

## SCIENCE

## Scientists find spaceflight affects immune genes, deforms brain

Vasudevan Mukunth

As humans prepare for longer missions to the moon and eventually Mars, scientists need to understand exactly how spaceflight affects the human body. They already know the microgravity and radiation in space affect astronauts' health.

To this end, a study published on January 2 in *Science* by researchers from Saudi Arabia examined human immune

cells (THP-1 monocytes) that had been sent to the International Space Station. They found that the space environment significantly altered the cells' gene expression, the instructions that tell cells how to behave.

Specifically, genes related to heart function, the nervous system, and the senses of vision and smell became overactive, which could explain astronaut health issues like heart risks and sleep trouble. On

the other hand genes that repaired DNA and helped cells divide worked less effectively, signalling long-term risks.

Previous research has shown that without gravity, the brain tends to shift position inside the skull. However, these studies only looked at the average movement of the whole brain. Another study published on January 12 in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* by researchers has examined

changes in specific regions. The researchers analysed MRI scans from 26 astronauts before and after missions and compared them to a control group of 24 participants in a head-down tilt bed rest study. Here, people lie in bed with their heads slightly lower than their feet for 60 days to mimic the effects of weightlessness.

This way, the study found that during spaceflight, different parts of the brain (reversibly) move

and deform in different ways. Those that handle movement and sensation shifted the most. In astronauts who spent a year in space, the supplementary motor cortex moved 2.52 mm up. The researchers also found that the more the posterior insula shifted, the worse the astronauts performed on balance tests when they returned, although the 'why' remains unclear.

The scientists identified the limited sample size, in-

ability to capture changes within specific brain regions, crew members being tested at different times post-mission, and the incomplete ability of the tilt test to mimic the effects of gravity on the brain as limitations of their effort.

Nonetheless, "Our approach provides state-of-the-art regional brain deformation and position shift maps induced by varying duration exposures to microgravity," the team wrote.

## SNAPSHOTS



Agri emissions are high but output is increasing faster

Researchers have found that since 1961, agricultural output has tripled while emissions have grown by 45%, a separation between growth and pollution they call 'decoupling'. It is driven by total factor productivity, meaning farmers are on average getting better at producing more food using fewer resources rather than just switching to cleaner inputs. Technologies that make land more productive have also been better for the climate than those that make farm workers faster.

## Can datacentres in orbit solve for AI models' energy demand?

Google's Project Suncatcher is experimenting with a novel approach: putting datacentres servicing AI workloads in low-earth orbit and letting them feed on solar energy; ISRO is also reportedly studying space-based datacentre technology

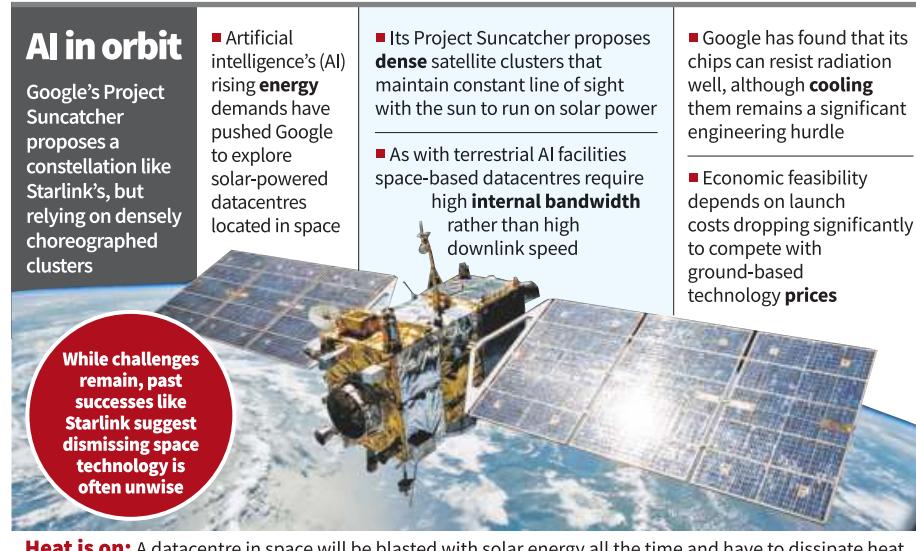
Aroon Deep

**D**atacentres are a growing share of global electricity consumption, and artificial intelligence is driving those power demands up. This is because AI datacentres use dense clusters of graphics processing units (GPUs) for running machine learning workloads, both when training large language models and deploying them. Since the generative AI boom shows no sign of slowing down, datacentres are guzzling more energy than ever, with whatever electricity sources are available. This has pushed Google Research to explore a literally outlandish prospect: launching datacentres into space and running them entirely on solar energy.

Google Research is so confident about this idea that its researchers have already chalked out a few of the main technical challenges and potential solutions.

Traditional datacentres have been driven primarily by growing consumption of content. In markets like India, that's mainly video, and as a result the bandwidth a datacentre needs on its own premises has theoretically been the same as that it is delivering to, or receiving from, the outside world.

All datacentres are different. They need high bandwidth not between the infrastructure they host and the users they serve but within the datacentre itself, and with others situated



ed nearby. For instance, Microsoft's AI datacentre complexes, called Fairwater, have petabit-per-second links between facilities. That is 10 lakh gigabits per second, a million times faster than the best consumer grade internet connection typically offered in Indian metros.

That kind of densely networked architecture is also important for datacentres in space. Since most of the bandwidth would be used for the distributed workloads across multiple satellites, the downlink bandwidth with ground stations is not nearly as important. An analogy is available closer to home: ChatGPT needs these superfast connections in its own infrastructure, but all the user needs the bandwidth for is the query they send and the response they receive.

Project Suncatcher proposes a constellation like Starlink's, but instead of being an evenly spread swarm blanketing the earth, the equipment architecture would rely on densely choreographed clusters, with each satellite no more than a few kilometres from its neighbours, while following an orbit that would always maintain a line of sight with the sun. This combined with technologies like multiplexing, which allows more data to be packed into a single radio beam, would enable the satellites to theoretically distribute their work while having enough power to operate.

Of course, there are many other challenges, and Google is working its way through. One obvious issue is how solar radiation might affect the tensor processing units over years of operation. "While the high bandwidth memory (HBM) subsystems were the most

sensitive component, they only began showing irregularities after a cumulative dose of 2 krad(Si) – nearly three times the expected (shielded) five year mission dose of 750 rad(Si)," Google researcher Travis Beals wrote in a post last November about Suncatcher. "No hard failures were attributable to total ionizing dose up to the maximum tested dose of 15 krad(Si) on a single chip, indicating that Trillium TPUs are surprisingly radiation-hard for space applications."

But datacentres have to be maintained all the time, and once equipment is in orbit, there's no cheap way to reach space for troubleshooting. Another "significant engineering challenge" is thermal management: While liquid cooling is practical in terrestrial datacentres, those in space are going to be blasted with solar energy

all the time and have to dissipate heat in a vacuum.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is economics. For space-based datacentres to be feasible, the cumulative cost of researching their technologies, placing clusters in space, and conducting fresh launches to replace individual satellites that have stopped working must together be competitive with the price a firm pays to work with technology that's already on the ground.

Google says satellite launch prices will have declined to \$200 per kilogram by the mid-2030s and that power savings due to the design of the architecture could lead to a compelling business case. Time will tell if Google – or indeed ISRO, which is also reportedly studying space-based datacentres – will be able to hit all these technological and economic targets while keeping pace with advancements for ground-based datacentres. Microsoft Natick, which tried underwater datacentres to make cooling their systems easier, ultimately abandoned the experiment in spite of its promise.

This said, scepticism about the viability and usefulness of satellite technologies tends to not age very well. Few could have predicted that Starlink would be able to reach the scale and performance it boasts today when SpaceX launched its very first test satellites in 2019.

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'Deep impact' event may have altered moon's chemistry

Scientists have found the moon rocks retrieved by China's Chang'e-6 mission from the lunar far side are chemically different from near-side samples. The rocks contain heavier iron and potassium isotopes. While volcanic activity could explain the iron differences, potassium points to a more dramatic event. The researchers conclude that the asteroid crash that created the gigantic South Pole-Aitken basin generated extreme heat, causing lighter potassium to evaporate from the moon's interior, leaving heavier atoms behind.



Horses sense fear through sweat, become nervous

In an experiment, researchers collected sweat from people watching scary or happy videos, then let horses sniff these samples. When they smelled the 'fear' sweat, they became nervous, were less likely to approach or touch a person, and reacted more intensely to sudden noises, with higher heart rates. Sweat from happy humans didn't have a different reaction than a neutral smell. This could explain why horses often get nervous around anxious handlers.

## When tech billionaires start packing their bags



John Xavier

While most of us were gearing up for the new year, something happened quietly toward the end of last year.

The founders of Google – Larry Page and Sergey Brin – began moving parts of their business and investment structures out of California. Dozens of entities tied to them were either shut down or re-registered elsewhere. Nevada. Florida. Texas. A large home in Miami. A private air terminal moved under a different jurisdiction, the *New York Times* reported.

None of this is illegal. None of it is especially surprising. But it is telling.

Page and Brin built Google in California at a time when the internet was still

young, smartphones didn't exist, and Facebook hadn't been launched. Google grew alongside Silicon Valley itself, feeding off the talent, capital, universities, and risk appetite that the state had cultivated for decades.

Now, California is considering a one-time wealth tax on residents worth more than a billion dollars. If it passes, it would apply retroactively. And that possibility seems to have concentrated minds.

Some of the reactions have been loud. Venture capitalists warning of capital flight. Entrepreneurs saying innovation will suffer. Others pushing back, arguing that extreme wealth should contribute more to public systems that are under strain.

But I'm less interested in who is right, and more interested in what this moment reveals.

In the digital economy,



California is considering a one-time wealth tax on residents worth more than a billion dollars. REUTERS

wealth travels easily. Code doesn't care about borders. Intellectual property fits neatly into legal entities. For people whose fortunes are mostly numbers on paper moving is often a matter of paperwork and planning.

States, on the other hand, move slowly. Laws take time. Ballot measures take even longer. They are built for a world where capital stayed put longer than it does now. That mis-

match is what we're seeing play out.

Some tech leaders, like Jensen Huang of Nvidia, have said publicly that they accept whatever taxes California decides to impose. Others have chosen to quietly reduce their exposure. Both responses make sense from their own vantage points.

But together, they point to something uncomfortable.

The relationship bet-

ween wealth and place is weakening.

In earlier eras, companies needed to stay close to factories, ports, workers, and infrastructure. Leaving a place meant real disruption. Today, many of the most valuable companies and individuals can operate almost anywhere.

That gives capital flexibility. It also weakens the idea of obligation.

California's problem isn't simply whether a wealth tax is good policy. It's whether states can still shape outcomes when the people they're trying to govern can so easily opt out. Push too hard, and they leave. Push too little, and inequality deepens.

While California's case is not unique, its where the tension is most visible right now.

As AI and automation concentrate wealth further, more governments will face the same dilemma.

I don't have an answer. But it feels like the right question to sit with.

How do you fund public goods when the most mobile people benefit the most from systems they no longer feel tied to?

There are no neat answers here. Only trade-offs.

What struck me most was the quietness of it. No press releases. No grand statements. Just filings, deeds, and addresses changing. That's often how big shifts begin.

Not with drama. But with people calmly preparing for a future where allegiance is flexible, and place matters less than it used to.

And perhaps that's the real question this moment raises – not just for California, but for all of us building and working in technology. If the systems we create allow us to move faster than the societies we depend on, what do we still owe them?

I don't have an answer. But it feels like the right question to sit with.



## Question Corner

## Fast and forward

When a fan is spinning fast, why can it seem like it's spinning backwards?

This is an illusion caused by the way our eyes and brains sample motion in discrete snapshots and the fact that fans have identical blades.

Our visual system 'integrates' information over short time windows and updates its best guess of where the blades are many times per second. If between two updates the fan has rotated almost, but not quite, 360°, the pattern we see now looks most similar to the pattern from a moment ago after a small shift in the opposite direction.

That is, your brain tends to

match the current image to the previous one using the smallest apparent shift, because that's usually the most plausible, and that shift can be negative, or backwards, rather than positive.

Further, LED and fluorescent lights often flicker, which can act like a strobe, forcing your visual system to sample the fan at regular intervals. If the fan advances by slightly less than an integer number of blade spacings between 'samples', it will appear to drift backwards. This can be another cause of the same effect.

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

## How are crypto firms vetting customers?

What has India's Financial Intelligence Unit mandated? How did crypto exchanges verify customers before?

### Sahana Venugopal

#### The story so far:

In January 8, India's Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU-IND) regulator updated the existing 'AML & CFT' Guidelines for Reporting Entities Providing Services Related to Virtual Digital Assets. These guidelines apply to entities that include cryptocurrency exchanges, setting down rules that govern how companies facilitating crypto trades will have to vet their customers.

#### What do the updated guidelines say?

Cryptocurrency exchanges will have to carry out their due diligence and obtain verified Know-Your-Client/Customer (KYC) details. In addition to this, exchanges will have to collect their customers' occupation and income range, a selfie with "liveness detection," and latitude and longitude coordinates of the onboarding location with the date, timestamp, and IP address. What's more, the customer's bank account will have to be verified through the penny drop method, in which a small sum is transacted to make sure that the account belongs to the stated person and is in working order. Exchanges will also have to identify high-risk transactions and clients in order to apply enhanced measures to them.

#### Do all exchanges carry out KYC procedures?

Centralised exchanges that support cryptocurrency trades have already been carrying out KYC procedures for years to ensure that legitimate customers are using their services for legal purposes. KYC also makes it easier to deter criminal activities, and freeze offending accounts. A persistent concern is that fiat currency, such as the rupee, could be converted into harder-to-trace crypto assets in order to evade legal reporting requirements. Anti-Money Laundering (AML) laws exist to prevent this. Regulators also fear that cryptocurrencies could be used to financially support terrorist groups, leading to the Countering the Financing of Terrorism (CFT) regulations that institutions must comply with. For example, Binance settled with U.S. regulators in 2023 for violations that included its failure to "implement programs to prevent and report suspicious transactions" with terrorists, ransomware attackers, money launderers, child abusers, criminals, and sanctioned users. Meanwhile, blockchain analytics platform Chainalysis reported that Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis were using crypto "at scales never before observed, in spite of various military setbacks".

Naturally, Indian regulators are keen to prevent crypto exchanges within the country from being used to facilitate similar illegal transactions. However, not all crypto exchanges carry out stringent KYC procedures. For example, numerous decentralised exchanges, called DEXs, offer a fully anonymous and unregulated transacting experience with far fewer controls and safeguards. While there are many non-criminal reasons for using a DEX, such as ensuring privacy, and avoiding state repression, DEXs are also attractive options for money launderers, scammers, hackers, and those financing terrorism.

**How do exchanges vet Indian customers?** WazirX founder Nischal Shetty stated that leading Indian exchanges were already following global best practices and bank-level compliance standards, with the FIU's new rules formalising existing ones. WazirX, which experienced a hacked multi-signature wallet in July 2024 and the loss of around \$230 million in assets, resumed operations last year. "The updated guidelines also highlight liveness detection for new users, and geo tagging to ensure the ID verification details match with the user location (exceptions apply under different conditions), which are already in place in our user onboarding process. We also have an instant verification process enabled with DigiLocker where it securely shares a new user's KYC documents (Aadhaar and PAN) with WazirX," Mr. Shetty told *The Hindu*.

Furthermore, ZebPay and CoinDCX, both popular crypto exchanges, were collecting users' photos as part of the KYC process for more than a year at least, according to their websites. Periodic KYC re-verification was routine at multiple crypto exchanges even before the rules were updated, while several Indian exchanges also offered KYC via DigiLocker. In essence, FIU-IND's guidelines do not introduce drastic changes to the existing KYC framework for crypto exchanges.

Both investors as well as business leaders in India have called for greater regulatory clarity surrounding cryptocurrencies. Though crypto sees capital gains taxed at 30% and a TDS rate of 1%, there is almost no reliable safety net for Indian investors in case they are scammed or subjected to unfair terms by private players.

## What happened to ISRO's PSLV-C62 mission?

What did ISRO chairman V. Narayanan state about the mission? How did Thailand's space agency GISTDA respond? Are Failure Analysis Committees standing bodies within the ISRO? Has the FAC report of the PSLV-C61 mission been released in the public domain?

### Vasudevan Mukunth

#### The story so far:

In January 12, the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) PSLV-C62 mission lifted off from Sriharikota carrying the EOS-N1 satellite along with 15 co-passenger satellites. Within minutes, ISRO said the mission had "encountered an anomaly during end of the PS3 stage", and that a detailed analysis was initiated.

#### What was the anomaly?

In a televised briefing after the launch, ISRO chairman V. Narayanan described what mission control was seeing: that performance was "as expected" up to near the end of the rocket's third stage, called PS3, then that there was increased "disturbance in the vehicle roll rates", followed by a deviation in the flight path. In other words, towards the end of the third stage, the rocket was spinning uncontrollably, enough for it to not be able to continue on its planned path. As of January 16, ISRO hasn't published a statement about the root cause of the mishap.

Following the incident, Thailand's space agency GISTDA, whose THEOS-2A satellite was on board PSLV-C62, said a malfunction late in the third stage caused an attitude-control abnormality and the vehicle deviated from its trajectory, preventing the rocket from deploying the satellites it was carrying. GISTDA also said

The mission's primary payload was EOS-N1, a surveillance satellite from the Defence Research and Development Organisation

the rocket and satellites were expected to fall back and burn up over the southern Indian Ocean. The anomaly resembled the events preceding the failure of the PSLV-C61 mission on May 18, 2025.

#### What happened to PSLV-C61?

ISRO's PSLV-C61 mission was carrying the EOS-09 satellite. The rocket failed after the first two stages, with the third stage not performing nominally. ISRO noted a drop in chamber pressure in the third-stage motor case during the PS3 operation, after which it said the mission "could not be accomplished".

Based on what has been reported publicly so far, both the C62 and the C61 missions suffered decisive anomalies on PS3 after a nominal early ascent and neither could deploy their payloads into the designated orbit (with a qualification for the KID payload). In C62, the main symptom was a "roll rate disturbance" late in the PS3 stage operation; in C61, the symptom was a chamber-pressure drop in the PS3 motor casing.

ISRO's initial communications in both cases also stressed that an anomaly had occurred and that analysis was underway, but it did not publish a detailed list of corrective actions it would have to take. After the C61 mission failed, Dr. Narayanan constituted a Failure Analysis Committee (FAC) to look into the causes of the mishap. The FAC submitted its report to the Prime Minister's Office in mid-2025.

**What does the FAC do?** The FAC is not a standing body of experts within ISRO but instead an entity the ISRO chairman constitutes in the event of a major incident. Its responsibility is to reconstruct the chain of events leading up to the failure using telemetry and subsystem data and in conversation with people involved in that mission. It's expected to identify the causes, and recommend corrective action before the vehicle is cleared for a 'return to flight'.

The Committee members include experts within ISRO as well as relevant experts from academia. It has also been known to include former ISRO chairmen. The FAC submits its final report to the Indian government. The ISRO chairman is Secretary to the Department of Space, which functions directly under the PMO.

The aftermath of the GSLV-F10 mission provides an instructive window into the FAC's efforts. After that mission failed in 2021, here's an excerpt of what the FAC found: "The FAC concluded that the lower liquid hydrogen tank pressure at the time of cryogenic upper stage engine ignition, caused by the leakage of vent and relief valve resulted in the malfunctioning of

the fuel booster turbo pump, leading to mission abort command and subsequent failure of the mission."

#### Where is the PSLV-C61 FAC report?

Although the PSLV-C61 FAC submitted its report to the PMO, the PMO hasn't cleared it for public release yet. Independent experts criticised the decision to withhold it after PSLV-C62 also suffered an anomaly in its third stage. ISRO has also not said whether it has constituted an FAC for the C62 mission, although a short statement on its website says "a detailed analysis has been initiated". On November 15, 2025, during an unrelated lecture, Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre director A. Rajarajan had attributed the loss of the PSLV-C61 mission to a "slight manufacturing error".

That said this isn't the first time details of the FAC's findings of a mishap have been withheld. Previous instances include the PSLV-C39 mission in 2017. ISRO has also been terse about the issues leading up to the underperformance of the NVS-02 satellite.

Earlier, even when the FAC report hadn't been released into the public domain, ISRO had issued statements with detailed summaries of the FAC's findings, for example, after the GSLV-F10 mission in 2021 and the GSLV-F02 mission in 2006. The aftermath of PSLV-C61 is a break from the past in this sense as well, since no such statements have been issued.

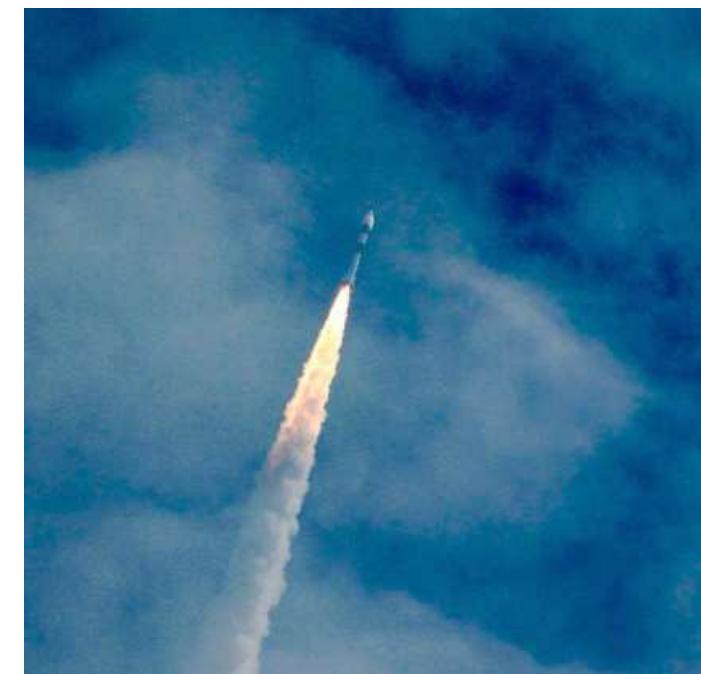
#### What happened to satellites on PSLV-C62?

The mission's primary payload was EOS-N1, a surveillance satellite from the Defence Research and Development Organisation. The co-passengers comprised payloads involving Thailand, the U.K., Nepal, France, Spain, and Brazil, plus seven satellites from Indian enterprises.

The PSLV has failed four times so far, but PSLV-C62 was the first time it failed while carrying customer satellites provided by Indian and foreign entities. The mission had been facilitated by ISRO's commercial arm, NewSpace India, Ltd. While the ISRO didn't say whether the mission had failed after the anomaly on January 12, the statement from Thailand's GISTDA suggested that the rocket's remaining stages and the payloads would fall back down towards the earth and burn up.

The KID payload was a reentry demonstrator – a device designed to fall back down from orbit and splash into the southern Pacific Ocean. In a statement released after January 12, Orbital Paradigm, its Spain-based co-developer, said KID had transmitted "off-nominal" data for about three minutes.

GISTDA said its THEOS-2A satellite had been insured. The Indian private sector payloads onboard PSLV-C62 reportedly hadn't been insured, so the cost of the loss would have been absorbed by the developers of each satellite. The cost of losing EOS-N1 will be borne by India.



**Grave error:** ISRO's PSLV-C62 carrying the EOS-N1 lifts off from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh, on January 12. PTI

## Has an Arbitration Council been constituted?

What would be the functions of the Arbitration Council of India? Why have there been concerns with respect to institutional impartiality? What are some of the criticisms of the amendments? What does the draft Arbitration and Conciliation (Amendment) Bill, 2024 propose?

### Aaratrika Bhaumik

#### The story so far:

Nearly six years after the 2019 amendments to the Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996 (1996 Act), the Union government is yet to constitute the Arbitration Council of India (ACI), envisaged as the central regulatory and promotional body for institutional arbitration.

#### What was the proposed mandate?

The 2019 amendments proposed the establishment of the ACI as a premier regulatory body tasked with promoting, reforming, and advancing the practice of arbitration in the country. This institutional framework drew from the recommendations of the High-Level Committee on Arbitration, chaired by Justice B.N. Srikrishna, which submitted its report in July 2017. The amendments vested the Council with a wide range of functions, including grading arbitral institutions, recognising professional bodies that accredit arbitrators, and maintaining a repository of arbitral awards made in India. The ACI was proposed to be headed by a Chairperson appointed by the Union government in consultation with the Chief Justice of India. The Chairperson could be a former judge of the Supreme Court, a former Chief Justice or judge of a High Court, or an

expert with expertise in arbitration. In addition, the Council was to comprise ex officio members from the executive.

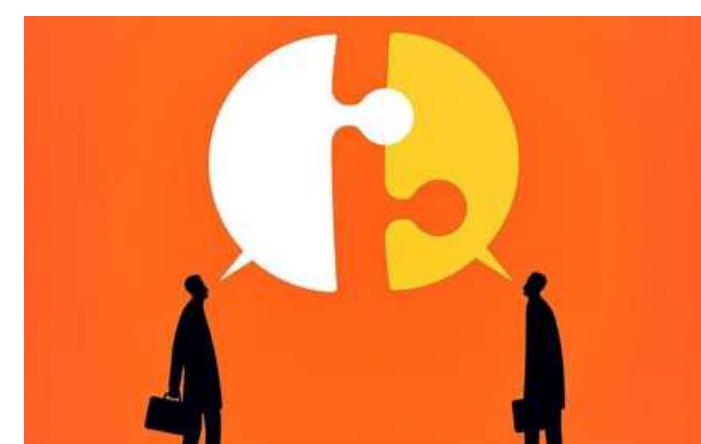
#### What about institutional independence?

A major criticism of the Council relates to its perceived lack of institutional impartiality. Most of its members are either nominated or appointed by the Union government. This has raised concerns about the independence of arbitration in India, particularly given that the government remains the single largest litigant. Experts have cautioned that a government-dominated arbitration regulator with powers to grade institutions, accredit arbitrators, and advise on policy raises serious questions of independence and finds little precedent in arbitration-friendly jurisdictions.

Concerns have also been raised about the ACI's role in accrediting and grading arbitral institutions. While this framework is said to draw inspiration from jurisdictions such as Singapore and Hong Kong, a key distinction remains. In both jurisdictions, arbitration is administered primarily through a single, centralised arbitral institution rather than through a regulatory body overseeing multiple institutions. The 2019 amendments empower the ACI to accredit an unlimited number of arbitral institutions, a feature that could dilute quality standards, place significant administrative demands on the Council, and add to costs for the public exchequer. Another concern relates to the exclusion of foreign legal professionals from the pool of qualified arbitrators. Their exclusion could further undermine India's attractiveness as a seat of arbitration for foreign parties.

#### What does the 2024 draft Bill mandate?

On October 18, 2024, the Union government released the draft Arbitration and Conciliation (Amendment) Bill, 2024, inviting public comments. The draft Bill seeks to give fresh impetus to institutional arbitration through a series of structural reforms. It introduces a revised definition of an "arbitral institution" as a body or organisation that conducts arbitration proceedings under its aegis, in accordance with



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its own procedural rules or as otherwise agreed by the parties. This marks a departure from the 2019 amendments, which required institutions to be formally designated by the Supreme Court or a High Court as arbitral institutions.

The Bill also proposes to expand the role of arbitral institutions by vesting them with powers that currently lie exclusively with courts. These include the authority to extend the time limit for making an arbitral award, reduce arbitrators' fees where delays are attributable to the arbitral tribunal, and substitute arbitrators. If enacted, these measures are expected to reduce judicial intervention. However, in March 2025, responding to a question in Parliament, Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal said that the Bill was still under consideration.

#### How is it restricting judicial intervention?

Under the 1996 Act, Indian courts are empowered to grant interim measures to protect the rights of parties in an arbitration. At present, such relief may be granted before or during arbitral proceedings, and even after an award is rendered but before its enforcement in India. The draft Bill seeks to recalibrate this role by limiting courts' power to grant interim measures to the period before arbitration commences or after the award is rendered. It proposes to amend Section 9(2) of the Act, which currently requires arbitration to be commenced within 90 days of a court granting pre-arbitral interim relief. Under the proposed framework, this 90-day period would instead begin from the date on which an application for interim relief is filed. The stated objective is to curb delays caused by prolonged pre-arbitral court proceedings. Another significant proposal is the introduction of a new Section 9-A, which would allow parties to seek interim measures from an emergency arbitrator once arbitral proceedings have commenced but before the constitution of the arbitral tribunal.

#### What is the way forward?

According to the Justice B.N. Srikrishna-headed report, the continued dominance of ad hoc arbitration in India is primarily attributable to a strong preference for procedural autonomy. This preference is further reinforced by persistent scepticism towards domestic arbitral institutions, particularly with respect to independence and administrative competence. Bridging this trust deficit is critical if Indian institutions are to rival established global bodies.

# PROFILES

# The revolution will not be televised

## Iran protests

What began as a shopkeepers' strike transformed into one of the largest anti-government protests the Islamic Republic has seen, triggering a violent crackdown in which thousands are feared killed; Tehran says Western intelligence agencies hijacked the protest and unleashed 'domestic terror'

Stanly Johny

**I**f someone can do something, by all means, go for it. I can't do anything. Don't curse me," Masoud Pezeshkian, Iran's President, told a gathering of university students and academics in early December. At another meeting with provincial *Ostenders* (governors) and local officials, the President said, "solve your problems yourselves. You shouldn't think that the President can make miracles happen." Mr. Pezeshkian, a heart surgeon-turned politician who won the 2024 elections on a platform of reform, said his government was "stuck, really badly stuck", referring to Iran's structural problems. The economy, reeling under Western sanctions, came under added strain after the June 2025 war with Israel and the U.S. Already grappling with hyperinflation and a tanking currency, a drought last year compounded Iran's economic distress, while periodic water and power cuts deepened public frustration. The government appeared largely helpless, while the security establishment prepared for the next round of confrontation with Israel. "Iran was a tinderbox," a Tehran-based academic said. "All it wanted was a spark."

The fuse was lit on December 28, when traders and shopkeepers in Tehran's Grand Bazaar went on strike over the collapsing currency, the rial. The bazaar carries immense symbolic weight in Iran's revolutionary folklore. In the late 1970s, it was a key hub of revolutionary activity. The *bazaar* (the trading class), conservative in outlook and angered by the Shah's economic policies, threw their weight behind the anti-Shah movement, which snowballed into a nationwide uprising that brought down the monarchy in 1979.

In December 2025, the *bazaar* shut their shops and staged rallies, demanding solutions to mounting economic grievances. The authorities initially showed restraint and promised to address the shopkeepers' demands, but protesters remained defiant. And then, on January 2, after meeting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Florida, U.S. President Donald Trump warned Iran's rulers against killing protesters. "The U.S. is locked and loaded," he wrote in a social media post.

Days later, as protests spread across the country, Iran imposed a nationwide Internet shutdown. A brutal crackdown followed. On January 10, security personnel used lethal force to crush the unrest. According to two Iran-watching organisations based in the U.S. and Norway, at least 3,000 people were killed. State media reported that more than 130 security personnel were also killed in the violence. Reza Pahlavi, the U.S.-based son of the late deposed monarch, emerged in Western media as the voice of Iran's opposition. He urged the protesters to sustain the pressure and unveiled a transition plan from America – which kept reinstating the monarchy as one of the options. Mr. Trump, for his part, called on "Iranian patriots" to keep protesting and "take over institutions", promising that "help is on the way". But after the January 10 crackdown, the protests appeared to lose momentum. Mr. Trump, meanwhile, seemed to have developed cold feet about military action – at least for now. He said he was "notified" that Iran had halted the planned execution of hundreds of protesters, calling it "good news".

