension between materialism and spirituality, not through doctrine but experience. Her approach is gentle and inclusive, inviting readers to reflect without feeling preached to.

A unique aspect of 'Tangerine' is its integration of Indian classical music into the spiritual journey. Music becomes a metaphor for life and a path to transcendence. The brief reappearance of Dhondubai, her music teacher from 'The Music Room', adds a layer of continuity.

Philosophers like Kabir, Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi and Sri



**TANGERINE: HOW TO READ THE UPANISHADS WITHOUT GIVING UP COFFEE**  
 by Namita Devidayal.  
 Westland.  
 Pages 222. ₹599

Aurobindo appear throughout the book, not as distant figures but as companions in her journey. Kabir, in particular, is affectionately described as a "ghostly bestie", offering intuitive guidance along the way.


The book's structure mirrors the four Vedic stages of life — *brahmacharya* (student), *grihastha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (forest dweller), and *sanyasa* (renouncer) — with chapters that reflect this progression. From *Iss Par* (this side) to *Uss Par* (the other side), the narrative moves from confusion to clarity, without ever suggesting a retreat from worldly life.

Her tone is candid and often gently humorous. She doesn't claim expertise, instead sharing her learning process with humility. Anecdotes — like reading 'Archie' comics instead of memorising verses from the 'Ram Charit Manas' — add charm and relatability. Her playful irreverence reflects a deep yet light-hearted engagement with Indian culture.


The cover by Saurabh Garge is a lush blend of jungles, oceans, skies, the moon and lotus ponds. The book's title, in vibrant tangerine orange, pops beautifully.

In all, 'Tangerine' is a compelling memoir that offers a nuanced, non-dogmatic exploration of spirituality in contemporary life. It's a book that invites reflection, not just on philosophy, but on how we live, feel, and find meaning.

— The reviewer is a freelancer




**BACKFLAP**



**SCUM OF THE EARTH**  
 by Rakshit Sonawane.  
 HarperCollins.  
 Pages 321. ₹499

Living in a Mumbai slum, where open drains ran past crumbling homes and dreams were rationed like rice, Avinash knew early on that he would have to claw his way out to live with dignity. This book traces his journey and tells the story of Mumbai's underclass, its brutal chum and its fragile hope.



**APARNA SEN: A LIFE IN CINEMA**  
 by Devapriya Sanyal.  
 Rupa.  
 Pages 173. ₹495

Aparna Sen's films offer intimate yet radical portrayals of women, redefining representation in Indian cinema. This book attempts to look at her cinematic world through these women characters as they navigate love, loneliness, power and identity.

A reminder that there's no such thing as a small story

BINDU MENON

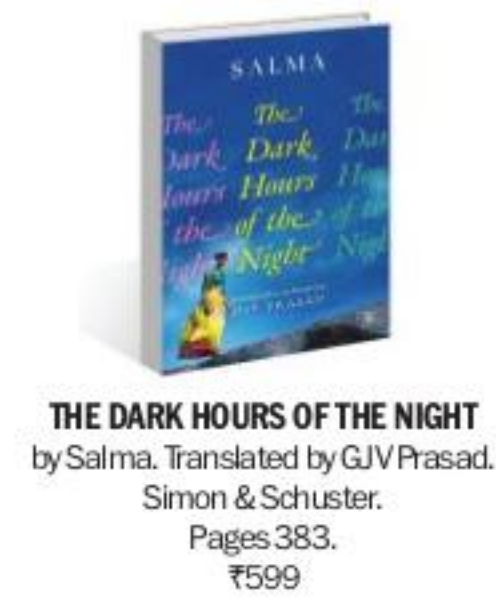
**'N**O story is ever small," said International Booker Prize winner Banu Mushtaq in her acceptance speech, adding that "in the tapestry of human experience, every thread holds the weight of the whole". This sentiment finds resonance in 'The Dark Hours of the Night', a new English translation of Tamil poet and novelist Salma's acclaimed debut, '*Irandaam Jaamangalin Kathai*' (2004). Translator GJV Prasad's rendering seeks, as he notes, to bring the novel to "a newer generation of readers" — and in doing so, preserves its lyrical cadences and political urgency.

At its heart, the novel follows Rabia, a perceptive schoolgirl in a tightly-bound Muslim neighbourhood in Tamil Nadu, but the narrative belongs to many women. Rabia's life is interlaced with those of relatives, neighbours and friends, all navigating the suffocating architecture of patriarchy. Their sto-

ries, though rooted in a specific social and religious context, speak to the universality of women's confinement — within physical walls, social codes, and inherited beliefs.

Through Rabia's gaze and in the polyphony of voices that surround her, Salma constructs a vivid gallery of women. There is Zohra, Rabia's conservative mother, whose submission to her husband's authority is absolute; Wahida, a cousin whose fantasies of marital happiness crumble; Firdaus, beautiful and spirited, who walks out on her wealthy old husband, discovers desire with a married Hindu man, and pays a tragic price; and Mairum, the child-woman, who leaves her husband after two months only to meet a cruel fate. Nafisa plays a dutiful wife to her much older husband while maintaining a not-so-secret affair; Fathima, abandoned by her spouse, elopes with a Hindu man and is cast out by the community.

Salma makes it clear that patriarchy is not upheld solely by religious elders or the Saudi-returned husband who campaigns to ban



women from the cinema; it is also policed by women themselves, their tongues primed to flay anyone who "strays".

The hypocrisy of sexual morality is glaring: Zohra's husband's long-standing affair with his Dalit maid Mariyayi, while exposing the intersection of caste prejudice with gender oppression, is met with a wry

shrug, while Nafisa's transgression is paraded as a moral cautionary tale.

Not all male characters are portrayed in varying hues of black though. Men sympathetic to women's struggles exist, but they too are hemmed in by the fear of challenging entrenched social codes.

The novel's power lies in its refusal to glamourise survival or underline the cliché of the hapless, voiceless Muslim woman. Even those who never leave their homes are not without agency. The women are neither saints nor victims; they are resourceful, affectionate, flawed. If the men believe they own these women's lives, Salma's answer is as clear as it is subversive: only until the women decide otherwise. But the punishments for defiance can also be brutal. One woman is poisoned by her own mother to protect the family's "honour". Another newlywed is left to wallow in the slow suffocation of a loveless marriage, provoking the girl's mother to wonder: "Was her life so bad that she was already weary of it?"

Prasad's translation registers the rhythms and rawness of everyday speech and is attentive to the tonal range of these women's conversations — domestic chatter, whispered conspiracies, and the occasional bursts of defiance.

There are autobiographical traces, too, in the novel. Like Rabia, Salma (born Rajathi) once slipped out to watch a film, only to be berated and later pulled out of school. Married off very early to a relative, Rajathi was denied books and writing paper at her in-laws' home. Her earliest poems were scribbled in the privacy of the toilet, smuggled out through her mother and sent to publishers.

The journey from Rajathi to Salma, and from there to public life as a writer, activist, and now Rajya Sabha member, was neither quick nor easy. That hard-earned freedom breathes through every page of this novel, and reminds us, as Mushtaq said, that there is no such thing as a small story.

— The reviewer is a contributor based in Bengaluru



# REFLECTIONS

## Nepal and Kumaon bond



TOUCHSTONES  
IRA PANDE

IN terms of political unrest, this past week has been like none other. After the turmoil in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the new hotspot in our neighbourhood is Nepal. Whoever imagined that what was a students' agitation would morph into a violent near-revolution? Several commentators have tried to see a pattern in these eruptions and pointed to the Deep State's sinister ploy to keep this part of Asia boiling. Who can say? But the resignations of the Nepali and Japanese PMs, and the wave of public protest in Indonesia do lend it some credence. Further afield is the Gaza-Israel situation and the killing of suspected Hamas leaders in Qatar. God knows where that will lead. To Europe now, and the resignation of the French Prime Minister has created another frightening spectacle of street violence in several French cities, including Paris.

As a post sent by a cousin said, the recent *chandragrahan* (lunar eclipse) has brought more instability than any eclipse thus far. I recall my mum forbidding me (I have an exalted moon in my horoscope) to ever see a lunar eclipse. Many superstitious Hindus still shut temple doors and throw away the leftovers of any food cooked that day, to calls of "*Daan karo, daan karo*", like those who come on Saturdays for a *shani daan*. I couldn't decide whether to honour my mum's admonitions or see the Blood Moon that day. So I compromised by seeing it on the Nehru Planetarium website.

There has been nothing else in our newspapers and news broadcasts but this wave of violence, so let me tell you about our relationship with Nepal as I remember it from my Kumaoni childhood. Tibet and Nepal in the 1950s (my childhood days)

had an open border and a lively trade between Kumaon and these remote regions (so it seemed to us then). The Tibetan lamas would bring exotic herbs and smelly *'hing'* (asafoetida), while the Nepalis came mostly to work as porters. They were hardy, strong mountain people and accustomed to carrying huge loads on their backs cheerfully. Don't forget they were the sherpas who carried all the Himalayan mountaineers' kits (remember Tenzing and Hillary?), often without even getting their due. The Gurkhas were tough fighters, too, and anyone who has

mountain sides, carrying huge loads (even steel cupboards) for a few coins. They would eat together and in Nainital, even when it was bitterly cold, they slept on a raised stone platform (the annual Ramila venue), often with just sacks spread on the floor and with one big collective patchwork 'quilt' of rags. They would turn together after the Mate (their clan head) called out, "*Kwalte, kwalte, pharko*", so that the 'quilt' covered everyone evenly.

A stately house called 'The Retreat' faced our Nainital home, where a *Nepal ka Raja* (so called by our staff) would come in summer with a bevy of concubines and servers. Every evening, he would be carried in a palanquin (called '*dandi*' in Pahari) by liveried *dotiyals* to the Boat House Club to play cards and drink. We watched this procession every evening from our *verandah*, and created stories about that interesting household. His meals were served by his pretty women attendants with loving morsels from a huge silver *thaali* put into his mouth.

So the inequality that has incensed the Nepali students today, their anger against the entitled lives of those whose spoilt brats run over walkers and never look back (the exiled King Gyanendra's son killed an innocent walker and ran away), has a long and shameful history. The decadent lives of these rich lords and their chiffon-clad ladies go back a long, long way. Democracy and such exploitation and inequality are strange bedfellows and the public anger and violence we now witness is like what must have happened in France and Russia once.

Before I wind up, let me also add that no revolution (except perhaps the French Revolution) has ever resulted in a stable government. Look no further than our Northeast: fiery students overthrew entrenched political parties but left the states carved out in a perpetual state of turmoil. Nepal may well devolve into a farcical puppet regime (like Bangladesh), or be ruled (like Pakistan and Myanmar) by its army.

Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.

— The writer is a social commentator

## Sovereign right to privacy, or secrecy?



AVAY SHUKLA

WE live in strange times indeed where the rules of logic are turned on their head everyday with a new executive diktat or court ruling. The latest is this epidemic of "privacy" — one-sided, of course. On the one hand the government is doing everything to prise loose every shred of personal information from its citizens, through Aadhaar, PAN, voter registration, authorising the tax sleuths to mine even one's social media chats and emails, snooping on their phone conversations through imported malware. On the other, it refuses to share with the same citizens information they are entitled to in order to meaningfully exercise their democratic rights. In other words, the citizen has no right to privacy, but the government has a sovereign right to it!

When you buy a packet of noodles, you are entitled by law to know what it contains. But when you choose your Prime Minister — a more consequential decision, you will agree — you are not entitled to know whether he has a valid educational qualification or not. Even though he has declared it in his electoral nomination form, it has been displayed in a press conference and published in papers! For, the Delhi High Court has ruled that this is private information and no public interest is served by revealing it.

There are so many threads of logical incoherence and fallacy in this ruling that it is difficult to separate them. For one, a person in public life cannot claim privacy in matters that may have a bearing on his character or functioning, such as educational qualification, income and its sources, marital status, material disposition of his family members, or whether he has a criminal past: these details are necessary for the public to decide whether or not to repose confidence.

Second, he has already disclosed this information on oath to the government (in this case, the ECI) and it is no longer private. Third, such disclosure has to be properly verified to the satisfaction of not only the election authority, but also the voter. Fourth, by this same misconstrued logic, all other information provided by a candidate also cannot be verified or made public! Then why ask for this information in the first place, if the purpose is to put it under lock and key?

In effect, the court is telling us that we have no right to any information about a candidate.

Actually, this ruling is an inevitable consequence of a disturbing judicial pattern which began with the jurisprudence of the sealed cover, a hideous anomaly in any rule-based form of governance. It started with the Rafale case, was refined in the Pegasus case and has now become institutionalised with this judgment.

The recent elevation of some High Court judges to the Supreme Court

further establishes how entrenched the element of secrecy (under the garb of privacy) has become. It has been reported that one judge has been elevated after superseding judges senior to him, and in spite of a dissenting note of a member of the Collegium (which is not being made public). Now, in the executive, even an Upper Division clerk cannot be superseded without recording detailed reasons for doing so. It's the courts which have themselves reiterated time and again this principle of natural justice. But, strangely, they are loath to practice what they preach, on the grounds that it would infringe on the "privacy" of the superseded judges by besmirching their reputation. Which begs the question: are only judges entitled to have a reputation?

### Do citizens have no right to information? Is public scrutiny a wrong expectation?

This perverted interpretation of "privacy" has now become a weapon to deny legitimate information to the public, whether in Parliament, the Information Commissions, statutory or constitutional bodies, the courts, the media.

A Delhi court recently restrained some investigative journalists from publishing "defamatory" and "misleading" articles on a leading business group. Pardon me, but how can the court be so sure that the articles are not based on facts, or are defamatory? Has it examined any evidence to this effect? Legitimate questions all, since more and more politicians and "celebrities" are now taking this easy route of claiming "privacy" to avoid any public scrutiny of their deeds.

The dubiously constituted Election Commission of India has set new standards in opacity and secrecy, refusing to share any worthwhile or timely information, whether it be the number of votes cast, VVPAT counts, reasons that prompted a hasty SIR in Bihar, the names of the excluded voters and the reasons for their deletion, the number of "Bangladeshis" detected (a stated reason for the SIR). Whenever it has divulged some information, it has done so reluctantly and on the nudging of the courts.

It has, however, reached the height of nebulousity and obtuseness with its refusal to make public the video recordings of the polling process on the grounds of "protecting" the privacy of our mothers, sisters and daughters! This is a formulation worthy of a Uriah Heep or a Goebbels, given that these same ladies are videographed every day at airports, hotels, shops, road crossings, usually without their permission or even knowledge (unlike the polling booths where it is part of publicly proclaimed SOPs).

How can justice be "seen to be done" when the process is shrouded under a cloak of secrecy disguised as privacy? Justice can be served, and the law upheld, only in the full glare of the public gaze, not in the shadows of legally doubtful subterfuge.

— The writer is a former IAS officer

## Finding grace in the grind

PUNJAB, along with much of North India, lies devastated by floods. The rains would not stop, dams overflowed, as did the rivers. What was widely noticed was the spirit and resilience of the people.

While natural disasters occur with distressing frequency, there is little doubt that relentless encroachment of natural habitats in the name of development has exacerbated the situation. Guru Granth Sahib says a lot about respecting nature, but that's something we will discuss another time. Coping with floods and their aftermath is the more immediate need, even though it only serves to emphasise the larger issue.

As people struggled to save themselves and salvage their belongings, videos showed many chanting *Sat Naam Waheguru* and others reciting lines from Gurbani even as they carried out manual tasks necessary for the moment.

The spirit of the people who were working at shoring up embankments, saving fellow human beings and animals as well as providing food and necessities to the displaced, was captivating. It arose from the Sikh ethos that is deeply entrenched in the people of Punjab.

Guru Nanak's '*Naam Japo, Wand Chhako, Kirat Karo*' call, asking his followers to engage in honest living, is not just economic advice. It is a spiritual direction asking them to work with integrity, serve without ego, and to remember the Divine in the midst of the mundane, which transforms the grind into grace. The Guru's message sank deep into the psyche of the peo-



ple who responded to it by making it a part of their lives. It resonates more in rural areas, and manifests especially during times of crisis.

In Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Nanak says (page 1,245): "*Ghaal khayee kichh hath de, Nanak raah pachhaneh se*" (One who earns by honest labour and shares with others truly understands the path). As we navigate the vicissitudes of life, the principles provided by our Gurus and sages guide us. They give us the direction, but it is up to us to ensure that we follow these in letter and spirit.

The stress on ethical conduct is the first underpinning of moral life, and this is true no matter where you are and what your religious denomination is. Indeed, it is so fundamental that even those who do not believe in God or follow any particular faith still show allegiance to the fundamental ethical value system, which is univer-

sal and all-pervasive. Devotees find solace in meditation and in recitation of the holy hymns even as they carry out their duties. We have the "*Tera-tera*" example from Guru Nanak's *Janamsukh*. To recapitulate: as a young person, he worked as a storekeeper in Sultanpur, where his sister lived. Legend has it that as he was distributing goods, he was heard saying "*Tera teru*", which implied, "*Yours, yours — all is yours*", while also sounding like the number 13 in Punjabi. Some people felt that a person who should have been working was disconnected with the world.

Complaints led to an audit, which exonerated the young Nanak. The incident is part of the lore that is woven into the Punjabi psyche. It is cited as an example of the Guru's teachings of being a Gursikh, who is connected with God while being engaged in the regular day-to-day activities of a person with a livelihood.

Through God's grace, we recognise the sacred in the mundane. We also submit to the divine order, or *hukum*, and recognise that all that happens is as a consequence of *bhama*, or God's will. As part of daily prayers, Sikhs request the Almighty to give them the strength to submit themselves to the will of God. Indeed, the Gurus also submitted themselves to God's will.

We see people's inner strength as they live their lives empowered by their commitment to ethical and spiritual values. They act as exemplars for all of us, more so when they are blissfully humble.

— The writer is an author and journalist

## Dowry is extortion, alimony is agency, don't conflate the two



MEGHNA PANT

WHEN 28-year-old Nikki Bhati was allegedly beaten unconscious and set ablaze by her husband and in-laws over dowry, the MRAs (men's rights activists) shouted — but but... what about alimony? If women marry for money, then dowry demands are fair!

This is despite Nikki's family already giving her in-laws a Scorpio, gold, and lakhs in cash. This is despite her little boy, the only witness, telling the police: "Papa killed mummy with fire." Despite a guy from Navi Mumbai similarly burning his wife alive in front of his seven-year-old daughter. Despite a guy from Bengaluru hanging his wife because of her complexion.

Choosing a financially stable partner is not the same as being forced to cough up cash, cars, or cosmetic surgery demands under the threat of violence. One is agency, the other is extortion. Conflating the two is not just intellectually dishonest, it legitimises violence against women. Calling women gold-diggers to justify dowry deaths is like calling rape a date gone wrong. It's a false equivalence designed to excuse violence.

So, yes, stop comparing dowry to alimony! One is a death sentence; the other is survival. Dowry is criminal extortion — demanded before or during marriage, often under threat of harm and death. Alimony is a civil remedy, granted after due process, usually to women left desperate by callous and irresponsible spouses. This false equivalence is not harmless rhetoric; it keeps women unsafe and men unaccountable.

Because for every alimony, there are thousands of burnt bodies of a Nikki, a tortured Sonali, an unknown woman whose death will never trend. Misuse is the exception. Murder is the epidemic.

Sadly, these tragedies flare briefly in headlines before fading. India scrolls on, outrage

evaporates, and the women stay dead.

We've tried 60 years of laws and awareness. Yet 7,000 women are killed every year over dowry. That's 20 women every day. One every hour. We call them "dowry deaths", but they're society-enabled femicides. Women are burned, poisoned, hanged, or pushed off balconies, while we debate "misuse" of laws.

Just as after Nirbhaya's brutal gang rape in 2012, India rewrote rape laws overnight, we need something similar for dowry: make dowry murder a capital offence. If a man and his family can demand dowry like a birthright, the State should respond with equal force. This isn't vengeance; it's deterrence. When cruelty is systemic, only the harshest punishment fits the crime.

Yet every time a woman is killed, trolls scream "498A misuse!" They cherry-pick tragic outliers — like Bengaluru techie Atul Subhash's suicide — to claim women weaponise the law. This is national gaslighting. For every one alleged misuse, there are lakhs of silent graves. Low conviction rates don't prove innocence — they prove police apathy, witness intimidation, and evidence buried along with women's bodies.

The main issue is that dowry isn't disappearing, it's modernising. It isn't a "village problem". In Gurugram, Noida and Mumbai, dowry has "modernised" into liposuction packages, IVF cycles and foreign honeymoons. Bollywood beauty standards meet capitalist greed and women become customised commodities. We sanitise murder with phrases like "domestic issues", gaslight victims as "gold diggers", and cry about "false cases" at women's funerals. These aren't cultural quirks but calculated crimes.

Honestly, I blame the collective. Just the husband or in-laws do not kill the woman. We as a collective do. Especially the parents who give dowry. You are complicit in doing something that has been illegal since 1961. Paying dowry doesn't protect your daughter; it bankrolls her abuse. Remember: you're not giving dowry, you're giving *supari*. Respect your daughter. Believe in her enough to know that she is not a parasite you have to "pay" for. Stop calling dowry "gifts". Agree to a wedding you can comfortably afford; cap wedding expenses to 1 per cent of your net worth. Make this the new normal. Save for your daughter's education

and investments instead of her dowry. Show your daughters off for their achievement and not their marriage — remember, marriage is not the end goal of life, it's a part of life.

Know the law. The law bans dowry demands even before marriage, but police rarely register FIRs until a woman is bruised or dead after marriage. Girls, if a man slaps you, abuses you, or asks for dowry once — leave. Divorce is better than death and disrespect. It's better to be single and alive, than married and dead, no? I mean, why does this have to be said out loud? Stop asking, "*Log kya kahenge?*" The *log* are busy lighting pyres of bodies they did not respect.

India spends more energy protecting excuses than protecting women. We've turned kitchens into crime scenes and buried too many daughters to stay polite. If we could rewrite rape laws after Nirbhaya, we can rewrite this script too: make dowry murder a capital offence, punish both givers and takers, incentivise education over weddings, and enforce laws that already exist.

The question is simple: will India protect women — or their murderers?

— The writer is an acclaimed author



Rivers did the bulk of the hauling, until mafias, dwindling forest cover, and stricter rules squeezed out old hands and handed the reins to uncertainty and accusation

# When floating timber was trade, folklore, lifeblood

SONALI GUPTA

If hashtags could archive Himalayan history, #GoneWithTheFlow, #LogOn, and #Floatzilla would have trended centuries before drones brought bird's-eye-view drama to your screen. Today, just one viral video of logs jamming the Ravi or Beas will send phones buzzing, resurrecting memories of when these rivers once carried fortunes and futures, not just disasters.

Before the social media era turned floating logs into Internet celebrities, rivers of Himachal were the original highways of high-stakes entrepreneurship. For generations, communities like Kullu's Thakurs, Kangra's Kanets, Chamba's Rathis, and above all, the Sood merchants of Shimla and Solan built their destinies on the current. Timber wasn't just commerce; it was choreography and spectacle.

Picture this: teams felling pine or deodar in winter, piling logs like a giant Jengai forest clearings, and then waiting for spring's thaw. Come the melt, logs were nudged into the wild, roaring rivers. What followed was part sport, part sacred ritual. Locals steered timber with poles and nerves of steel, dodging sandbanks and negotiating "toll" with

With great (timber) power came bureaucratic responsibility. The colonial state and later, Himachal's government, debated how to keep the timber trade from turning into a free-for-all. The solution? Timber Distribution (TD) rights, an elegant Himalayan hybrid of ancestry and bureaucracy. Under the 1968 Forest Act and related rules, select families became licensed lords of the log, each getting a turn to harvest, float, and (of course) file paperwork. Mischief managed, or so the paperwork claimed.

For decades, it worked. Winter's felling, spring's river runs, and summer's auctions at Jawalamukhi, Shamshi, Bhuntar, Lakkar Bazar and Panthaghati mirrored not just the rhythm of nature, but also the social calendar. It was sustainable, too: local checks, enforced regrowth, and rivers doing the bulk of the hauling, no diesel, no drama, barely a carbon footprint.

And this wasn't just a Himalayan innovation: river-log transport was repeated in Scandinavia, and Canada's St Lawrence. But only in Himachal did law, lore, and local custom blend so joyously. Here, timber floating wasn't just trade, it was folklore, almost festival, and collective lifeblood.

## CURRENTS OF CHANGE

Cue the slow-mo montage of roads snaking into remote valleys, trucks replacing river flotillas, and enforcement taking centre stage. As infrastructure improved and markets boomed, the old system began to crack. With loopholes in law and oversight, timber mafias entered the stage, bringing smuggling and scandal. Regulation tried to keep up, culling TD rights and tightening forest laws through the 1990s. By the time the 21st century arrived, the once-proud tradition had been overrun by backdoor dealings and clickbait headlines.

What once inspired pride now fuelled suspicion. The legacy of the Soods, once famed for nurturing both trees and commerce, tangled in new tensions, panchayat politics, bureaucracy, and a growing sense of mistrust. Community stewardship, once a badge of honour, became a grim tug-of-war.

Striking, though, is how the public gaze still shifts over time. A century ago, floating logs meant celebration, a sign of hard work and a good season. Festival-goers grabbed driftwood as lucky finds. Now, when logs float, questions swirl: "Who's stealing? Who's failing? And who will be blamed this time?"



Officials say most logs are uprooted by cloudbursts, flood debris, not criminal enterprise, but environmentalists disagree because of the sheer volume. PHOTO: MANI VERMA

## DISASTER GOES VIRAL

Fast forward to the monsoon this year: rivers in spate, logs shooting rapids like they're chasing a role in 'Pushpa 3'. Timber collects at bottlenecks like Pandoh Dam, Old Sheetla suspension bridge in Chamba, piling up like a set designer's fever dream. Video after video loops across WhatsApp and Insta reels, and suddenly, all of Himachal is scrolling, speculating, and, let's face it, sharing opinions your grandmother never taught you.

Is this the 'Pushpa' effect come alive? Officials say most logs are uprooted by cloudbursts, flood debris, not criminal enterprise. Environmentalists, less convinced, point to the sheer volume: "No way this is all chance." The Supreme Court demands answers, and every new video only deepens suspicion. It's a perfect storm: legacy logs meet modern scandal.

As blame slips like water between government hands, the famous Sood depots fade into memory, replaced by images of

chaos and ruined timber. Heritage and hazard become hard to tell apart.

## HOLDING ON, LETTING GO

So where does this leave the old timber families? Their stories survive in carved verandahs, hand-hewn beams, and community tales of river-smart entrepreneurship, proud reminders of an era when prosperity and prudence walked together.

But the lesson of timber is this: even careful stewardship can unravel. When profit, population, and politics swamp the old codes, systems once tight unravel. Timber mafias, dwindling forest cover, and stricter rules squeezed out old hands and handed the reins to uncertainty and accusation.

Now, the very river that once floated dreams floats evidence and let's admit, nostalgia. Social media's #throwback isn't about celebration, but caution: history's logjam is today's warning. And as Himachal's rivers rage against landslides and legal battles, the timber story floats

as a test case for how traditions adapt, or sink, when everything else is in flood.

## LESSONS ADRIFT

History, like any river, never flows only one way. Himachal's floating timber saga, brimming with ambition, regulation, and reinvention, tells us that both fortune and memory are at the mercy of shifting currents. Prosperity springs from community and law, until vigilance fails. The narrative, too, is fluid: what begins in ingenuity can drift into controversy if environmental warning signs are ignored.

If today's reader finds humour in logs adrift, or recognises the need for better forest policy, that's progress. The rivers of Himachal, and all who once hitched their lives to the current, are still writing the next chapter. Here, where legacy will be measured not just in wood and water, but in wisdom and restraint.

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

River-log transport was sustainable, with rivers doing the bulk of hauling. The picture shows a logjam. TRIBUNE PHOTO: JAI KUMAR



neighbours along the way — ancient business partnerships, Himalayan style.

For the Sood families, rivers didn't merely carry timber — they floated reputations, hope, and a whole lot of family drama. Legendary tales abound: grand houses rising from timber profits, epic wedding feasts sponsored by river-borne cargo, even the odd festival where a runaway log became the star. But beneath the gossip swirled deeper truths: this prosperity shaped entire valleys and left footprints across generations.

# As hockey gets new hosts, it's a waiting game for Punjab

INDERVIR GREWAL

BHAR hosting its second international tournament in two years is a clear sign that Hockey India is intent on expanding the sport's visibility across the country. Former national team captain and current Hockey India president Dilip Tirkey has repeatedly said that their goal is to popularise the sport by bringing international tournaments to different parts of the country, emphasising that watching live matches is an inspiring experience for a budding sportsperson.

It is no coincidence that the national federation has picked a time when the national teams are enjoying their best phase — in terms of success on the field and popularity off it — in decades. The Olympics success — back-to-back bronze medals — has elevated the men's hockey team to the elite group in the Indian sports arena, helping it regain the lost respect and fame.

This revival has led to a growing number of state governments showing interest in hosting international tournaments and using hockey not only as a vehicle to promote their state, but also gain political publicity among the masses.

This eagerness has in turn fuelled Hockey India's ambition of hosting international tournaments regularly and maintaining its influence in the Asian and world bodies.

In the last decade and a half, India has played host to all the major Asian and world-level tournaments. A year after its formation in 2009, Hockey India made its ambitions clear by bringing the men's World Cup back to the Indian shores after a gap of 28 years.

Back then, New Delhi was the preferred venue, playing host to many tournaments over the next few years. But the federation quickly realised the logistical issues of hosting major tournaments in the national capital, with traffic congestion, rising pollution and the complications in procuring permissions from various municipal bodies proving major roadblocks.

The men's Junior World Cup in 2013 was the last major tournament held in New Delhi.

It was then that the federation went searching for

With Hockey India expanding the sport's visibility — as Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, TN, UP organise key events — many states like powerhouse Punjab are missing out, not for lack of trying though



Hosting the Asia Cup men's hockey tournament recently, that India won, has buoyed the profile of Rajgir in Bihar as a suitable international venue. PTI

more viable options. They chose Odisha for the 2014 Champions Trophy, Chhattisgarh for the 2015 World League Final and Lucknow for the 2016 Junior World Cup. The Uttar Pradesh government also signing on as the title sponsor of the 2016 tournament started a new trend. That is when Odisha went all in — it saw the potential of using sports, particularly hockey, as a soft power tool. From 2017 to 2023, the state organised every international hockey tournament to be hosted by India, promoting itself as a sporting and tourist destination.

To its credit, Odisha did expand its sporting infrastructure during this period, not just for hockey but for other sports as well.

With Odisha also becoming Indian hockey's biggest

sponsor, it became almost impossible to loosen its grip on the sport. Many states missed out on hosting international tournaments during this period, not for lack of trying though. For years, Punjab, which has dominated the Indian team lineup for more than a decade now, tried in vain to bring international hockey to the state.

"In 2009, when I was the director of sports, we hosted the Punjab Gold Cup, a four-nation tournament, in Chandigarh," said Pargat Singh, former India captain and sitting MLA from Jalandhar Cantonment. "That was the last tournament given to Punjab. We tried but could not because of politics in the federation and the Indian Olympic Association. Our plan was to hold international events regularly. We had developed five stadi-

ums — in Amritsar, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, Bathinda and Mohali," he added.

"We wanted to showcase our strength as a hotbed of talent. Punjab has played an important role in Indian hockey's revival, with the sheer number of players we have provided to the national team in the last decade and a half. Winning the Junior World Cup, two Asian Games gold and two Olympics bronze medals, the state played a big part in these achievements. We wanted our youngsters to watch their state-mates play for India, so that it would inspire them. I tried even when I became an MLA and was involved with the Punjab hockey body, first as secretary and then president. But I guess the national federation did not want Punjab's influence to grow off the field as well," Pargat added.

Punjab, he said, was also ignored because Narinder Batra, the most influential person in hockey administration in the last decade and a half, felt threatened by him as he had been a contender for the Hockey India presidency. Pargat had contested in 2010 against Vidya Stokes, who was backed by Batra.

"We already had so many players in the team. I think they feared that the promotion from hosting international tournaments would make our influence grow even in the world body," he said.