**Cycles of protests**  
The Islamic Republic, founded in 1979 after the ouster of the Shah, has witnessed several waves of protests ever since. In 1999, students launched a mass agitation demanding social and political reforms. The trigger was the shutdown of a reformist newspaper at the University of Tehran. In 2009, after allegations of a massive electoral fraud surfaced following the presidential election in which incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared winner, tens of thousands took to the streets. The unrest, which came to be known as the Green Movement, eventually lost momentum.

In September 2022, after Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, died while in police custody, nationwide protests rocked the country once again. But by far the 2025-26 agitation proved the gravest challenge the Islamic Republic has faced. This time, the protesters took to



**Lit fuse:** The protest started when traders and shopkeepers in the Grand Bazaar in Tehran went on strike over the collapsing currency. AP

the streets, with some calling for the overthrow of the regime, while the U.S. threatened to bomb Iran. It was a rare and perilous moment of convergence of both internal instability and the threat of external aggression.

"It's not that Iran doesn't want to solve its economic problems. Nor does the state want to live in perpetual cycles of unrest. There are issues of corruption and cronyism. But what has really tied the hands of the regime are the sanctions," said the Iranian academic.

Iran is among the most heavily sanctioned countries in the world. The U.S. imposed the first batch of sanctions on Iran's economy immediately after the 1979 revolution – it banned oil imports from Iran and froze some \$12 billion in Iranian assets. In 1995, President Bill Clinton barred American companies from making investments in Iran's hydrocarbon sector. In 2006, the UN Security Council imposed additional sanctions over its nuclear programme. In 2019, the first Trump administration designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a paramilitary unit, as "a foreign terrorist organisation". Currently, Iran's assets held overseas are largely frozen, its ability to trade freely is severely constrained and foreign countries and companies are effectively barred from making investments.

Sanctions on oil sharply reduced Iran's foreign exchange earnings and slowed down its economic growth. The loss of revenues led to massive deficits, which were financed by monetary expansion, triggering hyperinflation. Tehran had in the past sought to engage the West and ease the economic stranglehold without loosening its ideological grip. In 2015, Iran reached a multilateral nuclear deal, agreeing to scuttle its nuclear programme and open its facilities for international inspection, while retaining its nuclear technology. In return, the U.S., then led by Barack Obama, and other powers pledged to remove economic sanctions. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear deal was called, was seen by many as a new beginning for Tehran.

But Israel staunchly opposed the deal, and lobbied against it. In May

2018, during his first term, Mr. Trump tore up the agreement by pulling the U.S. out of it despite UN certification that Iran was fully compliant with the terms of the agreement. He reimposed sanctions on Iran, effectively killing the JCPOA. In response, Iran started enriching uranium to levels beyond the limits set by the deal. In September 2025, European nations reimposed snapback sanctions, saying Iran had violated the JCPOA.

Amid fears of conflict and uncertainty, economic pains mounted. In December, the rial's value fell by 16% – the currency lost roughly 60% of its value since the June war. Food inflation reached an annual rate of 72%, nearly double the official target. The Pezeshkian government tried to implement some reforms by increasing taxes and removing food and fuel subsidies, moves that only inflamed the public anger.

**External interference**  
"In June, Iran was subjected to an illegal military attack by the U.S. and Israel. Over the past two weeks, Iran experienced a terrorist attack. We had Mossad agents directing rioters to attack police stations, schools and mosques. This was domestic terrorism," Foad Izadi, professor of world studies at Tehran University, told *The Hindu*. "It initially started as a peaceful protest by merchants, who were upset about currency fluctuations, but that was quickly hijacked by Israel and the U.S." he said.

On January 2, on the day Mr. Trump declared the U.S. was "locked and loaded", Mossad, Israel's external spy agency, wrote on social media in Farsi, encouraging Iranians to protest against the government. "Go out together into the streets. The time has come," Mossad wrote. "We are with you. Not only from a distance and verbally. We are with you in the field." In October 2025, *Haaretz*, Israel's liberal daily, reported that Israel was indirectly funding Persian language online campaigns targeting the Iranian government, and projecting Reza Pahlavi as the next Shah. On January 3, Mike Pompeo, former U.S. Secretary of State and CIA chief, wrote on social media, "Happy New Year to every Iranian in the streets. Also to every Mossad agent walking beside them."

On January 13, Channel 14, a far-right Israeli channel, reported that "foreign actors are arming the protesters in Iran with live firearms".

Mr. Izadi said the Western media ignored these facts in their coverage of the "riots" in Iran. "The West wants to portray that peaceful protesters were killed by the police, but in reality, Mossad agents were shooting at ordinary citizens because they want to increase the number of deaths so that they could get Trump to attack Iran," added Mr. Izadi.

A UN staffer based in Tehran told *The Hindu* that the protests had turned violent in several pockets. "There were incidents of gunmen from among the crowd targeting security personnel." But groups based in the U.S. and Norway claimed security personnel unleashed brutal violence against protesters. The government is yet to release the official toll. But Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said "hundreds" were killed. The UN staffer in Tehran said on January 13 that protests had subsided but "the air is very tense and fearful". "Many here say this kind of repression has never been seen. But there is no sign of weakness from the government's side. They are holding up," said the official.

According to Arash Azizi, an Iranian author who is teaching at Yale University, the Islamic Republic "might have quashed this wave of street protests but, unlike 2022, it has not returned to stability". Its core policies and structures remain untenable. It can barely restore the social equilibrium."

He said the regime has committed a grave crime by killing "thousands" of protesters. "The opposition remains fragmented and in shock of the massacre. It would need to get its act together if it is to reach its ambitions. Barring that, it is likely that forces inside the regime will implement changes to the regime's core policies and structures as they seek a new deal with the people and also the U.S." Mr. Azizi, author of *What Iranians Want*, told *The Hindu*.

### Curse of geopolitics

Iran has long been in Washington's crosshairs. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, Iran was among the first countries to condemn al-Qaeda assault on the U.S., and even offered cooperation for America's war in Afghanistan. Yet in January 2002, then-U.S. President George W. Bush grouped Iran with North Korea and Iraq as part of an "axis of evil". A year later, the U.S. invaded Iraq.

North Korea, sensing the danger, abandoned nuclear diplomacy and accelerated efforts to build a nuclear bomb – which it tested in October 2006. Iran built a nuclear programme, but stopped short of weaponisation. Instead, Tehran invested heavily in building its so-called axis of resistance (forward defence), involving Hashad al Shabi in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon and militant groups in Palestine.

When the U.S. got stuck in Iraq, Iran steadily expanded its regional influence through the axis which it thought would ensure its deterrence. When Arab Spring-inspired protests plunged Syria, an Iranian ally, into a civil war, Tehran, along with Russia and Hezbollah, stepped in. They turned around the civil war by 2018.

But the first blow came in January 2020 when the U.S. assassinated Qassem Soleimani, the charismatic head of the Quds Force. Soleimani was one of the key architects and executioners of the forward defence strategy. Soleimani's killing disrupted Iran's complex power projection in a volatile region.

After the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack, Israel took the war straight to Iran. On the one side it destroyed Gaza, and on the other, it went after Hezbollah and the Syrian government. Hezbollah was severely weakened after a month-long Israeli military operation in November 2024. In December, the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad collapsed when a Turkey-backed jihadist militia, headed by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, a former al-Qaeda commander, marched towards Damascus. With Syria fallen, Hezbollah rolled back and Hamas pushed to the ruins of Gaza, Iran suddenly lay vulnerable to external threats. And in June 2025, Israel began bombing Iran's nuclear facilities. The U.S. joined in.

Israel has never hidden its desire for regime change in Iran. During the June war, Prime Minister Netanyahu had said regime change could be one of the outcomes of the attack. On Day 1, Israel carried out a large-scale decapitation strike killing several military chiefs. The Iranian state recovered quickly and hit back with ballistic missiles, eventually forcing Israel to agree to a ceasefire. But only the direct confrontation came to a halt. The rivalry continued.

Israel, and several U.S. politicians, including Republican Lindsey Graham, openly support Reza Pahlavi as a potential successor to the Islamic Republic. From Israel's perspective, Iran is the only revisionist power in the region. No Arab country challenges Israel's military dominance. If the Islamic Republic falls and a pro-American, pro-Israel dynast is installed in Tehran, Israel, with support from Washington, could redraw the geopolitical landscape of West Asia. As the Islamic Republic's rivals seek regime change and Tehran seems determined to fight back, the protesters, who demand freedoms and reforms, risk being reduced to pawns in the broader games countries are playing.

Even though many, including German chancellor Friedrich Merz, predicted an imminent collapse of the Iranian government, that did not occur. Even at the peak of the protests, state institutions remained unified, with no visible cracks in the loyalty of the security apparatus.

The protesters, divided among separatists, liberals and monarchists, appeared to lack the political capital to bring down the republic. Questions also remain about what would follow the clerical leadership. Reza Pahlavi, who hasn't set foot in Iran for over 40 years, lacks the organisational backing or popular appeal to emerge as a credible alternative in a country of over 90 million people. "He has been living off the money his father had stolen from Iran for the last 47 years. Now, he wants to become the king. His father came to power through an American-British coup, and the son wants to come to power through an American-Israeli colour revolution, which failed," said Mr. Izadi.

But the ground reality appears more complex. "Back-to-back crises are fraying the social contract. Iranians demand structural reforms – if not regime change. The state understands this, but is unable to deliver. The push has to come from within. What you are watching on TV, the coronation of another Pahlavi, holds little significance for ordinary Iranians," said the Tehran academic. "The revolution will not be televised", he said, referring to the Gil Scott Heron poem.

The republic may have weathered the storm for now, but tornadoes lie ahead. The economy remains in deep peril, trapped in cycles of crisis. Iran's powerful external adversaries have read recurring protests as signs of state weakness. They are likely to intensify efforts to further isolate the country, tighten the screws of sanctions, and sow internal instability. Caught between a sanctions-battered economy, a state unable to reform, and external rivals bent on forcing a violent regime change, the revolutionary road remains torn. As President Pezeshkian warned in December, nobody "can make miracles" to fix the country's myriad problems.

## THE GIST

In December, the rial's value fell by 16% – the currency lost roughly 60% of its value since the June war

Food inflation reached an annual rate of 72%, nearly double the official target

The Pezeshkian government tried to implement some reforms by increasing taxes and removing food and fuel subsidies, moves that only inflamed the public anger

In December 2025, shopkeepers shut their shops and staged rallies, demanding solutions to mounting economic grievances



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# Opinion

SUNDAY, JANUARY 18, 2026



Ali Sher at the Delhi Golf Club

## From caddie lines to centre stage

### FAIRWAY FILES



Rahil Gangjee

BEFORE ANYONE STARTS pulling out record books and world rankings, let me say this upfront. India has produced golfers who have achieved far more on the global stage than the names I am about to talk about. This is not a list of our most decorated champions. This is not about who won the most on the European Tour or who cracked the highest world ranking. This is about something else altogether. This is about the men who came from nothing, who learned the game while carrying bags, collecting balls, cutting grass and borrowing clubs, and who quietly built the foundation of professional golf in this country. The ones who turned "rags to riches" from a cliché into a lived reality. The ones who made it possible for later generations to dream of golf as a profession.

These are the unsung heroes. The domes-ticating. The pioneers who didn't just play the game in India — they created the ecosystem for it. Chronologically, the story begins with three towering figures: Rohtas Singh, fondly called Guruji; Basad Ali, the artist of the short game; and Ali Sher, the man who broke a psychological barrier by winning the Indian Open as a professional. Their stories deserve to be told before we even get to the more familiar modern names.

#### Rohtas Singh — Guruji, the original torchbearer

Rohtas Singh was not just a golfer. He was an institution. Long before corporate-backed academies, long before structured junior programmes, long before fitness trainers and launch monitors, there was Guruji — winning, teaching, inspiring and carrying Indian golf on his shoulders. He came from humble beginnings, learned the game the hard way, and went on to dominate the domestic circuit for decades. He won an astonishing number of tournaments across India at a time when travel itself was a luxury and equipment was often borrowed or outdated.

But what made Rohtas special was not only his victories. It was his role as a mentor. Generations of Indian professionals will tell you that they didn't just learn how to hit a draw or read a putt from him; they learned how to conduct themselves, how to survive on tour, how to respect the game. That is why he wasn't just called a champion — he was called Guruji. In today's language, we would call him a "pathfinder". In simpler terms, he showed that a boy from modest means could become the best in the country and make a living out of this beautiful, cruel, addictive game.

**Basad Ali — the magician around the greens**

If Rohtas was the general, Basad Ali was the artist. Every era has a player whose short game makes fellow professionals stop and stare. Basad was that man in his time. Around the greens, he had hands that could make a golf ball obey like it was tied to a string. Touch, imagination, feel — words that commentators love to use today — were simply natural to him. He, too, came through the hard route. No silver spoon. No privileged access. Just hours and hours of practice, an intuitive understanding of turf and trajectory, and a competitive fire that made him a regular presence at the top of leaderboards. In many ways, he represented a generation of Indian golfers who had world-class skill but limited opportunity to showcase it beyond our borders. Basad's career also quietly underlined one of the great what-ifs of Indian golf: how many such gifted players could have gone much further internationally if they had received support at the right time, not after they had already proven everything at home?

#### Ali Sher — the man who changed a mindset

Then came 1991. And with it, Ali Sher.

Until that moment, the Indian Open — our most prestigious tournament — had been a fortress. Foreign professionals came, played, and usually won. Indian players competed bravely, occasionally contended, but rarely crossed the final line first. There was an invisible psychological barrier: *we belong, but do we truly belong at the top?*

Ali Sher smashed that barrier. A former caddie at Delhi Golf Club, he knew the course, he knew the grind, and he knew what it meant to fight for every opportunity. When he lifted the Indian Open trophy as the first Indian professional to do so, it was not just a personal triumph. It was a moment of collective belief. Two years later, when he won it again, it confirmed that 1991 was no fluke.

For the first time, young Indian golfers could look at the biggest event in their country and say, "One of us can win this. One of us has won this." That shift in mindset is priceless. You cannot measure it in prize money or world ranking points. You measure it in dreams.

#### The rags-to-riches thread

What connects Rohtas, Basad and Ali Sher is not just talent. It is origin. These were not academically polished juniors flying business class to international events as teenagers. These were men who learned the game from the ground up — literally in some cases — and who climbed every rung of the ladder with grit rather than privilege. They are living proof that golf in India was never only a rich man's game; it was a *dreamer's* game. And yet, here lies the great irony. While they became kings at home, most of them never truly got the chance to wage sustained battles on the global stage. Not because they lacked ability, but because they lacked something far more practical: timely sponsorship.

In India, sponsorship has traditionally followed international success. You do well abroad, you get backing. You start earning big, brands come calling. But golf doesn't work like that. To do well abroad, you first need to travel, to play, to fail, to learn, to adapt — and all of that costs money. Serious money. You need support *before* the breakthrough, not after. You need it when you are honing your talent, when you are gaining exposure, when you are taking those first nervous steps into bigger fields. Not when you are already cashing cheques.

It is a cruel loop: you need sponsorship to compete internationally, but you need international results to get sponsorship.

Rohtas, Basad and Ali Sher lived in an era when that loop was even tighter. Facilities were limited, information was scarce, and corporate interest in golf was minimal. Yet, they built careers, inspired generations and laid the tracks on which the Indian golf train now runs.

#### Why these stories matter today

In countries like Japan, even players who compete largely on the domestic tour are national celebrities. Their stories are told, their struggles understood, their journeys celebrated. The public knows them not just as golfers, but as characters.

In India, we often wait for global validation before we anoint our heroes. Perhaps it is time we reverse that thinking. Perhaps it is time we celebrate the men who made the journey possible in the first place — the Guruji who taught by example, the short-game magician who showed what skill truly means, and the former caddie who dared to believe he could conquer his own national open. This is the first chapter of that tribute. In the next columns, we will move forward in time to the next wave of rags-to-riches heroes — Ashok Kumar, Feroz Ali, SSP Chawrasia and the modern-day fairytale of Shubham Jaglan. Different era. Same hunger. Same dream.

Because every superstar story begins long before the spotlight — usually in the shadows, with a borrowed club, a scuffed ball, and a belief that refused to quit.

*Rahil Gangjee is a professional golfer, sharing through this column what life on a golf course is like*

Then came 1991. And with it, Ali Sher.

## ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram

The theory that unemployment is not a big issue is a myth and hypocritical. While the government is self-congratulatory, we know that joblessness is the darkest stain on the body economic

**THERE IS A** deluge of good news. Retail inflation is at 1.33%. The GDP growth for 2025-26 has been estimated at 7.4%. I think we must add another hurrah: there is *no unemployment* anywhere in India, at least unemployment of the kind we need to worry about.

#### No takers for jobs!

I have good reasons to state that there are no takers for jobs. Data shows that for hundreds of thousands of vacancies in the government and quasi-government sector, there are *no takers*. Despite good pay (and the 8th Pay Commission will improve it), dearness allowance, annual increments, promotions, job security, medical benefits, HRA, Transport Allowance and other allowances, leave benefits, advances and loans, and Unified Pension Scheme, young men and women are *not* inclined to take the jobs — sanctioned by the government but vacant. What will you conclude from this extraordinary situation other than *there is no unemployment* and no takers for jobs?

According to Ministry of Education, the sanctioned and vacant posts in central universities (see Table 1), as of April 1, 2024, 27% of teaching posts and 47% of non-teaching posts were vacant in central universities.

| Type of posts      | Sanctioned | Vacant/unfilled |
|--------------------|------------|-----------------|
| Teaching posts     | 18,940     | 5,060           |
| Non-teaching posts | 35,640     | 16,719          |

TABLE 1

As of June 2025, 7,765 teaching posts in KVS and 4,323 teaching posts in NVS were vacant. Nevertheless, we are assured that teaching is well and thriving in India.

#### Official data speaks

There are more examples all over India. In the central armed police forces (CAPF) there are 25,487 posts of constables that



The replacement of MGNREGA by a supply-driven, guarantee-less, funds-constrained scheme will make matters worse for the rural poor who will face unemployment or under-employment

EXPRESS PHOTO: JASBIR MALHI

## No unemployment in India!

are vacant. In Rajasthan, in the post of LDC/Clerk Grade II, there are 10,644 vacancies. In Bihar, there are 12,199 vacancies. In U.P. there are 60,244 posts of constables that are vacant. There are 2,255 vacancies in staff nurses in Tamil Nadu. The aspirants are usually from the lower middle class who have just finished higher secondary school or are graduates.

Moving up the education chain, in 21 AIIMS, there are 3,485 persons holding faculty positions and 1,731 positions are vacant. In one district alone — Kendrapara in Odisha — among doctors and paramedics, 1,087 persons were in position while 805 posts were vacant. Bank employment has high value and status. In 12 public sector banks, the position is as follows (see Table 2):

|           | In position | Vacant |
|-----------|-------------|--------|
| Officers  | 4,30,599    | 17,500 |
| Clerks    | 2,43,817    | 12,861 |
| Sub staff | 84,092      | 2,206  |

Do not worry, all is well in internal security, healthcare and banking.

The PM Internship Scheme was launched in October 2024. A report in *The Hindustan* December 2, 2025 said that, over two rounds, 1,65,000 offers were made by companies and only 20% accepted; and of those who accepted the offers, one-fifth left before completing their internships. So, nearly 1,40,000 offers went a-begging because there were no takers.

Those who believe that unemploy-

ment is not a problem in developing India may stop reading at this point.

Those who think that unemployment is a problem may read further.

To be fair, the peculiar situation of vacant posts on the one hand and presumably reluctant job seekers on the other is not attributable to the BJP government alone. It has spanned many governments and many decades. However, two events under the BJP's regime have exacerbated the situation.

#### Past haunts present

*First*, demonetisation. It was a man-made, self-inflicted grave injury. As I have commented earlier, it was not demonetisation in the strict sense because no currency notes were invalidated or taken out of the system. It was a scheme that offered 'new notes for the old'. The total value of currency-in-circulation (CIC) was restored to the old level, and in fact exceeded it, quickly. On November 4, 2016, the value of CIC was ₹17.97 lakh crore; at the end of December 2025, it had more than doubled to ₹39.24 lakh crore. The worst fallout was that demonetisation closed many thousand small and medium businesses and destroyed jobs — which, of course, the government denies to this day. But, according to the All India Vypar Mandal, there were 6,25,00,00 small businesses in 2016 and nearly 48% of them have closed down in the last decade.

*Second*, COVID. A survey in 2022 estimated that 14% of MSMEs perma-

nently closed down due to the pandemic. A government report indicated that 75,000 registered MSMEs were shut down between July 2020 and February 2025 (that went beyond the Covid-affected years). UNCTAD estimated as many as 47% of MSMEs in India were permanently or temporarily closed as of February 2022. These numbers cannot be verified but they are in line with common observations. As I wrote in a previous column, the main reason was that government did not fulfil the promises of financial assistance and credit guarantees. Closure of businesses due to demonetisation or Covid meant massive loss of jobs. Were these jobs restored or created again? Government has been silent on this question.

The replacement of MGNREGA by a supply-driven, guarantee-less, funds-constrained scheme will make matters worse for the rural poor who will face unemployment or under-employment (at distress wages). Many rural households, especially women, will face loss of supplemental income.

The theory that unemployment is not a big issue is a myth and hypocritical. While government is self-congratulatory, we know that *joblessness* is the darkest stain on the body economic.

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## FIFTH COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

LAST WEEK, WHEN the results came for the election to the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, it was the Chief Minister of Maharashtra who made it clear that he was the hero of this victory. Nobody saw the incongruity. Did you? Did you while watching the results stop for a moment and think that it was absurd that a chief minister should be exulting in a municipal victory? When Zohran Mamdani became Mayor of New York city, it was his victory and his alone and if he does not deliver on the promises he made, he alone will be held responsible. The buck stops with the mayor in most major cities in the world but in our colonial system of governance this does not happen. So municipal governance simply does not exist. Everything is controlled by chief ministers who have many other things to attend to.

This is the real reason why most Indian cities routinely make the annual list of the worst governed cities of the world. This is why nearly half the citizens of Mumbai live in squalid shanties that have no access to basic municipal services like clean water and electricity. As someone who has lived in Mumbai for the most part of more than 30 years, I consider myself

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## Missing municipal governance

an honorary citizen of this magnificent, chaotic behemoth of a city. But I also spend a lot of time brooding over how much more magnificent and how much less chaotic it would be if it was governed by an elected mayor instead of an autocratic, unelected Municipal Commissioner.

This municipal commissioner will be appointed by the Chief Minister of Maharashtra and will control a budget that at ₹74,427 crore is more than the budget of many small states. The man who has the misfortune to become the mayor plays a ceremonial role mainly because we continue with the colonial system of governance that we inherited from the British Raj. So, it should not surprise us at all that as we slouch towards becoming 'vikas' by 2047, a metropolis that should be Singapore or Hong Kong is unable to provide millions of its citizens with a need so fundamental as affordable housing.

If you want to see wretchedness and unspeakable urban squalor, all you need to do is spend a morning in a Mumbai slum. I have had the occasion to do this many times and can report that living conditions are worse here than they are in the wreckage of war-torn Gaza. Or at least as bad. The inhabitants of these slums live in windowless hovels on the edge of drains so clogged with waste that they have become solid

pipelines of garbage. Most slum dwellers have access to cell phones and televisions but the electricity they use is stolen from municipal supplies with the complicity of corrupt officials.

Similar conditions exist for poorer citizens in all our metropolises. If you think life is more salubrious in smaller towns, think again. It is worse. Last week, a viral video from Gonda (in 'double engine'-ruled Uttar Pradesh) showed rats as big as kittens crawling up oxygen tanks and into patients' beds. And as someone who has the misfortune to have travelled to many other small towns in this state, believe me when I tell you that I have seen schools built in garbage dumps and hospitals in which half of Mumbai's citizens live restricted themselves to asking voters which party they would be voting for.

The reunion of the Shiv Sena heirs of Bal Thackeray was given more attention than the city's real problems. By next week, this municipal election will be forgotten and life in Mumbai will go on as it does now. A handful of people who can afford to live in the glistening new buildings that are rising high above the squalor of this metropolis have a living standard that is comparable to the best in the best cities in the world. They remain totally indifferent to how the other half lives until one of their domestic servants brings some disease from the slums into their homes.

## The Sunday Statesman

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### Speed's Cost

India's decision to push quick-commerce platforms away from the headline promise of "10-minute delivery" is not a crackdown on innovation; it is a course correction on a model that has normalised risk for convenience. The urban consumer has been trained to expect groceries, chargers, and snacks at near-teleport speed, while the worker bearing that speed has remained largely invisible. The recent intervention acknowledges what riders have said for years: velocity is being monetised, safety is being externalised.

The timing matters. India's gig workforce is expanding rapidly, and for a large section of riders this is not pocket money but primary income. When algorithms reward haste and penalise delay, they do more than optimise logistics - they reshape behaviour on crowded roads. Tight delivery windows, opaque ratings and income volatility create a constant pressure loop. Even a small traffic snag becomes a financial threat. In such a system, accidents are not aberrations; they are predictable outcomes.

Critics argue that removing the slogan will change little because speed is "built into the system." They are right to be sceptical. If order allocation, surge incentives and customer ratings continue to privilege the fastest, the countdown clock merely goes off-screen. Riders will still read the signals. The platform may no longer promise ten minutes, but the algorithm will. This is why the present move should be seen as an opening, not a conclusion.

India's regulatory challenge is to reconcile two truths: quick commerce has created jobs and convenience, and quick commerce has also created precarity. The answer is not to freeze innovation but to civilise it.

That means minimum earning floors that smooth out volatility, mandatory insurance and accident coverage, enforceable limits on continuous working hours, and clear safety protocols. It also means transparency - workers should know how ratings, penalties and dispatch logic affect their income.

There is a broader lesson here about how India wants its digital economy to grow. If efficiency is pursued without dignity, the social licence of these platforms will erode. Urban shoppers may enjoy speed, but they do not want blood on the handlebar. A model that depends on men riding shifts under algorithmic scrutiny is not scalable; it is brittle.

The government's nudge signals that the era of "move fast and let workers absorb the shock" is ending. But symbolism must give way to structure. Without enforceable standards, platforms will adapt the language and retain the incentives. With standards, they will adapt the incentives and retain the innovation.

Quick commerce will not slow down because a tagline is retired. It will only become safer when the cost of speed is properly priced.

This requires rules that recognise gig workers as workers in fact, not contractors in name. India has an opportunity to shape a fair digital labour model before scale hardens bad design into destiny. The choice is simple: build an economy that runs fast, or one that runs forward.

### Cold Ambitions

In the Arctic, ambition wears a colder mask. It speaks the language of security, wraps itself in maps and radar arcs, and insists it is driven by necessity rather than desire. The renewed American fixation on Greenland must be read in this light, not as a passing provocation, but as an assertion of power in a region where the ice is melting and old instincts are thawing. What is unfolding is not just a debate over territory; it is a stress test for international law, alliance politics, and the meaning of self-determination in the twenty-first century.

At one level, the strategic logic is undeniable. Greenland sits astride critical sea routes, hosts missile-warning infrastructure, and will become more accessible as ice recedes. Security planners have studied its value since the Cold War. That part is not new. What is new is the language.

The real fault line is between two incompatible ideas of power. US President Donald Trump's is transactional: leverage creates rights, control creates security, and pressure is simply a tool. Denmark and the European Union's is institutional: law creates rights, consent creates legitimacy, and alliances exist precisely to remove coercion from relationships among friends. Greenland now sits uncomfortably between these philosophies.

Legally, the territory remains part of the Kingdom of Denmark under a self-rule arrangement that recognises Greenlanders as a people with the right to self-determination. That framework is built for autonomy and, if chosen, independence. It is not built for transfer to the United States. Independence is decolonisation. Annexation by the US, militarily or otherwise, is alienation. International law treats them very differently.

Even a hypothetical vote to join the United States would not erase Denmark's sovereignty. Without Danish consent, any attempted acquisition would collide with the UN Charter, the principle of territorial integrity, and post-war norms that protect borders. Referendums do not magically override sovereignty. The world has been clear about that elsewhere.

Then there is Nato. Denmark is an American ally, not a neutral bystander. If the idea takes hold that alliance membership does not shield a country from territorial pressure, the psychological architecture of collective security collapses. European unease is therefore rational. The fear is not simply about Greenland changing hands, but about hierarchy returning to a system built on equality.

None of this means security concerns in the Arctic are imaginary. They are real, and they will grow. But there is a difference between partnership and possession. There is a difference between access and ownership. There is a difference between influence and annexation.

The likely endgame is therefore less dramatic and more ambiguous: expanded US bases, military integration, rare earths and oil for America and US dominance without ownership. It satisfies security planners without detonating alliance politics.

Greenlanders have been clear. They are open to cooperation, not ownership. In the race for the Arctic, that distinction matters. Cold ambition may be understandable, but it is not automatically legitimate.

# Riding the Storm

*The effective GST cut may not fully neutralize the loss in export revenue, but it would provide a sufficient, strategic domestic stimulus to mitigate the loss, sustain competitiveness, and reinforce the economy's resilience. Ultimately, the GST reform would serve as a strategic fiscal tool that stabilizes India's price competitiveness, which will strengthen the nation's economy in the midst of a volatile global trade situation, arising from the increase in tariff by the US Government*



In India, the evolution of indirect taxation reached a historic milestone with the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) from 1 July 2017. This reform marked one of the most ambitious and transformative policy shifts in the country's economic history. Prior to GST, India's tax landscape was fragmented, characterized by a web of Central and State levies such as excise duty, service tax, VAT, and entry tax - often leading to cascading effects, inefficiencies, and lack of transparency. The introduction of GST aimed to dismantle this complexity by subsuming multiple indirect taxes into a unified, destination-based tax system. The main objectives of GST were to enhance economic efficiency, promote ease of doing business, and create a seamless national market by eliminating inter-state tax barriers.

With a view to carry the growth-oriented, transparent, and equitable reform process forward, the Government restructured the GST system in September 2025, referred to as GST Reforms 2.0. By means of this restructuring, the Government has streamlined the tax slabs with the main aim of reducing rates on those items which had been affected by higher import duty imposed by the USA.

The basic assumption underlying this GST reform is that the reduction in GST rates would concurrently reduce the cost of sales on one hand and on the other, there would be a reduction in cash outflow, thereby making a situation that might save them from facing working capital deficiency. But then, how has it been done?

On September 3, the GST Council replaced the four intricate tax slabs of 5, 12, 18, and 28 per cent with a more straightforward two-tier structure of 5 per cent (merit rate) and 18 per cent (standard rate). Also, a new rate of 40 per cent has been kept for luxury and sinful goods like tobacco, sugary drinks, expensive cars, yachts, and private planes. Common wisdom would want to know how the affected companies would derive benefit from this reform? The answer is that in the face of global uncertainty, these changes would increase retail consumption and directly benefit labour-intensive industries like textiles, micro, small, and medium-sized businesses (MSMEs), and the automotive sector. Lower tax rates will generally result in lower prices for many consumer goods, which would boost consumption because consumers with more disposable income will spend more.

The GST Council has reduced rates in several areas: on cement it has been cut from 28 to 18 per cent, while small cars, two-wheelers up to 350cc, buses, trucks, and ambulances will now attract 18 per cent. Healthcare and education items like medical devices, life-saving medicines, and study materials now face either 5 per cent tax or are tax-free. Essential foods, daily necessities, and consumer goods such as packaged foods, dairy, textiles, electronics, footwear, and paper products have to pay taxes of 0 or 5 per cent only.