With a new executive body at the helm, there is renewed hope for Punjab, especially with other venues getting tournaments.

Since 2023, Hockey India has awarded two tournaments each to Jharkhand, Bihar and Tamil Nadu. "We hosted the men's junior Nationals in Jalandhar last year after a long gap," said Amrik Singh Powar, former India player and current general secretary of Hockey Punjab.

"We got the tournament after my predecessor raised the issue at a Hockey India meeting. They were happy with our organisation so they gave us the same tournament again this year. Now we have asked for an international tournament and there are talks ongoing about a four-nation or six-nation tournament in Jalandhar. But one of the requirements is a second turf, and work for its installation has begun. Even the Chief Minister has shown interest in hosting a tournament. Hopefully, we will get a tournament very soon," he added.



# DECCAN Chronicle

14 SEPTEMBER 2025



Krishna Shastri  
Devulapalli

Off the beaten track

## Can one have intimacy under the arc lights?

You would have had to be blind, deaf — or a hater — to have not heard of Arundhati Roy's new book. The clamour surrounding it is loud enough to awaken a politician's conscience. Well, almost.

The media blitz feels like an elitist, 'literary' version of today's deafening campaigns for big-ticket movies. (Almost all of which have failed at the box office, fyi.)

I have managed to silence the hype. It's taken work, mind you. My current exercise routine has been running for cover as soon as I hear Roy's unmistakably shy, girlish voice on my phone or comp.

Why, you ask.

Because I ordered the book as soon as it was available. Because I like Arundhati Roy, the writer and person. I like her because she is that rare artist who cannot be separated from the person. Unlike several writers I know who only do the talking, she has been doing the walking, too. All I wanted to know about her, I figured, would be in the book. And anything anyone, including Roy herself, said outside of the book, in my opinion, would dilute, and perhaps even contaminate my experience of it.

My first issue is with what they have been referring to as an 'intimate' launch of the book, curated by one Mayank Austen Soofi. I am all for intimacy, mind you. But intimacy demands privacy. One can't have intimacy and arc lights. Anything 'intimate' made public becomes an exercise in exclusion. Intimacy displayed, alas, is vulgarity. And that's precisely what the campaign felt like to me. It seemed to say 'Look, the chosen few who gather here with Roy are all special. You are not. But, guess what? Here are some crumbs for you unspecial common folk, catch!'

Roy has been an indefatigable champion of the underdog. It puzzles me that someone like her permitted something like this — a carnival of overdogs — to happen. I want to give her the benefit of the doubt, though. Maybe she's tired, as she should be, with all that's come with being Arundhati Roy. Maybe she succumbed to the publisher's plan. Maybe she craved some old-fashioned love and affection.

There is much being said about Penguin Random House's 'masterly' publicity campaign for this book, too. I refer to Antara Baruah's piece in *The Print*.

How her brother sang The Beatles' 'Let It Be', a line of which is the book's title. How Roy spent days and days tirelessly signing copies, so as to incentivize readers to buy from stores in the age of Amazon's tyranny. How, a year ago, the publishers formed a core team encompassing all departments — sales, editorial, product, marketing — to devise a strategy, with nothing left to chance. Because 'When Arundhati Roy is your author, you start early.'

Above all, how 'The book is everywhere, but quietly.'

Quietly? Why then have I got cotton stuffed into my ear canal?

All this is wonderful. I'm happy Roy, whose unmistakable sorrow is as much a feature as her striking eyes or ringlets, got to do 'normal' stuff, had fun, got hugged, no doubt, indulged herself a bit publicly and allowed herself to be vulnerable in a completely different way from what she is used to.

But I have questions.

How is this a masterly campaign on the publisher's part? Arundhati Roy has a legion of loyal readers who would have read her book anyway. Even if there had been one tiny news item about it in the back pages of one newspaper. That her new book was out would have organically become 'news'.

If at all the publishers managed anything with their 'masterly' campaign, they got a whole bunch of people who have never read her, and dare I say may never read her still, to buy her new book with their so-called campaign. It profits Roy, as it should. Which is not a bad thing. More importantly, it profits the publishing house. Which is what it's all about. Not, as they'd have us believe, about their concern for writers, readers, bookshops, and other endangered species.

The book will sell because it is Arundhati Roy. The book would have sold had it been published by Akkupakshi Publications from Amalapuram, and their campaign consisted of their watchman blocking passers-by and waving them into their office.

My question to the publisher: would your brilliant planning, strategy and multi-departmental input work on any other writer? Forget unknowns — which you do anyway — but could your marketing mastery do this with, say, Priyanka Chopra's book?

As for this campaign to incentivize readers to buy books from stores 'in the age of Amazon's tyranny', I think not. It's laughable to think readers will suddenly stop buying books from Amazon just because hordes of them bought Roy's autographed book from a bookstore. People will continue using Amazon as long as it's cheaper and more convenient. Amazon's tyranny over the book trade will continue. As will the tyranny of big publishers over writers who aren't Arundhati Roy (or Priyanka Chopra, for that matter).

Gentle request to Roy: resist being co-opted by big corporations and hangers-on. Be the old you. Give us more books. Quietly.

Krishna Shastri Devulapalli is a novelist, columnist, playwright and screenwriter

Subhani



## For BJP & Opp, abuse ruse to avoid issue-based politics



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya's View

The recent use of abusive language against Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi at a public meeting convened by the Congress and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar is not only a random misdemeanour. It reflects, in a more disturbing sense, the continued corrosion of our national political discourse — a corrosion that is no longer incidental, but systemic.

What was once the preserve of ideological contestation has today degenerated into an arena of verbal mudslinging, completely devoid of dignity and decorum. We must ask ourselves with candour: how did we, as a polity, arrive at such a nadir? At the heart of this linguistic degeneracy lies a deeper malaise: the hollowing out of political culture in India. In a country where the legacy of political leaders once bore the mark of stateliness — where Gandhi wrote letters to adversaries with civility, and Nehru and Atal Bihari Vajpayee sparred with the Opposition with grace and intellect — we now find ourselves surrounded by a vocabulary of vitriol.

Memories in Bihar of the RJD's 'jungle raj' (1990-2005), when law and order and rectitude were jettisoned on the altar of brute power and corruption, are still vivid. In that milieu, where brand new cars could be forcefully hijacked from showrooms, and people were afraid to step out of their homes after dark, the fact that the RJD and Congress leaders have not apologized for this outrage should not come as a surprise.

The PM, in a speech in Bihar on September 2, strongly condemned this

incident. His speech was emotional, as he claimed that abuses that targeted his mother were an insult to all mothers in India. His anguish is understandable, but perhaps he should also introspect on what has led to this deplorable state of affairs.

The truth is that leaders of all political parties, as and when it has suited them, have condoned, overlooked or even tacitly encouraged this kind of politics. In 2014, soon after Modi had just become PM, a minister in his Cabinet — no less — had in a public speech used the unparadigmatic juxtaposition: *Ramzade* and *haramzade*. It created widespread revulsion and it was expected that the PM and the BJP would take stern action against the uncouth minister, including expulsion from the Cabinet. But this was not done, and the concerned minister only expressed regret at her utterance. More recently, a BJP MP, on the floor of the Lok Sabha, hurled obscene and racist slurs at a MP from a minority community. He was not suspended by the Speaker, nor was action against him taken by the party.

Other parties are equally guilty. Congress leaders have abused the PM too, and used incendiary language in speeches which are punishable under the law. In response, BJP leader, and the PM himself, have responded in similar tone, using deplorable sexist expressions like "jersey cow", "Congress *vidhua*" and "50 crore girlfriend".

This demeaning public discourse has by now developed a collateral support system. One has only to take a look at the coarse and abusive language now common on dopamine dri-

**The RJD-Congress has nothing substantive to say about their agenda for Bihar, nor has the BJP. The PM, for instance, should ask the 'double engine sarkar' in Bihar, what it has done for them?**

ven social media platforms. All sense of restraint has been thrown to the winds. Social media platforms have become cesspools of hate speech, often masquerading as political opinion. Anonymity and virality have combined to make online discourse even more brutal, encouraging politicians to mimic that tone in real life to stay 'relevant'. The role of media — both traditional and digital — in amplifying the worst tendencies of our political class must also be taken into account. In the age of 24x7 news cycles outrage sells. Abuses hurled at a political rally are immediately clipped, shared, memed, and debated on primetime television with breathless indignation. The substance of the political message is ignored; the style — however crass — is magnified.

It is tempting to put all the blame on 'party workers,' often portrayed as rogue elements whose passions occasionally overtake their reason. But this is a facile defence. In politics, as in any institution, the culture is set from the top. When leaders turn a blind eye to indiscipline — or worse, derive political mileage from the outrage such indiscipline generates — they become complicit. Silence is endorsement. And in today's political climate, silence in the face of abuse has become the default response.

Indeed, in several cases, one can observe a pattern: the abusive remarks are made, a brief furore ensues, the party issues a half-hearted clarification (often without naming the individual), and then the

matter is allowed to recede from public memory. The individual in question faces no significant consequences. Often, they are rewarded with greater visibility, for in today's politics, shock value is currency. This tacit acceptance from leadership, across party lines, has sent a dangerous signal — that electoral gains justify rhetorical gutter-diving. That the ends justify the means.

Ultimately, all this filthy froth is a ruse to avoid issue-based politics. The RJD-Congress has nothing substantive to say about their agenda for Bihar, nor has the BJP. When the PM expressed his agony at the insult of mothers, he should ask the "double engine sarkar" in Bihar, what it has done for them? One out of three of the 14 crore Biharis live below the poverty line. Surely, there are mothers amidst this vast number? Till very recently, mothers above the age of 60 got a pension of only ₹400 a month. Mothers seeking to educate their children are still faced with a situation where schools are ruins and teachers are absent. And when their sons, whom they have brought up by remaining hungry themselves, grow up, they are forced to migrate for lack of jobs to other states, meeting their mothers only once in a year, if that. In villages, most mothers above 50 years are prematurely bent, because of anemia, lack of calcium and nutrition.

While politicians abuse publicly, the public suffers. The issues that matter to them are drowned out in this continuous verbal sewage. More importantly, we must all think what kind of political culture we are bequeathing to the next generation? One where might is right, where language is weaponised and where the art of respectful disagreement is lost in the cacophony of abuse?

*The writer is an author, diplomat and former member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha)*

### LETTERS

#### TRUMP HANDSHAKE

A graphic handshake between US President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi depicted in the cartoon tells everything about Trump's brain waves (*You are my good friend, Sept. 13*). Trump is adept at playing mind(less) games with one and all and none can decipher what he means next moment.

Parthasarathy Mandadi  
Tirupati

#### NAIDU'S PLANS

Long-term plans can see the light only through successful growth of short-term achievements (*Naidu eyes ₹57 L-cr GSDP by '34, Sept. 13*). The sources for getting revenue to AP are not yet known to the public. Freebies are emptying the coffers. None can be sure who will be the successor in future. What was the experience in the previous term? Great work would be possible if Polavaram and Amaravati works are completed by 2029.

N. Ramalakshmi  
Malikipuram

Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu's vision for AP, outlined at the Mangalagiri digital media conclave, reflects a transformative roadmap for the state's future.

Raju Kolluru  
Kakinada

#### DRINKING WATER

It is good to note that the municipal administration minister has said the state is adopting best global practices in waste management like many other countries. (*Clean drinking water for every home in 3 yrs: Min. Sept. 13*). The notion of ensuring the supply of clean drinking water is laudable.

Suresh Venkatadri  
Tirupati

#### VANITY FARE

The caravan culture in film units is a fiscal farce. While one vanity van is essential for dignity and practicality, stars now demand fleets — for staff, stylists, and ego — forcing producers to fund 15+ vans daily. This absurd luxury inflates budgets ruthlessly. If stars desire extra vans, let them pay — not the producers bleeding crores. It's time to end this entitled excess. True stardom respects art, not extravagance.

C.S. Raju  
Puttaparthi

Email your letters to  
info@deccanmail.com,  
editor@deccanmail.com.

Anita Katyal  
Political  
Gup-Shup



## Cross-voters in our midst exposed? Anger grows in AAP's Punjab unit

Days after the National Democratic Alliance's vice-presidential nominee C.P. Radhakrishnan cruised to a comfortable victory by securing more votes than he was expected to poll, a bruised Opposition is still coming to terms with the harsh reality that there was significant cross voting from its ranks. Speculation is rife over the identity of the I.N.D.I.A. bloc members who could have betrayed the side. Given the fluid political situation in Maharashtra, members of UBT Shiv Sena found themselves high on the list of suspects. The party's Rajya Sabha MP Priyanka Chaturvedi was being mentioned as a near certainty though it is difficult to prove so as voting for the vice-president's election is by a secret ballot. It has been noticed that Ms Chaturvedi has lately been cosying up to the ruling dispensation which, it is believed, could be linked to the fact that her Rajya Sabha term ends next year. It may be recalled that she had lost no time in switching sides from the Congress to the Shiv Sena which promised her a seat in the Upper House. Several Aam Aadmi

Party MPs, who have been feeling neglected or marginalised due to the disarray in the party following its Delhi defeat, are also suspected to have voted for the NDA candidate. While this blame game will continue in whispered private conversations for days to come, the breach in the opposition ranks does not bode well for the I.N.D.I.A. bloc which had shown remarkable unity in the moon-session of Parliament.

With Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's announcement last week in Rae Bareilly that he will soon provide 'dynamic, explosive proof' about "vote theft" in the coming days, there was a strong buzz in the Capital that the big announcement could be made on September 17, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's birthday. This gained credence following Uttar Pradesh Congress chief Ajay Rai's statement that the new expose would be made by Rahul Gandhi at the Prime Minister's Lok Sabha constituency Varanasi. However, there is no official word so far about when and where Rahul Gandhi will present his

case though he has declared that he would be dropping a "hydrogen" bomb soon to further prove how the Election Commission has been helping the Bharatiya Janata Party win elections through manipulation of voter lists. His previous presentation had focused on the Assembly constituency Mahadevpur in Karnataka while the next one could be about the last Haryana Assembly election or even Varanasi as the Prime Minister won the 2024 Lok Sabha election with a far reduced margin as compared to his earlier victories.

The current drift in the Aam Aadmi Party is understandable as its national convener Arvind Kejriwal has literally moved base to Punjab after his government was shown the door by Delhi voters earlier this year. Having lost power in Delhi from where he shot to national fame, it became imperative for the AAP boss to ensure that the Bhagwant Singh Mann government does not suffer a similar fate in Punjab, the only state where the party is in power. For the

past several months now, Kejriwal along with his former deputy Manish Sisodia and trusted colleague Sandeep Pathak have been camping in Punjab at a *sarkari* guest house in Mohali, specially renovated for the Delhi leaders. By all accounts, Mann has been reduced to a figurehead as decisions on major government policies and the transfers and postings of officials are vetted by Kejriwal, according to AAP insiders. These decisions, they said, are conveyed to the concerned ministers and officials by Kejriwal's close aide Bibhav Kumar who has emerged as an independent power centre. As a result, there is growing anger and frustration in the AAP's Punjab unit whose members find themselves sidelined while Kejriwal's favourites from Delhi have been accommodated in various boards and corporations.

Iqra Choudhary, the 31-year-old Lok Sabha MP from Kairana, has learnt early in her political career to pick her battles wisely. Speaking at last week's launch of Rashid Kidwai and Ambar Kumar Ghosh's book, *Missing from the House: Muslim Women in the*

*Lok Sabha*, Iqra spoke about the challenges women face in public life and how she has dealt with them. In several instances, she said she decided to play by the rules of the game, especially since she had to work doubly hard to be accepted by the members of the local Muslim community in her constituency even though she comes from a well-established political family. With women politicians constantly under scrutiny for their appearance and clothes, Iqra started covering her head after she plunged into politics though she had never done so before. When questioned for giving in to the community's conservative elements, her response was remarkably mature for a young, debutant MP.