Now, let us look at the issue from a macro angle. According to preliminary estimates from the Ministry of Finance,

India's gross GST collections in FY 2024-2025 reached a record Rs 22.08 lakh crore. The country's taxpayer base also increased from 6.6 million in 2017 to 15 million in FY 2024-2025. This illustrates how indirect tax has become crucial to India's financial system and shows the expanding scope and effectiveness of the GST network. Despite these achievements, the external shock from the U.S. tariff hike poses a major challenge for India's trade sector.

The United States, India's largest trading partner, accounts



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for nearly one-fifth of India's total merchandise exports. According to data from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, India's exports to the United States climbed from USD 48 billion in 2018 to nearly USD 86 billion in FY 2025, while imports from the U.S. reached USD 52 billion. However, this steady upward trend is now at risk. In August 2025, President Donald Trump announced a 50 per cent tariff hike on Indian goods. Although the goal of this action is to safeguard American manufacturers, it has caused a stir in India's export industries.

Up to two-thirds of India's exports to the US market are anticipated to be impacted by these new tariffs, particularly in labour-intensive industries like engineering goods, textiles, gems, and pharmaceuticals. Indian products will be less affordable in the U.S. market due to their higher prices. The higher costs will make them less competitive, pushing American buyers to seek alternatives from countries like Vietnam, Mexico, and Bangladesh. Economists estimate that these new tariffs could pose a 60-80 basis point downside risk to India's annual GDP growth, primarily through falling exports. Additionally, a drop in export earnings could weaken the rupee and reduce the current account balance.

Now the question is whether the effective GST cut will be

significant enough to fully compensate export losses from tariffs? Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman mentioned that the government would lend support to the sectors hit hard by the 'tireade of tariffs' and would ensure that exporters were not left 'high and dry.'

Keeping in view these steps taken by the Government, one would understand that notwithstanding the sharp rise in U.S. tariffs straining India's export performance, the timely and concurrent steps taken by the central Government by putting into operation the GST Reforms 2.0 has emerged as a powerful tool to stabilise the economy. The logic is a matter of accentuation. While there will be an increase in the landed cost of Indian goods abroad by virtue of higher tariff, reduction in GST rate will offset that adverse impact and maintain overall price competitiveness.

Reduction in GST on crucial inputs such as engineering components, textiles, and automobile parts would effectively enhance supply-chain efficiency, preserve export viability, and prevent contraction in trade volumes. Sectoral estimates made by the Progress Harmony Development (PHD) Chamber of Commerce and Industry would lay bare the scenario more clearly.

While engineering, electronic items and pharmaceutical products may experience loss of about USD 4.2 billion (USD 1.8 billion for engineering goods, USD 1.4 billion for electronic items and USD 1 billion for pharmaceutical products), textiles sectors, small cars and two-wheeler industries, MSMEs and ancillary industries would make good that amount of loss.

According to the projections made by the Ministry of Finance, there would be an 8-12 per cent reduction in production costs and a boost in competitiveness for domestic producers. Robust household spending, supported by lower GST rates and increased disposable income, would act as a buffer even if external demand declines. According to the ministry's estimates, a 10 per cent fall in export-driven growth can be offset by a 7-9 per cent increase in domestic production and consumption under the new GST regime. This implies that India's growth trajectory will be driven by internal demand and industrial efficiency rather than dependence on exports.

In conclusion, one may say that the effective GST cut may not fully neutralize the loss in export revenue, but it would provide a sufficient, strategic domestic stimulus to mitigate the loss, sustain competitiveness, and reinforce the economy's resilience.

Ultimately, the GST reform would serve as a strategic fiscal tool that stabilizes India's price competitiveness, which will strengthen the nation's economy in the midst of a volatile global trade situation, arising from the increase in tariff by the US Government.

**The Daily Star**

### Bangladesh needs institutional repair, not tougher policing

People are increasingly weary and frustrated with the pace of improvement in law and order. This is reasonable given the little visible remission in nationwide crime, with gun shootings, knife killings, beatings with sticks and rods, street clashes, and mob attacks continuing to punctuate public life. As a result, the interim government is being branded weak, incompetent, and indifferent, accused of lacking clues about how to reverse the situation. But weak or incompetent compared to whom? And measured against which standard of "order"? To demand a restoration of law and order requires an honest analytical starting point: restore it to what period, exactly?

This question is almost never asked, yet it is an important gateway to understanding the present crisis. It bears recalling that the violence of knives, guns, and organised

street terror also existed throughout the 15-and-a-half-year rule of Sheikh Hasina, but for the large part it took quite a different institutional form compared to what Bangladesh is witnessing now. This distinction matters because it explains why today's violence feels chaotic, retaliatory, and socially diffused rather than centrally controlled.

During the klepto-fascist phase of Hasina's governance, violence was not an accidental failure of law and order - it was an instrument of rule. For more than a decade, coercion replaced political competition. Opposition parties were systematically suppressed, journalists intimidated, and dissent criminalised. Enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings were not aberrations but rather signals carefully calibrated to instil fear without provoking decisive

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retaliatory - anger released after years of humiliation, suppression, and forced silence. This is a classic post-authoritarian pattern: when fear collapses faster than institutions can be rebuilt, the muscle memory of violence remains. Klepto-fascism reprogrammes social behaviour, teaching citizens that law is irrelevant and that survival requires aggression. When such a system ends, society does not instantly revert to civic norms; it suffers the withdrawal symptoms of a long coercive regime.

The state monopolised violence but delegated its execution to party-aligned actors, creating a system in which brutality was rewarded with protection. Justice did not fail accidentally; it was deliberately suspended for loyal perpetrators. What Bangladesh is experiencing now is the "leakage" of that violence from the state back into society.

Today's violence is decentralised and

international. At the grassroots level, ruling party activists and student wings functioned as informal enforcers, using knives, rods, and machetes not randomly, but rather selectively - to silence opponents and control tenders, campuses, and neighbourhoods. That era produced suppressed violence, not peace. Crime statistics appeared manageable because fear discouraged reporting, and streets looked calm because dissent had been crushed, not resolved.

The film pays a heartfelt tribute to the unsung heroes who demonstrated exemplary courage, unwavering spirit, resilience, resolve, leadership, and tactical planning in the face of overwhelming odds - limited road connectivity, severe weather constraints, heavily outnumbered, deficient, outdated arms and ammunition, overlooking the feasibility of Chinese attack, and utter lack of strategic planning.

These bravehearts inflicted heavy casualties on the Chinese army and made supreme sacrifices, defending the Chushul airfield, a strategically vital area of Ladakh. Though India lost this epic battle, it is etched in India's strategic and cultural memory as an abiding symbol of honour, courage, loyalty, and national pride.

**IN MEMORIAM**  
GUHA BINAPANI — Our sincere homage on your 29th death anniversary. — Dr. Santanu (son), Samayita (grandchild), relatives and friends. B-16, Subodh Park, Kolkata-700070. Phone: 24103640.



abiding symbol of honour, courage, loyalty, and national pride.

The film offers insights into the challenges of mountain warfare, the limits of strategic defences and the importance of cohesive small-scale leadership. It avoids loud, chest-thumping, jingoistic nationalism and calls for serious introspection at a time when India's relationship with its northern neighbour remains tense. An astute defence policy and military preparedness are imperative to deter any Chinese onslaught in future.

Yours, etc., D S Kang, Hoshiarpur, 13 January.

**Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com**

### Face-off

**Sir,** This refers to the front page report, "SC stays FIR against ED officers over I-PAC raid, issues notice to Bengal govt" (16 January). In a setback to Mamata Banerjee, the Supreme Court on Thursday described the ED's allegation that Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee caused "obstruction" in its probe as "very serious" and agreed to examine whether a state's law-enforcing agencies can interfere with any central agency's investigation into any serious offence as it stayed FIRs against the agency's officials who raided political consultancy I-PAC on January 8. Earlier in the day, the top court said it is "very much disturbed" by the chaos in the Calcutta High Court during a hearing related to the face-off between the central agency and the Bengal government. The court issued notices to CM Banerjee,

the West Bengal government, DGP Rajeev Kumar and top cops on the ED's petitions seeking a CBI probe against them for allegedly obstructing raids at I-PAC premises. The apex court said a central agency has no power to interfere with the election work of any party.

But at the same time, if central agencies are acting bona fide to investigate any serious offence, the question arises whether agencies can be restricted from carrying out duties under the shield of party activity.

Yours, etc., S S Paul, Nadia, 16 January.

### Tribute to heroes

**Sir,** This has reference to the editorial "Forgotten Courage" (11 January). The new Bollywood movie '120 Bahadur' explores a significant but under-recognised chapter of



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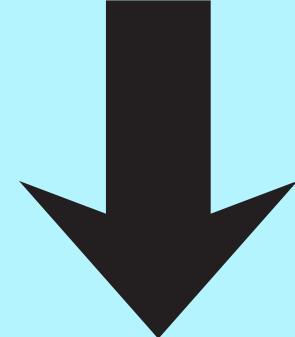
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# America's pullback hurts the world

SANTHOSH MATHEW

The United States' withdrawal from multilateral institutions marks more than a tactical foreign policy shift; it signals a fundamental rethinking of how global power, aid and influence will be exercised in the coming years. By stepping away from multilateralism and favouring bilateral treaties, Washington is rewriting the rules of international engagement - with consequences that will be felt sharply across the Global South, including India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and small island states.

At the heart of this transition lies a simple but unsettling reality: multilateralism spreads responsibility and accountability, while bilateralism concentrates power. For aid donors, bilateral treaties offer greater control, visibility, and leverage. For aid recipients, however, they often mean conditionality, political pressure, and reduced autonomy. In this emerging order, humanitarian principles risk being subordinated to strategic calculations.

Multilateral institutions such as UN agencies were designed precisely to avoid such imbalances. Bodies like the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Health ecosystem, and climate-focused alliances ensured that assistance reached vulnerable populations based on need rather than geopolitical loyalty. With the U.S. stepping back, these mechanisms are weakened, and the burden of sustaining them shifts to a smaller group of committed states.

Nowhere is this impact more evident than in population and health programmes. UNFPA support has been crucial for countries like Afghanistan and Bangladesh, where maternal health, reproductive rights, refugee welfare, and demographic stability are pressing concerns. In conflict-hit Afghanistan, UNFPA assistance has often filled the vacuum left by collapsing state structures, supporting women's health and basic services.

The U.S. withdrawal threatens not only funding flows but also the moral legitimacy of these programmes. When a major donor disengages, it emboldens other sceptical actors to question the value of multilateral humanitarian commitments. The result is a shrinking humanitarian space at a time when demographic pressures and displacement are intensifying.

The shift from multilateral climate action to bilateral energy deals is equally troubling. Hydrogen fuel technologies and electric vehicles, often projected as the future of clean mobility, remain prohibitively expensive for most developing countries. Infrastructure costs, rare-earth dependencies and high consumer prices make rapid adoption unrealistic for large parts of Asia and Africa.

In this context, fears are growing that the U.S., while stepping away from global climate commitments, may aggressively push conventional fuel-based vehicles into developing markets. Such dumping of petrol and diesel vehicles, cheaper and immediately deployable, could undermine global emission reduction efforts and lock developing economies into carbon-intensive pathways for decades.

For countries like India, which are attempting a delicate balance between development needs and climate responsibility, this creates a policy trap. On one hand, affordable transport is a social necessity. On the other, dependence on outdated technologies delays the transition to cleaner energy and increases long-term environmental costs. Without strong multilateral pressure and incentives, climate commitments risk becoming optional rather than obligatory.

This is where the U.S. withdrawal from the India-France-led International Solar Alliance (ISA) becomes particularly significant. The ISA was not merely a climate platform; it was a symbol of South-South cooperation and a rare example of India exercising global leadership

in shaping climate governance. Designed to mobilise solar energy deployment across tropical countries, the alliance aimed to make clean energy affordable, accessible and scalable.

Washington's disengagement from the ISA is a setback not just for India and France, but for the broader Global South. It signals a lack of confidence in multilateral renewable frameworks and sends a message that clean energy leadership can be sacrificed for short-term national priorities. For developing countries banking on solar power as a pathway to energy security and climate resilience, this weakens momentum and financing prospects.

The broader diplomatic implications are equally profound. Multilateral forums provided smaller and middle powers with platforms to negotiate, collaborate and assert collective interests. Bilateralism, by contrast, favours asymmetry. Powerful states set the terms; weaker states adapt.

In South Asia, this dynamic could reshape regional diplomacy. Countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, which rely heavily on multilateral climate finance and development assistance, may find themselves navigating a more transactional world. Aid may increasingly come with strategic strings attached, blurring the line between assistance and influence. The Maldives, facing existential threats from sea-level rise, cannot afford a slowdown in global climate cooperation. Yet, bilateral aid alone cannot substitute for coordinated global action on emissions and adaptation.

India occupies a complex position in this changing landscape. As a major recipient of multilateral cooperation and an emerging donor and agenda-setter, India has a stake in preserving global institutions. At the same time, it must adapt to a world where the U.S. prefers deal-making over consensus-building. This demands diplomatic agility: strengthening ties with Europe, deepening South-South cooperation,



and assuming greater responsibility in sustaining multilateral initiatives.

The retreat from multilateralism also affects the global knowledge economy. International experts, development professionals and policy specialists who worked through UN systems face shrinking opportunities. Research collaborations, global data-sharing initiatives and coordinated responses to pandemics and climate disasters become harder to sustain without a central convening power.

Historically, American power was not derived solely from military strength or economic dominance, but from its role as an architect and guarantor of global institutions. By stepping away, Washington risks eroding the very influence it seeks to protect. Influence exercised through cooperation lasts longer than influence imposed through transactions.

The revival of bilateralism echoes an older worldview — one that prioritises national advantage over collective security. In an interconnected world, however, climate change,

population pressures, migration and public health crises do not respect borders or bilateral agreements.

They demand coordinated responses that only multilateral frameworks can deliver.

For the Global South, the challenge is stark. The erosion of multilateralism means fewer safeguards, less predictability and greater vulnerability to power politics. Yet it also presents an opportunity for emerging powers like India to step forward, not as replacements for the U.S., but as stabilisers of a cooperative international order. As the world stands at the crossroads of climate urgency, demographic transition and geopolitical uncertainty, the question is no longer whether multilateralism is imperfect - it is whether the world can afford its decline. In choosing bilateral bargains over collective responsibility, the U.S. may gain short-term leverage, but the long-term costs - for aid, climate action and global stability - will be shared by all.

(The writer is Professor, Centre for South Asian Studies, Pondicherry Central University.)

NOW AND AGAIN

## A TRAGIC END TO THE YEAR

NJ RAVI CHANDER

3 December 2007, brought a tragic end to the year as it stole two of our beloved family members. Earlier that year, in May, we had been devastated by the loss of our sexagenarian mother. Just as we were beginning to cope with that grief, my young niece, Nikhita, was diagnosed with aplastic anaemia. Battling adversity, her parents travelled between Bengaluru and Vellore in search of a cure. The brave and brilliant ten-year-old was admired by her peers and held in high regard by her teachers.

After my mother passed away, our father lived alone in our ancestral home. My elder son and I would often spend the night with him. Overwhelmed by grief, he isolated himself, rarely venturing outside and only receiving visitors who came to offer their condolences. When he was alone, he would sit in the pooja room, praying and remembering his beloved wife. Having lived together for nearly five decades, their bond was inseparable.

Despite the six-month extensive treatment and compassionate care provided by the nuns at CMC Vellore, my niece's condition continued to deteriorate. Her anxious parents decided to move her to Bengaluru, where they had a brief meeting with our father before moving her to a city hospital. Although my father was feeling depressed, he showered love on his granddaughter. Nikhita, too, was filled with affection, and we all hoped that their reunion would help revive her spirits.

The crisp winter air enveloped us on New Year's Eve. Tired from a sleepless night, Dad, who slept on the divan where our mother breathed her last, complained of a sore back. He had already risen before the first light of dawn and sat perched on the sofa. Despite the dark cloud of depression hanging over him, he was otherwise healthy.

Around 7:30 a.m., my younger sibling, Prem Prakash, burst in with a morning greeting. Concerned about Dad's aching back, he offered to accompany him to the doctor. However, Dad was adamant and reassured us that he would be fine. My son and I then took our leave, little realising that this would be our final interaction with him.

That afternoon, Dad called my uncle and, in a hushed tone, revealed that he would be going out of town on New Year's Day. Did he sense his impending demise? Even now, we remain puzzled, as he had disclosed no such plans to us. He also asked the housemaid to come early the next morning to tidy the house.

After a long day at the office on New Year's Eve, I headed home for supper. Then, as usual, we drove to my father's house to spend the night with him. However, to our utter shock, we found his limp, lifeless body on the sofa. The tiffin carrier containing his supper, which my youngest brother had brought in, remained untouched. The TV remote in his hand suggested that life had suddenly slipped away.

Minutes later, we received another piece of sad news: my niece had also succumbed to her illness. The twin deaths struck us like a bolt from the blue. The bodies were placed side by side in the living room for mourners to pay their last respects. They say that time heals all wounds, but this dual tragedy continues to haunt us.

## News Items

### CHINAMEN ARRESTED

### GAMBLING ACCESSORIES AND MONEY SEIZED

As the result of a police raid carried out at 51, Bentinck Street, George Limp and thirteen other Chinamen were arrested late on Thursday night. Acting on information, an Inspector of the Bowbazar thana together with a number of constables, surrounded the house and surprised the men, it is alleged, in the act of gambling with cards. As soon as the police appeared, the men threw away their cards and made a rush for the doors but were overtaken and arrested. Besides the cards, the police also seized over Rs. 200.

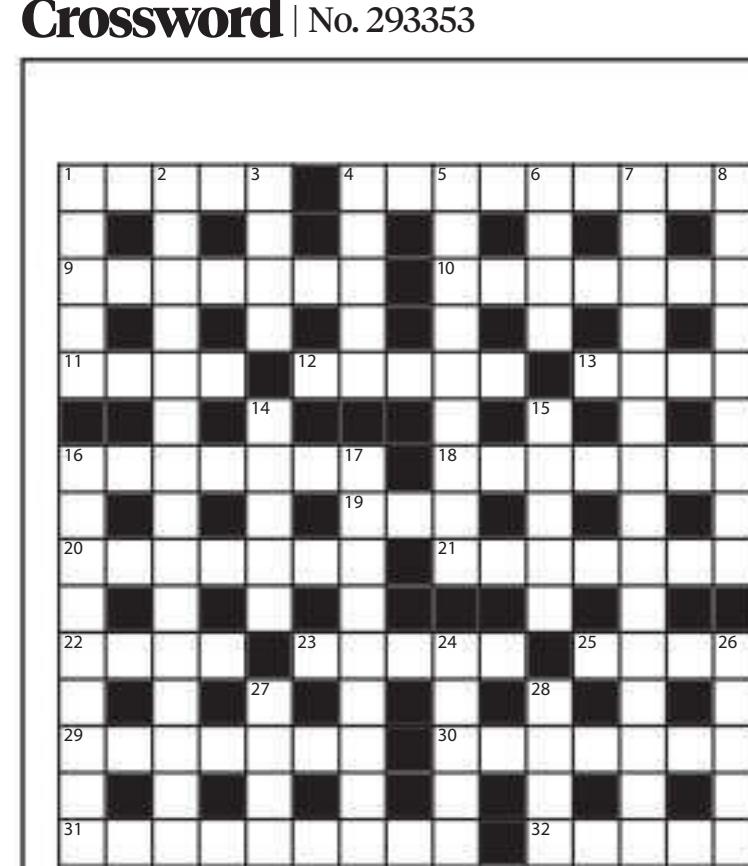
### NEW BUILDING

### MUNICIPAL OFFICE FOR JUBBULPORE

(From Our Correspondent.)  
Jubbulpore, Jan.

At yesterday's ordinary meeting of the general committee held in the Victoria Town Hall, a sum of Rs.10,000 was sanctioned for the foundation of a Municipal Office to be built at Mahartal near the Fox Strangways Park. The building when completed is estimated to cost Rs. 62,000 and will include all branch municipal offices which are now scattered over different parts of Jubbulpore.

### Crossword | No. 29353



#### Last Sunday's Solution

DUNEE HULL LABALOO  
TEANIAE R  
CRUISER CODLING  
KATSIESTY  
CORRESPONDENT  
IASSESYEB  
SPLASH COMETRUE  
SMTRP  
ENAMELED MORSEL  
LMNCPREY  
MOTHEROFPEARL  
SOMRIBA  
CONVIENE PONCEAU  
AIRNSGEIG  
GUARANTEEDITCH

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

#### ACROSS

- 1 Division of supermarket is into (5)
- 4 Puzzling clue for 3 riders found here (5)
- 9 Transfer a stolen design for spout (7)
- 10 English tend to provide for universal support (7)
- 11 Watershed moment? (4)
- 12 Trustworthy channel (5)
- 13 Worry Frequently with French and ... (4)
- 16 ... Saunders essentially going on second after support is rejected (5)

#### DOWN

- 18 One's usually needed to learn Jennifer's missing first half (7)
- 19 Ultimately we cull musk deer (3)
- 20 Wasp, perhaps, to hover next to drink (7)
- 21 Discontented servant not opening drawer to get plate with design (7)
- 22 Regularly visit hectic hotel to eat out (4)
- 23 Small farm regularly pursuing credit (5)
- 25 Flag is recognised international (5)

#### symbol for starters

- 29 I disapprove of that list - revealing quality of some online searches (7)
- 30 Expedition travelling west in khaki kit - no knapsacks (3-4)
- 31 Came with diamonds over diamonds - profit not unknown - could spades help make your fortune here? (9)
- 32 Danger of a laundry detergent completely fading a little shirt (5)

#### computer accessory

- 2 Improper accessory? Hold on, teachers work here (9,6)
- 3 Bonnie Langford s style (4)
- 4 Band search round (5)
- 5 Sing with old partner on the radio, wearing these? (4,5)
- 7 Broadcast cunning horror film with Queen and Prince of Wales, say (8-7)
- 8 Shocking treatment following heartless teacher's (8)

#### millions of voters

- 14 Attempt to change eel's gender (5)
- 15 Deduce where American goes to generate terror (5)
- 16 You can pack it with cooked dough on top (6,3)
- 17 Submission of study describing free movement about Europe (9)
- 24 Simulated attack outside, on board Iron Duke (5)
- 26 Small farm s peaceful (5)
- 27 Worker gets fine for complaint (4)
- 28 Retrospectively criticises game (4)

Every revolutionary ends up either by becoming an oppressor or a heretic.  
— Albert Camus

New Delhi

January 18, 2026



A Nation Under Strain

Iran is facing a deep existential crisis – economic hardship, intense domestic unrest, and escalating confrontation with Israel and the United States.

Its domestic problems are no longer confined within its borders; they are affecting the entire region. As the US President throws his weight around, Iran faces a major challenge – to defend and safeguard its borders. The bigger question is this: has Iran's leadership failed its own people, or have years of sanctions, isolation, and external pressure pushed the country into a perilous corner?

## Ensuing crisis in Iran: A threat to peace and regional stability

Iran has witnessed large-scale protests to change the regime for the past two decades. The 2009 Green Movement followed a heated presidential election and was characterised by massive protests throughout the country with a focus on achieving political reform through greater transparency. In 2019, large-scale protests began erupting throughout the country following the sharp rise in fuel prices. Quickly, these protests turned into a much wider and deeper expression of socio-political and economic discontent that was shared by many people. The Women, Life, Freedom movement began in 2022 after the killing of Mahsa Amini in the custody of government officials and called for an end to compulsory hijab laws, as well as restrictions on women's rights and state authority. Each protest movement spread rapidly across several social groups and met with large-scale government responses, marking key moments in the evolution of contemporary Iranian society.

### Recent Protest and Counter-Protest

Iran has been experiencing protests and unrest since the last week of December 2025. Merchant storekeepers within the Grand Bazaar in Tehran put their businesses on hold due to the worsening condition of the Iranian economy, expressing frustration regarding high inflation, falling currency value, and the rising cost of living. The protests soon expanded beyond just an economic issue to become a national event with demonstrations in several cities across the country, such as Tehran, Mashhad, and Karaj. Over time, protesters began calling for more than just financial relief; they were also demanding political accountability as well as systemic change in the government. There were reports from various activist organisations that during the uprisings, large numbers of protesters had been killed as the government responded with considerable force, including the use of live ammunition.

On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of Iranians came together in many cities to show their support for Iran's government. The demonstrations were intended to promote national unity, national stability, and resistance against foreign interference. The people placed their national flag over themselves and held up portraits of the leaders of the Islamic Republic. The demonstrators chanted for Iran's national sovereignty and independence. Demonstrators cited the government as providing security to its citizens against the economic conditions facing the country due to regional tensions and foreign intervention, but argued that improving conditions should come through legal and constitutional methods rather than through protest. These dual forms of mobilisation illustrate the increasingly divided social and political atmosphere in Iran due to growing economic diffi-



ANISUR RAHMAN

ATIKUR RAHMAN

culties and international pressure. This can, however, never be denied that the major causes of the unrest in Iran are internal mismanagement and external interference, especially from the United States and Israel, which are both considered long-time adversaries of Iran. In response to the protests and actions used against protesters by the Iranian government, the US took an active and public stance.

The US President Donald Trump and other American government officials publicly supported the Iranian protesters, which Tehran considers proof of outside influence. Although US officials deny that the US Government is responsible for causing the unrest, these statements fit into a larger US agenda: to apply economic and diplomatic pressure on Iran, to limit its influence in West Asia, and to protect energy routes like the Strait of Hormuz, as well as to restrict Iran's development of nuclear weapons and missile technology.

It seems that the US intends to weaken the Iranian regime, though it presents itself as the defender of human rights in the region. It is evident that US sanctions against Iran and its financial networks have also created additional inflation, increased unemployment, and devalued the currency, which are all immediate and direct causes of public discontent and therefore have contributed to a higher level of public unrest in Iran. The Israeli government's approach to Iran is more specific and less broadly based than that of the US, but it is equally impactful on the Iranian regime's economic well-being. Both the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and NATO's interven-

tion in Libya in 2011 were justified by each country's desire to protect human rights, eliminate authoritarian leadership, and promote democracy.

The results of the US intervention included the removal of Saddam Hussein; however, following this removal of a dictator, Iraq has been plagued with ongoing instability, sectarian violence, weakened government institutions, and contested control over oil resources. Further, although Iraq now has a democratically elected government, it remains fragile. Similarly, although the removal of Muammar Gaddafi was the result of NATO's military intervention, Libya has suffered from the lack of a stable democratic government. In Libya, NATO's actions have led to the emergence of multiple governments competing for power, as well as the rise of numerous militias and foreign governments seeking to influence the direction of Libya's future. As a result of both invasions and the underlying strategic interests related to the intervention in Iraq and Libya, today's Iranian government views this history of intervention as further evidence that whenever a foreign power calls for intervention or regime change, it has led to crisis in society. In this manner, Iranians see the current crisis as deepened due to their lack of trust in foreign powers.

**Energy Markets and Response of the Gulf States**  
By implementing severe sanctions against Iran, deploying significant military assets to the region, and launching airstrikes against Iranian-affiliated targets throughout West Asia, the US has substantially complicated the operation of global energy markets. A large portion of the world's oil and gas reserves is held by Iran; sanctions have reduced the amount of Iranian oil on the market and therefore have created considerable price volatility, particularly in times of increased military tension in the Strait of Hormuz. Approximately one-fifth of the total global oil trade passes through the Strait of Hormuz. Prior to sanctions, major importers of Iranian crude oil

included China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Turkey. While China continues to purchase oil from Iran, other countries have had to search for more expensive ways to obtain crude oil. The unfolding crisis has also drawn the attention of Arabian Peninsula states (GCC) on account of their security interests, economic stability, and diplomacy. It is noted that Gulf Arab states have not openly supported the Iranian protests; rather, they share a degree of interest in minimising the potential for a regional conflict that might destabilise energy markets and threaten the security of the region.

Moreover, it is seen that Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Egypt have engaged in extensive diplomatic efforts to urge both the United States and Iran not to resort to military action. During this period, Gulf Cooperation Council states warned the United States that a military strike against Iran would most likely result in retaliatory attacks on US interests from other regional countries, would create a direct threat to oil infrastructure in the GCC, and therefore the world, and would create a major disruption to global energy supply chains. Subsequently, the United States chose to delay carrying out any military action against Iran due to indications that the level of violence in Iran was decreasing.

### Way Forward

Looking into the future, there are many uncertainties and challenges regarding the Iranian ruling system, which has continued to face public protests on account of declining economic conditions and increasing pressure from external powers. The Iranian Government must address pressing socioeconomic challenges such as inflation, unemployment, falling currency, gender inequality, and restrictions on freedom to meet the aspirations of the Iranian people.

Furthermore, the Iranian regime must come out with a pragmatic approach to deal with continued sanctions that have isolated Iran and have continued eroding the quality of life and living standards due to rising inflation, high unemployment rates, and a weak currency. These protests must be taken seriously so that people restore their lost faith in the governance system. Several programmes and policies must be initiated for meeting people's economic needs and aspirations. It is also the responsibility of the world's major powers, which share a collective obligation to work toward avoiding escalation to military confrontation, to support the tenets of international law, and to seek diplomatic resolution to these issues involving Iran, which directly threaten peace, energy security, and economic stability in the region.

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## Iran – A history of revolution, resilience, and the struggle for change

Iran's contemporary history is marred by periods of unrest and crisis as well as continuous growth and strides in nation-building. It overthrew the US-backed monarchy in 1979 to establish a revolutionary Islamic Republic. Thereafter, it maintained an anti-West stance, braving sanctions and isolation on the world arena to date. The overthrow of the Shah in 1979 was indeed a turning point in the political history of Iran. Here is a brief contemporary history of Iran.

### 1970s - Growing Discontent and Revolution

Shah's rule and modernisation: In the early 1970s Iran under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi pursued rapid modernisation and economic growth reliant on oil revenues, but also suffered rising inflation, inequality, and political repression.

Widespread opposition: By the late 1970s, protests against the Shah's authoritarian rule, corruption, and Western influence intensified.

**Islamic Revolution (1978-79):** Mass demonstrations, strikes, and civil resistance culminated in the Shah's departure in January 1979 and the fall of the monarchy. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from exile.

### Early 1980s - The Islamic Republic is born

New theocracy formed: The revolutionary government consolidated power, adopting a theocratic constitution with the Supreme Leader as the highest authority.

Political repression: Rival political groups - leftists, liberals, and others - were purged, and thousands were executed in state-sponsored campaigns to eliminate opposition.

Hostage crisis: In November 1979, Iranian students seized the US embassy in Tehran, holding diplomats hostage for 444 days, which severely damaged Iran-US relations.

### 1980s - Iran-Iraq War

War with Iraq (1980-1988): Iraq President Saddam Hussein

invaded Iran soon after the revolution, leading to a devastating eight-year conflict with massive casualties and economic strain.

### 1990s - Recovery and Reform Movements

Reconstruction and politics: After the war, Iran focused on reconstruction. President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) pushed for political reforms, civil society, and a 'Dialogue Among Civilisations.'

### 2000s - Conservatism and Nuclear Tensions

Political polarisation: Hardliners regained influence under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), intensifying confrontations with the West over Iran's nuclear program.

Green Movement (2009): Large protests erupted after contested presidential elections, demanding democratic reforms.

### 2010s - Sanctions, and Renewed Unrest

Economic pressures: Harsh US sanctions linked to Iran's nuclear activities deeply affected the economy.

Social protests: Between 2017 and 2019, Iran saw widespread protests over economic hardship.

### 2020s - Current State

Mahsa Amini protests (2022-23): The death in custody of a young woman branded for 'improper hijab' ignited nationwide protests demanding freedom.

2024 Presidential Election: Independent reformist Masoud Pezeshkian won the June-July 2024 election following the death of Ebrahim Raisi.