She said if she could avoid an unnecessary discussion on her looks and attire by covering her head, it was worth it as it would help her focus on more important and urgent matters.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist



# When You Go to Paradise and Realise You Have to Earn for Such a Place to Even Exist

You don't have to be a Greta Thunberg to realise that jet plane travel, which takes you to places where skies are blue and jams are glorious, is corrosive to the beauty of these very places

## NO FILTER



**RUCHIR JOSHI**

**Berlin: Recently,** I found myself in paradise again. Or to be clearer, I found myself visiting again one of the shrinking number of paradises left in the world. While wildfires were devastating northern Portugal, Spain, and southern France, this region in central France seemed untouched by climatic upheavals.

Here, skies were blue, hills a bit dry, but still mostly green or yellow and rolling, the woods lovely, dark and deep. Not death-sexuctively, but in a good way, the streams flowing through them burbling

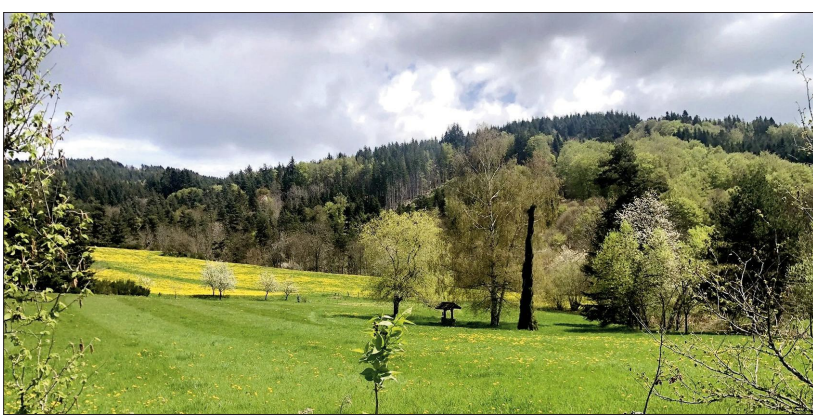
with some of the cleanest and best-tasting water in the known universe.

The provenance of a lot of the amazing food gracing our tables was visible outside the kitchen window. Vegetables were from the back garden. Steaks, sausages, and lamb shanks from one of the animals dotting the fields. Cheese from one of the two fromage-famous areas nearby.

The local wine not being that great, the bottles had to travel a bit, but not much, a few hundred kms. We got a blueberry tart from the local bread and cake shop, and it was the most otherworldly tart I had ever tasted.

The blueberries connected to strawberries and raspberries and that whole gang of fruits. The friend I was staying with took me and her other guests to a local farm for a jam and compote-buying trip. This was some of the best jam in the world. A few years ago, when G7 leaders met in the nearby Alps, this farm supplied the jams.

The farm is not huge, and the shop attached to the main house is small. Inside,



**QUITE NATURALLY, IT'S THERE: FOREZ REGION, CENTRAL FRANCE**

the owner was in discussion with a customer about the qualities of a jar of blackberries. After sending him off, the owner—let's call him Jules—turned to us.

After welcoming us and describing different jams, he asked me where I was from. India? Did I know Chandigarh? He

had friends there. Some other French friends also lived in Bangalore. He loved Bangalore and Pondicherry.

So, he came over to India? No, he hadn't been for a while, and he didn't think he'd ever visit. Why not? 'I would love to go, but I don't have time to make the journey.

## I don't feel anywhere near the same culpability for global warming as 'first world' people should

It takes too long by ship.'

Oh, so he was scared of flying? No. He just couldn't justify the damage each long-distance flight causes to the environment. To travel that far just for pleasure was now, in his book, unconscionable.

Even before I met Jules, looking at the paradise, I'd found myself thinking how I shouldn't ever take for granted that I'd get to come here again. I have luckily managed to visit the place a few times when foreign festival/conference/publishing gods have bestowed brief smiles. And now, who knew what the Trumpaynashus would do? Who knew how the planet would continue its now unmistakable retribution for our homo sapiens crimes?

Till I met Jules, I had only thought of external forces stopping me from coming. After Jules, I met three other people in Europe who thought transconti-

mental air travel was now immoral.

For an Indian like me who's been lucky enough to travel abroad often, this was counterintuitive. I've always seen where I live as a home base, a place that you need to escape every now and then. Furthermore, I don't live in a small continent that has long seen itself as the centre of the world and gathered profit and privilege to itself accordingly.

I love a lot of what is nearby. I know it is as unique in terms of landscape, produce, and culture as the most fascinating places on the planet. And yet I've always felt the need to see as much of the world as I could. Self-serving though it is, I also don't feel anywhere near the same culpability for global warming as I think 'first world' people should. Nevertheless, having met Jules and the others, I found myself checking the internet for ship travel times and sea lanes leading from India to nearby countries.

## FILM FATALE



**ANNA MM VETTICAD**

## Europe Cancels A Khasi Film for Moscow Kudos

The Russia-Ukraine war has had an unexpected fallout for Indian cinema

**A triumph at** one of the world's oldest film fiestas should ideally open doors to an independent director. For Pradip Kurbah, however, winning big this April at the Moscow International Film Festival (MIFF) has been a bitter-sweet experience.

His latest Khasi language film, Ha Lyngkha Bneng (The Elysian Field), bagged the Golden Saint George, MIFF's top trophy, along with the Best Director Prize. It also won the NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asia Pacific Cinema) Award for Best Asian Film in Moscow. These victories were followed by bad news though, says Kurbah: festivals in the rest of Europe have since dropped The Elysian Field.

Kurbah has not publicly spoken about this issue, until now. In an exclusive interview, he told me: 'I thought the film will travel more because of the win, but it backfired. Due to the geopolitical situation between Russia and Ukraine, festivals in Europe that I won't name dropped my film after selecting it.'

The unprecedented degree of censorship that Indian cinema is currently facing within the country has become a major talking point this year—and rightly so. But The Elysian Field's curtailed journey in Europe underscores the nature of censorship in the West's so-called 'democracies' that does not attract the criticism it should in the Indian or international media.

As one of the first Hollywood stars to condemn Israel's genocide in Palestine, Oscar winner Susan Sarandon, for instance, was dropped by her man-



## AT CROSS PURPOSES

agement company in 2023, and says she lost films after her remarks at a pro-Palestine rally. Around that time, Melissa Barrera, star of the Scream franchise, was thrown out of Scream 7 when she accused Israel of 'brutally killing innocent Palestinians...'

Unlike Sarandon and Barrera, who have been punished for clearly articulated stances, Kurbah has been penalised because his mere participation in the Moscow gala was perceived as a pro-Russia statement in the middle of the Russia-Ukraine war. The loss is not his alone. If festivals in Europe continue to avoid The Elysian Field, they are denying their audiences access to one of the most brilliant films of 2025 so far.

Kurbah's film is set in a future in which only six people remain in a village, due to urban migration and an earlier aversion to outsiders that at least one of them was guilty of. Co-written by Kurbah and Paulami Dutta, and edited by Badeimon Kharshing, it features an excellent cast, not one of them full-time actors. This is a tale of positivity, human bonding, loyalty and grit in trying circumstances, in addition to the disconnect between what governments promise versus what they deliver.

Kurbah's elegiac storytelling is complemented by Pradip Daimary's unblinking camerawork beautifully capturing a village stripped bare of people on a landscape stripped bare of fauna. The abstractness in the air is underlined by the film's name—the Elysian Field in Greek mythology is a space in the afterlife. The cultural detailing in the narrative includes stirring hymns sung by a choir that is a recurring motif throughout, and the local church.

The film's post-Moscow setback is hardly the first challenge Kurbah has faced in his career. After all, he has chosen to build his oeuvre in his mother tongue despite the scarce resources for cinema and limited number of theatres in Meghalaya.

Since he began making films in the 1990s, Kurbah has won multiple National Awards, and in 2019, the coveted Kim Jiseok Award at the Busan International Film Festival for his film Iewduh (Market). As he prepares for The Elysian Field's next festival outing—but outside Europe—the 50-year-olds says, 'A film from Meghalaya, that has nothing to do with what's happening in Europe, has suffered. But it's okay. The film has its own journey. It's a good learning process for me too.'

# THE SOFTLOUD GENIUS OF THE PIANO

Listen to, play, even look at it—not only is the instrument a master of disguise, but it also hammers on our heartstrings in unlikely ways

## RED HERRING



**INDRAJIT HAZRA**

**Pianoforte. Or, softloud.** That was what the musical instrument invented in the late 17th c. by Bartolomeo Cristofori, the Medicis' 'Keeper of the Instruments', was called after its official name *un cimbalo di cipresso di piano e forte*—a keyboard of cypress with soft and loud'. That's before some 18th c. millennial, who would have radically shortened 'ok' to 'k' today, truncated 'pianoforte' by 50% and made it 'piano'.

For most of us, pianos are large furniture-sized objects we encounter at hotel lobbies and airport lounges that, by their very presence, make the space 'classier'. If there's not one lonesome player playing some classical muzak like an elevated busker while everyone goes about their business, the public piano—always a grand—teasingly invites the passerby to plunk on a few keys, regardless of the person's familiarity with the instrument.

But the piano, among all other keyboard instruments, wears a disguise. Unlike its predecessor the harpsichord (string instrument), harmonium (wind), or synthesiser (electronic), the piano is a percussion instrument. You press a key, a hammer strikes a taut string before falling back again.

I was reacquainted with this truth kept

under a lid while rewatching the Tom and Jerry short, The Cat Concerto. Released in 1947—as it happens, on my father's 7th birthday—this William Hanna-Joseph Barbera animation masterpiece not only explores the dynamics of any cat-and-mouse rivalry, but it also throws open the piano's mysterious workings. All to the synchronised—and choreographed—music of Franz Liszt's rousing 1851 Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2.

Tom's concert performance, rousing Jerry from his comfortable sleep under a blanket and above a set of piano hammers, is as revealing of the instrument's magic as Beethoven's Piano 'Moonlight' Sonata No. 14.

My brush with the piano was as passing as it was perfunctory. Even when I did at-

tend classes (it was like going to the dentist's after school), I was more interested in 3-key chord play with the left hand than any intricacies with the right. But much like with football, what I lacked as a player, I made up as an ardent follower: I remain a devoted piano-listener. While Western classical was my entry point into this hall of hammerstrings—Glenn Gould's divine 1955 recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations, anything Chopin by Martha Argerich, Pierre-Laurent Aimard's 2016 rendition of György Ligeti's dizzying Study No. 13 'The Devil's Staircase' remain pinnacles of my piano listening—it was later that I found the instrument's softloud genius in less-obvious places where it is 'merely' an accompaniment.

Take the relatively obscure Rolling

Stones song 'Coming Down Again' from their 1973 album, Goat's Head Soup. Nicky Hopkins' piano starts gently enough, echoing Cat Stevens' 1971 'Morning Has Broken'. The song meanders along with Keith Richards' leather-cracked plaintive vocals—until, that is, at 3:50 into this 5:55 song, Hopkins makes the notes from his piano literally cascade down leading to the soaring sax of Bobby Keys. This isn't virtuosic piano playing, but it is alchemic magic. The pianist is the drummer holding up this song with percussive grace, and then for a few seconds, he becomes an accompanying 'vocalist' too.

Which is why the piano, to my mind, is the 'broadest' of all musical instruments, shape-shifting into the 'minds' of other instruments, the human voice included. Keith Richards, even being the human riff that he is, speaks about his fondness for, and comfort in, composing songs on it: 'The piano is kind of laid out more logically... it's all laid out horizontally'—which he can then transpose to guitar.

At my parents' place in Kolkata, an upright piano still stands upright against a wall. It is now no longer a musical instrument, but a two-storied table-top providing shelf space to framed photos. It hasn't been tuned for decades and, barring three notes, when the keys are pressed, they make a rattling, choking, arthritic-asthmatic sound.

But as our world goes up in flames, gunfire, bombs or deceptively peaceful disrepair, and I listen to Tori Amos' left hand crush out angry, defiant chunks as she sings 'Cruciflake Girl', I have a good mind to go over to my parents', lift the lid of that wheezing piano, and wake Jerry up.

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## The Cat Concerto explores cat-and-mouse dynamics, and lifts the lid on the piano's mysterious workings



**STRIKE A CHORD**

# Do You Really Read Any Columnist on This Page?

In this age of podcasters and stand-ups, can these miniaturists hold their ground?

## ON THE LEDGE



**PALASH KRISHNA MEHROTRA**

**Today is World Columnists' Day.** Okay, so I made that up. But the logic is sound. We have many dedicated days, such as International Puddle Jumping Day. So why not WCD? (Puddle Jumping Day, incidentally, invites you to reconnect with your 'inner child'.)

Even if such a day doesn't exist, it should. For, as someone insinuated to me recently, column writing is a dying art. By that I mean the general interest columnist (GIC), who isn't a specialist but a compulsive commentator on—for lack of a better word—life. The defence or cricket columnist still holds their ground. But GICs have been upstaged by the stand-up comic and podcaster.

But a column is a column. The columnist doesn't need to perform a structured ramble in front of a captive audience that feels compelled to laugh audibly and visibly. The e-book didn't kill the physical book, right? Besides, columnists rarely get into trouble with the law. No one reads the fine print.

Did I say 'art'? Is column-writing an art? In school, in our first economics lesson, we were taught that economics is both an art and a science. Ditto for columns. In the sense that a columnist tries to get at some objective

truth, in the most subjective possible way. The quest for truth is not a prerequisite. Sometimes, a columnist might tell a story, a slice from their life. Like Adil Jussawalla used to in his Bombay columns.

GICs get plenty of suggestions from readers. 'Next time you should write on this...' Now, just because a GIC writes on anything and everything doesn't mean that everything and anything can be turned into a column. There's a process of trial and error.

In the pre-social media era, a certain kind of glamour was attached to columnists, an aura even. In my early 20s, when I was working at my first job and living in Delhi's Def Col, I'd go every Monday to the newsagent in C Block to pick up a copy of the Bombay Mid-Day's Sunday edition. It ran many columns.

Columns always fascinated me. The slug and strapline were so seductive. Like with any art form, one first consumes others who've been doing it for a while and observes how they do it. I

could take names, but then I'll run out of space—and a columnist is first and foremost a miniaturist.

I had some delusions of glamour when I landed my first column with a Delhi tabloid. I was disabused of them when I went to buy brinjal and the shopkeeper gave me a paav of baingan wrapped in a paper bag made from a page that carried my column. I was amazed at the speed of recycling. The column appeared on Sunday, and it was a paper bag by Thursday. This is a true story.

Nowadays, a columnist must contend with another beast: the response on her own social handles. Earlier, one wrote, the column got published, and that was it. The writer had a romantic notion of a stranger reading it on a train or bus somewhere, chuckling to herself, then falling asleep.

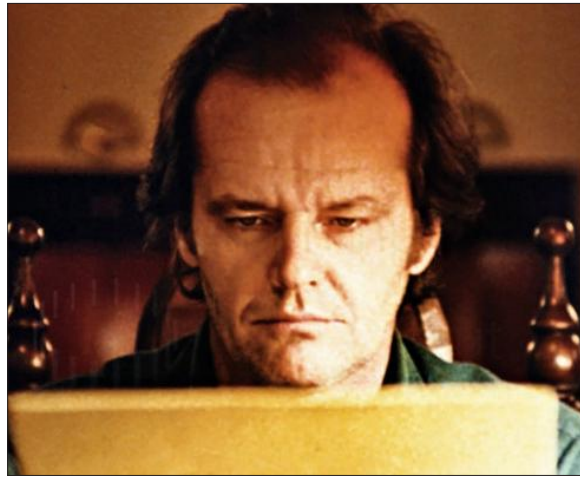
Aaj-kal, one shares it on FB or Insta or X. There's an added layer of apprehension: the column will flop. That's also fine, because column-writing is a low-stakes game. In the sense that it's not like an expensive film flopping, or a botched surgery, a matter of life and death.

Here's the thing about GICs. Unlike stand-up comics, they don't form a close-knit community. They might not 'like' each other's work on social media. But I suspect they read each other secretly.