2025-26 unrest and crackdown: Since late 2025, large protests driven by economic decline, currency collapse, and wider discontent against the regime have erupted across the country. The government's brutal suppression has caused thousands of deaths and mass arrests.

"THE PURPOSE OF THE UNITED NATIONS SHOULD BE TO PROTECT THE ESSENTIAL SOVEREIGNTY OF NATIONS, LARGE AND SMALL."

— NIKITA KRUSHCHEV

# India under seige: The strategics challenges

## Managing simultaneous threats from the neighbours

India today finds itself encircled by a volatile neighbourhood dominated by unelected or unstable regimes, many of which have historically posed challenges to its security and sovereignty. From persistent cross-border terrorism originating in Pakistan to the systematic marginalisation of minorities, especially Hindus, in Pakistan and Bangladesh, India's external environment remains fraught with risk. Recent unrest along the Myanmar border, intensified by that country's internal conflict, has further destabilised India's northeastern frontier. Together, these developments underline a critical reality: safeguarding India's security perimeter has been a continuous and evolving priority since independence, shaped by hostile borders, regional instability, and enduring threats to national integrity.

In a village near the Line of Control (LOC), daily routines have quietly adapted once again. Evening movement is cautious, conversations turn hushed at unfamiliar sounds, and drone sightings are discussed with the resignation of experience. Far to the east, exporters in West Bengal describe growing unpredictability in cross-border trade with Bangladesh, where political unrest and administrative disruptions now translate quickly into delayed shipments and cancelled orders. In the Northeast, border districts remain on alert as instability across the Indo-Myanmar frontier continues to affect security conditions. These local experiences reflect a broader regional pattern.

Across South Asia and India's eastern periphery, political instability, economic stress, and armed conflict have intensified simultaneously. Pakistan is grappling with a renewed surge in militant violence, Bangladesh is navigating a difficult political transition, Sri Lanka remains economically fragile despite restructuring efforts, and Myanmar's civil war continues without a clear end. For India, these developments converge at the border-through security risks, economic spillovers, and strategic pressure-reshaping the country's neighbourhood environment as 2026 begins.

### A neighbourhood under strain

Pakistan has seen a marked deterioration in internal security. Militant attacks have risen sharply, driven by groups operating from its western regions, including factions linked to the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and transnational extremist networks. Balochistan remains volatile, with separatist groups repeatedly targeting security forces and infrastructure projects, including assets associated with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. This pattern reinforces long-standing concerns in New Delhi that Pakistan's internal instability continues to generate indirect pressure along India's western frontier.

Bangladesh is undergoing political flux following leadership changes and sustained public mobilisation. While state institutions continue to function, the transition has coincided with episodes of unrest and a more visible role for Islamist political actors. These developments have had tangible consequences for India. Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia, and disruptions at land ports and transport corridors have affected exporters and logistics networks in West Bengal and the Northeast, highlighting the economic sensitivity of the eastern border.

Myanmar remains locked in a prolonged civil war involving the military junta and multiple resistance groups. Large areas of the country remain contested, and cross-border security challenges persist along India's northeastern frontier. The conflict has complicated border management and heightened concerns over arms trafficking and organised crime networks operating in poorly governed spaces.

Sri Lanka has stabilised from the depths of its 2022 crisis but remains economically vulnerable. Debt restructuring agreements and multilateral support have improved liquidity conditions, yet growth remains modest and public finances constrained. Climate-related shocks-cyclones and flooding-continue to impose repeated fiscal and infrastructure costs. Sri Lanka's dependence



dence on external assistance has also sharpened strategic competition among its partners, with economic vulnerability translating into diplomatic leverage.

### Converging risks for India

The impact of instability across India's neighbourhood is cumulative rather than compartmentalised.

Security risks have expanded geographically. On the western front, Pakistan's internal turmoil has coincided with increased militant activity, reinforcing the persistence of proxy threats. In the east, the continuation of conflict in Myanmar complicates border control and internal security in sensitive northeastern states. The strategic importance of the Siliguri Corridor-India's narrow link to the Northeast-has grown as instability affects both Bangladesh and Myanmar simultaneously.

Economic exposure has become a frontline concern. India's annual trade with Bangladesh exceeds \$11 billion, with land routes playing a critical role. Political unrest, administrative delays, or informal restrictions across the border have immediate consequences for Indian exporters, particularly in sectors such as textiles, agriculture, and small-scale manufacturing. Unlike maritime disruptions, land-border interruptions disproportionately affect smaller firms and regional supply chains.

Strategic competition overlays these challenges. Economic stress in neighbouring states increases reliance on external financing, infrastructure development, and emergency assistance. In the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, ports, logistics hubs, and connectivity projects increasingly carry strategic significance alongside commercial value. As a result, neighbourhood instability often intersects with broader geopolitical rivalry rather than remaining a purely local issue.

### India's response

India's engagement across its neighbourhood reflects differentiated conditions rather than a single policy template.

In Sri Lanka, India has played a visible role in crisis response and recovery, extending emergency assistance after climate disasters and participating in stabilisation efforts during the debt crisis. These measures have helped sustain bilateral ties during a period of economic fragility and reinforced India's role as a key regional partner.

With Bangladesh, India has maintained diplomatic engagement and trade continuity despite political uncertainty. Security cooperation and institutional dialogue have continued, even as businesses report heightened volatility linked to domestic developments across the border.

Along the Myanmar frontier, India has prioritised border security coordination and humanitarian support in cooperation with state governments. While these measures address immediate pressures, the protracted nature of the conflict means that security challenges remain persistent rather than episodic.

Regarding Pakistan, India has sustained a posture of deterrence and preparedness.

Infrastructure upgrades, surveillance enhancements, and intelligence coordination along sensitive sectors reflect assessments that instability within Pakistan continues to pose indirect risks to India's security environment.

At the regional level, platforms such as BIMSTEC and Indian Ocean cooperation mechanisms provide frameworks for engagement, though their capacity to respond quickly to overlapping crises remains uneven.

### Patterns shaping India's neighbourhood

Several patterns emerge from developments across India's neighbourhood.

First, instability is increasingly multi-directional. Challenges arise simultaneously from the west and the east, reducing India's ability to sequence or compartmentalise responses.

Second, economic and security dynamics are tightly linked. Trade disruption, internal unrest in neighbouring states, and security risks often stem from the same underlying political and economic shocks.

Third, state capacity in neighbouring countries matters as much as intent. Even where bilateral relations remain formally cooperative, weak institutions and domestic volatility generate spillover effects that India must manage regardless of diplomatic goodwill.

What the past year underlines is that India's neighbourhood challenge is less about episodic crises and more about structural instability across adjoining states. Pakistan's internal security trajectory, Bangladesh's political flux, Sri Lanka's fragile economic recovery, and Myanmar's unresolved conflict are driven primarily by domestic factors beyond India's direct control. These stresses interact with India's geography, trade routes, and security calculus whether New Delhi intervenes or not. The result is a regional environment where disruption has become frequent rather than exceptional.

A limited but unavoidable inference follows. India's strategic posture in 2026 is shaped not by its ability to resolve neighbours' internal problems, but by how effectively it absorbs and buffers their spillover effects. The neighbourhood is no longer a zone of influence in the traditional sense; it is increasingly a zone of exposure. Managing that exposure-across security preparedness, economic resilience, and diplomatic bandwidth-has become a defining feature of India's external environment as the decade unfolds.

As India navigates an increasingly unstable neighbourhood and persistent threats to its sovereignty, the imperative of vigilance and resilience remains unchanged. History reminds us that national security is not merely a matter of borders and military strength, but of collective resolve and the courage to act in defence of the motherland. As Tipu Sultan once declared, "It is better to live one day as a lion than a hundred years as a jackal." In today's strategic environment, that sentiment continues to resonate as a call for firmness, unity, and an unwavering commitment to protecting India's national interests.

(The author, an Associate Editor with *The Pioneer*, has over a decade of experience covering foreign policy and conflict)

governance—not because it preaches, but because it understands how institutions and humans inside institutions actually function.

Hidden capability and the quiet art of mentorship Hanuman's awakening is a reminder that 'capacity building' is not always a training programme with banners and folders. Often it is one senior who sees potential, calls it by name, and removes hesitation. In administration, the best seniors are not the ones who collect credit; they are the ones who unlock talent.

Modern public systems are increasingly designed to unlock capability at scale. UPI is a clear example. It did not merely digitise payments; it mainstreamed economic participation for citizens and small merchants with extremely low friction. NPCI reported around 20.47 billion UPI transactions in November 2025 alone.

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### This is a masterclass in mission discipline.

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sonally' is constant, especially for capable officers. But institutions do not run on individual heroics; they run on repeatable processes, clear responsibilities, and coordinated execution. The mature choice is often to win correctly rather than win quickly.

That is why modern governance increasingly invests in coordination frameworks. PM Gati Shakti, for example, is framed as an integrated planning approach to improve multi-ministry coordination and reduce implementation friction by bringing stakeholders onto a common platform. In Ramayan terms, it is not just about building a bridge; it is about ensuring the bridge fits the plan, the plan fits the mission, and the mission fits the larger dharma.

### 'Bhaya bina hoye na preet'

'Bhaya bina hoye na preet' sounds blunt, but it carries a governance truth: trust needs protection. A society that rewards honesty must also

discourage dishonesty; otherwise, the incentives invert and the honest become naïve.

The Ramayan repeatedly shows this balance. Diplomacy is attempted, messages are sent, and persuasion is tried. But the duty to protect the innocent is not outsourced to goodwill. Deterrence exists so that peace can exist.

In recent years, citizen-facing enforcement has become more process-driven and technology-enabled. The National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal and the 1930 helpline are designed to help citizens report cyber fraud quickly so that action can be initiated faster. Similarly, 'Chakshu' under 'Sanchar Saathi' enables the reporting of suspected fraud calls and messages. This is deterrence done in a modern way: predictable, accessible, and rule-bound-not fear as theatre, but consequence as design.

### Why files are moral documents

Dasharathji keeping his word, even when it costs him dearly, is one of the most administratively relevant moments in the epic, because governance is ultimately a credibility business.

States function on commitments: notifications, orders, citizen charters, contracts, affidavits, and assurances. A word recorded is not just language; it becomes an obligation. That is why drafting is not clerical; it is ethical. Any experienced officer has seen how one sloppy sentence can create years of litigation or confusion, and how one precise paragraph can prevent a hundred grievances. The Ramayan understands this deeply: speech becomes action when power sits behind it. It is also why reforms that standardise processes and reduce arbitrary variation matter. The Income Tax

## India's triple border crisis

India confronts an unprecedented convergence of security threats across its 15,200 km land frontiers and 11,098-kilometre coastline, amplified by emerging technological challenges. With instability erupting simultaneously in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, combined with maritime vulnerabilities and AI-enabled hybrid threats, India faces its most complex perimeter security challenge.

Pakistan has always been involved in posing multifaceted threats. Pakistan ranked twelfth on the 2024 ACLED Conflict Index with disputed elections, economic freefall reaching 35.4 per cent inflation, and its 25th IMF bailout. Militant violence more than doubled with 856 attacks in 2024. The April 2025 Pahalgam attack killing 28 triggered Operation Sindoora, India's most significant military strikes since 1971.

Pakistan weaponises narco-terrorism as hybrid warfare. Drone-related drug smuggling cases spiked to 179 in 2024 from just 3 in 2021, with over 800 kg heroin and 1,200 kg opium seized. ISI-backed drug cartels fund terrorism while addicting Indian youth, particularly in Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir, where one addict walks to Srinagar OPD every 12 minutes.

The Sir Creek dispute adds another flashpoint. Pakistan's military build-up in this 96-kilometre tidal estuary prompted Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's October 2025 warning. The disputed waters facilitate terrorist infiltration-the 2008 Mumbai attackers captured an Indian boat here-while control determines access to oil and gas reserves worth billions. Bangladesh's terror revival is extremely worrisome for India. The August 2024 upheaval ousting Sheikh Hasina has unleashed chaos. Murders average 11 daily in 2025-a 25.9 per cent increase-while mob lynchings surged 1,250 per cent. Indian security forces detected 1,104 infiltration attempts in 2025, the highest in nearly ten years.

Most alarming is the revival of Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, dormant for eight years. With ISI support, JMB recruits from illegal immigrant camps and Rohingya settlements, instructing infiltrators to work in Muslim-dominated areas while planning attacks. The JMB-Al Qaeda nexus now targets India's northeast and West Bengal. Bangladesh's growing rapprochement with Pakistan-with direct trade resuming for the first time since 1971-enables cooperation between anti-India terror outfits, creating a dangerous arc of instability.

In Myanmar, the military junta controls only 21 per cent of territory while rebels hold 42 per cent, with over 3.5 million displaced and 6,486 civilians killed by April 2025. The conflict directly fuels Manipur's ethnic violence. An estimated 40,000 Rohingya reside in India in sensitive areas like Jammu, West Bengal, and Delhi. Indian intelligence has documented links between Rohingya and terrorist organisations, including a 2018 NIA prosecution charging a Rohingya man with building Al-Qaeda networks. With 70,000 Rohingya fleeing into Bangladesh over the past year, India faces the dilemma of balancing humanitarian obligations with security concerns about terrorist recruitment and radicalisation. Cross-border drug trafficking from the Golden Triangle, arms smuggling, and insurgent movements further exploit the porous frontier.

Maritime vulnerabilities also pose serious threats. With a coastline spanning 11,098 kilometres, India's maritime trade worth \$800 billion annually faces escalating threats. Chinese naval presence with six to eight PLAN submarines under the String of Pearls strategy, and terrorist infiltrations across the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and Palk Strait threaten sea lanes. India's 12 major ports and 217 non-major ports face exposure to smuggling, terrorism, and cyber intrusions. Maritime drug trafficking surged with 10,564 kg seized in 2024.

Most alarming is terrorism's evolution-educated professionals including doctors, engineers, and academics now leverage technical expertise for sophisticated attacks. Analysis of Islamic State recruits shows less than 2 per cent were uneducated. The November 2025 Delhi blast, perpe-



trated by educated professionals using biotechnology knowledge, exemplified this threat. Women jihadis add another dimension, with more trained as combatants and suicide bombers, exploiting reduced security scrutiny. Adversaries deploy AI for sophisticated propaganda, deepfakes, and coordinating

hybrid attacks. India's dependence on foreign AI infrastructure creates strategic vulnerabilities.

Technological fortification is essential. The Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System integrates sensors, communication networks, and command-control solutions. Plans announced in April 2025 aim to cover the entire India-Pakistan border with electronic surveillance within four years, incorporating anti-drone systems that intercepted 294 Pakistani drones in Punjab in 2024. Border infrastructure funding jumped 50 per cent to Rs 5,597 crore in Budget 2025-26. The government sanctioned Rs 31,000 crore for fencing the Myanmar border, while approximately 3,141 kilometres of the Bangladesh border is fenced. In counter-narcotics operations, narcotics worth ₹25,330 crore were seized in 2024—a 55 per cent increase over 2023. BSF's jurisdiction extended from 15 km to 50 km from international borders enhanced interdiction success. The Indian roadmap envisions AI, machine learning, and big data integration by 2026-27, with AI-powered smart fences and predictive algorithms, though indigenous capability development remains crucial.

India's challenges demand nuanced responses. With Bangladesh, engaging diplomatically while monitoring the Pakistan-Bangladesh-JMB nexus remains critical. For Myanmar, balancing support for democratic forces with pragmatic engagement requires calibration. The Sir Creek dispute needs resolution through sustained diplomatic engagement while maintaining military deterrence. Maritime security requires naval and coast guard modernisation, regional cooperation frameworks, and intelligence-sharing. The AI domain demands urgent indigenous capability development to reduce dependence on foreign infrastructure.

Most critically, India must integrate security with economic development, cultural sensitivity, and diplomatic engagement. Enhanced inter-agency coordination between military, paramilitary, intelligence agencies, and state governments remains essential. The simultaneous instability in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, combined with maritime vulnerabilities, narco-terrorism, and AI-enabled hybrid threats presents India with an existential challenge.

However, with strategic investments in technology, infrastructure, indigenous AI capabilities, maritime power projection, and adaptive diplomacy, India can transform vulnerabilities into strengths.

The test lies in implementing a cohesive vision that anticipates threats, protects sovereignty, enables prosperity, and maintains regional stability in an increasingly volatile and technologically complex security environment.

(The author is a retired Additional Director General of Indian Coast Guard and a defence and strategic study expert)

## Ramayan and the anatomy of governance: Leadership lessons from the shoreline



ADITYA PRAKASH BHARDWAJ

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— MARK TWAIN

# Sonam Losar: The living tradition of The Himalayas



ANIL  
RAJPUT

As winter gradually starts showing signs of receding, local inhabitants from India's Himalayan regions, ready themselves to observe Sonam Losar, a festival to mark the seasonal change representing renewal and continuity. Celebrated in Ladakh, parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and the higher Himalayan regions of Himachal Pradesh, Sonam Losar commemorates the New Year according to the traditional lunar calendar of several Himalayan communities. Falling between mid January and February, (falls on 19th of January this year) the festival presents an occasion to carry forward age-old traditions, ethical conduct, and shared responsibility into the new year.

Sonam Losar is an acknowledgment of perseverance rather than a celebration of abundance. In societies that endure high-altitudes and harsh winter conditions, it marks a moment to pause and reaffirm community bonds defining the idea that change requires patience, preparation, and respect for the cycles of nature. As a result, Sonam Losar is commemorated in a restrained and dignified manner shaped more by reflection and togetherness rather than by extravagant spectacle.

The origins of this festival are deeply rooted in India's Himalayan civilisational culture. For centuries, communities inhabiting these regions organised their lives around climatic thresholds rather than a fixed calendar. The arrival of the New Year presented an opportunity to offer thanksgiving for what has passed and reorganize life for what is to come. Homes were tidied, old tools made ready for use, livestock shelters repaired, debts settled, and relationships renewed. Rituals were performed to seek protection and to ensure safety and well-being within households and villages.

Ritual observance during Sonam Losar unfolds over several days. Invocations are offered in monasteries, village shrines, and household altars. Prayer flags with spiritual inscriptions are replaced, and new ones hoisted symbolising the renewal of gratitude and the dispersal of goodwill across the land. Masked dances, music, and communal gatherings follow, filling the air with mirth and joy. The severity of another harsh winter is put behind and replaced with a moral and social reset.

In Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, and Sikkim, Sonam Losar is marked by region specific ceremonies that emphasise spiritual and moral values that the festival represents. Among the Tamang communities, households begin the New Year with early morning prayers offered to local deities and ancestral guardians, seeking harmony between family, land, and season. Ritual lamps are lit and incense is burned to purify homes, followed by offerings of food and water at household altars. In Ladakh, monasteries conduct special prayer assemblies where chants are recited for peace, health, and agricultural well-being, while homes perform protective rituals meant to ward off misfortune. In Sikkim, similar ceremonies are held within monasteries and villages, where prayer flags are changed and symbolic offerings are made to mark the



end of the old year and the moral readiness to enter the new one. Across these regions, rituals are conducted in a somber manner showing humility and readiness to enter the next chapter of existence.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Sonam Losar lies in its social significance. Unlike festivals marked by individual ceremonies, Sonam Losar offers a platform for strengthening collective bonds. Entire villages gather together in anticipation and revelry. Elders play a central role in guiding rituals, transmitting oral traditions, and ensuring that customs are followed with discipline rather than improvisation. This intergenerational participation reinforces purity of purpose, ensuring that cultural knowledge is transmitted through experience rather than instruction alone. In environments where survival historically depended on cooperation, Sonam Losar became a cultural platform to renew trust, social order, and collective accountability that bind families and communities together.

During Sonam Losar, clothing reflects both climate and cultural continuity. Men and women wear traditional woollen robes such as the goncha, often layered over heavy undergarments and secured with wide sashes that are symbolic of the region and made to protect against the cold climatic conditions. Silver jewellery, turquoise ornaments, and embroidered accessories are added by the woman-folk in keeping with the simplicity of the people. This in itself mirrors the festival's character of simplicity.



The heart of the festival nevertheless lies in the warm preparations of the domestic kitchens. Long before the festival begins, families get together to prepare an inventory of available foodstuff, dry vegetables and meats, roast grains, and ingredients for use in the festival meals. Such assessments are made for practical purposes rather than anxiety, to determine the availability of resources. Food systems, thus, remain resilient and waste is consciously avoided. The recipes used are rarely written but the processes are well rehearsed and transmitted through observation and repetition, often led by the elders in the family who carry the culinary memory across generations. Younger members learn not only how to cook but when to cook, how much to prepare, and which foods are related to specific rituals and occasions.

Emphasizing an egalitarian society, men and elders assist with grinding grains, storing firewood, and preparing preserved ingredients. Cooking is a collective exercise enjoyed by the whole family rather than considered an arduous task. This ensures that the culinary preparations become an enjoyable family activity and an occasion to transmit to the younger generations the distinctive Himalayan heritage. Cuisine here is not merely a festive spread but a responsibility to be learnt.

Food prepared during these days is nourishing, warming, and naturally seasonal, intended to restore strength after months of cold while preparing the body to the metabolic adjustments required for the change in the seasons. Meals are

only consumed after ritual offerings to local deities are completed, affirming the belief that nourishment is inseparable from gratitude and discipline.

Warm soups and noodle based dishes form the foundation of Sonam Losar meals, particularly during early mornings and evenings. *Thukpa*, prepared by simmering hand-made wheat noodles in a lightly seasoned vegetable or meat broth, is consumed in the entire region and is often the first shared meal of the New Year. A dash of black pepper adds to its warmth and nourishment. *Momos*, made by filling thin wheat dough wrappers with minced meat or vegetables and steaming them gently, are prepared in large numbers to serve relatives and neighbours, as generous hospitality is a hallmark of the festivities. *Skyu* and *Chutagi*, wheat based pasta dishes slow cooked with root vegetables and mild spices, are eaten during extended family gatherings on subsequent days. Their preparation requires patience and cooperation, but the outcome is well worth the wait.

The cuisine of Ladakh during Sonam Losar, like the rest of the region, reflects a deep reliance on foods that offer nourishment, strength, and longevity. In addition to staple soups and breads, households prepare *gur gur cha* (often called butter tea) made by churning strong brewed tea with yak butter, salt and water to enhance meals, and sustain energy through long ritual days. *Chhurpa* based dishes, made using hardened local cheese or dried curd prepared from yak or cow's milk, and softened in broth, are consumed during prayer intervals. *Shabdalay*, a lightly pan-fried stuffed bread filled with meat or vegetables, is prepared in some homes for festive lunches, offering nourishment without excess. These foods are eaten slowly and deliberately, shared among elders and guests, who are served first, reinforcing the Ladakhi ethic of hospitality and respect for labour.

Breads and staple accompaniments hold equal importance and symbolic weight. *Khambr*, a dense sourdough flatbread made from naturally fermented wheat flour, is baked in abundance and eaten throughout the festival, particularly during prayer mornings. *Tingmo*, a soft steamed bread prepared from yeast leavened dough, accompanies soups and stews and symbolises humility and adaptability. In some households, buckwheat pancakes and roasted grain flatbreads are prepared in small quantities, linking the meal directly to local agriculture and seasonal limitations.

Barley, a local produce of the Himalayan region, especially in high altitude areas of Ladakh, Lahaul-Spiti and Sikkim is a staple crop that is widely used in local dishes. *Paba*, a Ladakhi local bread made from barley, is usually eaten with butter tea or stews of vegetable or meat frequently relished by elders as it is easily digestible and yet healthy. *Tsampa*, prepared from finely roasted barley flour, is consumed by mixing it with butter tea or warm water during early rituals, reinforcing strength and self-reliance. Barley stews cooked with dried vegetables

further emphasise careful resource use and continuity through winter. *Chhang*, a mildly fermented barley beverage, prepared weeks in advance of the festival, is shared liberally, reinforcing social harmony.

In Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, Sonam Losar cuisine reflects common regional agricultural practices through a lighter approach to ritual meals. Tamang households in Arunachal Pradesh prepare simple rice and barley-based dishes paired with fermented greens and seasonal vegetables. Steamed dumplings made with locally grown grains, and filled with a variety of stuffings along with mild vegetable broths, make for a popular meal. In Sikkim, the festival is marked by foods rooted in the region's Himalayan heritage influenced by Bhutia, Tibetan, Lepcha, and Tamang communities. Dishes such as *momos* and *thukpa* are common like the rest of the area. Traditional preparations like *phagshapa*, made from meat simmered with radish and dried red chillies, *gundruk*, a fermented preparation of leafy greens like mustard and radish leaves and *chhurpi*, a fermented cheese made from yak's milk reflect long-standing practices of fermentation and preservation. Together, these foods underscore a cuisine shaped by climate and seasonality rather than indulgence.

Sweet preparations are mostly reserved for auspicious moments. *Dresi*, a festive rice dish cooked with butter, sugar, and dried fruits, is prepared on the most significant day of Sonam Losar and consumed at dawn or after the initial rituals. *Khapse*, deep fried crisp pastries made from wheat flour and lightly sweetened dough, is normally served during tea time in the evenings. *Sel roti*, a lightly fermented ring shaped rice bread with a mild sweetness, is especially popular among Tamang communities. These sweetened barley or wheat preparations are served to children as a special offering and blessing for success as the New Year begins.

In the Himalayan region, food preservation practices such as sun-drying, smoking, fermenting, and storing grains and meat in naturally cold conditions have been practiced as practical responses to long winters and limited growing seasons. These techniques have been passed down through generations by oral tradition and daily practice with elders teaching youngsters by example especially during these festivals. This ensures food security while reflecting a keen understanding of the sustainable use of resources. The preserved and fermented foods become central in Sonam Losar cuisine more out of necessity rather than preference as the fields are still snow bound.

In contemporary India, Sonam Losar holds growing significance as a reminder of celebrating the conditions that we live in. As Himalayan regions experience rapid social and economic transformation, the festival also serves as an anchor of identity. It reminds younger generations that tradition is not an obstacle to progress but a framework that lends guidance for the future. Culinary participation reconnects them with ancestral knowledge rooted in balance rather than convenience and forms an inherent component of this future.

Festivals such as Sonam Losar, though observed in the high reaches of India's mountains, serve as cultural reference for the nation as a whole, reflecting and reinforcing its diverse civilisational fabric. They preserve Himalayan heritage by passing down values refined over centuries. It is my belief that recognising and safeguarding the principles embodied in such festivals is a shared responsibility for all of us, ensuring their relevance for future generations. In doing so, I am confident that Sonam Losar will continue to guide communities through changing seasons, carrying forward a legacy shaped by resilience, dignity, and wisdom.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)



## Step into a new era of style, taste, and sound

### TEAM AGENDA

Anyone who lives in Delhi probably knows OTB. It has been a permanent part of Khan Market since 2012, usually the spot people end up at for a long Friday night. But twelve years is a long time, and the place has finally ditched its old look. The loud, bright reds and yellows everyone remembers are gone. The new interior is totally different now—lots of deep browns, gold accents, and warm lighting. It feels like the 'box' has finally grown up along with its regulars.

Architect Aatika Manzar did the redesign, and you can tell the goal was to make it look expensive without being 'stiff'. It does not have that cold feeling you get at most new high-end places. Visitors can either hide in a cozy indoor nook or grab a seat on the terrace to look out at the old market buildings. It is a flexible space. You could go there for a quiet afternoon coffee or end up staying for a loud party once the DJ starts at night.

But the biggest change is not the decor; it is what is happening in the kitchen. Chef Akshay Malhotra has moved the menu toward global comfort food. They even brought in new pizza ovens that hit 509°F. Pizzas go in and come out in under two minutes now. The crust is crispy and charred, and honestly, it is better than what you get at most specialised pizza shops.

The menu has starters like *Nested Lotus Kebab* and *Malai Broccoli*, which are handled well. But the *Ghee Roast Chicken* with *Malabar Parantha* is the real standout. It is heavy, rich, and exactly what people want when they are looking for soul food. For something lighter, the

*Truffled Edamame Crystal dim sums* are a good choice. For dessert, do not even bother looking at the rest of the list. Just get the *Burnt Cheesecake*. It is thick and creamy and actually lives up to all the hype. The bar is different now too. The *Mango Picante* has a sharp kick to it, and the *Rose Whisper* is a more refined pick. Even the coffee is much better than before. The *Pistachio Latte* is a solid choice if you are just there for a midday meeting. It is still the OTB people know, but it is not just a 'box' anymore. It has finally become a neighborhood legend.

Twelve years of stories, now wrapped in a brand-new golden glow. From

heritage views to that perfect 500°F wood-fired crunch, our transformation is all about elevated flavors and effortless soul. Whether it's a quiet coffee or a high-energy night under the stars, your favourite social spot just got a whole lot better.

## Happiness in every slice!

### TEAM AGENDA

Circle of Crust brings its signature 'Pizza But Better' philosophy to West Delhi. The grand opening recently, saw a massive turnout of foodies eager to experience the innovative handcrafted menu. Known for its 'Indianised' flavour palette, the menu features everything from *Paneer Makhani* to *Pizza Chatkare*. Founders Neha and Kartik Anand expressed their excitement about joining Uttam Nagar's bustling food scene, emphasising their commitment to craftsmanship and consistent quality. With a growing footprint spanning Punjab, Chandigarh, and Dubai, this new Delhi outlet marks a major milestone in their expansion. Whether you're craving a classic slice or a bold new fusion, this is the place to go. Staying true to its modern philosophy, Circle of Crust blends innovative crusts with bold, Delhi-style flavours, ranging from whole wheat, beetroot, and spinach crusts to flavour-packed pizzas like *Paneer Makhani*, *Chicken Tikka & Butter Chicken*. Kartik Anand, Co-Founder, said, "Seeing people enjoy our pizzas reaffirmed our belief that great pizza comes from care, craftsmanship, and consistency."

As Circle of Crust continues its journey across India and beyond, the brand remains committed to delivering consistent quality, memorable flavours, and elevated pizza experiences, one neighbourhood at a time.



## REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

## MAGA fault lines and implications for India

The momentous changes within the US will continue to strain India's strategic calculus even after a trade deal is signed

**I**f we lose the midterms, if we lose 2028, some in this room are going to prison — myself included," warned Steve Bannon to a roomful of Republicans.

This statement by an influential hardliner in the Make America Great Again (MAGA) camp and a former Donald J Trump loyalist should offer us pause. When the institutional guardrails of a superpower are visibly eroding, when political violence is increasingly normalised, when immigration officers are attacking Americans with impunity, when tariffs hurt local farmers and foreign partners, when the person occupying the highest office in the land prioritises personal loyalty over the Constitution, when allies fear territorial annexation, and adversaries experience an extrajudicial effort to seize a sitting head of State, it is time to take an earnest measure of where India's most important strategic partner is headed.

Bannon is right. Trump's America is increasingly testing the legal and moral limits of power at home and abroad. It has opened many fronts at once. Something must give. When that happens, hubris is likely to pave way for fear in team Trump. That's when the US will face its most dangerous moment. Trump is undoing the long-term American social contract, while maintaining short-term popularity and a devoted

personality cult. This is true in all spheres — economics, politics, military, and society. Trump tariffs are protecting some industries but spiking consumer prices and threatening inflation. Still, the Democrats are failing to outmanoeuvre Trump on policy and popularity nationally, notwithstanding Zohran Mamdani's historic mayoral victory in New York City.

This is not a crisis that will automatically resolve with the next electoral cycle. The US is at the foothills of what comes the day after polarisation and a fortnight before a severe rupture.