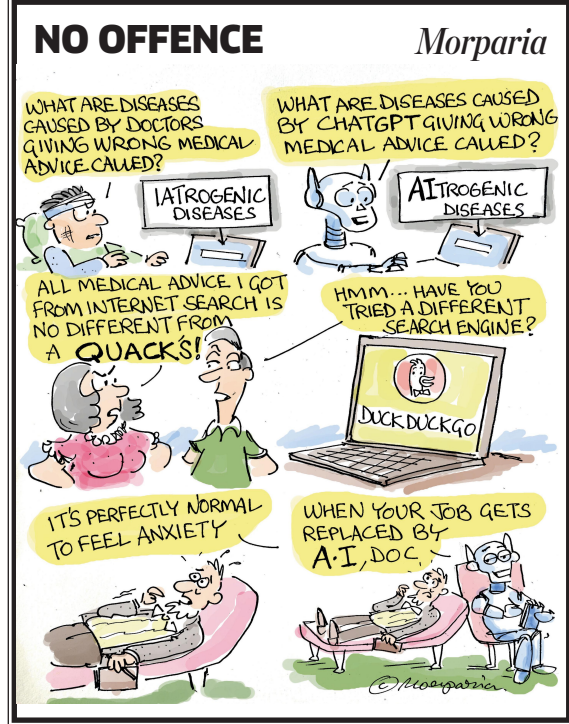
For instance, I have this fantasy that Twinkle Khanna reads my columns. On a Sunday morning, she starts to laugh uncontrollably, and Akshay Kumar asks her, 'Babes, what happened?' And she says: 'PKM is so funny.'

'Okay, let me have a pronounces, 'Kya bakwaas!'

**THIS WEEK'S COLUMN WILL BE ABOUT WRITER'S BLOCK AND IT'S....**



Akki says, 'look,' and bakwaas!'



**But who on earth gave it such an odd name – Pallas's, with the capital 'P' and the tiny apostrophe 's'?**

Haha, blame (or thank) Peter Simon Pallas, a Prussian zoologist and explorer who first described the cat way back in 1776. Hence, Pallas's cat! This little beast sports dense grey fur and a glorious bushy tail, perfect for surviving chilly heights. In Arunachal Pradesh, it was spotted at almost 5,000 metres—a gentle reminder that the eastern Himalayas probably still hide many wild secrets waiting for nature lovers to uncover.

**Tell me – didn't those camera traps catch more than just the cat?**

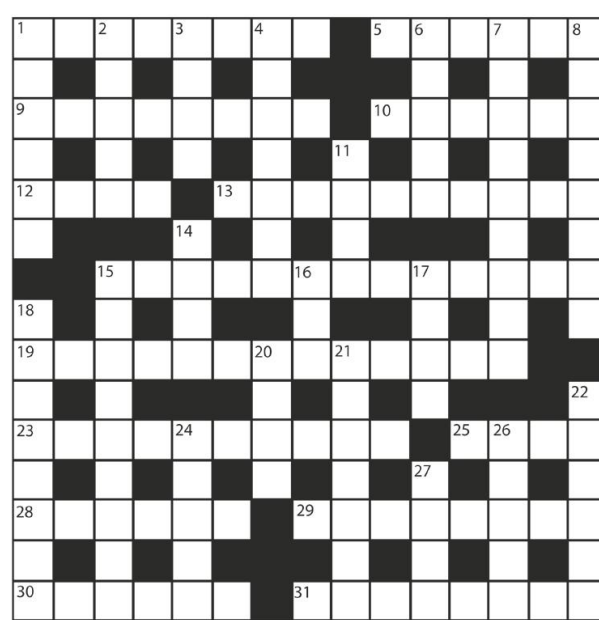
Oh yes! The survey also logged the highest-ever altitude records for a bunch of species – imagine a common leopard chilling at 4,600 metres above sea level! Plus, the cameras snapped the clouded leopard, marbled cat, Himalayan wolf owl, and even the grey-headed flying squirrel.

**Huh...how much do we really know about our own backyard?**

Text: Team Sunday ET

## ET Sunday Crossword

0133



## ACROSS

- Flag part of the Bible, one of the gospels (8)
- Cordiality's what perhaps impresses magistrate (6)
- Perfectionist tidies up around a student (6)
- Name a French car that's recalled—it stops squeaking (6)
- It grows in market town in Staffordshire (4)
- Words change crossing old Kabul, I hear (10)
- WMD one director missed somehow, probing treachery (6,7)

## DOWN

- Newly-wed clutches large part of harness (6)
- Swim in them at Spa or drink them in Britain? (7,6)
- Rivalry at home with fruit thing being cooked (10)
- Scorch small fish (4)
- Those people hold alternative idea (6)
- Exciting time of life, ruined on June 6, 1944 (5,3)
- Like 1 or 2 apples or maybe 10 after time (6)
- Viewer uses it to ogle man on board (8)

- 'Globe' serves to describe this type of person? (5)
- Soften twisted metal without one (4)
- Gentleman sent up fish and meat dish (7)
- Weird idea by university's the last word in France (5)
- People in workshops dismantled machines, about 100
- Wobbly Wendy house's no use storing English fruit (8)
- Heal massage includes soothing ointment (4)
- He tells stories, taking over bar (4)
- Not completely neglectful criminal to show humility (9)
- Early moisture's to be expected, they say (3)
- Killed almost all in Welsh uprising (4)
- Cause sore feeling: cook termite over top of bonfire (8)
- Many items for sale (4)
- Some accept night in Paris as payment (7)
- Like socks worn by Plymouth football team? (6)
- Prickly plant goes wild across Romania (5)
- Field border initially has advantage (5)
- Unsuccessful play fellow cut (4)

© The Daily Mail



# Mohalla to Madison Square, meet the new wave of Muslim comics

Zakir Khan made history recently with the first-ever Hindi show at Madison Square Garden, but he isn't the only one walking the tightrope of faith & fun

Sharmila.Ganesan  
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They say Muslims are the most unemployed. Others claim

Muslims are the most backward. Still others insist Muslims are the most uneducated. But judging by the sheer number of mushrooming eateries in Muslim areas, it seems that Muslims are simply the most hungry.

That is a joke by Rehman Khan, born and raised in "Mumbai's most too much place" Kurla. His "tandoori-roasted, biryani-laced, full-spice" set 'Miyan Bhai Khana and Kurla' has racked up nearly three lakh views on YouTube. Fluent in street swagger and Bambai-yala-laced slang, the now-Powai-based comic recalls the casual confidence of local boys who once approached him for a selfie saying: "Chal Rehman bhai ko famous karke aate hain (let's make Rehman bhai famous)." Legendary late comic Raju Srivastav too praised Rehman's grasp of language: "How did you get the nuance so right?"

Indore-bred comedian Zakir Khan may have capped his blockbuster career with a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden in New York, but there is also a new wave of Muslim comics finding laughs in gullies and mohallas. From biryani to backstreet banter, they mine food obsessions and neighbourhood stereotypes while walking the tightrope of identity and scrutiny.

Do not ask Haseeb Khan where he is from. Once, an uncle made that mistake. When Haseeb said "MP", the man's eyes lit up. "Where in MP?" he pressed. "Bhopal," Haseeb replied. The uncle hugged him. "Where in Bhopal," he asked. Haseeb stopped short of saying Jahangirabad — afraid the man might kiss him next.

"Why can't people believe two people can hail from the same city?" he wonders in his set 'Mein Karachi Se Hoon', which has earned him over one crore views on YouTube, apart from fans on both sides of the border. With over 4 lakh followers on Instagram spanning Lucknow to London, the Bhopal-born engineering dropout aka @a\_sad\_comic — who is sometimes mistaken for standup comic Zakir Khan's brother — has become a face of a small yet significant wave.

Yet behind that laughter lies a quiet tension. "There was a time when I used to perform and watch political comedy," says Rehman. "Now I've stopped watching the news," he says, half-joking. A year ago, he found two of his corporate shows in a state that he does not name cancelled suddenly because of his political jokes. "I have toned down my material a lot. It is



“Hundred percent, there is censorship. I am a woman. I am a Muslim. I am a comedian — enough fodder for a news channel for a month”  
Daahab Chishty

“There was a time when I used to perform and watch political comedy... I have toned down my material a lot. It is suffocating and a bit sad”  
Rehman Khan

"Just like in the Parliament, the representation is low." It's rarer still to find Muslim women comics within this minority. Apart from established Mumbai comics such as Sumaira Shaikh ("I love gangsters. You are like, you are from Dongri. Of course, you don't like poets") and Urooj Ashfaq, emerging voices include Delhi's Daahab Chishty, who grew up in a mohalla in Uttam Nagar, observing the "nau se barah shows" of gossiping aunties, a kirana store owner named Pappu uncle with capacious khatas (credit accounts) and his grandma who'd sit on a chatai, serving as the "CCTV" of the street. "A mohalla," Chishty says in 'Ladke', which has nearly six lakh views, "is an L-shaped gully which collects funds from residents to erect gates at both ends and calls itself a society."

In 2021, a severe bout of Covid landed her in an ICU for four months.

'Alive' — her first special — was mostly about surviving, about what happens when your lungs fight to remember breath. "People are not comfortable with the idea of joking about death," says Chishty, who cut out many bits from the show though she aches for a poignant special in the vein of Zakir Khan's 'Tathastu', an ode to his late grandfather.

Daahab also feels the weight of identity in every joke she considers posting. "Hundred percent, there is censorship," she says. "I am a woman. I am a Muslim. I am a comedian — enough fodder for a news channel for a month," laughs Daahab, who has a set about Muslim identity that she will never post. If she does, she says it will either go viral or get her family into intense trouble or both. "I have been given a new lease of life. I want to value it," deadpans Daahab.

Recently, at an event in Islam Gymkhana in Mumbai, Rehman noticed the audience gravitate toward the buffet counter as soon as he began his set. "I said, *Assalam Walekum, mere bhooske musalmanon* (greetings, my hungry brethren). They didn't like it," he says. On another occasion, when he joked about Muslims who were not getting vaccinated, members of the community said: "Why are you spoiling our reputation?"

While Rehman finds solace in a friend's refrain, "Yeh gaali nahin, dua hai" (these aren't abuses but blessings), he too, like Daahab, has learned to wrap political jokes in "malmal": not naming parties, using allegory, using subtlety. In one of his sets, he gives his girlfriend a lotus on Valentine's Day.

As for Daahab, she takes a friend — who has suddenly lost his voice — to a doctor in one of her routines. The doctor diagnoses him with Stage 2 Apolitical Syndrome: "First, it takes away your spine, then your voice, then your mind and then the nation gets screwed over."

suffocating and a bit sad," admits Rehman, who envies the freedom comics abroad enjoy.

In India, political satire remains a minefield. Junagadh-born Munawar Faruqui's brushes with FIRs and controversy have underscored how fragile a minority comic's voice can be. "There is always a fear of being targeted, especially in North India," says Adel Rehman, who hails from Arrah near Patna. His viral video 'Bihar' (2.8 lakh views) skewers stereotypes: "Comedians smoke and drink after shows. In Bihar, they go home and study for UPSC". Adel — who faced hecklers in Gurugram on two occasions — has now shifted base to Bengaluru, partly to be able to speak his mind.

"I have been denied homes here too because of my identity but I find the city more open," says Adel, who runs comedy venues in Bengaluru. "Jokes are jokes. They are not meant to offend. For instance, I do a lot of jokes on my dead father, both onstage and off it. It's not disrespect, it's how you cope with grief."

While A-listers can afford lawyers, many comics — who hail from tier 2 and 3 towns — cannot, he says. "Going to jail is the last thing but there are other personal costs — threats, family members getting hassled, venues being ransacked, brands stepping away, and boycott culture," says Adel, who thinks twice before posting his sets online. "I have also stopped reading the comments," he says.

Ask him about the ratio of Muslim voices in standup and Adel quips:

## A centuries-old Chinese pastime has spread through drawing rooms with the velocity of a viral meme

Unexpected but true: Mumbai's elite have a new passion, and it's called mahjong! Living rooms and club lounges from Chembur to Churchgate echo with the clack-clack-clack of 144 tiles shuffling — a sound that has decisively dethroned the genteel clinking of silver tea services and the buzz of kitty parties. Forget idle gossip or the thrill of a Prada bag, the new badge of honour is slamming a tile declaring mahjong with the drama of a Bollywood climax.

What began as a curious pastime, a let's-try-this diversion brought back from holidays in Singapore or Hong Kong a couple of years ago, has morphed into a full-blown, designer-clad, avocado-toast-fuelled obsession among women. Age and profession don't matter; an entire gamut of elite, be it the ladies that lunch, Bollywood actors, young mothers and even a multitude of working professionals have been drawn into its orbit. The weapons? Hand-crafted tiles of bone or even jade and gold. The armour? Statement Cartier bangles that risk damage with every aggressive move. The battlefield? An impeccably polished mahogany table where social capital is won and lost.

The origins of mahjong are shrouded in mystery. Most historians agree the game was codified during China's Qing dynasty in the 19th century. But the romantic legends are far more entertaining. Some say Confucius himself developed the game, its three main suits — Bamboos, Characters, and Circles — symbolised the virtues he admired. Others insist it was a clever invention of a bored concubine trying to win an emperor's favour.

By the 1920s, it had become a roaring craze in America. Articles from the time fretted over 'Mahjong Madness' as a dangerous addiction, a seductive Oriental diversion that was causing women to ignore other obligations. A headline from a 1923 edition of 'The New York Times' might as well have been written about today's Mumbai: 'Society Women Abandon Bridge for Mahjong; Fear New Game Will Cause Neglect of Homes'.

In India, it led a quieter life — in Kolkata's Chinatown where it was played in smoky, neon-lit clubs over steaming bowls of hakka noodles and chilli pork; in army cantonments where wives wielded strategy with the same precision as their officer husbands; and among the well-heeled and internationally travelled Indian upper classes.

But like all fads, it faded till its dazzling revival in the last year when the contagion spread through Mumbai's drawing rooms with a velocity of a viral meme. One season, it was the quirky thing your cousin from Singapore did. The next, it was 'the' thing to do. From its South Mumbai epicentre, the tremor is radiating outward. Pune's leafy clubs have begun hosting mahjong tournaments alongside golf championships. Bengaluru's tech-woman wives are swapping start-up talk for tile strategies. And this has even spread to the guarded farmhouses of Delhi.

In this new order, your status isn't your last name. It's your mahjong set. Starter sets made of lightweight plastic or bamboo tiles are treated with the same disdain as a fake Birkin. The intermediate player graduates to a weighty set of bone, the tiles clicking with a satisfying, authoritative tone. A lucky few have an ivory or a jade set in their collection. But the grand masters of this social game play on a different plane entirely. We are talking bespoke luxury sets crafted from malachite, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and housed in leather cases that cost more than

a family sedan. The latest additions are automatic, self-shuffling tables imported from China that whirr and hum, dealing perfect walls of tiles at the push of a button, effectively eliminating the one bit of manual labour of the afternoon.

The refreshments match the sophistication of the game. In Mumbai, it's a parade of exotic hummus, truffle-infused arancini, sushi rolls crafted to look like miniature works of art, and gluten-free, sugar-free desserts that are photographed intensely before being nibbled. The peak of this foodie one-upmanship was a party where the cheese platter was meticulously carved into the shapes of the green and red dragon tiles. In Delhi, the approach is more robust: mini kebabs served on silver skewers, delicate kathi rolls, and paneer tikka. The conversation that flows around the game is fairly spicy

advanced psychological warfare techniques. Their students form WhatsApp hives, buzzing at midnight with scoring queries and images of complex hands. The real bragging rights, however, belong to the circle that pools their resources to fly in a 'Master' from Macau or Hong Kong for a weekend retreat.