The US economy is K-shaped. Some macroeconomic indicators such as GDP growth rate, which rose to 4.3% in the last quarter of 2025, a rebound in exports, and increased spending on defence and tech indicate strength. Inflation is currently at a manageable 2.7%. But microeconomic indicators such as the cost of living for middle- and lower-income households is going up, and labour market sluggishness, thanks to immigration crackdown, is risking the viability of small businesses. In a country without a serious welfare net, such K-shaped growth is inauspicious. It is not sufficient to generate social and political violence at scale though. Acute polarisation is what increases the odds of that.

On January 6, 2021, when a large mob of Trump-supporters violently stormed the US Capitol to disrupt the Congressional certification of the 2020 presidential election, the world had a glimpse of how polarised the US is. Things have become worse. Not only has partisanship increased, but also splits within these movements. The socialist Left of the

Democratic party is facing more opposition from within the party than outside. Neither the Clintons nor the Obamas openly supported Mamdani during his campaign against a fellow Democrat Andrew Cuomo. Led by Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Left-of-centre Democrats have yet to mount a nationally coherent challenge. They are leading the race for the mid-terms but will struggle to retake the Senate in 2026.

The MAGA camp is a potpourri of factions. There are the working-class economic nationalists who love tariffs but are at odds with the elitist corporate nationalists including the tech-bros who abhor trade wars. Then there are the Christian nationalists and the culture warriors who are fighting migrants, minorities, and liberals with equal zeal. The most powerful split is between the institutionalists and the anti-institutionalists. The former, typified by the governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, want to exploit American institutions to allow the movement to outlast Trump. Bannon signifies the anti-institutionalists. They view the American State as irredeemably broken and want to run an insurgency against it.

Trump keeps these factions busy. By cult, not tact. He lets them fight and cut each other to size. So potent is his cult that Pete Hegseth, secretary of war, has openly championed a warrior ethos, purged professional generals, and promoted a vision of military loyalty centred on Trump rather than civilian institutions.

The corrosion of the American social contract is not a problem, it is the point. It is



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BLOOMBERG

no surprise that ICE is harassing migrants, and their aggressive tactics led to a fatal encounter in Minneapolis. Mayor Jacob Frey's outraged message that "ICE should get the f--- out of Minneapolis", followed by the governor mobilising the Minnesota National Guard in response, signals a brewing conflict.

American society is resilient, and many hope that this will pass. But the possibility of that is remote unless the Democrats suddenly, surprisingly, and significantly dent Trump's politics. China has pushed back in the trade war, and something may give internationally. But foreign policy failure will not bite electorally.

What can hurt is an unexpected electoral upset. For a movement aware of its excesses, and a presidency habituated in dog-whistling, the loss of power is not an option. If the anti-institutionalists are fearful about losing elections, they will fight harder against both the Democrats and the

institutionalists.

India has become a geopolitical casualty of Trump's politics and policy. It failed to foresee the warning signs and prematurely celebrated Trump's win in 2024. Such a mistake must not be repeated. Sergio Gor's appointment as ambassador to India and his proximity to Trump offers New Delhi a channel to the White House. Such access does not mean influence. There are limits to what Gor can deliver beyond diplomatic spectacle. He can translate India's concerns into Trump-speak and support trade negotiations. He has invited India to join Pax Silia. All this is necessary to arrest a further decline in this bilateral relationship. It is not sufficient to rebuild trust.

Gor's remit as special envoy to South and Central Asia offers India's neighbours a vote on his subcontinental worldview. In combination with MAGA's anti-Indian racism, this regional aspect of Gor's portfolio will limit his ability to build bridges with India.

In any future India-Pakistan crisis, he is perfectly poised to play the regional peace-maker and Trump's personal roving envoy. India will find it harder to deny Gor's role in that moment than its recent pushback against Trump's claim of brokering a ceasefire during Operation Sindoora.

The US is experiencing nothing short of a revolution. It will continue to strain India's strategic calculus even after a trade deal is signed.

New Delhi should prepare for a scenario where the next transfer of power in Washington DC could be contested, destabilising, and potentially violent — if it occurs at all. There is nothing more dangerous than arch ideologues and cult leaders fearing loss of power.

Avinash Palwal teaches at SOAS University of London and is the author of *India's Near East: A New History* (London: Hurst, 2024). The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



## Why I consider 13 to be my lucky number

**A**re you the sort of person who attaches significance to the number 13? I do. In fact, I consider it my lucky number. Whenever significant developments are due to happen on that date, I feel confident, even reassured, about them. But I'm not unusual, and I'm certainly not unique. The number 13 plays a significant role in other people's lives as well. Although, of course, for many, if not for most, it's ominous, even unlucky.

Take the late Atal Behari Vajpayee, for instance. For many, he was their favourite prime minister. Thirteen ran like an astrological *leitmotif* through the last decade of his life. In 1996, his first government lasted just 13 days. Thirteen months after it was formed, his second was defeated by one vote in Parliament. His best years as Prime Minister were during the 13th Lok Sabha. They began on the 13th of October 1999 and ended on the

13th of May 2004.

In my case, the number has always been fortunate. Or so I believe. But that apart, it runs through my life like an invisible thread of significance. My first school number at Doon was 238, which adds up to 13. At Stowe, it was 490, which is also 13.

Yet if that was simply a coincidence, just look at this. Over the next 20 years, I joined the Gymkhana Club, the India International Centre and the India Habitat Centre, and in each case, the number 13 was given added up to 13.

But even that is not the end of the story. I got my first job on a 13th, met my wife on a 13th, and proposed to her on a 13th. In fact, I could go on and on. My point is simple: Even though I may not always remember the month, I'm unfailingly sure of the date!

Historically, the significance of 13 stretches back into the mists of time. Most

people believe it has Biblical connotations. There were 13 at Jesus's last supper, and Christ was crucified on a 13th. Actually, the day also happened to be Friday. But the superstition — if that's what it is — could be older. Some historians claim Alexander the Great's downfall was foreordained by his ambition to be recognised as the 13th god of Macedonia. Others claim it carries echoes from the Norse legend.

The Viking Baldr was slain on a night when there were 13 to dinner in Valhalla. If you ask me, it would seem the influence of 13 has been with us since man first learnt to count!

13 is perhaps also the most universally acknowledged superstition. I can hardly think of a society that is unaware of it. For example, you would be hard pushed to find a house in Paris with the number 13, whilst the Italian lottery skips this digit altogether. The British don't like inviting 13 to dinner, whereas the Turks have almost eliminated the word from their vocabulary. And walk into any hotel in India, and chances are it won't have a 13th floor.

In fact, when they rebuilt the Hilton in Colombo, after an LTTE bomb blew it apart in 1997, they omitted the 13th floor. Incidentally, that's where I was staying the morning the explosion occurred!

Actually, so deeply ingrained in the Anglo-Saxon psyche is the fear of 13 that the English language even has a word for it. It's pretty unpronounceable and I

## 13 IS PERHAPS ALSO THE MOST UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED SUPERSTITION. I CAN HARDLY THINK OF A SOCIETY THAT IS UNAWARE OF IT. FOR EXAMPLE, YOU WOULD BE HARD PUSHED TO FIND A HOUSE IN PARIS WITH THE NUMBER 13, WHILST THE ITALIAN LOTTERY SKIPS THIS NUMBER ALTOGETHER

wouldn't use it if I were you. But it exists. It's *triskadekaphobia*. It derives from the Greek word for 13, which is *treiskaideka*, and *phobia*, which is the Latin form of the original Greek *phobos* for fear. In my case, since I consider 13 to be lucky — the odd bomb notwithstanding! — I imagine the noun for the love of 13 would be *triskadekapheilia*. *Philia* comes from *philos*, which is Greek for love.

So what happened five days ago on the 13th? Nothing of note. But there are 11 more 13s to go!

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

## Adjusting to Delhi-NCR pollution, with a smile

**S**top protesting against Delhi-NCR's air quality. Stop posting screenshots of your city's Air Quality Index (AQI) on the social media platform where you get the most likes. Stop writing essays. Stop raising your voice. Stop tagging the government handles at least.

Don't get me wrong, I don't represent the ruling dispensation. I have been a resident of the National Capital Region for over 10+ years now. A closer examination of my lungs and my driving seat vocabulary will prove this beyond doubt. In these 10 years, I have seen various permutations and combinations of governments in Delhi and its adjoining states — the smog supply chain. I have also been an unwilling guinea-pig to various experiments by each of these governments. The rulers have changed, the ways to curb pollution have changed, but one thing that has stayed constant is poor AQI.

Each winter, Delhi residents protest — on social media and on-ground — and force the government to "do something". In a bid to appear vigilant, the government then inflicts short-term experiments such as sudden vehicle emission controls that allow the traffic police the remit to extort thousands — a double whammy of pollution and punishing control measures. Vehicles are impounded. Construction work is hit. The AQI remains the same, a breeze blows and improves



Abhishek Asthana

things. The rulers keep administering the bitter pill to us NCR residents — a mere placebo, though — in an attempt to assure us that things are going to improve. Imagine you are unable to breathe, you call a doctor, he comes home, and to cure your breathlessness, he whips you repeatedly with his stethoscope. You cry in agony, tell him it isn't working; the doctor apologises, assures to change the treatment, and takes out a club wrapped with barbed wire, which he says he imported for ₹14 crore. So, my humble request is: I will learn to breathe, as I don't wish to be beaten up every season.

China solved Beijing's pollution problem in less than 10 years. In 2013, the AQI in the Chinese capital used to touch 700, people were choking and children were at risk. Then, China did an ingenious thing: It erected a giant smog tower in the city, and asked its citizens to follow the odd-even rule. No, not really. Instead of going for such hacks, it did the boring thing of shutting down/relocating the industries around the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region.

It didn't treat it as a city issue, it fixed the entire region. It was able to do it because it doesn't enjoy the perks of democracy and associated federalism. Now, its AQI stays in double digits.

In India, the other bit of "innocence" is relying on pollution-source data that are averaged out over a year instead of looking at pollution sources that peak in winter.

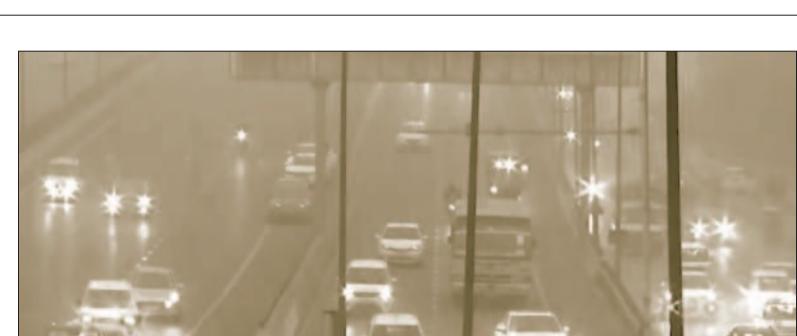
Hence, the maximum focus is on controlling vehicular emission. A Pollution-Under-Control (PUC) certificate is our answer to a meter-defying AQI reading of 999.

Moving industries or effectively stopping stubble burning require political will, which is usually spent on issues yielding better results at the ballot box. The unfortunate bit is that though the pollution issue has been raised prior to quite a few elections now, our politicians have realised it isn't a deal breaker for the voting populace.

If the amount of money transferred to the Jan Dhan account of a female member of a family is more than the AQI of the city, it nullifies the issue.

Delhi goes through this cycle every year. It begins with monsoons, when the roads made by the L1 vendor peels off, drains get clogged with corruption, and the logged water is eagerly waiting to enter your car's exhaust pipe. People curse the infrastructure and regret not moving abroad.

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



Though the pollution issue has been raised prior to quite a few elections now, our politicians have realised it isn't a deal breaker for the voting populace.

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare



## Decriminalising adolescent relationships under POCSO

**F**ive centuries after Shakespeare wrote about the world's most famous star-crossed young lovers, Romeo and Juliet popped up at India's Supreme Court. The court was urging the government to consider adding a "Romeo-Juliet clause" to the Protection of Children from Child Sexual Offences (POCSO) law where the offence of rape carries a minimum of three years to a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

Jurisdictions where this clause exists include the US, where it is believed to have been first used, to make allowances in rape law for romantically-involved young people. This is based on the understanding that the law cannot criminalise sexual relations between adolescents who are close to the legal age of consent but not quite there yet.

In India, that age is 18 and, so, sexual relations with a girl below that age (even if she's your wife) is legally rape. Hearing an appeal against an Allahabad High Court judgement that had granted bail to a young man charged under POCSO, Supreme Court Justices Sanjay Karol and N Kotiwas Singh retained bail but took exception to the medical tests ordered by the court — the mother had claimed her daughter was 12, the girl insisted she was 18.

Then, towards the end of its 66-page judgment, the apex court observed how POCSO was being "misused, misapplied and used as a tool for extracting revenge". There was, the court said, a "grim societal chasm" between children and their families. "There are numerous instances where this law is used by families in opposition to relationships between young people."

POCSO's object is to protect minors from sexual abuse. But by defining everybody below 18 as a child incapable of consent, it has "trapped many adolescent couples in a legal paradox", finds a 2025 study by Vidhi Legal Policy. One in four POCSO cases, or 24.3%, are 'romantic' cases, a study of 7,560 judgments between 2016 and 2020 from just three states, Assam, Maharashtra and West

Bengal by Enfold Proactive Health Trust, found. Of these cases, 80.2% had been filed by family members angry with their daughters for running off with their partners (64.9% of cases). The accused was eventually acquitted on the grounds that the relationship was consensual in 61.7% of cases. But until then, young men end up languishing in jail for a crime of falling in love.

There are concerns from child rights activists that young girls could be groomed by far older men. The exception must be only for couples close-in-age.

The Supreme Court's suggestion for the insertion of a Romeo-Juliet clause is not a free pass, the judgement makes clear. Courts must use discretion, evaluating cases individually. Is the relationship consensual? Victim statements can shed light. The aim must be to "balance the protection of minors with the recognition of their autonomy."

Autonomy is a tricky word in a country where up to 95% of marriages are arranged, according to the India Human Development Survey. Several BJP-ruled states have laws that virtually prohibit interfaith marriage. In Karnataka where the Congress now rules, there is no talk of repealing this law.

Families continue to vest honour on the sexual "purity" of their daughters. Murder of young people by their families for crossing caste and faith lines, or merely exercising choice, remains our modern nation's ancient shame.

Earlier this week, BJP councillor in Delhi Munesh Dedha uploaded a video of herself accosting a young couple for sitting in a park together. Following a public uproar over concerns of moral policing, she claimed she was merely responding to complaints that the park had "become a hotbed of anti-social activity". There is another front where change is needed just as much.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

## Utmost care for women patients

This is with reference to "Looking at cancer care, through the gender lens" by Lalita Panicker (January 11). The government should bring down the cost of cancer treatment to make it affordable to even the underprivileged. Special care should be provided to women patients due to their vulnerability.

Abhilasha Gupta

## Constructive diplomacy among nations

This is with reference to 'A few silver linings on the South Asian horizon' by Gopalkrishna Gandhi (January 11). The article offers a reminder that even amid hostility, India and Pakistan have preserved vital channels of sanity. Such mature engagements deserve recognition and must be strengthened.

Sanjay Chopra

Despite the animosity India and Pakistan have for each other, there are always avenues where cooperation to promote peace and regional stability can be achieved. These must be used as baselines for interaction.

Vishwas Sutar

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

# DECCAN Chronicle

18 JANUARY 2026



Krishna Shastri  
Devulapalli

Off the beaten track

## Two short stories on love and business

I was speaking to a friend a few days ago about the new business venture she was embarking on. I congratulated her — she was smart, had put in a lot of thought into the idea, and I knew her as someone who would give it everything she had. She was that kind of person.

Then she told me who would be partnering her in the venture: her boyfriend (for want of a better word), someone she had got into a relationship with a few months earlier. And despite knowing — from all that she'd told me about him — that he was a good guy and treated her with kindness and respect, it gave me pause. I wondered for an entire minute before doing what I always do (usually to my own detriment) and said what I felt needed to be said.

"Think a bit before getting into a business deal with a romantic partner," I said.

My friend, used to my ways, gave me her defence. Good guy, he's got expertise in the field, makes economic sense, good venture, good opportunities, etc. Like I said, she was a smart woman.

But I said what I thought anyway. And this, in a nutshell, is it:

When one is embarking on a relationship, any relationship, one should have clarity on how one defines it. And, most often, one should be able to encompass that in a word.

He is my boyfriend. She is my boss. He is my colleague. He is my friend. She is my partner in business. She is my sister. She is my editor. And so on.

Whenever one tries to combine these two, like, say, she is my friend and my colleague, one of those relationships is going to take a backseat. Especially when there is conflict. And how can there be relationships without conflict? And when one of those relationships is affected, sooner or later, chances are, so will the other.

The important thing to note here is that one has to be all the more careful with a new friend, a new girlfriend, a new boss or a new colleague, to make sure you don't assign another role to them too quickly.

Clear, well-defined, non-dual relationships themselves are hard to navigate and maintain. How can it make sense then to prematurely assign two roles to the same person? That's unfair to both assigner and assignee.

(NB: I met my wife at a publishing house where she was editor when I was a freelance illustrator. And she actually gave me work. And we have been partners at work from pretty nearly the day we got married. So there's that, too.)

On another occasion, I was speaking to a friend going through a relationship crisis. Some time earlier, she had become romantically involved with a person she was working with. While the early part — like all early parts — was good, she said, she found that she wasn't in agreement with his 'working style'.

As expected, this led to conflict. And she found herself giving her partner/collaborator more rope than she normally would in similar circumstances. Mainly because she found that he was caring and affectionate with her in their personal time.

After a few months of being part of this off-kilter equation — where the professional part was full of conflict while the personal was all chocolate and cuddles — her first realisation was that she couldn't work with the person any more. And that in the interest of their relationship they needed to stop working with each other.

But her next realisation — one that few get — was the important one. Having terminated their work relationship, she figured quite quickly that she couldn't be romantically involved with him any more either.

How could she, the wise woman said (as I applauded silently), when she didn't respect his work ethic.

That is key.

We mistakenly think we can break up the human beings in our life into their different roles, like businessman-brother, financier-father, advocate-sister, doctor-friend, and tell ourselves that, as long as someone is a good brother, father, sister or friend to us, how they conduct the rest of their lives has no bearing on us.

But I have always wondered how anyone could love a person they didn't respect. How is it love then? Doesn't it mean that you don't respect yourself?

I am exacting on my family, friends, colleagues, and even passing acquaintances. And I encourage them to be exacting with me, too. For me it is important to know that you treat everyone — from wife to waiter, from CEO to chauffeur, from publisher to waste paper vendor, from poet to plumber — in exactly the same fashion.

That's probably the reason I shed people like a Lab sheds hair.

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



## Judiciary key in restoring the health of institutions



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya's View

**Perception in politics shapes behaviour. The perception of bias in India's Central agencies, therefore, is not an abstract complaint; it goes to the heart of equitable democratic engagement.**

true, and often the only hope. Yet, the judicial process is tardy, and depending on the law against which a person is booked, both draconian — making bail extremely difficult — and so long drawn out that the process itself becomes the punishment.

We are not debating here the merits of the allegations against the Opposition parties or leaders within it. Perhaps, they do require investigation.

Over the past decade, the incidence of such actions is difficult to dissociate from electoral calendars. Investigative agencies, it appears, do not operate in a political vacuum. Their actions have real political consequences — whether intended or incidental — when they involve prominent politicians, especially in the phases immediately preceding polls.

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Politicians against whom there are multiple cases of corruption, attempt to murder, kidnap, theft and cheating. Have these been investigated as rigorously or expeditiously?

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## Oscar-Nominated or Not, This Film Takes Humans Beyond the Usual Data Labelling

Training AI to identify living and non-living things in our world is wonderfully used as a metaphor for an adivasi mother's struggle to teach her daughter to adapt to their new environment

### FILM FATALE



ANNA MM VETTICAD

In a universe far from toxic men, bloody wars, and noise crowding mainstream Hindi cinema these days, an adivasi child lies quietly on a forest floor, watching a porcupine observe her from its refuge in the tall grass. Instinctively unafraid of her companion, whose quills can do real damage to predators, the girl turns to stare at the birds in the sky.

This sublime scene of nearly a minute lifts the curtain on writer-director Aranya Sahay's meditative film, *Humans in the Loop*. The Hindi-Kurukh feature set in Jharkhand is about indigenous women

training AI to identify living and non-living things in our world.

*Humans in the Loop* takes its title from a technical term, which assumes that algorithms require human intervention to ensure their accuracy. The starting point for the film was journalist Karishma Mehrotra's 2022 article, 'Human Touch' about women in Indian towns and villages doing data-annotation jobs outsourced by large AI corporations headquartered in the West. This laborious function that involves labelling scores of images, which are then fed to AI, has changed the lives of first-generation women workers, according to the report.

Mehrotra examined race and class elements, and consequent exploitative practices, at play in such outsourcing to poorer regions on the globe. *Humans in the Loop* does not touch upon these aspects of the industry. Instead, it is inspired by a woman quoted in the article explaining the purpose of data labelling thus: 'It's like how, if you show a child the colour red enough times, they can recognise the category the next



AI FIRMLY TO THE GROUND

time they see the colour red.'

In the film, Nehma (played by Sonal Madhushankar) returns to her village after her live-in relationship with a non-tribal man in the city falls apart. She needs an income to get custody of their children. Employment at a local data labelling centre saves the day. Sahay treats Nehma's assignment coaching AI as a metaphor for her struggle as a mother teaching her daughter to adapt

to this new environment. Sahay's departure from his base material operates at two levels. By writing the heroine as a tribal woman, he offers an intriguing glimpse into the depth of indigenous knowledge.

But he has also simplified a complex scenario by not acknowledging the multiple layers in the unequal dynamic between the centre where Nehma works and the client

from a rich country, or the caste difference between Nehma and her manager, as potential factors in the response from both parties when she insists on having a mind of her own. And while its insights into human prejudice influencing AI are fascinating, the script never interrogates AI per se.

In that sense, the AI track in *Humans in the Loop* feels overly optimistic. The

ability criteria to enter the Oscars (including getting a theatrical release in the US), they applied for entry in the Best Original Screenplay category, and have been running a dogged, low-cost Oscar marketing campaign since 2025.

Whether or not its Oscar bid bears fruit, *Humans in the Loop* should spark a conversation about the virtual erasure of

### Humans in the Loop takes its title from a technical term, which assumes algorithms need human intervention to ensure accuracy

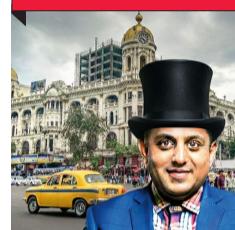
themes it chooses to explore are so unique though, that the film as a whole is an eye-opener; wrapped around Nehma's well-written relationship with her older child Dhaanu (Ridhima Singh).

Following a domestic theatrical release, and after *Humans in the Loop* began streaming late last year, Sahay and his producer, Mathivanan Rajendran of The Storiculture Company, secured the prestigious Film Independent Sloan Distribution Grant in the US. Having fulfilled the eligi-

avids communities in mainstream Hindi cinema, which is no better than the disgraceful, caricatured representations of an earlier era.

The film owes its ruminative tone considerably to Monica Tiwari and Harshit Saini's observant frames of exquisite locations, and a soundscape that blends nature with indigenous music and a pensive original background score. The world that Sahay builds with these blocks and his charming cast feels as real as reality itself.

### FUNNY BUSINESS



ANUVAB PAL

## Nostalgia's Never Been So Good For This Old Town

If you can't quite join the future, might as well live off your 'glorious' past

The media keeps talking about how Kolkata is a city of retirees. While efforts are always on to get industrialists to invest at this or that Bengal summit, and vague platitudes are given by some billionaire promising to move all his cash here, largely the game has been lost to the likes of Hyderabad, Gurgaon, and Pune.

Crumbling nostalgia hasn't helped, along with a reputation that it's hard to do any work in a city where everyone is an aspiring poet. Bengali public intellectuals who moved to Delhi bemoan that this once commercial capital of the eastern hemisphere has been decimated by communist hounding of private business, while lakhs of the brightest employable have fled to any pasture that isn't this.

All of this we've known for a while. But what's happened now is something no one anticipated or worked for. Even as the state government was chasing Ambanis and Adanis, a quiet tourism boom has been taking place selling the very crumbling nostalgia everyone's been complaining about. Suddenly, and in no small measure due to social media, all the old, dying, litigated buildings in Kolkata have been lit up, 'forgotten history' walking tours are booming, rundown 'international' eateries – Nahoum, the cake maker; How Hua, the chimney soup family – is now an Insta reel. The riverfront, once a nefarious den of crime and jungle, is exploding with river cruises and social events.

Kolkata may have lost the battle to be Dubai or Noida. But it's becoming a tiny (and dirtier, crazier) Seville or Dubrovnik, where people come to cherish old lost things. People travel here to film an unused rickety hand-pulled rickshaw, a ruined home, a street Satyajit Ray may have shot in, a communist graffiti, a British dance hall, an Armenian church, a hole-in-the-wall momo shop, a massive memorial to a Victorian queen called Victoria...

It's a bit like Woody Allen's Small Time Crooks, where a bunch of incapable thieves attempt to rob a bank and sets up a cookie shop as decoy. The robbery fails, but the cookie shop becomes a hit. Kolkata is that cookie shop.

Great forgotten stories of cosmopolitan Calcutta



GO AND POP A TIME CAPSULE

of the '50s, a Casablanca-like place with the grand leafy Fairlawn Hotel, or jazz at Trinca's Restaurant & Bar are back with their old world charm, and menu, catering to the grandchildren of those that told the stories. 'We can try to sell MNCs and skyscrapers and jobs. But what people are buying here is the 19th century feel. Being forgotten in time is not a liability, but an asset,' said a Kolkata resident.

'The Tata Nano exit marked an inflection point that stalled West Bengal's industrial momentum and unsettled investors. Since then, tourism – propelled by Unesco's recognition of Kolkata's Durga Puja as an 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity' in 2021 – has unlocked an entire ecosystem spanning infrastructure, hospitality, urban renewal, and services, signalling a development model rooted in cultural capital,' said former Calcutta Chamber of Commerce president Manoj Mohanka.

One of the forces behind this trend is stock market analyst-urban space activist Mudar Patherya, who's done an incredible job of raising awareness and money – for heritage-building. Through citizens' group Kolkata Restorers, he's been lighting up many iconic heritage buildings through the Calcutta Illumination Project since November 2023.

Granted, the regular Kolkata insanities continue: apocalyptic traffic, noise, building collapse, construction nightmares, grime, AQI... Recently, Leo Messi nearly needed to see a therapist on his visit here. It's also election year. On my way to a show, I was almost bathed in the flags of the two main political parties and encountered so many posters of the CM's nephew that I felt I knew him. With marches, rallies, and political speeches wafting over loudspeakers, it can feel like an '80s time capsule with WiFi.

Yet, in the middle of all this, hundreds of new coffee shops and restaurants are selling old world revival cuisine – trätzini anyone? – in crumbling houses now redecorated with trätzini. So much so, that I walked into one, only to be told by a patriarch: 'Get out. This is my home. Not every old Calcutta house is selling espresso.'

pur, Manhattan, and Bardhaman being gender-insensitive (they would like them to be renamed as Personipur, Personhattan, and Bardhaporson) – find that to stand in support of protesting Iranians may, willy-nilly, be supporting Ayatollahs Trump and Netanyahu. So, it's best to stay hush on Iran and see where the politically correct river flows.

And this could well be the manoeuvre of our times. We live in an era where choosing feels less like picking something that we want – politics or toothpaste – and more about avoiding what we don't want. Well, this isn't exactly new. Neg-

crawl, don't get to run the show. I suspect even Modi fans are really, in their Bajrang Bali heart of hearts, Nehru-Rahul-haters.

And in MAGArica, the rallying cry is less 'Yes, we can' and more, 'No, they mustn't' these days.

And why point to Persia when in soon-to-be poll-going Banga, the ruling party thrives on the fear of letting Boymen Janata Party in? This is not to say that BJP is all made of jaggery and fish. But for people to

shape one's support of TMC on the sheer basis of it being the only thing between the Fourth

Reich and 'Amar Shonar Bangla,' no matter how dismantled and dishevelled, is like loving garlic solely for its much advertised vampire-repelling quality.

Retail mirrors this mood. Actual acts of purchase are often guided by avoidance. 'Not that one – it's got sugar.' 'Not this one – it's owned by a conglomerate with five Israeli backpackers in Manali.' 'Definitely not that one – it reminds me of an ex.' The chosen product is less a about appeal than the last product standing up to one's set of 'is-not' scrutiny.

Without sounding like Utopia Uthup, the lesser evil has become the default candidate, an ancillary product of whataboutery. If Iran's murderous regime goes, what will

stop Trump from Greenlanding and Netanyahu from Ga-zapping that country?

It seems, we've all become amateur diplomats doubling as variations of dogs in the manger-clutching on to things so as to prevent others from having it. Meanwhile, as Iran's thugs, America's bullies, Bengal's goondas evangelise their necessity to keep 'invaders,' 'aliens,' and 'barbarians' at bay many

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# Rise of the quiet divorce: Why some couples skip the drama & D-word

To avoid stigma, legal tangles and financial fallout, some couples are choosing emotional separation and leading parallel lives while staying married on paper

Sneha.Bhura@timesofindia.com

In popular imagination, marriages end with shouting matches, accusations hurled across living rooms, custody battles and a courtroom where a judge draws the final line. But many marriages don't explode or even reach that point. They thin out instead, without drama or even mention of the D-word. As confrontation gives way to apathy, the marriage carries on in rituals, family photographs, and on paper.

The Aroras in Gurugram look like a picture of domestic success: an early-40s couple with two children, in-laws downstairs and luxury cars in the driveway. Inside, though, the marriage runs on a simple understanding. Ritesh earns, Radhika spends, and neither interferes with the other. For six years, this has been their arrangement. "I take care of the house, the bills, the future. She has her space, I have mine," says Ritesh. "I may not be perfect, but I've provided stability." Friends often ask Radhika how long she will continue with it. She shrugs. "Divorce is a war where everyone loses," she says.

If Gwyneth Paltrow gave us the term conscious uncoupling in 2014 for a more respectful way to end a marriage, we now have the 'quiet divorce'. Think of it as marital flight mode where the marriage is still 'on', but the emotional network has no signal. Couples stay married for the kids, the EMIs, family WhatsApp groups or just because paperwork feels like a horrid migraine. Many parents and grandparents quietly divorced long before the term existed; they just called it "adjusting". What is new is the branding. In a world of 'quiet quitting' and 'quiet luxury', marriages were bound to catch up. It's denial, diplomacy, self-preservation and cost-saving strategy, all rolled into one.

For some quietly decoupled couples, stigma is the reason they didn't head for the courts. Delhi-based Sunil\* and his wife, Rachna, whose 25-year marriage snowballed into constant fights, with accusations like "she shops too much" and "he is a sloth", did want a divorce but parents from both sides invoked social stigma and family honour. In the end, Rachna moved to a new house close to her marital home and the two worked out an arrangement to keep out of each other's hair.

"I do not want to marry again, so a divorce does not matter. But it is a hindrance that I am still married on paper when I try to go back to dating," says Sunil, a doctor whose marriage with Rachna has dissolved into what many now call a 'quiet divorce'.

At 39, Rishika Chauhan consciously chose to avoid the drama of divorce to retain her parents' support. "For all practical purposes, I'm single," she says. "If I'd asked for a divorce, there would've been no support, no money, only shame. In Rajput families, divorce is a sin. Why set myself on



fire to prove a point?" Married young, she spent nearly a decade largely confined to the rajwada, where motherhood and a sprawling mansion defined her world. After nine years of marriage, she moved to the nearest city under the respectable pretext of "better schools" for her child, started a clothing line and rebuilt her life with help from her parents. She still visits the rajwada, performs the expected matrimonial duties and publicly maintains the marriage. In practice, her vacations and decisions are all solo.

## Comfort over companionship

India remains one of the world's lowest-divorce societies. Data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21) shows that fewer than 1% of women and about 0.3% of men report being divorced or separated. Even as lawyers and sociologists point to a visible rise in urban divorce filings linked to financial independence, shifting social norms and women's empowerment, divorce continues to be the exception; they just called it "adjusting".

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## When separation isn't affordable

Jerath says that in older couples, particularly those in their fifties, the resistance to divorce is higher. "That demographic rarely considers divorce," she says, "because the focus shifts to children, age and exhaustion rather than liberation."

Gender expectations further complicate matters. "Husbands are often advised not to initiate a divorce because the moment they do, the wife may respond with maintenance claims or domestic violence proceedings. There's also the fear that half their assets will go so they compromise and co-exist. Wives usually turn to court only when circumstances become unlivable. Many are financially dependent, and their threshold for filing comes after domestic violence, adultery or prolonged conflict," says Jerath.

Among lower-income families, informal separation is routine. "People in the lower social strata often assume that years of living apart automatically translate to legal separation. That keeps many stuck in limbo," she says.

Like Pallavi Gupta, a gig worker with a home services company. Her marriage collapsed after years of daily fights over money, schooling, groceries and alcohol. "He used to drink and abuse me. One day, he threw me out of the house. Bas, khata!" she says. Today, she has no clue about his whereabouts. "It's just easier telling people he's dead," says Gupta.

"If I apply for anything — like buying a house — everyone asks for a husband's signature. I add my father's name. Why go searching for a man who doesn't exist in my life?" Gupta's quiet divorce was not a choice but the only exit available to her.

\*Names of couples have been changed to protect privacy

— With inputs from Himanshi Dhawan

**I take care of the house, the bills, the future. I'm not hiding anything. She has her space, I have mine. We don't interfere. It works**

Ritesh Arora

**“ Why should I jump into the furnace? Divorce is a war where everyone loses**

Radhika Arora

Food educators are teaching young urbanites to spot what's edible, even as chefs turn forest knowledge into fine-dining narratives

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The resin of the Chinese lacquer tree can trigger intense itching. In Duhum, a remote village in Arunachal Pradesh's Chug Valley, only one 60-year-old is known to harvest it without breaking into a rash. Phurshing, as the resin is locally known, once eased labour pain and polished tableware. Today, women from the same village are turning it into corn tarts at Damu's Heritage Dine, an eatery rooted in Monpa tribal traditions and supported by the World Wide Fund for Nature-India (WWF).

Last month, the women at Damu's trekked 12 hours out of their valley with half a kilo of foraged phurshing before flying out to Delhi for a sold-out five-course pop-up at Sidecar, a South Delhi bar, opening with their signature Phurshing Gombu, maize tarts with slow-roasted lacquer resin and yak ghee. "When Damu's was conceived, the team listed forgotten dishes. Phurshing gombu was among them but I hadn't heard of it," says Leike Chomu, Damu's manager.

Their Delhi tour wound through a Japanese sandwich shop, tastings at the University of Chicago Centre and The Kunj mall, and everywhere, the backstory of Phurshing Gombu held audiences rapt. "Earlier, there was hunting and logging of forest resources," she says. "With Damu's, our community business helps protect the forest and empowers locals," adds Chomu, whose 12-seater dinner won a responsible tourism award last year.

## Forest wisdom to fine dining

For centuries, foraging has been the quiet knowledge of tribal communities, rural households and the urban poor. Even today, in Indian cities, you might see women from marginalised communities combining parks and green pockets for wild greens or mushrooms for dinner. Yet, something is shifting in how foraging is being reclaimed and repositioned. Chefs, researchers and food educators are pushing foraged ingredients to the centre of the table as expressions of terroir and ecological wisdom.

# Forest kitchens to chef menus, foraging is taking Indian dining back to the wild



**GROUNDED:** Foraging walks led by Waghoba Habitat Foundation in Mumbai's Aarey forest often end in pop-up meals (top and left)

Globally, Rene Redzepi of Noma, the Michelin-star restaurant in Copenhagen, popularised this survival practice into a sophisticated culinary discipline, encouraging chefs to reconnect with landscapes and indigenous traditions. In India, chefs like

& Pals, a new cocktail bar in Delhi, began in Kumaon's hills where they discovered the dry, discarded Myoli fruit. Rana climbed trees to collect it and later paired it with pine leaves to balance its dryness. Their cocktail — a blend of tequila, pine-leaf vermouth, Myoli cordial and spice tincture — became the star on opening day.

As interest in lesser-known ingredients grows, food educators are leading walks through parks and forests, teaching young urbanites to spot wild leaves, fruits, flowers and mushrooms.

**Truth about wild mushrooms**  
In India, mushroom foraging has long been part of food cultures. Today, guided monsoon walks teach participants how to distinguish edible fungi from toxic

# Bringing the moon to Mumbai and other lunar and loo-ny thoughts

**8am** Election mornings in Mumbai have a familiar rhythm: mild domestic combat and misplaced civic pride. After a brief argument with my daughter on why her school is open while other schools are shut because of the BMC elections, I tell her, 'The only candidate you are likely to support is Mr Beast and I've checked, he is not standing for the elections. So, go to school.' I'm not being entirely facetious. But if Mr Beast took it up as a YouTube challenge, he could probably fix all our potholes in two days.

**8.10am** I wave goodbye to the man of the house, who has already voted at 7.15 am sharp. This is after we've had a discussion in which we both agreed that it was completely pointless for us to vote because we would cancel each other out. One vote for his party, one for mine, the needle swinging left and right until it landed firmly at zero.

**8.30am** I enter the polling booth and wait my turn. The woman in front looks closely and says, 'I recognise you.' I smile politely. Then she adds, 'Raveena Tandon, right?' I deny this allegation. She insists, I wave my voter ID triumphantly. Not just as proof of eligibility, but of her failing eyesight. In my case, documentation is not just administrative; it's existential.

**8.40am** I am ushered into the voting room. After all the speeches about the sacredness of democracy, I am asked to go behind a setup so dubious it resembles a school science project. The voting machine is hidden behind a cardboard box that looks like it once housed an Onida TV sometime in the late eighties. I'm not asking for luxury, just a cardboard box that looks like perhaps it once held a Panasonic flat screen instead.

**8.45am** On my way out, a friendly policeman stops me for a selfie. He says, 'Madam, you look better in real life.' I briefly debate whether this is a compliment or an insult, then decide not to question him. He has a gun. I have an eyebrow tweezers. We are not equals.

**12.30pm** Trying to read in my hammock, I have to dislodge myself because my dog is barking incessantly at my poor gardener. Lately, the only way to calm him down is to play fetch. In the middle of my simultaneously being a bowler and wicketkeeper, my cousin, who works for a large investment firm, messages me two 'solid' stock tips. One says markets will turn around in two weeks because 'Boss' spoke to top guys at Kotak.' The other says markets will keep falling for six months because 'Girish bhai came to office and told Boss'. When I ask which tip is reliable, he suggests I speak to my astrologer. This may not be as absurd as it sounds because a business paper once carried an article about how stock market investors consult astrologers on a daily basis. My CA keeps insisting Indian markets have 'trampo-

## Mrs. Funnybones



TWINKLE KHANNA

line-like resilience'. Personally, I think it's more like bungee jumping. Even if the harness doesn't snap, you're still left hanging mid-air.

**3pm** I watch a clip of Aamir Khan voting in the BMC elections. He speaks in Marathi, is asked to repeat his message in Hindi, and replies, 'In Hindi? This is Maharashtra.' Language is indeed, a bigger issue for the BMC than drainage. In the lead-up to the elections, there were furious debates about Marathi versus Hindi, and in 2008, the BMC tried conducting all administrative work only in Marathi. This led to a backlash in every possible language and forced an immediate retreat. Ideology is powerful until you have to fill out long forms.

**3.30pm** On the way to fetch my daughter, I pass numerous signs pointing the way to Mumbai Airport. I, of course, grew up calling it Bombay Airport. What confused me though is why Mumbai is still written in English everywhere. If linguistic purity is the goal, shouldn't we commit fully? Which brings me to toilets. I have a simple test for politicians who want to change names, languages, and signage. I want to ask them what kind of toilet do they have at home. If this were a courtroom drama, some one would shout, 'Objection, milord' and I would say, 'There is a connection.' Because if you are passionately opposed to English, but sit every morning on an English toilet, then that reeks of, well, a certain level of hypocrisy.

**I have a simple test for politicians eager to rename things: what kind of toilet do you have at home. If you're passionately opposed to English, but use an English toilet, then that reeks of, well, a certain level of hypocrisy**

lands directly at their Achilles' heel, where he nips at them, not out of aggression, but out of frustration. The same frustration that makes perfectly reasonable Mumbaiites scream at traffic lights, stock markets, potholes, and municipal announcements about language. Like the rest of us, Jeeves has also internalised the chaos. My therapist would call it unprocessed rage. So, if you have ever wondered why folks in Mumbai are always so stressed, please look at my dog: formerly docile, currently feral. He answers to whatever name you shout loudest, hoping that after paying his dues, he might someday get a treat or two. In Mumbai, we have all unleashed our inner Jeevda, so we go on, jumping over broken sidewalks, stomping on garbage, sticking our inked finger out, more out of habit than hope.

**4.30pm** On my way back, the unchanging state of our roads convinces me that it doesn't matter who wins, our roads and our kismat will remain the same. We will continue being recipients of the BMC's unique space programme, bringing lunar surfaces directly to citizens. The BMC truly believes in equality. They are determined that each Mumbaiite should have their own pothole and hopefully, we will soon get to name them as well. In Marathi, of course.

est. He advises chefs on what's safe to eat raw and what must be cooked, and leads seven-hour foraging walks through Aarey that introduce greens like nal bhaji and tubers such as kon and karanda, often culminating in forest pop-up meals. "When divorced from ecological priorities, it can lead to overharvesting and exploitation," he warns. But food, he believes, can soften tough conversations. "Aarey has been very politicised. Food takes the edge off such debates."

Menus by foraging chefs are, by design, only a fraction wild. "The menu at Naar is about two percent foraged. It's impossible to have a fully foraged menu. Our team doesn't live in the jungle," says Sadhu, who has worked with hyperlocal ingredients for over a decade, first at Mumbai's Masque and now at the 16-seater Naar, on a cliff in Darwa village near Kasauli in Himachal. "It's funny when people say 'foraged mint' or 'foraged berries'. You can't grow mint or apples at home and call it foraged. That's whitewashing. It has to be wild," he says. His horticultural team grows and tests ingredients to avoid stressing fragile ecosystems. Recent expeditions have yielded wild marigold, lavender and rhubarb — some churned into ice cream, others crystallised into chips.

## The city as pantry

Foraging need not belong only to forests. What if the city itself were a pantry, with edible plants sprouting between cracked tiles and roadsides? That idea drives Forgotten Greens, a project by Shruti Tharayil that began as a Facebook page in 2018 and now draws over 20,000 followers to walks, workshops and research on uncultivated greens.

On her walks — from Chennai and Coimbatore to Surat and Delhi — she introduces weeds with long culinary histories like Bengal dayflower for monsoon fritters, stinking cassia that mellows when cooked and salsify, an aquatic herb that can slip into dal, stir-fries, salads and pesto.

"Purslane, an edible weed rich in omega-3 and vitamins, grows everywhere in big cities. Other weeds like black nightshade and creeping woodsorrel grow abundantly around sidewalks," says Tharayil, who tosses up purslane theplas, Bengal dayflower tempuras, cutlets and dumplings in her workshops.

Of course, city foraging is complicated by trash but Tharayil sees it as part of the fix. "Our public spaces are littered. But if communities start coming together to forage, they will also start caring about waste management." For her, foraging isn't about fancy wild-food pop-ups. "Chef-driven wild-to-fork dinners are expensive. Even I can't afford some of them," she says. "It's about reclaiming our commons. When people start foraging, they start paying attention to nature around them."



Prateek Sadhu's Naar is set amidst mountain forests



Science is the cognition of necessity, freedom is the recognition of necessity

Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi

## FIVE-POINT AGENDA FOR MAHARASHTRA'S TRIPLE-ENGINE CITIES

**D**ÉJÀ VU can be both fascinating and frustrating. In 1987, I wrote a cover story on the state of the then Bombay Municipal Corporation's (BMC) services and finances. The corporation had spent 64 paise of every rupee—nearly two-thirds—on itself, leaving little for the city's improvement after covering contingencies. The story in other cities was not dissimilar, often worse. Those in power had little inclination to invest in cities' future.

Nearly four decades later, the slogan engineering for the 2026 municipal polls revealed little has changed. Today's BMC—in which Bombay has been replaced by Brihanmumbai—is the richest municipal corporation in India. Its budget of ₹74,427 crore is twice that of Goa, and larger than that of nine states. The pie chart on how much is spent on what shows the spending on salaries and administration is lower, but the quality of spending seems worse. The city is filthier, potholes define the contours of the roads, the curse of water shortage is visible every dawn and dusk as tankers career down streets blaring power horns, the air quality is worse, flooding is perennial and primary health services are worse. The picture in other cities is equally bad.

This week, the BJP and Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis established their dominance across urban Maharashtra, sweeping elections in every major city—Mumbai, Pune, Thane, Nagpur—and ending the day with a tally of 25 out of 29 municipal corporations. The Thackeray cousins have retained relevance and survived to fight another day. The big losers are Ajit Pawar, who tied up with

Sharad Pawar and fought against the BJP, and Eknath Shinde, who tied up with BJP but finds his footprint shrinking on his home turf.

The dust and decibels will settle down in the coming weeks. The mandate demands that the BJP walks the talk. Maharashtra is among the most urbanised states. Urban India is home to over 550 million and, by 2047, over 900 million Indians will be living in cities. Urbanisation is known to be a force multiplier of growth, but it requires a viable, sustainable model to operate on.

The momentum of the grand victory affords Fadnavis an opportunity to design a template for cities to drive growth. Here is a five-point agenda—essential steps that could create a Maharashtra Model for national adoption.

**Authority for accountability:** The elected representatives of the cities must have the freedom to propose, own and execute their ideas for development. The BMC budget, for instance, is prepared and presented by the municipal commissioner, not the elected House. For starters, why not authorise the BMC standing committee's chief to prepare the budget? Sure, the state government can wield a veto. Three decades after the 74th amendment, the promise of self-governance is effectively hostage to the whims of state governments. Enabling authority will ensure accountability and pave the way for a directly elected mayor.

**Clean up the cities:** Mumbai is on the list of the 10 dirtiest cities in India. It dumps nearly 2 billion litres of sewage into the sea every day and is home to the largest garbage dump/landfill in the country. There is the issue of scale and legacy, but there is no escaping inefficiency and corruption. Why not adopt global best practices—a blend of technology and behavioural psychology from the smart cities of Songdo, Tokyo, Singapore, Seoul or Shanghai? Change calls for a sustained campaign and policy to incentivise homeowners and businesses for adopting modern sanitation methods.

**Tanker-mukt water and clean air:** Mumbai is not as bad as Delhi. The bad news is the state's urban air quality is getting worse—19 cities in Maharashtra consistently fail to meet the standards. This calls for more monitoring stations, last-mile e-bus connectivity and a policy with exemplary provisions for construction practices. In 2014, the BJP promised a 'tanker-mukt' Maharashtra. Yet, every city is haunted by the tanker mafia. The combination of options ranges from learning membrane-based recycling from New Water Singapore and solar-powered desalination plants to efficient scalable desalination tech from Israel, Carlsbad and Saudi Arabia.

**Invest in connectivity:** Ideally, cities should move towards walk-to-work facilitation. In its absence, the effort should be to cut commute time and enable last-mile connectivity. Maharashtra's cities—especially Mumbai and Pune—face last-mile disconnects. In Mumbai, those using the metro or the airport struggle for connections. Cars drive off sweeping flyovers and into old road jams. In Pune, the metro is on an infinite crawl. Connectivity between IT parks and residential areas is poor. Commute times in Mumbai, Thane and Pune are less about distance and more about choked roads. The 2024 Budget created a ₹1-lakh-crore fund for 'urban challenges'. Fadnavis may want to look at it to solve his state's last-mile problems.

**Make cities liveable:** Quality of life is a causal factor and a consequence of prosperity. The quality of liveability determines investment and reinvestment. The joke in Mumbai's Bandra or Pune's Koregaon Park is that you pay top-rupees for property and drive into a traffic jam of potholes. Property value in Mumbai is comparable to global cities, but it is ranked 158th on the Mercer Quality of Living index. The aspiration of Mumbai to be a global financial centre or Pune to be a start-up capital or Thane to be an industrial hub or Nagpur to be an aero-logistics hub calls for improved liveability—construct pavements, rid potholes, and build green zones and walking spaces.

Cities are engines of ideas and catalysts of growth. As John F Kennedy warned, we neglect cities at our peril, "for in neglecting them we neglect the nation".

### QUOTE CORNER



[The US] mainstream media are so lame or so bought that they report that the Iranian government has lost control of the economy without saying that the US has crushed the Iranian economy. If the attempt at regime change through maximum pressure doesn't work, I would expect outright attacks by the US very soon.

Jeffrey Sachs, professor of economics at Columbia University

We are exiting the world in which central banks were run by economists. Once it's gone, our prediction is that it won't come back.

Wolfgang Munchau, director of Euromoney, on the Trump administration's prosecution of former Fed chief Jerome Powell

I need FIFA to clearly condemn actions that kill footballers. For example, the financing of a genocide and the genocide itself.

Hedvig Lindahl, Swedish goalkeeper, refusing to join the FIFA Legends team

### MAILBAG letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Delivery pressures

Ref: *Don't dictate business model to cover government deficiencies* (Jan 17). With both consumers and investors favouring quick commerce, government intervention in such a dynamic market must avoid stifling innovation. However, the move to discourage rigid 10-minute delivery commitments is justified. Algorithm-driven pressure to meet these promises has compromised delivery workers' safety and endangered other road users. India's quick commerce can still remain globally competitive while ensuring safer working conditions and more sustainable efficiencies.

N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

#### Protecting workers

Ten-minute delivery is a marketing strategy, not a customer demand. When business steps into a high-risk operational domain, the government has to protect gig workers. Regulatory safeguards are es-

sential, but a business model thriving on speed and algorithm-driven wages is a disruptor. The platforms should have settled this issue, but their failure necessitated government intervention.

Rajarao Kumar, Bengaluru

#### Waning Pawar

Ref: *Uncertain future ahead of Maha dynasts* (Jan 17). The Pawar family's political influence in Maharashtra faces significant shrinkage following the poor performance in the civic elections, especially in Mumbai, threatening their decades-long dominance. With Sharad Pawar's waning electoral appeal, the Nationalist Congress must either reinvent its strategy or risk becoming a marginal player in the political landscape.

P V Prakash, Mumbai

#### Beyond subsidy

Ref: *Strengthening India's fertiliser backbone* (Jan 16). The article correctly points out that the fertiliser subsidy regime has led to unintended consequences such as excessive urea use, nutrient imbal-

ance in soil, and an ever-growing fiscal burden. The suggestion to gradually bring urea under the nutrient-based subsidy system is rational and forward-looking. Equally important is the emphasis on protecting small farmers through targeted support during any transition. The broader message is significant—fertiliser policy should no longer be viewed merely as a subsidy issue, but as a strategic tool for achieving long-term agricultural sustainability and environmental resilience.

Sanjeev Jha, New Delhi

#### Strategic sovereignty

Ref: *When dust settles on the shadow war waged in Iran* (Jan 17). The challenge in front of the Indian government presents a moment of truth. In trying to secure the Chabahar port in Iran from the looming American sanctions in April 2026, we should end the search for a waiver. Protecting our sovereignty in the deal would entail developing a system of non-dollar payments, in a manner favourable to regional objectives.

Adnan Koduvally, Kozhikode

#### Citizens' kindness

Ref: *Be kind, rewind* (Jan 17). It's unfortunate that kindness toward strangers is gradually declining across India. Recently, four Tamil men harassed an innocent traveller from another state in front of everyone on a train for social media reels. Yet, no one stepped forward to help. Thankfully, there are still some good souls who care: a poor worker recently handed over lost jewellery to the authorities. We need more such people.

S Sundareswara Pandian, Kovur

#### Tree rights

Ref: *Flag removed from tree atop Thiruparakundram hill, Dargah files plaint* (Jan 17). The tree in question is sacred to Lord Shiva and Karthikeya. It is an indigenous species whose leaves are used in pujas and in Ayurvedic medicine. Even so, the focus on its 'ownership' is misplaced. Placing flags or posters on the tree should be considered inappropriate, and every tree has the right to stand and live without human disturbance.

Komala Brunschwig, email

## IRAN INFERNO: PRELUDE TO A CATACLYSM



### POWER & POLITICS

**PRABHU CHAWLA**  
prabhu.chawla@newindianexpress.com  
Follow him on X @PrabhuChawla

**H**ISTORY offers a grim and recurring warning. When rulers confuse personal ego with national destiny, when ambition is mistaken for greatness, and when power is pursued without restraint, nations are pushed toward catastrophe. Today, that familiar and dangerous pattern is unfolding once again. This time in Iran, a nation standing at the epicentre of domestic implosion and international confrontation, with consequences that could reverberate across the world.

At the heart of this crisis stands the Khomeini-led regime, clinging to authority through repression rather than legitimacy. The domestic economy has been sacrificed at the altar of ideological vanity. At the same time, the external pressure intensifies. Donald Trump's rhetoric roars with threats of intervention and more punitive sanctions. Beijing and Moscow, sensing both strategic opportunity and ideological alignment, have rallied behind Tehran, fortifying Iran's resistance against Washington. Between these opposing power blocs stands India, caught in an excruciating bind. It is unable to abandon Iran entirely because of geography, energy needs and regional interests, yet equally unable to openly defy the US and its tightening sanctions regime.

Washington's message has been unambiguous. Nations that continue dealings with Tehran will pay a heavy price through sanctions and additional tariffs. New Delhi, reading the storm clouds carefully, has already begun recalibrating. Indian citizens have been

advised to leave Iran immediately. Strategic enthusiasm for the Chabahar port project has visibly cooled. It was once touted as India's gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia. As tensions escalate, a chilling question hangs in the air: Could this Iranian crisis snowball into a third world war, or trigger the collapse of the already fragile global economic order? If world leaders fail to meet, talk and compromise, the answer may no longer be hypothetical.

The Iranian crisis today is not merely a geopolitical chessboard. It is a human tragedy unfolding in real time. The Indian government's urgent advisory urging all nationals to leave Iran underscores the severity of the situation. From Tehran to Mashhad, Tabriz to Isfahan, Shiraz to Qom, streets are simmering with violence and rage. Brutal repression has become routine. Protests flare, are crushed and re-emerge with renewed fury. Estimates suggest that nearly 10,000 Indian nationals remain stranded across Iran. Among them are students pursuing higher education, religious pilgrims seeking spiritual fulfilment, businessmen trapped by frozen transactions, engineers employed in technical projects, and tourists caught unawares by a rapidly-collapsing security environment.

The current Iranian inferno did not erupt overnight. The turmoil is a culmination of centuries of historical contradictions, political betrayals, social tensions and ideological experiments gone wrong. Iran was once among humanity's greatest civilisational beacons. The Persian empire dazzled the ancient world under rulers like Cyrus the Great and Darius, leaving behind monumental legacies such as Persepolis. Persian culture gifted humanity poetry, philosophy, science, and art of extraordinary depth and beauty. Ferdowsi, Rumi and Hafez shaped universal thought. Archi-



he mobilised the disillusioned, framing modernity as moral decay and authoritarian rule as Western subjugation.

By the late 1978, Iran was ablaze with revolutionary fervour. The Shah fled in January 1979. On February 1, Khomeini returned to Tehran to a rapturous reception and a new Iran was born as an Islamic Republic. Today's Iran bears the heavy burden of that transformation. Nearly 90 million people live under crushing economic and political pressure. Inflation soars relentlessly. Unemployment is widespread, especially among the youth. Sanctions cripple industry and trade, while corruption and mismanagement corrode what remains.

Despite holding 208 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, around 12 percent

darker currents were taking shape. The Shah's secret police, SAVAK, was cultivating fear through torture and surveillance. Gargantuan corruption at the highest levels widened economic inequality. Into this volatile mix stepped Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, an exiled cleric who transformed grievance into ideology. Broadcasting sermons from France, he mobilised the disillusioned, framing modernity as moral decay and authoritarian rule as Western subjugation.

The choice before humanity is stark. Continue down the path of pride and power, and risk dragging the world into irreversible ruin—or step back, listen, compromise and choose coexistence over confrontation. Iran's inferno is not just its own. It is a warning flare to the world. Whether it becomes the spark of global collapse or the catalyst for collective wisdom will depend on what leaders do next. The future, precariously balanced, is watching.

## THE CRISIS OF RELATIONSHIP RECESSION



**GEETHA RAVICHANDRAN**  
Former bureaucrat and author of *The Spell of the Rain Tree*

**R**ECENTLY, we have had a number of media personalities and social media influencers weighing in on marriage—with some even calling it "an outdated institution". It reflects changing value systems and the relationship recession that today's world faces.

Even a few decades ago, marriage was considered a sine qua non for every young man and woman in India, arranged by families within the community. Children were considered a safety network that would support parents in old age and perpetuate the bloodlines. Problems in relationships were often swept under the carpet, although legislation was introduced to tackle conspicuous maladies like dowry and domestic violence.

Women often found themselves in an unequal relationship, with little access to economic resources and mobility. In recent years, the reach of education

and employment of women has proved to be a game-changer. Across the globe, women have begun to focus on personal goals and financial independence. They have become empowered, spell out their terms and evaluate options before entering into relationships. There is an increase in the average age of marriage for both men and women, especially in urban India. Child marriage, although illegal, is still prevalent in pockets of rural India.

The stigma that was attached to single, unmarried and childless women is receding today. The main reason is that more women are gainfully employed, take risks and enjoy social mobility. Today's women do not merely subscribe to the roles thrust upon them by societal expectations. They have discovered that they possess agency. The movie *Queen* (2013) was a rhapsody of how a single woman transforms her rejection by celebrating herself on a solo honeymoon.

Being single is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the conscious decision made by young individuals to stay single. Today's women do not see it as a milestone to be achieved by a certain age. An increase in divorce rates also reflects the mismatch in expectations.

Active sex selection with a preference for male children is coming back, contributing to the 'marriage squeeze'. Gender disparity resulting in a lack of eligible women in certain communities has given women more bargaining power in decision-making. While parents and

elders despair at delays or even rejection of marriage, many youngsters have thought it through, having observed the limitations of family structures and the unequal dynamics at play.

The impact of marriage on career prospects, the cost of raising children and the support they can count on are all analysed before decisions are made. As a result, there is a rising scepticism about marriage as an institution across communities. Even the pithy signs on



Higher education, rising costs and skewed demographics are changing relationship choices the world over. As societies age and loneliness bites, many countries and communities are trying to reverse the trend

the back of trucks—'Hum do, humare do'—seem to have disappeared. An openness to unconventional live-in relationships, without seeking validation from society, is on the rise.

In China, November 11 is celebrated as Singles' Day. Sales and discounts have transformed it into a mega shopping festival. But the fast-rising number of singles across the globe has consequences beyond the commercial, with a fall in fertility rates below the replace-

ment rates in certain countries like India. The resultant increase in ageing populations has implications on productivity and economic growth. This is, however, not uniform across communities. There is segmental asymmetry in populations as patriarchal and authoritarian sub-groups impose marriage on youngsters and make child-bearing a moral duty for women. This is resulting in skewed demographics.

The numbers, however, do not tell the whole story. The reduction in human interactions has weakened social skills. There is a predicted increase in robotic companions, with cinema even depicting human-robot romances. While this seems outlandish, the future would see the culmination of many influences. There is a growing movement of pro-natalists promoting larger families for social and economic reasons.

Japan and South Korea are among the countries offering cash incentives at every stage of a relationship—for dating, getting married and having children. Whether this will bring the desired results remains to be seen.

The rise of artificial intelligence tools has brought in a new dimension by redefining of human productivity. When the centrality of work as a source of identity no longer holds, people may seek intimacies to fill the vacuum. While youngsters enjoy their state of solitary splendour as a life choice for now, it could well be a cyclical phenomenon as the cost of social isolation rises.

**SHIFTING ORDER** American policies clearly reflect a presidency unbound by precedent

# Trump 2.0 altered the image of United States in first year

**O**ne year into US President Donald Trump's second term, ending January 20, 2026, it is increasingly difficult to separate his domestic agenda from his foreign policy. Both reflect the same governing instinct: to exercise American power visibly, forcefully and with little regard for longstanding norms.

At home, that instinct has taken the form of the most expansive immigration enforcement campaign in modern US history. Federal agents have appeared in parks, parking lots, farms, factories, outside courthouses and along city streets. Videos of masked officers detaining immigrants have flooded social media. In less than a year, roughly half a million people have been deported. Construction projects have slowed, restaurants have struggled to staff kitchens, and delivery bicycles have been left abandoned after riders were detained mid-shift. The administration also tightened H-1B visa approvals, restricting skilled foreign workers and adding pressure to tech and engineering sectors, with companies reporting slower hiring and difficulty filling specialised roles.

At the southern border, Trump moved swiftly. By declaring a national emergency and effectively halting asylum, his administration reduced illegal crossings to levels not seen in decades. That same logic — borders first, obligations second — has shaped his foreign policy. In Europe, renewed pressure on Nato allies to sharply increase defence spending has shaken confidence in US security guarantees. For decades, American leadership rested as

much on predictability as on power. Under Trump, predictability has become conditional, forcing European governments to accelerate discussions about strategic autonomy.

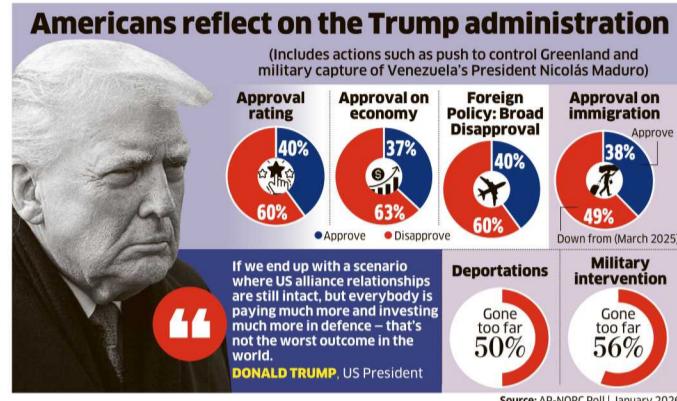
#### King of tariffs'

In Asia, Trump has revived a confrontational approach toward China, reimposing high tariffs and tightening restrictions on advanced technology. Supply chains have strained because of his "trade wars." Allies such as Japan and South Korea have welcomed Washington's tougher posture toward Beijing, even as they navigate the uncertainty of a more transactional United States.

West Asia has presented some of the clearest tests of Trump's second-term foreign policy. In Gaza, the administration has sought to shape the postwar landscape through direct involvement, backing transitional governance arrangements while sidelining traditional diplomatic frameworks. Critics warn that bypassing established multilateral mechanisms risks deepening divisions in an already fractured region.

In Ukraine, Trump has pressed for a negotiated end to the war with Russia, signalling impatience with what he has described as an open-ended conflict. His administration has floated peace frameworks that put Ukraine at a disadvantage as he emphasised rapid de-escalation, even as fighting continues. Allies have grown uneasy that US policy could prioritise disengagement over long-term security guarantees, while Moscow continues to test Western resolve.

Iran has remained another flashpoint. Trump has revived and expanded economic pres-



sure on Tehran, imposing new sanctions aimed at financial networks linked to regional proxies. He also authorised US strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities that he said "obliterated" the programme. The strategy reflects a belief that sustained pressure can curb Iran's influence without triggering direct confrontation, though critics argue it risks further escalation.