For some, the game itself is secondary. This provides them the oldest currency of all: access. An invitation to the 'right' mahjong table is the new-age equivalent of making the cut for a private yacht party in Monaco or an exclusive pre-wedding saangeet in Udaipur. The mahjong table is a sealed universe of four. To be one of those four is a tacit announcement that you are 'in'. As one Mumbai hostess, a queen bee of the mahjong scene, confided with a wave of her bejewelled hand, "It's not about the money, dahl-



Harsh Goenka

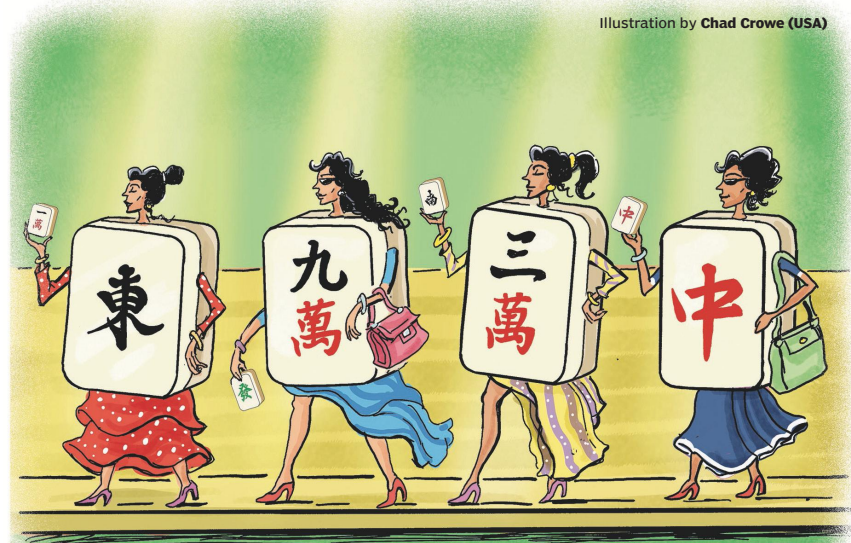


Illustration by Chad Crowe (USA)

—whose marriage is shaky, which builder is going bankrupt, which art gallery has the next big thing, and which doctor does the best non-surgical facelift.

Clearly, a social sport would not be complete without fashion. Mahjong afternoons are as much about Louis Vuitton bags, Patek

**As one Mumbai hostess confided with a wave of her bejewelled hand, 'It's not about the money, dahling. If you're not at my table on a Thursday, frankly, you don't exist'**

Philippe watches, Hermes scarves and chic co-ords (coordinated sets for the uninitiated) as they are about tiles. Food, fashion and fortune now sit comfortably at the same table.

Even the hallowed, tradition-steeped halls of the Willingdon Club, a bastion of bridge, badminton, and complex membership rules echoing with the sound of clattering tiles. One can almost hear past presidents muttering into their favourite drink, "We survived the British Raj, the permit era, and the new money, but by God, we couldn't survive the mahjong mania!"

As it happens with any obsession, demand rapidly outpaces supply. So, mahjong instructors are more in demand than Bollywood fitness trainers and celebrity chefs, with wait lists stretching for months. These senseis of the tiles impart not just rules of the game but also its secret rhythms and

ing. If you're not at my table on a Thursday, frankly, you don't exist." Another Delhi socialite was even blunter: "Mahjong is the new membership committee. It tells you who's rising, who's falling, and who's desperately trying to buy a set to get in."

This has not gone unnoticed by astute brands. The opening of a high-end jewellery store in the city recently featured not a champagne fountain, but four mahjong tables. The lure was simple: "Play a hand, win a discount."

Curiously, men remain at the periphery of this revolution, retreating to their golf courses, poker games, and the new fad of padel. Perhaps the potent combination of intense strategy, endless gossip, and the requirement to sit still for three hours is a biological impossibility for the male species.

So why has this particular game, above all others, captured the collective imagination so completely? The answer is simple: it combines skill, luck and endless conversation. It offers the thrill of competition without the brute force of sports. It's sophisticated enough to feel exclusive, yet social enough to make new friends. Above all, it fits beautifully into the rhythm of modern social life: it takes time, attention, and provides the perfect excuse to meet three times a week without guilt. What's there not to love?

And in many ways, it mirrors our own journeys — from the ambition to build a winning hand, to the lessons of failures and missed chances, to the wisdom of patience and strategy, the exhilaration of seizing the right moment — and when all else fails, the quiet art of bluffing with confidence.

The writer is chairman, RPG Enterprises

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The latest Sample Registration System (SRS) report has highlighted a striking milestone for Kerala — the state had achieved an infant mortality rate (IMR) of 5, a figure lower than even the US (5.6). This achievement is all the more remarkable because for over two decades, between 1995 and 2015, Kerala's IMR stubbornly refused to fall below 12-15. Breaking free of that stagnation took persistence, innovation, and a rare partnership between the state govt and the paediatrician community.

Infant mortality rate refers to the number of infant deaths under one year of age per 1,000 live births. Even at an IMR of 12, Kerala was well ahead of the rest of the country. However, while India's IMR fell from roughly 75 to 37 in the same two decades, showing remarkable progress, Kerala's IMR barely budged. This made the state govt take a hard look at what was holding Kerala back.

The contrast became sharper because maternal mortality had steadily declined. Kerala's maternal mortality ratio (MMR) fell from 150 in the mid-1990s to 61 in 2011-13. In the latest report, its MMR is 30. Rajeev Sadanandan, who was then with the department of health and family welfare in Kerala, credits this success to a confidential review of maternal deaths started by Kerala Federation of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (KFOG) in 2002. "They used to publish a fabulous report every three years called 'Why Our Mothers Die'. Every maternal death review was seen as a learning exercise and not a fault-finding exercise. This provided a very clear evidence-based template to reduce maternal deaths," explains Sadanandan.

### LIKE MOTHER, LIKE CHILD

When Sadanandan returned to the health department in 2011, he urged the Kerala branch of the Indian Academy of Paediat-

# Saving the tiniest lives: The story behind Kerala's surprising infant mortality feat

For years, the IMR refused to fall. Then a rare partnership between govt and private paediatricians, paired with data-driven audits, scripted a turnaround



Photos: RK Sreejith

**PROTECTING PREMIES:** Abandoned when she was just three weeks old, this infant found refuge and care at Ernakulam General Hospital

rics (IAP) to adopt a similar approach for infant mortality. According to the then president of IAP's Kerala branch, Dr Sachidananda Kamath, the association decided to take up the challenge of bringing down Kerala's IMR to single digits.

"With the help of the National Rural Health Mission and Kerala govt, IAP reviewed infant deaths in four districts," says Dr Kamath. "We found that prematurity and congenital anomalies together accounted for more than 60% of infant

deaths. We suggested interventions such as increasing the level of care and tackling deaths from heart diseases. Boosting neonatal care improved the survival of 28-week-old babies and even newborns weighing 900 gm were able to live."

However, congenital anomalies, which accounted for almost 30% of infant deaths, were more challenging to tackle as they required access to highly skilled surgeons, medical infrastructure and financial resources. "We decided to focus on congen-

ital heart diseases, which is a significant proportion of congenital anomalies in infants," says Sadanandan, who served as the health secretary for 11 years.

With leadership provided by paediatric cardiologist Dr Raman Krishna Kumar and foetal cardiologist Dr Balu Vaidyanathan in Amritha Hospital, Kochi, the govt launched Hridayam, the first ever population-level programme to address congenital heart diseases in a low-middle-income country. Its web-based application launched in 2017 serves as a registry where any physician in Kerala could add the name of a suspected case of congenital heart disease. Once listed, a paediatric cardiologist would review the online record within 24 hours and classify the case according to urgency. In case there was insufficient information, the cardiologist could direct the District Early Intervention Center at the local level to get further tests done. Patient registrations have risen steadily since launch.

"A lot of deaths happen even before the child reaches the hospital or gets a diagnosis. Hridayam sought to minimise this attrition by ensuring timely screening and referral. Since this involved screening babies, the collateral benefit of screening was that other conditions such as respiratory conditions got picked up. Pulse oximeter screening within 24-48 hours of birth could identify babies who were sick or who could die. This way, we were able to save a lot of babies," says Dr Krishna Kumar. For this to work, hundreds of paediatricians, obstetricians and sonographers had to

be trained to enhance their diagnostic skills. Private and public paediatric cardiac programmes that could be referral centres were identified and empanelled, even as the public sector capacity in three institutions was expanded.

Neonatal transport networks were also strengthened, but risks during transit remained. This is where foetal echocardiography came in. "Kerala's newborn registry study showed that many babies died before reaching a centre to get surgery. A mother's womb is the safe-

**We suggested increasing level of care and tackling deaths from heart diseases. Boosting neonatal care improved survival of 28-week-old babies and even newborns weighing 900 gm were able to live**

Dr Sachidananda Kamath, FORMER PRESIDENT OF INDIAN ACADEMY OF PAEDIATRICS



est transport for a baby. So, the answer was to do foetal echo diagnosis during the mid-trimester scan, which is mandatory for all pregnancies. If a critical heart defect is suspected, the mother is referred to a person trained in foetal echocardiography. If that confirms a critical defect, the mother can be referred to a high-end centre for delivery so that the baby can be taken for emergency surgery soon after birth. It significantly improves the chances of surviv-

al," explains Dr Vaidyanathan. These measures, combined with Kerala's robust primary healthcare and female literacy, helped cut IMR to 5.

### AUDIT MODEL

Death audits also played a pivotal role. But since neither doctors nor hospitals like to do them, how did the medical community adopt it? Dr VP Paily, one of the founders of KFOG, says confidentiality was key, with neither the identity of the patient nor that of the doctor or hospital revealed to assessors. "We only studied the circumstances of the death, the treatment given and whether it was preventable. There were some doubts initially, but once we gained the trust of the obstetricians, it was fine. This was important because 70% of births in Kerala happen in the private sector," said Dr Paily. The govt, meanwhile, was happy to get robust data without spending any money. This model is now seen as a cornerstone of Kerala's health gains.

Still, experts warn of challenges ahead. Former IAP national president Dr Kamath notes that while Kerala is ahead of the US, there are several developed countries that have done better. Italy, Singapore, Japan, Korea, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Slovenia, Estonia and the Czech Republic have the lowest IMR of 2. "Within Kerala, there are pockets where the IMR is much higher than 5. We need special strategies for tribal and vulnerable populations. We need to find out why prematurity is high in Kerala. We must take care of adolescent girls — our future mothers — and focus on their nutrition, exercise and the rise of non-communicable diseases among them. We need a good strategy to bring it down further."

Others caution against over-celebration. "All this about Kerala's IMR being lower than the US is a bit misleading," says Sadanandan. "SRS is at best an estimate, unlike the US which has an excellent statistical system. What matters is that we've managed to sustain single-digit IMR."



**WHY DIDN'T THEY ASK MATHEW?** There was constant speculation over whether Agatha Christie ever came to India, but never any proof, even though she was known to be an avid traveller. Now, her grandson tells writer **Manjiri Prabhu** that she definitely had visited — not once, but twice

Some mysteries need to be actively cracked, but some solve themselves with time. There has been constant speculation about Agatha Christie's India connection. One question has recurred over the years, but has never really been accurately answered: did Agatha Christie ever visit India? The internet and popular belief will state that she did not. I, too, had often puzzled over how Christie, a world traveller, had never actually been to India. In fact, in a video in 2021, I had even concluded that she indeed hadn't.

Until one cool but sunny Easter day in Wales. In March 2024, I met Christie's grandson, Mathew Prichard, and his lovely wife Lucy, at their charming home in Wales. Prichard, now in his 80s, had been very close to his grandmother.

It was a memorable day, but it turned momentous when Mathew showed me Christie's personal memorabilia — her passports, her first typed and edited manuscripts, rare photos, her camera, and her last portrait painting, which hung on one of the walls of his house.

When Mathew signed and gifted me a copy of his grandmother's latest biog-



Agatha Christie descends from an Indian Airlines plane, during one of her two visits to India in the 1960s

raphy, I also realised what a mammoth task he had been entrusted with — to preserve her legacy, and how he had upheld that trust: a proud grandson of the Queen of Crime.

It was when I mentioned how strange it was that Christie had never visited India, that he glanced at me with a twinkle in his blue eyes, and said, "Oh, but she did!" I was startled. This was contrary to all that we believed. A few minutes later, as I skimmed through the numerous black-and-white, well-preserved photos, I found some that made my heart race — pictures of Christie with a garland,

# Mystery of Agatha Christie's India story finally solved



Agatha Christie autographs copies of her books



Mathew Prichard (also in photo right), who's settled the India question once and for all, with his grandmother Agatha Christie

descending from an Indian Airlines plane. Here, finally, was the missing link to a long-standing puzzle.

I was on the threshold of solving a real mystery, but I needed to know more. At my request, the archivist Joseph Keogh dug deeper and came up with some fascinat-



Manjiri Prabhu

## TOMORROW IS 135TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF 'QUEEN OF CRIME'

**Born** | Sept 15, 1890

**Died** | Jan 12, 1976

> She wrote the world's longest-running play, *The Mousetrap*, performed continuously in London's West End since 1952, except for a break during Covid (2020-2021)

> Married twice. Divorced her first husband, Archibald Christie, in 1928, and married archaeologist Max Mallowan in 1930

> Following the breakdown of her first marriage in 1926, she made headlines by going missing for 11 days. She was located at a hotel 296km from her home, registered as Mrs Tressa Neele, her husband's lover's surname

**Jan 11, 1960** | Future plans are, roughly, leave for Madras today — go via southern India to Bombay arriving 17th or 18th — Then some sightseeing near Bombay Agenta Caves (sic) etc and on to Delhi and then to Nepal on Jan 31st for a week — c/o British Embassy would find us there as I'm not sure what the hotel is.

**Jan 20, 1960** | Our plans are a bit different at the moment as accommodation at hotels is very hard to get exactly when one wants it but we shall be in and out of the Ashoka Hotel at Delhi between Jan 28th and Feb 2nd — and then Nepal (c/o British Embassy Kathmandu) 2nd to 9th then in and out of Ashoka again finally leaving it on Feb 17th for Karachi. So forward anything you think I ought to see to the Ashoka at Delhi — but nothing that I needn't!!



Pages from Christie's passport, showing (top) arrival at Palam, and (above) a Patna Police stamp that says 'To Kathmandu'

**Another letter was from Christie, then staying at the Ashoka Hotel in New Delhi, to Rosalind, her daughter.**

**Feb 16, 1960** | On our arrival here yesterday evening, several archaeologists were waiting with two porters and loads of archaeological material from their... dig. The examination of some intrigued the Ashoka guests very much.

Christie's second trip to India, a year later, seemed to be for leisure. The passport has a Palam, New Delhi stamp (month not specified) in 1961. This time she visited Srinagar in Kashmir and stayed at the Oberoi Palace. This is what she wrote to her daughter Rosalind:

**Oct 30, 1961** | Lake and mountains rather lovely. This is a Hotel rather like at Jaipur — converted Rajah's Palace — miles and miles of corridors — enormous rooms and we are in a kind of supersuite looking over lake. It's all terribly dried up by this time of year — one ought really to

come in May-June. Now one must be content by rich beds of red salvia and dahlias in the Hotel garden. Temp is about 50 at night. Delicious hot sun to sit in and about 60 in day. Suits me very well. We made some excursions — to the various Mogul gardens — and to a lake... which is very beautiful and ringed with snowclad mountains. You can see the mountains now after the rain. We have to leave here and go to the Hotel in the town — but expect that our booking for Nov 2nd to Delhi will be all right.

**From Delhi, she wrote again to Rosalind.**

Here we are in the Ashoka. I'm glad we had a good ten days and in a perfect Hotel for old ladies (very few of them nowadays) where I could sit, in the sun — and look at a view like a Japanese print. Lovely!

The letters revealed Christie's bright, chirpy personality and tongue-in-cheek humour; her eagerness to explore India and her appreciation of scenic beauty. She seemed happy to be in India.

But I pondered why her trips were not well-known. Was it because photographs were a rarity then or because she checked into the hotels in her husband's name — or perhaps simply because Agatha Christie was a private person?

Whatever the reason, I was thrilled with my discovery. That sunny day with Mathew, Lucy and Gwynnie the dog carried an extra fulfilling zing because of this exciting revelation.

I had always sensed a deep connection to Agatha Christie. But being the chosen one to unravel the mystery of her India trips felt truly special.

The author is an award-winning writer of mystery novels

[Extracts and photographs used with permission from Mathew Prichard and The Christie Archive Trust. Special thanks to Lucy Prichard and Joseph Keogh of The Christie Archive Trust]

# The book that brought ponds back to life

Avijit Ghosh@timesofindia.com

What do you call a book that was first published without the author's name on the cover, which has no copyright and encourages the reader to use it for free in any form, inspires common people to spend money from their own pockets and translate it, can be read in at least nine languages, including Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, and also in Braille, has been broadcast by at least 20 radio stations with over two lakh copies published, has almost become a holy book for water warriors and, yet, remains largely unknown to the educated public.