#### 'Neo-imperialism'

"In practice, the president's policies smack of neo-imperialism, not neo-isolationism," Charles Kupchan, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a professor at Georgetown University, wrote.

It is in Latin America, however, that Trump has most dramatically challenged diplomatic convention. Trump authorised an operation that resulted in the removal of Venezuela's president, Nicolás Maduro, who was taken into US custody to face long-standing federal charges, including

narcoterrorism. The administration framed the move as a law-enforcement action rather than regime change, arguing that sovereignty could not shield leaders accused of crimes involving Americans.

Whether viewed as overdue accountability or a dangerous precedent, the episode marked a rare departure from modern practice. For decades, US administrations relied on sanctions, isolation and negotiations, stopping short of treating the capture of a sitting foreign leader as an explicit objective. Under Trump, that boundary has been decisively blurred.

Trump's willingness to upset assumptions has extended even to questions of territory. His renewed push to acquire Greenland has unsettled allies. Trump has framed Greenland as a "strategic" necessity, citing its Arctic location and growing importance as ice melts and great-power competition intensifies with China and Russia. For him, territory, like trade or security commitments, is negotiable. Supporters see a president finally confronting geopolitical realities without the constraints of diplomatic etiquette. Critics see a pattern of norm-breaking that may be easier to begin than to contain. At home, the consequences of Trump's approach are reshaping politics. Immigration raids in Democratic-led cities have triggered protests and confrontations. Polls show growing unease with aggressive tactics, even among some voters who support stronger borders.

In less than a year, assumptions about American leadership have shifted. Allies are hedging. Adversaries are recalculating. Institutions built on US participation, including the United Nations and Nato, are adjusting to its unpredictability. Trump is not withdrawing the US from the world. He is redefining how it asserts itself — less as a steward of order than as a power willing to redraw it.

Reuters/Agencies

# US to slap 10% tariffs on 8 European nations over Greenland

**European Union weighing response, says council chief**

NUUK/ASUNCION, AP/PTI/REUTERS

President Donald Trump said on Saturday he would impose a 10% import tax starting in February on goods from eight European nations over their opposition to American control of Greenland.

Trump said in a social media post that Denmark, Norway, Sweden, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Finland would face the tariff, which would rise to 25% on June 1 if a deal is not reached for the "complete and total purchase of Greenland" by the United States.

The tariff threat marks a drastic and potentially dangerous escalation in a standoff between Trump and Nato allies, further straining an alliance dating back to 1949 that underpins collective security in Europe and North America.

Reacting to Trump's statement, European Council President Antonio Costa said the EU

will defend international law. "What we can say is that the European Union will always be very firm in defending international law, wherever it may be, which of course begins within the territory of the member states of the European Union," Costa told a press conference following the EU's signing of a free trade agreement with Mercosur. "I am coordinating a joint response," he added.

The Republican president has repeatedly used trade penalties to pressure both allies and rivals, securing investment commitments from some countries while drawing pushback from others, including China, Brazil and India.

Trump said in his Truth Social post that the tariffs were retaliation for recent visits to Greenland by representatives from Britain, the Netherlands and Finland, as well as broader opposition to his efforts to purchase the semi-autonomous territory of Nato-ally Denmark.

He has said Greenland is essential for the "Golden Dome" missile defence system for the US and has argued that Russia and China could seek to take control of the island. Resistance to Trump's ambitions has steadily grown in Europe, even as several countries agreed last year to his 15% tariffs to preserve economic and security ties.

## Biggest purple star sapphire unveiled

COLOMBO, AP/PTI: A Purple Star Sapphire weighing 3,563 carats, which is claimed to be the world's biggest of its kind, was unveiled on Saturday by the owners, who are ready to sell the precious stone, which is estimated to be worth \$300 million.

The round-shaped gem named "Star of Pure Land" is the world's largest documented natural purple star sapphire, said Ashan Amaras-



inghe, a consultant gemologist. "This is the largest purple star sapphire of its kind," he told the media.

## Israel objects to US announcement of Gaza committee members

NAHARIYA (ISRAEL), AP/PTI: Israel's government is objecting to the White House announcement of leaders who will play a role in overseeing next steps in Gaza.

The rare criticism from Israel of its close ally in Washington says the Gaza executive committee "was not coordinated with Israel and is contrary to its policy," without details. Saturday's statement also said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has told the foreign ministry to contact Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

The committee announced by the White House on Friday

## US President is a criminal: Khamenei

DUBAI, AP/PTI: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Saturday branded US President Donald Trump a "criminal" for supporting protesters in Iran, and blamed demonstrators for causing thousands of deaths.

In a speech broadcast by state television, Khamenei said the protests had left "several thousand" people dead — the first indication from an Iranian leader of the extent of the casualties from the wave of protests that began December 28 and

led to a bloody crackdown. "In this revolt, the US president made remarks in person, encouraged seditious people to go ahead and said: 'We do support you, we do support you militarily,'" said Khamenei, who has final say on all state matters.

He described the protesters as "foot-soldiers" of the United States.

## SUDOKU X - 3800

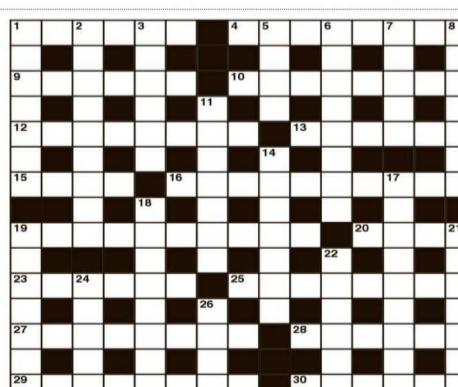


## Hindu man crushed to death in Bangladesh

NEW DELHI/DHAKA, PTI: A Hindu fuel station worker was crushed to death in Bangladesh after he tried to stop a vehicle from leaving a petrol pump without paying, police said.

It has not been confirmed whether the incident, which took place on Friday in Rajbari district, is related to the recent spate of violence targeting Hindus in Bangladesh. The victim has been identified as 30-year-old Ripon Saha, The Daily Star newspaper reported on Saturday, quoting police officials. He was working at Karim Filling Station in Goalanda Mor at the time of the incident, it said.

## ◆ SUNDAY CROSSWORD CHALLENGE 2663 ◆



## SOLUTIONS TO CROSSWORD 4023

### CRYPTIC

**ACROSS:** 9, in a tr-ice 10, Sea (see) 11, RIP-saw 12, Sam-pan 13, S-ince-re 14, Reel 15, Difficulty 17, Addition 18, Re-moved 19, Well 21, Excite (ex-site) 24, Stretched one's legs 27, Handel (handle) 29, Caws (cause) 30, Dis-play 33, Fair-isle 35, Slipping on 36, Mint 37, Observe 38, Scr-E-am 40, Screen 41, Use (ewes) 42, Tend-erly.

**DOWN:** 1, Un-easiness 2, Step 3, P-inn-acle 4, Be-astly 5, Name-calling 6, Fri-endless 7, Spirit 8, Makes out 10, Sunny 11, Floo-re-0 12, E-nido-w 22, Chea-pen 23, Chicken's out 25, Talks round 26, Season-able 28, At a pin-C 31, Imposing 32, Directs 34, Rot-ten 35, Serge 39, Reed (rev).

### EASY

**ACROSS:** 9, Dead beat 10, Can 11, Output 12, Street 13, Remnant 14, Lies 15, Antarctica 17, Colossal 18, Hostile 19, Star 21, Income 24, Feminine intuition 27, Kitten 29, Edge 30, Nunmetry 33, Beetroot 35, Playwright 36, Grin 37, Pointer 38, Euston 40, Calico 41, Toy 42, Tadpoles.

**DOWN:** 1, Setting off 2, Idle 3, Vertical 4, Steroid 5, Incarcerate 6, Tortellini 1, Styli 8, Lukewarm 10, Comma 16, Attempt 20, Thing 22, Chianti 23, Uncertainty 25, Nicompoop 26, North Korea 28, Ice cream 31, Unyieldly 32, Narrate 34, Tennis 35, Petty 39, Soon.

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Interested Consultants / firms who are having specific experience in Project Monitoring Services and having required infrastructure as well as financial capabilities to undertake such services may participate in the tendering process. The details such as Tender fee, EMD, Tender documents etc., are available on KTPP from 19.01.2026 onwards.  
"KSPH & IDCL reserves the right to accept or reject any or all Bids without assigning any reasons."  
Note: Henceforth any changes / modifications in the Tender will be updated only on KTPP.  
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No.KSMCL/e-Tender/Act/33/Tally/2025-26 Date: 17.01.2026

### e-TENDER INVITATION

KSMCL invites e-Tender for selection of Agency to maintain Company accounts in Tally Accounting system at KSMCL through Karnataka Public Procurement Portal (e-procurement).  
**CALENDAR OF EVENTS**  
Tender Reference 33/KSMCL/e-Tender/ACT/Tally/2025-26/2825  
E-Proc reference No. KSMCL/2025-26/SE0056  
Downloading documents from website https://kppp.karnataka.gov.in  
Last date for receiving queries 27.01.2026 Upto 5:00 p.m.  
Pre-bid meeting at H.O. of KSMCL 29.01.2026 at 11:00 a.m.  
Last date and time for uploading of e-tender in E-procurement platform on or before 31/01/2026 Up to 5:00 p.m.  
The Technical Bid will be opened Online by the Authorized Officer on 02/02/2026 at 11:00 a.m.  
Estimated Tender Value Rs.30,00,000/-  
Earnest Money Deposit Rs.60,000/-  
Address for Communication Asst. Manager Karnataka State Minerals Corporation Ltd., TTMC, 'A' Block, 5th Floor, BMTC Building, K.H. Road, Shanthinagar, Bengaluru – 560 027.

Sd/- District Officer, Backward classes Welfare Dept, Hassan Dist, Hassan.







**A**re the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and other investigative agencies selective in targeting the Opposition when elections are due? Prima facie, the ED's response -- and that of the BJP -- has theoretical validity: Action in matters of corruption cannot be timed to electoral phases; if wrongdoing is apparent, it must be pursued regardless of the political calendar; the majesty of the law cannot be arbitrarily suspended to suit the convenience of...

But, is it only a coincidence then that, in a clear pattern, Opposition parties have been regularly targeted before elections, while the ruling party at the Centre has almost never been subjected to such coercive scrutiny? India's Constitution mandates that investigative agencies act impartially, without fear or favour, serving their mandate rather than any one side's political advantage. Yet in the unfolding political narrative of the past decade, a perception has grown that the ED and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) act less as instruments of justice and more as tentacles of political strategy.

Perception in politics

shapes behaviour, confidence and the very sense of fairness that underpins democratic contestation. When millions of voters believe that the electoral field is tilted, the legitimacy of outcomes -- and of the democratic spirit itself -- is imperilled. The perception of bias in India's central agencies, therefore, is not an abstract complaint; it goes to the heart of equitable democratic engagement.

In recent months, this perception has been sharpened by the raid on I-PAC, the political consultancy advising the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal ahead of that state's elections, and the matter is now sub judice. Similarly, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) was subjected to coordinated action by the ED and CBI in the midst of state and general election cycles. Elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) has seen Income Tax searches on DMK chief M K Stalin's family members during the 2021 elections and further ED scrutiny of multiple DMK ministers.

Over the past decade, the incidence of such actions is difficult to dissociate from electoral calendars. Investigative agencies, it appears, do not

# Urgent need for structural reforms

Can our institutions be both powerful & impartial? If they are not, there is a need to take corrective measures

## CHANAKYA'S VIEW



Pavan K Varma

operate in a political vacuum. Their actions have real political consequences -- whether intended or incidental -- when they involve prominent politicians, especially in the phases immediately preceding polls.

Since 2014, multiple analyses of available data indicate that a vast majority -- roughly 95% -- of cases registered by the CBI and ED have been against Opposition politicians rather than those aligned with the ruling alliance. Moreover, the magnitude of enforcement actions has expanded dramatically -- from around a hundred raids by the ED in the decade up to 2014 to several thousand in the decade since. One interpretation could be that the current dispensation is far more active in acting against corruption. But equally, another inference could be that, even if this is so, is corruption so overwhelmingly only the monopoly of the Opposition? It is valid to ask this, because in the current (as per mid-2025) Union Council of Ministers, 29 out of 72 ministers -- roughly 40 per cent -- have, according to their sworn affidavits to the Election Commission, criminal cases against them, including murder, attempt to murder, kidnapping, theft and cheating. Have these been investigated as rigorously or expeditiously?



There is also the colloquial description of the ruling party as the country's biggest 'washing machine'. Politicians against whom there are multiple cases of corruption, which have been systematically highlighted by the BJP itself, suddenly become laundry white after they switch sides to join the party. Cases against them are dropped, files closed or, at the very least, the heat of the investigative agencies goes down to an indiscernible simmer. This again puts a question mark on the independence and impartiality of the investigative process, reinforcing the impression that you will be targeted only if you are on the opposing side of the ruling dispensation.

The short point is that a systemic predominance of scrutiny on one side of the political spectrum, even if it does not intrinsically prove intent, unquestionably nourishes the

perception of asymmetry. In a polity where trust in institutions is already fragile, such perceptions ossify into deep-seated scepticism about fairness in the democratic contest. It is often argued that those at the receiving end of this seemingly partisan investigation process can always knock at the door of the judiciary. That is true, and often the only hope. Yet, the judicial process is tardy and depending on the law against which a person is booked, both draconian -- making bail extremely difficult -- and so long drawn out that the process itself becomes the punishment.

We are not debating here the merits of the allegations against the Opposition parties or leaders within it. Perhaps, they do require investigation. However, in any democracy, if one side enjoys the quiet advantage of institutional neutrality while the other is under a barrage of in-

vestigation -- particularly in the campaign crucible -- the level playing field is compromised. At its core, the charge of misuse of central agencies is not simply about individual cases. It is about trust -- trust in impartiality, trust in equal treatment under law, trust in the integrity of democratic competition. When that trust erodes, the entire democratic enterprise feels the strain.

In this light, a democracy must ask itself a searching question: Can our institutions be both powerful and impartial? If they are not, there is an urgent need to take corrective measures. The judiciary can be a valuable sentinel in ensuring this. It is true that there is widespread corruption in the political system and all political leaders feel that because of the power they wield they will be insulated against legal consequences. For investigative agencies to act against them in an independent, credible and impartial manner, there is an urgent need for structural reforms -- clearer legal safeguards, independence of appointment processes, stronger judicial oversight and transparent protocols for action timelines vis-a-vis electoral processes. It is only then that the efforts to cleanse the system will be universal in scope and not selective in application.

The author is a diplomat and former member of Rajya Sabha. Views expressed are personal.

# A rare saga of a bold General

**T**oday's generation may not remember Lt General SPP Thorat, a courageous army officer from Maharashtra but Army men hold him in high esteem for telling the truth to the powers.

Since the Armed Forces are being regularly discussed in media and social circles with more fervour, especially after the launch of Operation Sindhur, I picked up this autobiography of an extra-ordinary Army officer. Autobiographies are expected to be as honest as possible, detailing the events that happened around the author's stint in any field in a neutral manner and with correct perspectives.

Lt General Thorat retired in May 1961 when the China war had not taken place but many officers posted along the China border, including Thorat, knew about the possibility of aggression. He has recounted his experiences in a gripping manner and with unquestionable integrity. His book stands as high as his stand during his remarkable career.

Shankarrao Pandurang Patil (SPP) Thorat died in 1992 at the age of 86 years. But before that, he had written this biographical account in 1985. Many editions and reprints happened afterwards and in 2025, his son, the former chairman of the NABARD YSP Thorat, revised and expanded this

Book: From Reveille to Retreat  
Author: Lt Gen SPP Thorat  
Publishers: Hedwig Media House  
Pages: 328  
Price: ₹650 (Hard Bound)

latest edition.

I was keen on reading it because of my recent interest in China. At the Bhopal Literature Festival (BLF), at least on two occasions, I had the opportunity to hear from close quarters former ambassadors and China experts talk about the impending threat to India. Thorat's book also has interesting details about China and when one reads today's references and of the time when Krishna Menon was the defence minister of India, one gets to know how things have developed into a full-grown problem for India over the decades.

In terms of the Chinese war, the book says some defeats, like Panipat, are never forgotten. India had lost to China in 1962 when he had just retired. But Thorat had left a written note on strategy and forewarned the government through an advice way back in 1959. It never reached the then PM Jawaharlal Nehru. Thorat had outlined a plan showing "how situation would unfold, warning that unless existing resources were better redeployed and more personnel and supplies were provided, Indian defences would strug-

## BOOK REVIEW



Abhilash Khandekar



gle to respond effectively".

Book tells us that he proposed an alternative to the 'Forward Policy' for engaging the enemy in the battle and even conducted a tactical exercise to support his case.

Thorat's efforts yielded no results. He was labelled an alarmist and warmonger, and his report was dismissed by his superiors.

After the attack occurred, the author who had retired, was hurriedly summoned by a worried Nehru who was surprised that a note of October 8, 1959 warning the government about Chinese risk, had not been shown to him.

As a result of that embarrassment, Thorat was asked to join the National Defence Council and the newly created prestigious Military Affairs Committee by none other than the PM.

Thorat was a bright student and he was selected to join the

Royal Military College, Sandhurst, England in 1924 after grueling tests and interviews. Only 10 students were selected from British India and Burma.

There he got the tough training and returned with flying colours to join the Indian Army which of course was under the British. The experience helped him when he joined the Punjab Regiment during World War II. He has given details of that war in many pages. He was a very well decorated officer by the time he retired and thus was much respected in the Army and political establishment. Having been posted in many places for securing India's border, he had experience of a wide nature.

He was an officer of strong opinions. During his career, he may have had many tough situations to handle but one was much talked about.

He never got along well with the defence minister Krishna Menon. He has openly written that he could have succeeded his good friend General Thimayya when his term ended as Chief of Army Staff in May 1961 but for his difference of opinions with Menon. Menon wanted Thorat to organise defences near McMohan Line for NEFA protection but Thorat had other ideas. He insisted on getting written orders from Menon which never came.

The author is a senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.

# Thick chains we can't see!

## BOB'S BANTER



Robert Clements

As I walk through New York, I notice the dogs. They stride along the pavements, chests puffed out, tails swinging like they pay property tax. Their expressions say, look at where we live. Look at our skyline. Look at the Brooklyn Bridge. Look at traffic that actually respects lanes. Look at our efficient subways.

The dogs seem unbearably smug.

I am about to feel impressed when something metallic catches my eye. Collars. Thick ones. Polished ones. Designer ones. And from those collars hang leashes. Very efficient leashes. Very obedient leashes.

'One minute,' I tell them. 'Look at your collar. Look at your leash. You live among skyscrapers but you cannot cross the road without permission. You sniff freedom but cannot taste it. What use are bridges and tunnels when someone else decides how far you may walk.'

The dogs stare back. Some bare their teeth. One lifts a leg near a parking meter. Point taken.

Then my thoughts drift home. 'Look at our temples. Look at our laws that promise to protect us from imaginary lovers from other religions. Look at our metros that glide like silver snakes. Look at our coastal roads and highways that curve like ribbons in glossy brochures.'

And then I whisper the same question. 'What is the use?'

What is the use of temples when fear decides our prayers? What is the use of laws when they silence others rather than protect. What

is the use of highways when conscience is stuck in traffic. We have chains too. Only ours are invisible. Much harder to notice. Much harder to remove.

In our country, corruption strolls openly like a respected uncle. Nothing moves without an envelope. No files. No favors.

Sadly, very often, not even neutrals.

Our poor grow thinner while our slogans grow fatter. Our anger is carefully directed at safe minority targets. Our courage is reserved for social media comments typed from behind locked doors. Freedom of speech exists as a much quoted line in our Constitution.

Meanwhile the dogs of New York continue their walks. They know they are chained. They accept it. They tug occasionally. They bark when annoyed.

There is honesty in that leash.

Our chains are more sophisticated. They are decorated with religion. Polished with patriotism. Justified with fear of 'the other'. We are told someone is always trying to convert us. Someone is always seducing our daughters.

Someone must always be blamed so that no one notices the collar tightening.

The dogs bare their teeth at me again. I smile back. At least they know who holds the leash.

We on the other hand admire the collar. We defend it. We decorate it. And we insist we are free because the chain is made of belief, tradition and tonnes of lies.

Thick chains indeed.

'Sadly, the most dangerous kind are the ones you cannot see!' laugh the dogs of New York.

# Better families, better world

**A**ttitude and behaviour are woven into the fabric of daily life. Research has shown that individuals register an immediate and automatic reaction of good or bad towards everything they encounter in less than a second, even before they are aware of having formed an attitude.

Most of the people hold complex relationships between attitudes and behaviour that are further complicated by the social factors influencing both. This explains why two people placed in the same situation often respond very differently, not because the situation is different, but because their inner lens is different.

The present state of the

world, in which we live, is what it is because of certain systems -- social, political, economic, religious and others, all these woven together into a complex structure called society. These systems, in turn, are built on certain attitudes and values which various nations, communities or groups of people have come to acquire over a period of time. When these attitudes remain unquestioned for long, they slowly turn into rigid beliefs, making change difficult but not impossible. These attitudes, in turn, are based on the ideas, ideologies or beliefs which people have acquired, over a period of time, from others or have learnt by first-hand experience.

Many of these beliefs

## SPIRITUAL INSIGHT



Rajyogi Brahmakumar Nikunjji

So, don't wait too long, adjust your attitude right now. You'd be surprised how much you really can change the world just by changing your attitude.

were relevant in a different era, but in a rapidly changing world, they now need re-examination. So, if we want to build a better world order, there is no way to it except through attitudinal change or the shift in values and that change or shift, as has been pointed out earlier, cannot take place unless certain age-old beliefs which people have acquired and which are now working as the matrix for their attitudes, relationships and behaviour, are changed.

People have to be given a



better ideal which inspires them to have higher values and nobler behaviour. It must be remembered that the present stage of turmoil is because our society has no such ideal which can motivate it for higher aims and give it a better direction. And in the absence of a guiding ideal, people tend to chase comfort instead of character, success instead of significance.

Let us, therefore, not forget that the improvement in the self, betterment of our relationships and the spirit of service of others would

not be possible without attitudinal change, and in order to bring about the attitudinal change, we have to give to the society a new, convincing and inspiring ideal and also the ideology necessary to achieve that ideal. Such an ideal must touch the heart, not merely appeal to logic. We should also remember that family is the unit of society. It is the first school where everyone gets educated. The lessons learned here silently shape a person's reactions for the rest of his or her life.

In fact, most of our attitudes are built up in our family and hence the deterioration first starts in the family and then it penetrates into the society. So, in order to shape a better world, we must inspire people to make a better family. Today, the family is disintegrating and there is a tendency of separation and fragmentation all over the world. As a result, a country like India that is known for its rich cultural heritage and family values is now witnessing more and more nuclear families as compared to joint families which acted as a strong support system for every member. With the weakening of this support system, individuals feel emotionally isolated even while being socially connected.

Nowadays, there is no real love among family members and, so, there is no real love in man's relationships with others. The criteria of every relationship today is "give and take". And when rela-

tionships become transactions, trust slowly erodes. We must remember a fact that a man who is dissatisfied at home and finds tension there, would spread dissatisfaction and tension outside as well. This can be clearly seen in the increasing number of cases of divorce in society.

A disturbed inner world invariably creates a disturbed outer world. So, before this erosion of values devastates us, we should seriously think about changing our attitudes and start building better families. For, better families would make a better world. So, don't wait too long, adjust your attitude right now. You'd be surprised how much you really can change the world just by changing your attitude.

The author is a spiritual educator & popular columnist for publications across India, Nepal & UK. Views expressed are personal.

Send your letters to the Editor, Lokmat Times, Lokmat Bhawan, Jalsa Road, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar (Aurangabad), E-mail: [Itedit.abd@lokmat.com](mailto:Itedit.abd@lokmat.com)

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Ustad Sukhvinder Singh Pinky shares his journey that began at Bhaini Sahib

ARTS PAGE 3

The Sunday Tribune

# SPECTRUM

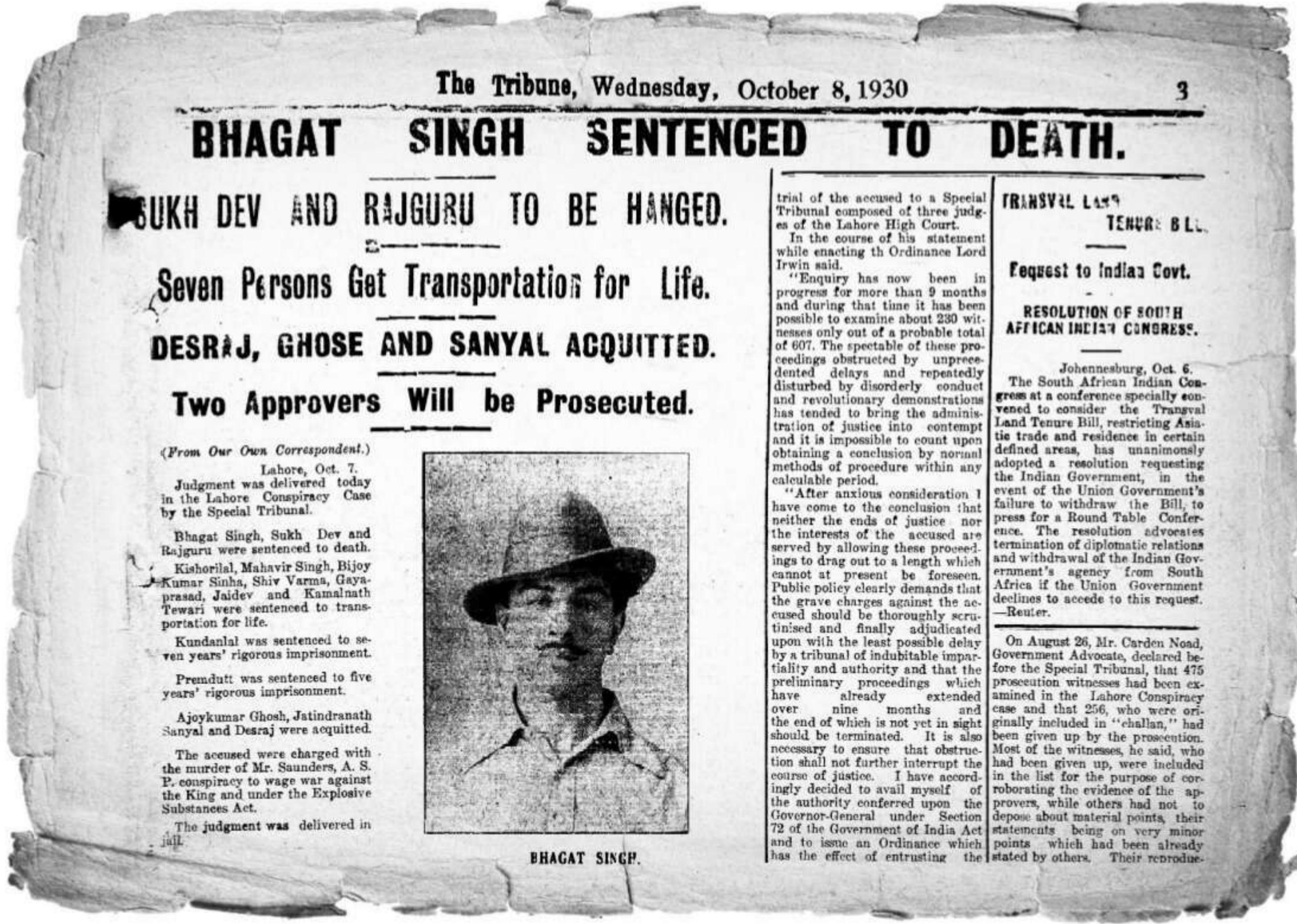


'Voices in the Wind' doesn't sit quietly on a table but rises like the Himalayan winds

BOOKS PAGE 4

CHANDIGARH | 18 JANUARY 2026

Punjab's interest in the audiovisual archives is not misplaced, but the Bhagat Singh trial took place when sound recording and film cameras were not permitted in courts. The written record left by the empire he defied and remembered acts are sufficient to explain why his trial and death continue to matter



SHYAM BHATIA

**A** LETTER sent last week by Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann to the British Deputy High Commissioner in Chandigarh reopened a question that sits at the uneasy intersection of political memory and historical record. The letter sought access to what it described as "original audio/video recordings and archival documentation" of the trial of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru, reportedly held by authorities in Scotland, a claim for which no archival trail exists.

The request reflects the enduring emotional and political significance of Bhagat Singh in Punjab and across India. But a review of British archival catalogues makes clear that the specific claim at the heart of the letter — the existence of audio or video recordings of the trial — does not align with the historical record.

Put simply, no such recordings were ever made.

The Bhagat Singh trial took place at a time when sound recording in British courts was not practised, and when film cameras were neither permitted nor technically suited to routine courtroom documentation. Even in Britain itself, systematic audio recording of legal proceedings came decades later. In colonial India, the very idea would have been inconceivable.

What survives instead is a substantial written archive, spread across British holdings in London, documenting the trial and its political context in considerable detail. These records are extensive, but they are textual, not audiovisual.

*[At the British Library, these records are found primarily in the India Office Records, including Home Department (Political) files (IOR/L/PJ/6) and associated intelligence reporting from 1929-31 relating to the Lahore Conspiracy Case. At The National Archives in Kew, parallel material appears in Home Office and Dominions Office files (including HO and DO series) dealing with revolutionary violence, policing, and the defence of imperial authority. No catalogue in either institution lists courtroom sound recordings or film material for this period.]*

The principal holdings are well mapped and long familiar to historians. The India Office Records at the British Library include Home Department (Political) and Intelligence Bureau material from 1929-31 tracking revolutionary networks, official assessments of Bhagat Singh's activities, internal correspondence on the Lahore Conspiracy Case, and detailed summaries of trial proceedings.

At The National Archives in Kew, related Home Office and Dominions Office files record how the case and the executions were discussed in London, including fears of mass protest, challenges to imperial authority and international reaction to the use of capital punishment. These materials have been open to researchers for decades and form the evidentiary core of existing scholarship.

What is striking about these holdings is their bureaucratic saturation. The colonial state recorded every stage of the process: surveillance reports, legal advice, crowd assessments, and exchanges between Lahore, Delhi and London. The absence of audiovisual material is therefore not accidental. It reflects a system in which power was exercised and defended through paper rather than preserved through public record.

Read together, these files also make clear the historical conditions under which the trial was conducted — conditions shaped by earlier colonial violence

# ARCHIVE & MEMORY

and by sustained official fear of political mobilisation. Bhagat Singh was executed on March 23, 1931, less than 12 years after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of April 1919, when British troops fired on an unarmed crowd in Amritsar. That event shattered any credible claim that British rule in India rested on impartial law. Its aftershocks shaped colonial decision-making throughout the following decade.

Bhagat Singh's actions were also rooted in more recent violence. In October 1928, Lala Lajpat Rai was beaten by police during protests against the Simon Commission. He died of his injuries on November 17, 1928. The assassination of police officer JP Saunders in December of that year was explicitly intended as retaliation for Lajpat Rai's death, an act framed by Bhagat Singh and his associates as political *badla* (retaliation) rather than random violence.

The legal process that followed was not an ordinary criminal trial. As protests spread, hunger strikes drew public support, and the accused became symbols of resistance, the colonial government intervened directly. In May 1930, the Viceroy overrode the ordinary courts by an emergency ordinance, transferring the proceedings to a Special Tribunal.