Anupam Mishra's 'Aaj Bhi Khare Hain Talab' (The Ponds Are Still Relevant) wasn't launched in a farmhouse or nominated for major literary awards. But the book has become a movement. Spread over a frugal 119 pages, it reveals how ponds and lakes were fundamental to life and livelihoods across the country, and how their construction, preservation, and regeneration was embedded in community fabric — guided both by science and deeper philosophical values.

First published by the Gandhi Peace Foundation in Hindi in 1993, the book continues to find fresh readers in new languages and forms. This year, it has been made accessible online in a disabled-friendly e-text, says Kailash Pande of Delhi Blind School.

Ramon Magsaysay award recipient Rajendra Singh says that at a time when headlines rapidly shift from drought to flood, the book remains as relevant as ever. "The change in weather patterns is an outcome of climate change and global warming. The book shows how to adapt to and mitigate the current crisis," says Singh, whose NGO Tarun Bharat Sangh also shaped Mishra's early ideas.

## Chasing Indigenous Wisdom

Aaj Bhi... was born out of Mishra's extensive travels as a seeker and surveyor of India's interiors in the 1980s. Mishra spoke less, listened more. A Gandhian by belief and environmentalist in action, he discovered a tradition of water-saving techniques in arid Rajasthan. In areas he couldn't visit, Mishra sought the aid of friends and fellow travellers, naming each of them in the book. "The book harnessed indigenous water wisdom scattered across the country," says social activist and old-time colleague Rakesh Dewan.

At the turn of the 20th century, India had 11-12 lakh ponds, the book says. Mishra referenced the 1907 gazetteer to show that the princely state of Rewa in north-eastern Madhya Pradesh had 5,000 ponds. Early 20th century Madras Presidency was home to 53,000 ponds. Who would believe that in the early 20th century, Delhi had 350 ponds, as a 1930 map illustrates. Dewan says that officers posted to Jabalpur during the British Raj were advised not to bring fans because the ponds were ensured a cool weather.

The book also details the craft of building ponds and devotes a chapter to their anonymous

Translated into eight languages and available in Braille, **Anupam Mishra's** book has quietly sparked a revolution in water conservation across villages — one pond at a time



The slim volume authored by Mishra, who passed away in 2016, was first published in Hindi in 1993

creators. Mishra illustrates how, for centuries, communities such as the Odhs, the Gonds, and the Ramnamis had dedicatedly constructed ponds. Such acts often cut across the caste spectrum. Building ponds was also part of the financial system. "Those who built ponds in the kingdom of Gond rajahs got a tax break. This tradition was strong in Sambalpur region," he writes. Digging ponds was among the punishments meted out by the caste panchayats of Bundelkhand. Ponds permeate every sinew of life.

## Deep Impact

Many found the book addictive. Some finished it in one go and keep revisiting it. "People were mesmerised," says Bhopal-based journalist Shabbir Qadri, who

translated the book into Urdu and distributed it for free at madrasas and panchayats.

Mishra, who passed away in 2016, would build a personal relationship with his readers. "I correspond with about 3,000-odd readers. The idea is to create awareness and build a movement through the book. You cannot do that without forming a long-standing relationship with them," he told this reporter in 2004.

One such reader was Surendra Bansal, then a freelance graphic designer in Punjab's Malerkotla. He learnt about the book from a piece by journalist Prabhas Joshi in 'Jansatta' newspaper. "I read that article four times and wrote to Anupam-ji," he says. "I didn't have the address, so I just wrote, Anupam Mishra, Delhi".

Miraculously, the letter reached its destination. Mishra sent him two of his books with a hand-written note in his signature style.

Bansal read the book and, then, translated it into Gurmukhi. He published it by selling off his prized cacti collection for Rs 11,000. "When Anupam-ji came to know about it, he first scolded me. Then he wept," remembers Bansal, who now works for Haryana govt's PR department. He has published five editions of the book in Gurmukhi. And he hasn't stopped. Bansal regularly scans Punjabi magazines and sends free copies of the book to those he believes might be interested in water conservation. "I also distribute it to youth clubs and village libraries," he says. Bansal has given away 6,200 copies so far.

The book has also been used to groom community leaders. Aaj Bhi... was introduced as part of the syllabus in Chitrakoot's Mahatma Gandhi Gramin Vishwavidyalaya. "It was taught to graduate students in 313 centres in a leadership course," says retired civil servant B Rajagopal Naidu. The book was also part of the Hindi syllabus for graduates in Mumbai University between 2017 and 2019.

## Why It Still Matters

Rajendra Singh, known as the 'Waterman of India', says Aaj Bhi... made a deep impact in MP and Rajasthan. Naidu, whose tenure as DM of Sagar in MP during 2002-04 was marked by a host of water management initiatives, says the book helped mobilise people and build awareness around check dams, and small drinking water ponds.

He also remembers how the clean-up of Sagar's sprawling Lakha Banjara lake got stuck due to a funds crunch. Help came in an unusual way. **Film lyricist and Congress politician Vithalbhai Patel, who had penned the 1973 hit Bobby's famous song, 'Jhooth Bole Kawwa Kate', went around every morning to the town's different wards, asking people to donate Re 1 for the talab.** The amount raised helped restore a huge portion of the lake.

Such examples abound. Singh of Tarun Bharat Sangh, which constructed at least 7,500 ponds, says that dozens of initiatives were undertaken in Jodhpur and Barmer districts. "A sarpanch from Bikaner's Nakhoda village called me after reading the book seeking help to build ponds," he recalls.

Chhatar Singh, a master of desert water conservation in Jaisalmer district, restored about 500 ponds, beris, and wells. A *beri* is a shallow well that harvests rainwater.

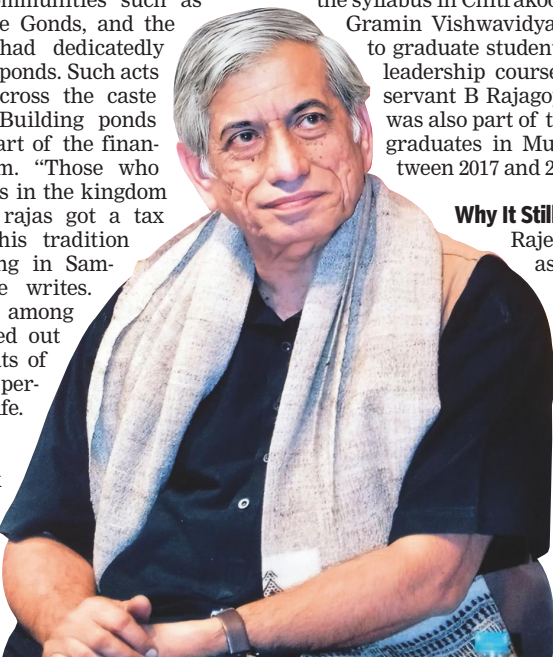
"Reading the book I felt my forefathers were talking to me. It was written in a way that inspired action," says Chhatar, who was also impressed by Mishra's book, 'Rajasthan Ki Rajat Boondein' (The Silver Drops Of Rajasthan)'. He explains Mishra's approach: "If you had any doubts about building ponds, Anupam-ji would organise a gathering. He knew the answer, but would let the answer emerge from us."

Eastern Rajasthan's Lapodia village is a famous conservation success story. Its head Laxman Singh read Aaj bhi... and encouraged fellow villagers to do so too. Impressed by its message of reviving traditional methods, they undertook a textbook application of rainwater harvesting and water management techniques to transform a sun-dried area into a village of three fecund ponds — Dev Sagar, Phool Sagar, and Anna Sagar, with a 300 *bigha* meadow.

Laxman Singh says Mishra visited Lapodia twice every year for 30 years. "He was our guide and guru. *Pehle woh insaan taiyar karte they, phir dharti* (First, he readied people, then the land)," Laxman told this reporter in 2016. When the book's Braille edition came out around 2009, Mishra visited Delhi Blind School, inspiring students to perform *shramdan*, or voluntary labour, recalls Pande.

Academic Annie Montaut, who has translated 'Rajasthan Ki Rajat Boondein' into French, writes how even prisoners of a French jail could relate to Mishra's lecture on water conservation. Some recalled their own childhood in Morocco. "I was surprised by the reaction, he wasn't. Anupam-ji told me that he had learnt a lot from the uneducated," she wrote in Hindi to Mishra's wife, Manjushree, for an upcoming book in tribute to her husband.

It is almost a cliché that a book can change your world. Mishra's slim volume certainly reaffirms that adage. With global water shortage now an impending reality, the book's significance has magnified in recent years. Today Aaj Bhi... is to water conservationists what Das Capital is to Marxists. A *ratna* of Bharat, Mishra never received even a Padmashri. But his book continues to usher in a silent revolution, one pond at a time.



## INQUIZITIVE

JOY BHATTACHARJYA

**1** What is the name of the first instalment of the film series centred around the life of Krishna Mehra, son of scientist Dr Rohit Mehra and Nisha Mehra?

**2** Margaret Court of Australia holds the record for the maximum number of Grand Slam singles titles, 24. But which person has won the maximum number of women's singles titles at Wimbledon, a total of nine?



**3** Which ancient city, whose name literally means 'son of the trumpet flower', was the capital of the Mauryan dynasty at its zenith, covering a vast part of the Indian subcontinent?

**4** Which landmark novel tells of three great powers — Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia — continually at war, and got its title from the author flipping around the year in which he wrote the book?

**5** Which city, believed to have its name from a Tulu word meaning 'emergence,' is well known for its Sri Krishna temple founded by Vaishnavite saint Madhvacharya in the 13th Century and its ubiquitous cuisine?

**6** On the executive orders of the US President, which American govt agency recently changed the operative part of its name from a seven-letter word to a three-letter word?

**7** What singular fact connects the capitals of the USA and Liberia?

**8** India is currently supplying E20 instead of normal petrol in petrol stations around the country. What is the 'E' in E20?

**9** Which silent screen filmstar spoke his first on-screen words in 'The Great Dictator' in 1940, playing the role of a barber mistaken for a dictator, giving a stirring speech against fascism, greed, and hate?

**10** Nupur Sheoran won a medal for India in the World Championships of a particular sport, emulating her grandfather Hawa Singh, a champion and Arjuna Awardee in the same sport. Which sport?

## ANSWERS

- 1 | Koi Mil Gaya, the next two are Krishi and Krishi 3
- 2 | Martina Navratilova
- 3 | Pataliputra (modern-day Patna)
- 4 | 1984, by George James Monroe
- 5 | Uddip!
- 6 | The Department of Homeland Security
- 7 | The only capital after American Presidents — Washington and D.C.
- 8 | E20 is a blend of 95% petrol and 5% ethanol
- 9 | Charlie Chaplin
- 10 | Boxing



# Nepal to France, not every revolt is a turning point

SWAMINOMICS



SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AIYAR

The world is witnessing revolts against life and politics as usual. A youth revolt against all political parties in Nepal has left a political vacuum. Indonesia is paralysed by protests after legislators voted themselves a housing allowance ten times the minimum wage. France is rocked by a ‘Block Everything’ revolt against President Macron, stemming from a widespread feeling that people are getting left behind.

Earlier, student protests overthrew govts in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. President Trump in the US is the ultimate revolutionary against politics as usual. Many analysts have proclaimed a turning point in world history.

Yet stock markets globally are booming. They show no alarm at a turning point. They seem to believe that we are witnessing just a blip, not a turning point, and that after a messy interlude, not much will change.

History is littered with turning points that never quite turned. Revolutions, wars, and crises get sold as world-changing breaks. In reality, many end up as false dawns—loud ruptures followed by minor changes to the status quo. They remind us of the old saying, “An empty vessel makes much noise.”

A good historical starting point would be Europe in 1848. Liberals, students, and workers rose up everywhere, demanding rights and constitutions. Monarchs trembled. Commentators declared a new democratic age. The biggest uprising was in France, later dramatised in Victor Hugo’s ‘Les Misérables’. Karl Marx wrote the Manifesto of the Communist Party, declaring, “A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism.” But by the end of the year, most uprisings were crushed, kings were back in power, and the ‘Springtime of Nations’ became a winter of reaction.

The US Civil War (1861-65) ended slavery, supposedly creating a true multiracial democracy. Alas, whites were soon back in power in the US South, using Jim Crow laws to thwart black voting rights and enforce segregation. These were eliminated only in 1965. The shadow of slavery still falls on the US, with blacks remaining in the lowest social strata.

World War I witnessed unparalleled slaughter and led to the world’s first anti-war movements. The Oxford Union, bristling with the British elite, passed a resolution saying, “This House will in no circumstances fight for King and country,” setting off anti-war resolutions across the West. Alas, a second World War followed. Wars continue today in Ukraine and Palestine.

The Spanish Civil War of the 1930s looked like a showdown between fascism and democracy. Foreign



**TINY TREMOR:** The French may be angry with the political class, but uprisings don’t always usher in a new dawn

idealists such as Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, and Andre Malraux rallied to the anti-fascist cause. But little changed, and Franco’s autocracy endured till his death in 1975.

Amazing protests rocked the world in 1968 with no seeming connection or organising force. Students took over Paris, and the French Army refused the President’s order to fire on the protestors. The killing of Martin Luther King in the US led to riots in 110 towns and the notion of black power. Czechoslovakia witnessed the ‘Prague Spring’, as a communist country revolted against Soviet overlordship. Many analysts declared that 1968 was a turning point against injustice. Alas, when the smoke cleared, little had changed. Consumer capitalism, racial discrimination, and state power carried on as before.

The end of the Cold War really looked like a turning point. Francis Fukuyama wrote ‘The End of History and The Last Man’, meaning liberal democracy had triumphed permanently over rival forms of autocracy. Within a decade, authoritarianism returned to Russia under Putin, while communist China became a super-power threatening to become a global hegemon.

Why do we keep mistaking blips for turning points, tremors for earthquakes? Because ‘turning point’ makes life seem more dramatic and exciting. The place that has resisted most ‘turning points’ must be Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion of the country in 1979 was supposed to be a turning point. So, too, was the guerrilla war that ousted the Communists in 1992. But then followed a cruel civil war and Taliban rule. That facilitated Osama bin Laden’s 9/11 bombing. The US declared war and soon established itself in Kabul. But that project too eventually failed, and the Taliban is back.

History is very untidy. Change is often incremental, reversible, or disguised. The revolutions of 1848 collapsed, but their ideas resurfaced later. The collapse of communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe looked to be a turning point, yet China soon rose with a reformed form of communism.

False turning points aren’t meaningless. They leave traces, shift expectations, and plant seeds. They remind us that history doesn’t turn on a dime. It bends, swerves, and doubles back.

Perhaps the traders on Wall Street have it right. Perhaps they cleverly foresee Trump’s attempted revolution as a blip that will change little. I think they may be right. ■

# My dad made us crack codes to find our Christmas presents: Dan Brown

At 61, **Dan Brown** is chasing his most ambitious puzzle yet — the human mind. On a video call from what he says is his library in New Hampshire though it looks uncannily like his protagonist Robert Langdon’s cryptic chambers, the author spoke about his first book in eight years. ‘The Secret of Secrets’ is built on the little-known field of noetic science or the mystery of human consciousness. In a chat with **Mohua Das**, he spoke about his obsession with codes, and why the mind may be the next big frontier of hidden knowledge

■ **Across the series, Langdon has had a brilliant woman by his side yet he’s famously unromantic. This time his bond with Katherine feels more intense but still restrained. Why tease readers waiting for him to have a love life?**

Well, Langdon does have a love life. He wakes up in bed with a woman he’s known his whole life, someone he’s very attracted to. You don’t see it in the narrative — the book takes place in under a day — but they end up in bed together. For Langdon, that’s an enormous leap. In this book, I wanted to give him a real romance.

■ **You have a loyal readership, but critics have called your writing ‘tour guide prose’ or ‘self-parody.’ Govts, the Vatican, even scientists bristle at your books. Why do your novels trigger such extreme reactions?**

It’s the nature of creative arts. Some people are going to like it, some people are not. Of course, you wish everybody loved what you do, but that’s unrealistic. Everybody has different tastes. These books spark dialogue, and that’s important. If you don’t like my book, there are thousands of others you can read. I’m just grateful for so many fans, especially in India. When I toured there for ‘Inferno’ in 2016, the reception was incredible. I’ve wanted to set a Langdon book in India.

■ **Why haven’t you, given your interest in Hindu iconography and symbolism?**

It’s complicated for a Western person to understand. I’m trying to learn but I feel like I don’t know enough yet to write about it. It would be almost disrespectful. But who knows? Life is long.

■ **In an age of AI, what do you see as the next big frontier of hidden knowledge?**

I see human consciousness as the great unknown frontier — more than space, oceans, or any technology. It’s the most important subject I’ve ever researched or written about.

■ **You’re also co-creating a Netflix series of this book. How different is screenwriting from writing novels?**

Screenwriting is minimalism — distilling a novel’s essence without the tools novelists rely on, like shifting viewpoints, flashbacks, or internal monologue. What I enjoyed this time was the collaboration with Carlton Cuse (showrunner of ‘Lost’). After seven years of working alone on this book, it was fun to be in a writers’ room, read pages, and give feedback.

■ **Your books have long played with the power of the mind, cracking codes of the Illuminati, Freemasons, and Dante. But in your new thriller you turn inward, to the mind itself. What took you down that rabbit hole?**

I like to write about big topics such as the life of Jesus, and artificial intelligence. But there really is no topic bigger than human consciousness. It’s the lens through which we see ourselves and the world. I always knew I wanted to write about it. I started a little bit in ‘The Lost Symbol’ but that was me getting my feet wet. It took me 10 years to wrap my head around consciousness enough to write a thriller. What drew me in was realising we’re at the cusp of a revolution in how we look at our minds, our interconnection to people, and the way consciousness works.

■ **Your novels always open with a ‘FACT’ page, but this one says even the experiments are real. Did ‘The Secret of Secrets’ finally close the gap between faith and science and did it change your own sense of the afterlife?**

Definitely. I began this book a sceptic of all things paranormal and noetic and came out the other side an absolute believer. I’m no longer afraid of death. The deeper we go into science, the more it fuses with spirituality. Particle physicists in noetic science have conversations that sound almost spiritual, describing the mind as a receiver or trusting unseen forces. Scriptures across traditions also speak of “receiving” the word of God or wisdom flowing into you. What’s

happened now is that Langdon has gone full circle, realising that ancients and moderns are often saying the same things. The FACT page is simply to remind readers that the science and locations are real. The characters are fictional, but they move through a real landscape. When I reference a govt document, an experiment, a tower, those things exist. For me, that makes the fiction more interesting and relevant.

■ **You manage to make something as dense as soul science rather accessible.**

That’s the challenge. To take a complicated topic and make it readable for someone who’s never studied it or can’t even spell ‘consciousness’. I read mountains of books, then spoke to physicists and noetic scientists. I use analogy and examples to explain the science of consciousness. Experiments in precognition, out-of-body experiences... the things that seem impossible. A baseball hitting a kid in the head and him waking up speaking Mandarin Chinese. That sounds impossible, but it happened. Which means our model of consciousness is incorrect.

■ **Half the fun of a Dan Brown mystery is the way you turn cities into puzzle boards with ambigrams and cryptexes to the riddles in Prague’s cathedrals and clocks in this book. What drew you to this way of storytelling?**

My dad was a mathematician who loved codes. We grew up without a television, so we did puzzles, music, and reading. On Christmas morning, there would be no presents under the tree. Just a code. You had to solve it to find your presents. For me, codes have always been fun.

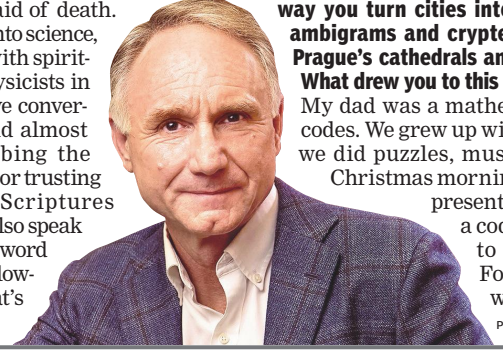


Photo Credit: Ben Flythe

# As Nepal navigates transition, India should offer only quiet support

BY INVITATION



K V RAJAN ATUL K THAKUR

The announcement of former chief justice Sushila Karki as interim prime minister could help restore a measure of normalcy to turbulent Nepal. The country is in the midst of its third Jan Andolan in 35 years—a people’s movement against corruption led largely by its younger generation. Whether Karki, who has been chosen by the protestors, can provide a credible bridge to stability will be watched closely, not just in Kathmandu but also in New Delhi.

India has every reason to be deeply concerned. With the political climate already fragile in Bangla-

desh, ties with Pakistan at a low point, and China looking to expand its influence in Nepal, the situation next door is a matter of strategic significance.

Nepal’s previous two people’s movements — in 1990, which reduced King Birendra’s role to that of constitutional monarch and ushered in multiparty democracy, and in 2008, which abolished the monarchy altogether — were different because there were clear, achievable objectives and identifiable leaders of the agitation to take charge. Both had India’s support. During the first transition, India adopted a twin-pillar policy of supporting both the monarchy and multi-party democracy. This ensured that, despite changes of govt in both countries, relations flourished, and key agreements were signed and ratified with cross-party support in Nepal. The second transition followed the Maoist insurgency and King Gyanendra’s attempt to assume absolute power by unleashing the army against them and dismantling the democratic structure. Again, India

supported the new popular agitation which finally ended with monarchy being abolished and the Maoists being mainstreamed as a democratic party.

Unfortunately, the dream of a new, inclusive Nepal proved illusory. Instead, the country slid into chronic instability, marred by corruption, politicised institutions, and nepotism. Poverty, inequality, and unemployment only deepened, forcing a steady exodus of its frustrated youth to other countries. And while Nepal formally became a federal democratic republic in 2008, the vision remained unfulfilled in real terms.

Jan Andolan 3 is a rejection of this old order. And now that Karki is expected to oversee the transition, India must leave it to the Nepalese political parties, civil society, and especially its youth, to decide the country’s future path. New democratic institutions can only take root if they emerge from within. While India cannot shirk its responsibilities of assisting Nepal on the dif-

ficult journey towards normalcy, its support is best extended quietly without too much fanfare. It must also help Nepal craft innovative policies that speak directly to the aspirations of its youth. In particular, new approaches to development need to be worked out that can attract a broad political and civil society consensus and create jobs on a large scale. Indeed, economic integration with India is the need of the hour.

Nepal’s chronic political instability—14 govts in the past 17 years—combined with rampant corruption is already a serious disincentive for investment, both foreign and domestic, at a time when its ailing economy needs it most. To restore the confidence of Indian investors in Nepal will be difficult, but it is a necessity.

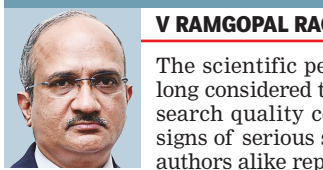
But there are other complicating factors, too. China’s influence has been expanding in recent years, thanks to former PM K P Sharma Oli and other like-minded leftists. Its intentions are very

clear: to deepen its presence in Nepal at India’s expense. Interestingly, the revival of the far left is accompanied by an increasingly strong clamour from forces on the far right, who are calling for restoration of the institution of monarchy and Nepal’s Hindu identity. India lost much of the goodwill of traditionally pro-India parties like the Nepali Congress after its decision to support abolition of the monarchy and mainstreaming of the Maoists. Left unchecked, continued instability could open the door to India-directed mischief from Nepal by third countries and their non-official partners. India should reorient its Nepal policy keeping in view these new strategic challenges. As for Nepal’s GenZ, the choice is clear — agree on a national direction under Karki or risk disorder that weakens the state. ■

*Rajan is former Indian Ambassador to Nepal and Thakur is a policy professional. They are the authors of ‘Kathmandu Chronicle: Reclaiming India-Nepal Relations’. Views are personal*

# Peer review crisis is stalling India’s scientific progress

BY INVITATION



V RAMGOPAL RAO

The scientific peer review system, long considered the backbone of research quality control, is showing signs of serious strain. Editors and authors alike report mounting difficulties in finding qualified reviewers. A recent study noted that fewer than half of invited reviewers now accept invitations, lengthening the review process and adding to editorial workloads. One editor recounted inviting 40 researchers just to secure two reviews for a single paper—an acceptance rate of barely 5%.

With so few willing to take on the task—even for journals in which they recently published—editors must send out far more requests, wait longer for responses, and often personally coax colleagues to volunteer. The result is a slower publication pipeline and mounting pressure on editorial teams. Perhaps more troubling are reports that journals are using swift desk rejections as a coping mechanism. This means many papers, potentially even worthy studies, are being turned away. In extreme cases, papers have been withdrawn simply because no reviewers could be found.

Meanwhile, a series of scandals has exposed how the peer review process can be gamed or outright defrauded. A notorious case emerged in 2014, when Sage Publications retracted 60 articles from the Journal of Vibration and Control after uncovering a peer review and citation ring. One author had created fake reviewer identities and fabricated email accounts to submit glowing reviews of his own papers, exploiting systems that allowed authors to recommend reviewers. Such incidents have since multiplied.

In recent years, the scale of fraud has become staggering. In 2022, publisher Wiley announced it would retract 511 papers across 16 journals in its Hindawi portfolio after exposing organised peer review rings. A further investigation in 2023 identified about 1,200 more compromised articles, traced to special issue editors and fake reviewer accounts. Other publishers have faced similar crises: the Institute of Physics Publishing retracted nearly 500 papers in 2022; PLOS One withdrew over 100; and Frontiers in Physiology retracted 13 papers after confirming that perpetrators had stolen or invented academic identities and even secured editorial roles to handle their own manuscripts. These cases highlight systemic vulnerabili-

ties. When overwhelmed editors rely heavily on author-suggested reviewers or cursory vetting, clever bad actors can slip through. The fallout is severe. Not only are fraudulent papers published, journals must devote significant effort to investigations, re-reviews, and mass retractions, all of which further burden editors and diminish trust in the publication process.

Considering these twin crises — too few honest reviewers and too many cunning fake ones — what is the way forward? Most experts agree that no single fix will suffice. On the policy front, journals and institutions are exploring ways to better reward genuine peer review, moving beyond the notion of it as a ‘good karma’ service. Some propose paying reviewers or offering tangible incentives, though this is controversial because of costs and potential conflicts of interest. More widely accepted is giving public credit for reviewing. Platforms like Publons now allow reviewers to showcase contributions, and some universities even consider peer review activity in hiring or promotion decisions. Another idea is reciprocity: requiring that authors who submit to journals also contribute reviews elsewhere, reinforcing the idea that publishing is a two-way street.

Technology is also being harnessed to shore up peer review. AI-driven manuscript systems now suggest qualified reviewers, track workloads, and flag suspicious patterns—for instance, when multiple submissions list the same reviewers. Forensic tools that analyse metadata or writing style are being developed to detect reviews generated by paper mills or AI. Such measures add extra layers of defence.

Ultimately, however, cultural change within academia will be key. Researchers must re-embrace reviewing as a core responsibility of scholarship. Senior scientists can help by mentoring younger colleagues in good reviewing practices, while academic leaders and department heads should set expectations that faculty devote time to peer review. Even small gestures can make a difference. In one experiment, adding a short, personalised note from the editor to accompany the standard review request email led to a measurable uptick in reviewers accepting the task. Such humanisation of the process reminds potential reviewers that they are not just cogs in a publication machine.

If these reforms take root, peer review can emerge stronger and more resilient. The stakes are high. Without reliable peer review, the credibility of published science itself is at risk. ■

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## WORD DROP

### SET-JETTING

You’re familiar with jet-setting, but have you heard of set-jetting? It’s when on-screen locations turn into real-world travel destinations. Think lounging on the beaches where ‘The White Lotus’ was filmed. So popular was the show that the properties featured in both seasons reported a tenfold spike in bookings. The New York Times notes. The phenomenon isn’t new: ‘The Sound of Music’



sent tourism soaring in Austria, while ‘Game of Thrones’ drew fans in droves to Iceland and Croatia. Today, from ‘Bridgerton’ to ‘Emily in Paris’, travellers are motivated not just by sightseeing but by the desire to step into a character’s world — if only for a holiday.

## INBOX

### Dismal picture

Apropos of ‘Myth of merit’ (ATM, Sept 7), the statistics pertaining to the appointments of women in the apex court present a dismal picture for the most populous democracy. The collegium system and the concept of seniority has vastly dented meritocracy.

—Ravi N, Secunderabad

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# Put security before sport: The case against India-Pak matches

BY INVITATION

BRAJESH KUMAR TIWARI

On the day you are reading this, India and Pakistan will meet at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium for the Asia Cup 2025. But with the wounds of the April 22 Pahal-

gam attack—in which Pakistani terrorists killed 26 Indians—still raw, we must ask: do such encounters serve any purpose beyond fleeting entertainment and commercial profit? Will this match not reopen the grief of victims’ families? Shouldn’t the dignity of the nation and the security of its citizens outweigh cricketing spectacle?

The unease is visible. Campaigns like #BoycottAsiaCup are trending, echoing public anger. For decades, cricket has been projected as a form of ‘people-to-people diplomacy’, a supposed balm to strained relations. Yet, when it comes to Pakistan, this cricket diplomacy has yielded little—at times even proving outright counterproductive.

From the inaugural 1952 Test series to heated ICC clashes, cricket has mirrored the volatility of bilateral ties. In the 1980s, there were glimmers of hope, such as the co-hosting of the 1987 World Cup, which briefly positioned cricket as a tool for goodwill. However, these moments were quickly overshadowed by escalating conflicts. The 1990s saw a surge in militancy in Kashmir, actively sponsored by Pakistan’s ISI which backed groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. The 1999 Kargil War dealt a severe blow to cricket diplomacy. A few years later came the 2004 ‘friendship tour’ of Pakistan but no Indian team has visited since the 2008 Mumbai attacks, which laid bare the deep-seated issues of state-sponsored terrorism. In the aftermath of the 2019 Pulwama attack, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) urged the ICC to sever sporting links with nations harbouring terrorists. Indeed, since India’s 2006 tour of Pakistan and Pakistan’s reciprocal visit in 2012-13, no full bilateral series has taken place. But India continues to compete against its arch-rival in multilateral events held internationally.

Throughout history, the legitimacy of sports boycotts has been well established. During the apartheid era, South Africa faced a comprehensive and long-term boycott across sports, including the Olympics and cricket. This boycott exerted moral pressure on the segregationist system. In Feb 2022, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) prevented Russia and Belarus from competing in international sporting events under their national identity.

The message is clear: when fundamental values, human rights, or security are attacked, sports can-



**PITCH IMPERFECT:** Time and again, sporting boycotts have been used to send a message

not proceed as normal. To normalise relations on the field while terror flows across borders is to legitimise violence.

Cricket is a massive business, with its media rights and broadcast ecosystem valued in billions of dollars. India-Pakistan matches generate enormous viewership and advertising revenue. India alone accounts for 80-90% of global revenues through the BCCI’s broadcast deals and sponsorships. Yet, this indirectly subsidises and provides revenue to the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB). In effect, India indirectly but effectively funds an adversary. Pakistan’s real weakness lies in its economy. India must strike at all sources that provide even minimal foreign exchange to Pakistan. If any economic activity weakens your security or diplomatic standing, then that activity is a net loss. By this logic, a complete boycott is the only logical path. Cricket with concessions to terrorism is not truly a sport. Morally, such a boycott sends a message that human life is above entertainment.

This is not a call to politicise every game but to recognise that cricket in this context is already political. It sends a signal of normalisation where none exists. A boycott is not just symbolic; it is a non-violent instrument of pressure, isolating a state that refuses to dismantle terror networks. Until Pakistan credibly reforms, distancing itself from sponsorship of violence, cricketing ties cannot be morally or strategically justified. And let us not forget that during Operation Sindoor, some Pakistani cricketers openly mocked Indian operations.

India’s security must come before sport. To continue matches now is to dilute the sacrifices of citizens and the spirit of national unity in times of crisis. As the Prime Minister had declared in the context of the Indus Water Treaty: “Blood and water cannot flow together.” Let’s stay the course. ■

*Tiwari is associate professor, Atal School of Management at JNU. Views are personal*