The tribunal sat without a jury, sharply limited rights of appeal, and was designed to deliver convictions quickly. This was not law proceeding independently. It was law reshaped to protect authority. Due process was narrowed deliberately, because the colonial state feared losing control of events.

This use of emergency law was not confined to India. Overriding ordinary courts was a recurring instrument of British rule whenever imperial authority was threatened. In Ireland during the War of Independence (1919-21), civilian courts were repeatedly sidelined through martial law, military tribunals and special powers regulations.

Suspects were tried without juries, detained without charge, and executed following proceedings designed for speed rather than scrutiny. Similar legal shortcuts later appeared in other British-controlled territories — Palestine, Malaya, Kenya — where emergency regulations displaced ordinary law in the name of security. Bhagat Singh's trial belongs to this wider pattern of control.

**The absence of audiovisual material is not accidental, it reflects a system in which power was exercised and defended through paper rather than preserved through public record**

The archive captures this fear with clarity. Officials worried about demonstrations, about international embarrassment, and about the political power of martyrdom. Capital punishment was defended internally not as an abstract legal necessity, but as a means of deterrence.

There are no catalogue references indicating that courtroom recordings were ever created and later destroyed, concealed or moved to Scotland or elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Nor do Scottish legal or museum archives list holdings that correspond to a colonial Indian trial of 1930. The absence reflects historical practice, not missing evidence.

Why, then, do claims of hidden recordings or suppressed material persist?

Part of the answer lies in how the modern imagination approaches the past. In a digital age, history is increasingly expected to survive as sound and image. When such material is absent, absence itself is often treated as evidence of concealment rather than as a feature of how power once documented itself. The archive is asked to supply emotional closure it was never designed to provide.

This habit of reading absence as suppression has surfaced repeatedly in debates about the colonial past, including Partition. Records from the weeks before the Radcliffe Boundary Award was made public show how unsettled outcomes remained.

So unresolved was the fate of key districts that Pakistan's first prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, warned British officials that Pakistan might withdraw from the Commonwealth if Gurdaspur were allotted to India. The warning, preserved in official correspondence, captures a moment of political fluidity that later memory flattened into inevitability.

Alongside the official record, remembrance has preserved details that could never appear in a file. Accounts of Bhagat Singh's final months recall a stray dog that attached itself to him during his time on Lodge Road in Lahore, following him with a constancy later treated as symbolic. Some recollections attribute to Bhagat Singh a dry remark that the animal must be the reincarnation of a saintly soul, deliberately choosing to remain at his side. Whether said in jest or reflection, the line has endured because it does cultural work. It asserts

humanity in a system designed to deny it. The British colonial archive is exhaustive in some respects and silent in others. It preserves summaries, minutes and correspondence, but not voices, gestures or atmospheres. Courts were documented through clerks' notes and official digests, not microphones or cameras. To expect otherwise is to project contemporary practices backwards onto a very different administrative world.

None of this means that Punjab's interest in the archives is misplaced. Serious scholarly and public engagement with the written record would be valuable. But such efforts are strongest when they begin from evidence rather than assumption.

The handling of Bhagat Singh's execution followed the same logic that shaped his trial. Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were hanged on the evening of March 23, 1931, earlier than publicly announced and without notice. The bodies were not returned to their families.

No mother was permitted to perform the rites that mark death in Indian life. No *matha tekna*, the final touching of the forehead, was allowed; no farewell prayer accompanied the body to the pyre. What should have been a moment governed by ritual was treated as a security risk, handled with improper haste and secrecy.

The executions were advanced and information restricted to prevent gatherings that might turn into demonstrations. Cremation was carried out near the Sutlej at Hussainiwala, far from major towns. Official correspondence makes plain why: funerals were feared as political events.

What followed survives outside the files. According to later accounts, the cremation was incomplete. After officials left, local youths returned to the site and recovered fragments of bone from the remains before they were dispersed in the river.

There is no official record of this act, no acknowledgement that it occurred. What endures instead is repetition — the story passed down through families and commemorations — not as documentary proof, but as refusal. A refusal to allow the body, like the record, to disappear without trace. Here, absence did not erase meaning; it produced it. Where the state denied ceremony, memory supplied it. The silence of the archive became the space in which commemoration took root.

Bhagat Singh does not need imagined recordings to remain a figure of sacrifice and courage. The written record left by the empire he defied — and the remembered acts and places that filled its silences — are sufficient to explain why his trial and death continue to matter nearly a century later.

That unease about memory does not end with trials and archives. In the decades after Independence, India largely refrained from formally demanding the return of artefacts held in British museums. This was not ignorance but restraint. Under Lal Bahadur Shastri, silence became a form of diplomacy.

Engagement was cautious, often limited to loans or cultural exchanges, while the larger question of ownership was left untouched. What lingers is not whether India knew what it had lost, but why the habit of not asking — and the fear behind it — endured.

Popular history has often been generous to the British empire. The archive, read carefully, is less so — and in the case of Bhagat Singh, it tells a far harsher story.

— Shyam Bhatia is the London correspondent of The Tribune

## VARIETY

Be it censorship, surveillance, borders or identity, artist Shilpa Gupta navigates multiple themes

## ART THAT SPEAKS

SUKANT DEEPAK

**T**HE hush decides to sit between us. We are talking, but the motion flapboard 'Sound on My Skin' at her ongoing solo exhibition 'Listening Air' in Kochi keeps interjecting. It wants to remind us of the politics of love, of interrupted lives, fear, truth, power... Sometimes it whispers a scream.

She ignores it. She has always spoken in a low decibel, but this time it seems she does not want the board to even eavesdrop. There are moments when intentionally misspelt words appear. She suddenly looks at them, then at you, and smiles into nothingness. She lets the audience arrive at most meanings. Some, she will never reveal.

Internationally acclaimed artist Shilpa Gupta, who works across drawing, installation, video and performance to address pressing concerns of identity, borders, censorship and human rights, has an awards list long enough to occupy half a newspaper page. Among the most recent are the Possehl Prize for International Art (2025) and the Asia Arts Pathbreaker Award (2025).



**'Sound on My Skin', Shilpa Gupta's 35-minute motion flapboard installation, explores the sensory interplay between sound and body**

Besides 'Listening Air', being showcased at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, she has another exhibition in Kochi at Amphibian Aesthetics, curated by Riyas Komu at the newly opened Ishara House. There, her site-specific sound installation, 'When the Stone Sang to the Glass', uses electronic motors, stones, found furniture, and glass collected from the neighbourhood to create a chorus of perseverance.

Even as her exhibition 'We Last Met in the Mirror' at Kunsthalle St Annen in Lübeck, Germany — on view until March 1 — celebrates her Possehl Prize win and features works spanning three decades of her practice; despite the strong political and social undertones in her work, Gupta resists labels. 'What needs to be emphasised is that there is no other option for me. It is about letting everything flow, not trying to alter the course of consciousness,' she says.

For an artist whose work has been showcased at the Venice Biennale (2019), Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2018), Berlin Biennale (2014), Gwangju Biennale (2008), Sharjah

Biennale (2013), Gothenburg Biennale (2017) and Liverpool Biennale (2006), 'Listening Air' becomes an investigation into resilience and hope. The multilingual sound installation — featuring protest songs, moving lights and microphones — suggests the flows that outline our inner worlds.

If one wonders what draws her to censored and interrupted voices, Gupta points to perception itself. 'A lot of what reaches us is not direct, but mediated. What we think is the truth often is not, because it is also shaped by what we seek. Even in interpretation, so many biases that live inside us decide to slip in. I am interested in what is real — but the question remains: is reality even possible to grasp?'

She notes how drastically socio-political realities have shifted in the past decade. 'Things we once considered 'normal' — what to eat, what to wear — are suddenly subverted. How have conversations that were once confined to drawing rooms become acceptable in the public domain? Is it not unbelievable how easily people can be blinded? Yes, I do not hold back, because I have no other option. I have no choice.'

For those who have followed her work closely — including 'I Live Under Your Sky Too', a permanent public installation at MIA Park, Doha — it is evident that Gupta's practice has the power to still the viewer, to alter the breath, ensuring that listening becomes a political and social act. 'Yes, like in 'Listening Air', I have spoken poems and imprisoned them in shards of broken glass — only because we are not ready to listen.'

She believes that listening, even imperfectly, can ease suffering. 'Inside us are many languages — some we know, some we do not. But then, not knowing is also part of knowing. You do not have to control or restrain — just listen, even to voices you cannot decipher,' says the artist, who was adjudged 'International Artist of the Year — Canada' (2004).

As the warm breeze from the sea asserts its presence, she stresses Kochi is a place of melting boundaries, with the ocean promising porosity. For an artist whose work engages deeply with borders and linguistics, the Biennale context is intriguing — especially since audiences often move quickly from one artwork to another. 'It is wonderful to be showing during the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, but I am generally making work not for any specific event. When something slows you down, you begin to 'discover' it. A conversation begins. We move together for a bit — because both of us matter to each other...'

As Gupta prepares for an upcoming exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, curated by Sam Bardaouil, the conversation turns to absence — the gaps in her work that invite interpretation. 'Where do I end and where do you begin? Does one have to say everything? Does it take two people to complete meaning? Does not a space always belong to two people — or many?' she asks.

It is time to leave Gupta with herself, but you are dying to ask. Does the 'superstar' tag affect her? She pauses. Smiles. 'But how can it, when it exists only in your head?'

— The writer is a freelance contributor

## CAPTION CONTEST 1545

MANAS RANJAN BHUI



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@tribunemail.com](mailto:captionpics@tribunemail.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 1544



SPECTRUM JANUARY 11 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

Biking the dust — Vineet Gupta, Jagadhri

Give me a brake — Tejwinder Singh Anand via epaper, Gurugram

Fast friends — Rajiv Arora via epaper, Mumbai

Partners in grime — Jaskaran Preet Kaur, Bilaspur

Done and dusted — Anita Sharma, Chandigarh

Why a TV series that blends science fiction, fantasy and horror is a runaway success



Cultural productions like 'Stranger Things' remind us how deeply fraught with anxiety and pain young lives can be.

## Striking strangeness

SIDDHARTH PANDEY

**I**T was on a whim that I started watching the Netflix series, and only then did I learn that I was a decade late in delving into one of the most beguiling onscreen alternative universes of our times. With its final episode airing on January 1, the Duffer Brothers' 'Stranger Things' completed the 10-year-run as a compelling blend of science fiction, fantasy and horror in a contemporary setting.

Having grown up with the 'Harry Potter' books, where my own evolution into an adult had somewhat paralleled the main characters' growth, I was accustomed to acquiring a slow yet thrilling experience of fantastical development rooted in reality. But observing the child characters of 'Stranger Things' turn into young adults within a span of 42 episodes provided another kind of thrill: one that hinged on the tempting habit of binge-watching but also immense psychological fulfillment.

While fantasy, sci-fi and horror are still disparaged as 'low' forms of writing and entertainment, their best expressions buzz with creativity that is at par with any well-constructed realistic production. And given their predilection for imaginative feats not bound by human understandings of space and time, alternative universes even retain a greater artistic elasticity than their true-to-life counterparts. It is this suppleness that spawns innovative ways of comprehending the meaning of existence in a world swarming with the unknown, the unexplainable and the unpredictable.

Set in the fictional American town of Hawkins of the 1980s, 'Stranger Things' draws together children and adults who befriend a mysterious girl called 'Eleven' born with extrasensory powers such as psychokinesis and telepathy. They all resist the derelict, dystopian and flaky world of the 'Upside Down'. Accessible through web-like portals whose opening and closing constitutes the politics of the narrative are itself, the Upside Down threatens to annihilate Hawkins and its citizens with every season.

At its heart, this is again a story of good versus evil, where the latter is configured in the form of interconnected villains, including the gigantic spider-like creature called the Mind Flayer; the malevo-

lent ruler Vecna, his younger self Henry, and the faceless monsters Demogorgons. It is however in its telling that the series acquires an indelible ingenuity.

As season after season throws up a new set of challenges, a vast realm of emotional complexities and struggles lays itself bare, both through the protagonists and the antagonists. One of the highlights of contemporary long-form storytelling (especially films and web-series) is the focus on the mental make-up of human beings, and cultural productions attuned to the supernatural and young audiences are endlessly inventive in this regard.

While 'Stranger Things' does a fantastic job in chiselling out the familial, professional and romantic struggles of Eleven's real-world friends, it uses Eleven and the wicked manifestations of Vecna on her and her friends' minds to explore the intricacies of cognition as well as childhood trauma.

In an adult-oriented world that ceaselessly propagates dewy-eyed perspectives about children, 'Stranger Things' reminds us how deeply fraught with anxiety and pain young lives can be. As the Mind Flayer and Vecna seize control of the youngsters and the entire territory of Upside Down, we receive a grandiose and macabre vision of a landscape endlessly smothered in slimy vines and writhing roots, that together constitute the villain's hive-mind. The abstraction of the mind is thus literally imagined as a gigantic place that latches onto other lives for sustenance and domination.

Among the series' most terrifying scenes are those depicting the creepers imprisoning children in mummified, trance-like states, their mouths viciously gripped by the vine-tips shipping energy to the rogue's body.

But for all the horror, it is the twin elements of the desire to be understood (or its absence thereof) and the freedom of making choices, that essentially undergirds the emotional core of the show. Somersaulting through numerous mindscapes, it illustrates the perils of growing up with supernatural energies as well as the consequences of divergent choices emanating out of them. Despite her being used as a guinea pig by the authorities who often rely on torture to elicit 'scientific' results, Eleven doesn't give up her goodness. On the other hand, Henry, subject-

ed to the same environment, chooses unhinged retribution against the world. And yet, he remains scared of traumatic memories from his childhood.

Such inventive steering of inferiority recalls many references from the world of contemporary children's culture, from Voldemort forcing his way through Harry's mind in 'Harry Potter' to the playful jamboree of human emotions in the form of actual figures in the 'Inside Out' franchise.

As a whole, 'Stranger Things' indeed evolves as a homage to a wide variety of cinema and TV (from Steven Spielberg to Stephen King), as well as taps into a plethora of mythological tropes. And though one can interpret the title's 'strangeness' in infinite ways, what most eloquently captures the series' otherworldly glory is its rootedness in the culture of the Eighties.

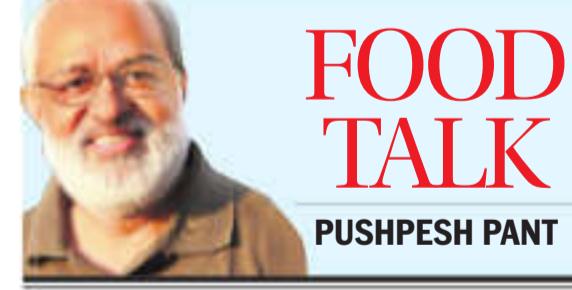
While Vecna and Eleven's supernatural sensibilities cast a strong grip on the viewers, they are as much enticed by the analog culture of walkie-talkies, roll-filled cameras, elaborate board games, mysterious radio signals, fireworks-as-weapons, and wily puzzle-solving techniques that the series resorts to. And it is also here that the show finds its most compelling anchor: music.

As Dumbledore quips in 'Harry Potter', music is 'magic beyond all' other kinds of spells, 'Stranger Things' literally orchestrates this magic in the form of a positive force. Thus, in Season 4, we see the character Eddie Munson energetically strumming his guitar to Metallica's thrash-metal classic 'Master of Puppets' to fend off the evil 'Demobots'. In the same season, Max Mayfield listens to Kate Bush's 'Running Up That Hill', that helps her stay conscious and at one remove from Vecna even in a life-threatening coma.

Thanks to its resurgence, this 1985 song quickly reached over one billion streams on Spotify a few years ago. According to Bush, the piece is 'about swapping places with another person in an attempt to understand things from their perspective'. Through its period flavour and plea for regarding otherness, the composition has rightly become a perfect metaphor for the core idea of the series — strangeness — and, indeed, for that strangest of all things called life.

— The writer is a historian, cultural critic and artist from Shimla

## A roast toast for vegetarians



Crafted out of *ajwain ki jad*, it can put the meaty stuff to shame

**T**RADITIONALLY, New Year is the time when the jewel in the crown on most tables is a roast. It is easy to dismiss the tradition as a colonial hang-up but, truth be told, slow-cooked, succulent roasts — be it *murg musallam* or a leg of lamb — are very much part of our own *Nawabi-Shahi* repertoire. The suckling pink pig, with an apple clenched between its teeth, is rarely encountered these days, though trade promotions have introduced turkeys to the non-vegetarian menu. The Anglo-Indian dishes include duck roasts but we digress. The trouble is that the vegetarians in the family, or among the guests, have always felt shortchanged.

We have always sympathised with the vegetarians and feel that

## SLOW-ROASTED CELERIAC 'HAM' WITH BARBECUE-SRIRACHA GLAZE

## INGREDIENTS

## For the roast

Celeriac/ajwain ki jad (wash, trim) 1 (1.25 kg)

Olive oil 2 tbsp

Sea salt 1 tsp

Black pepper (crushed) 1/2 tsp

Smoked paprika 1 tsp

Garlic powder 1 tsp

Thyme 1 tsp

Bay leaf 1

Garlic cloves (lightly crushed) 2

Vegetable stock 500 ml

## For the barbecue sriracha &amp; maple glaze

Barbecue sauce 4 tbsp

Sriracha sauce (adjust to pungency) 1 1/2 tbsp

Maple syrup or brown sugar 1 1/2 tbsp

Soy sauce 1 tbsp

Apple cider vinegar 1 tbsp

Smoked paprika 1 tsp

Olive oil 1 tbsp

## METHOD

■ Peel the celeriac, and shape it into a ham-like dome.

■ Score lightly in a criss-cross pattern on top (this helps absorption and gives it the classic ham look).

■ Rub the celeriac with olive oil, salt, pepper, smoked paprika, garlic powder, and thyme.

■ Heat a heavy pan and sear the celeriac on all sides until lightly golden.

■ Place the celeriac in a deep roasting tray. Add vegetable stock, bay leaf, and crushed garlic around it (not over). Cover tightly with foil.

■ Preheat the oven to 160°C. Place the celeriac in it and roast for 1 hour and 45 minutes to 2 hours, basting once halfway.

■ The celeriac should be knife-ten-

der but holding shape.

■ Prepare the glaze by whisking all glaze ingredients together.

■ Taste to check the balance of sweet-smoky-spicy.

■ Remove foil.

■ Brush the roast generously with the glaze.

■ Increase oven temperature to 200°C.

■ Roast uncovered for 20-25 minutes, brushing with more glaze every 7-8 minutes until well caramelised and acquires a sticky, lacquered finish.

■ Rest on the rack for 20 minutes, then carve at the table, slicing neatly with a sharp knife.



*shakhari* options mimicking meat — *soya chaap*, *kathal do pyaaza* and *lauki musallam* — fall far short of the diner's expectations. We are pleased to announce that the long wait is over.

A dear chef friend, forever experimenting, has created a roast craft-

ed out of celeriac (*ajwain ki jad*) that puts the meaty stuff to shame. We happily share the recipe with our readers.

Ironically, *ajwain* in its seed form is a widely used ingredient in India, prized for its many time-tested therapeutic properties. It is consid-

ered indispensable in fish-based recipes and blends of pickling spices. Its root, resembling a yam, is relished in soups, sauces and preserves in Europe. One wonders why no innovative *bawarchi* in Awadh ever thought of roasting it!

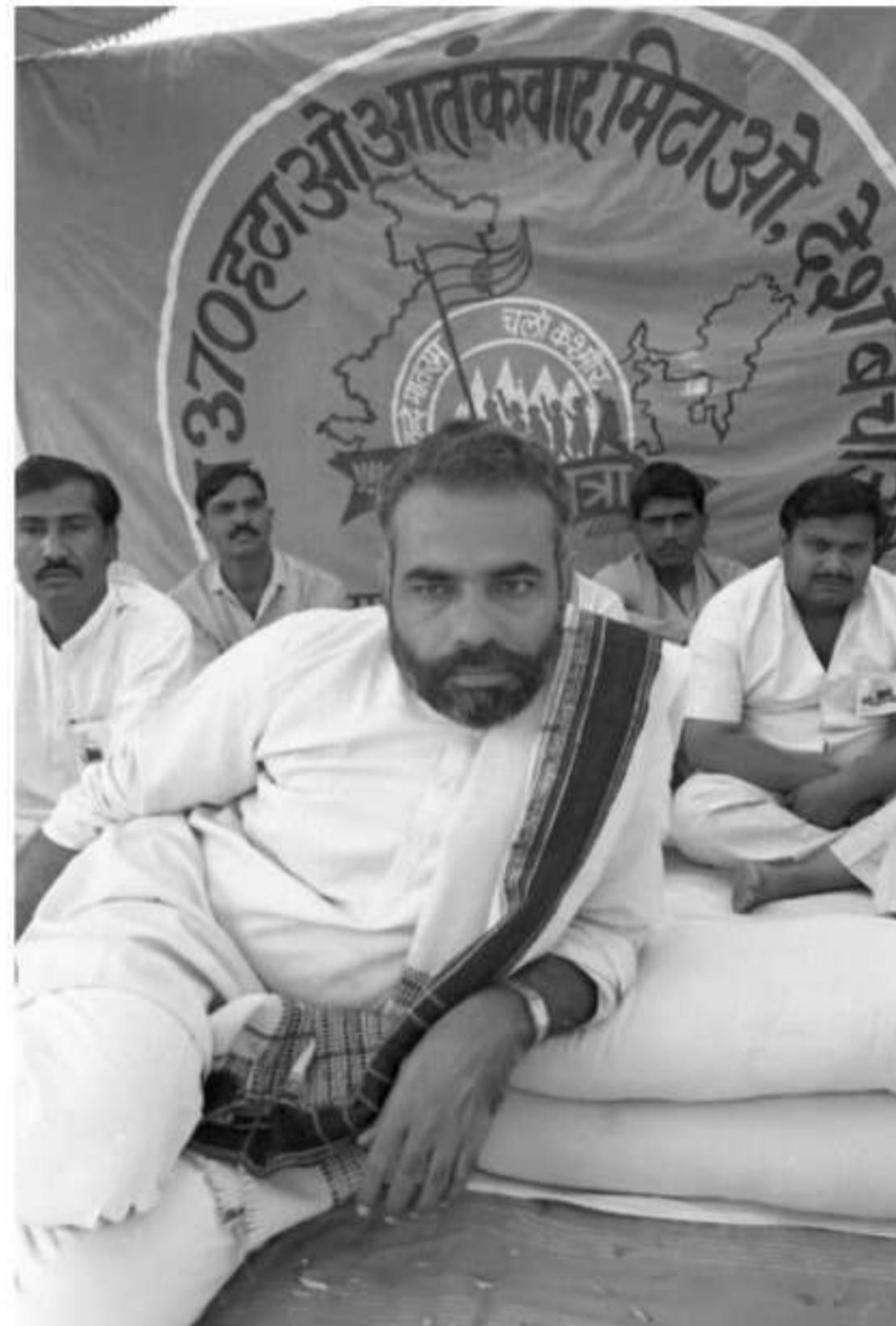
— The writer is a food historian



## THOSE LOOKS

My career as a photojournalist began with a simple Sure Shot camera gifted to me by my elder brother, Shiva Chandra. He was a photographer and an assistant director for films; his influence sparked my interest in photography. What fascinated me most was the byline in magazines. My first major photograph was of Waheed Rehman, taken on the sets of 'Baat Ek Raat Ki'. The image got full-page spreads in *Filmfare* and *Madhuri*. My lens captured some of the most defining moments of our time—from the Mumbai riots to the Congress centenary celebrations. Other projects included documenting the stories of Kashmiri Pandits, the children of Kamathipura, and the *havelis* of Shekhawati. I have authored books on Amitabh Bachchan and MF Husain, blending photography with storytelling. I'm working on another book on Husain, to be released this year, followed by volumes on Pritish Nandy and B Prabha.

— Curated by Aditya Arya, director of Museo Camera, Gurugram



UK-based percussionist Ustad Sukhvinder Singh Pinky shares his journey that began at Bhaini Sahib

SHAILAJA KHANNA

**A** recent concert in Kolkata, a slim-built, slight-statured, turbaned artiste brought the house down after his solo on *tabla* and *jori*. There was a prolonged standing ovation from the 3,000-plus audience. The artiste was the world-renowned percussionist Sukhvinder Singh, affectionately known as Pinky. Kolkata is considered the stronghold of *tabla*, with local legends like Pt Swapan Chaudhary, Pt Anindo Chatterji, Pt Kumar Bose and Bickram Ghosh; yet Pinky Singh not only held his own, his show was arguably the most popular in the three-day festival that featured more than 10 concerts.

Pinky is without doubt one of the finest *tabla* players in the world; often referred to as the Pride of Punjab. The late Ustad Zakir Hussain referred to him as the greatest living *jori* player; *jori* is an old Punjabi instrument, somewhat like a much larger *tabla*, with its own style.

Humble yet self-assured, it is a pleasure to interact with Pinky. I was curious to know how he had originally connected with music as his parents had nothing to do with it. Pinky explains: "My mother's family descended from Namdhari Satguru Ram Singhji's daughter's line. My uncles were born in Nairobi and there was a time when 90 per cent of the Indians in Nairobi were somehow linked with music. My grandmother (Nani) used to teach us simple 'shabads', which my brother and I would perform. My father, who was originally from Hoshiarpur, settled in Ludhiana."

He was five and his elder brother Suhdev was seven when they performed a 'shabab' in front of Satguru Jagit Singh Maharaj. "I played the *dholki*. Satguru was so impressed with us that he asked my parents to leave both of us, plus my younger brother, with him, to be brought up at Bhaini Sahib, near Ludhiana. This was in 1970. My father Santokh Singh was worried about our education, and Satguru promised to look after that aspect too. He gently explained to my father that musical talent was inborn and hard to acquire. Anyone could become a doctor or an engineer, but to become an influential musi-

## Ustad from Punjab

### LOOKING BACK

When Satguru asked me to come back to Bhaini Sahib, I innocently told him that I loved the crowd's attention, the thrill of concerts.

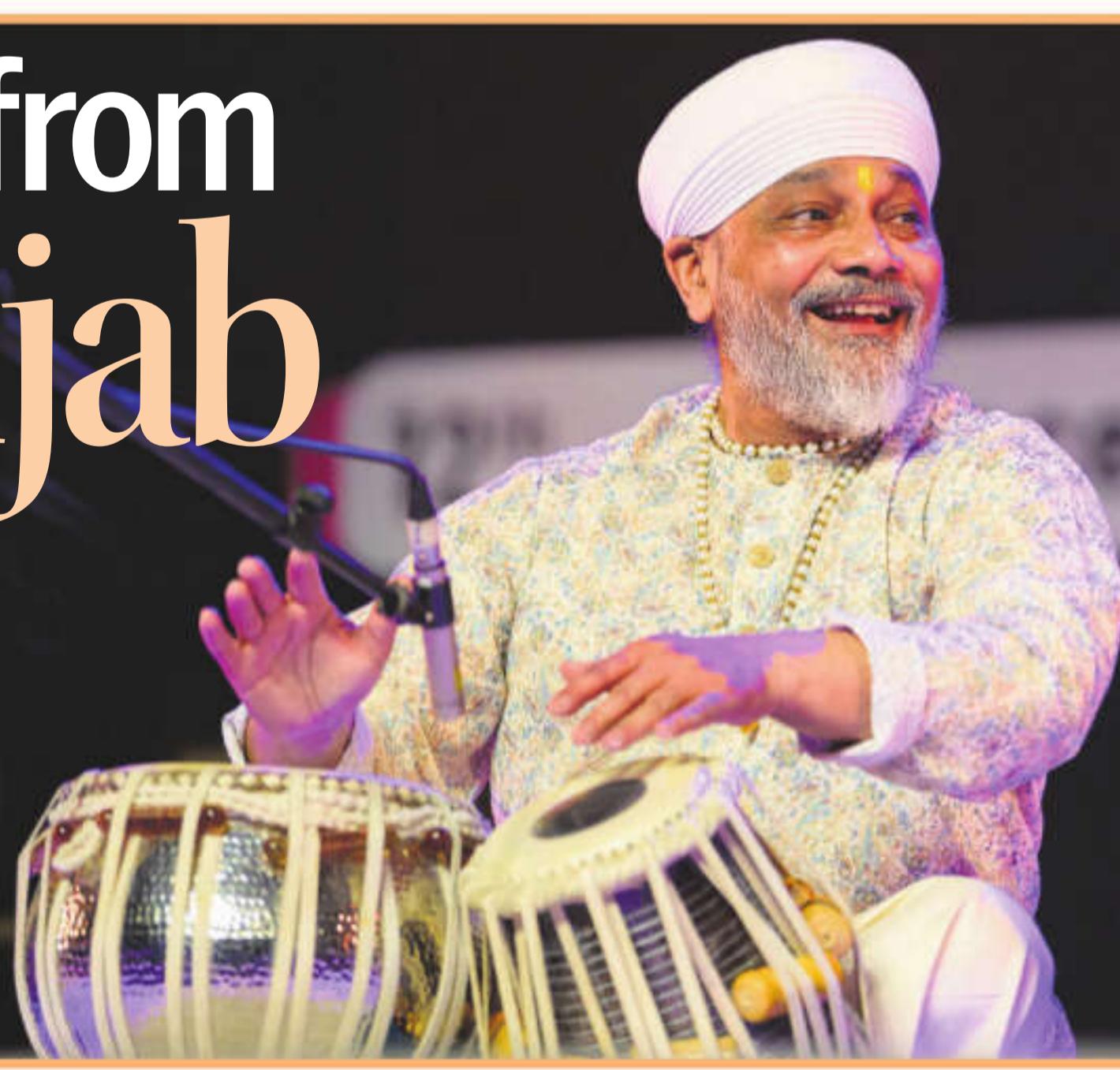


PHOTO COURTESY: AVISHEK DEY, SSF 2025

cian was rarer and could not be achieved without God's grace." Suhdev later became a disciple of Pt Rajan-Sajan Mishra.

Shaking his head in wonder, Pinky reminisces about his Bhaini Sahib days. "From the time of Satguru Pratap Singhji, Bhaini Sahib has had an enriching musical tradition. Great musicians like Baba Nihal Singh, Bhai Taba Singh, Bhai Udhoo Khan Sahib, Bhai Rahim Baksh, Mian Kadir Baksh (Ustad Alla Rakha Khan's *guru*) would come and stay in Bhaini Sahib; they received respect and honour."

Pinky was trained by Baba Nihal Singh from Rawalpindi. "His entire family was killed during Partition; he was the only one who escaped and came to India. Before moving to Bhaini Sahib, he was a Hazoori *ragi* at Darbar Sahib. When he first heard me, he realised my 'thaap' was very clear; even as a child. He started training me personally and

often said that I picked up things fast. I feel humbled as I recall this. I had surrendered totally to my *guru*, and would receive training literally any time of the day."

At the age of 12, Pinky went to live with the legendary Pt Kishan Maharaj of the Banaras *gharana*, and stayed with him for more than six years. Pinky recalls: "I first heard him in Delhi. There was a Mr Chawla who lived on Pusa Road; that would be Satguru's 'dera' when visiting Delhi. In 1977, three other boys and I were taken to a concert where Ustad Ali Akbar Khan was accompanied by Pt Kishan Maharaj. This was at Kamani Auditorium, and we sat in the front row. I had no idea of the stature of the artistes, but when I saw Pt Kishan Maharaj sitting in 'vajrasana', with that red 'tilak' on his forehead, I was totally captivated. When he played his first 'tha', my eyes became moist. I told myself that if I have to

play *tabla*, I have to learn from him."

When he returned home that day, he told Satguru he wanted to learn from him besides Baba Nihal Singh. "Satguru told me that Pt Kishan Maharaj was a big artiste and couldn't possibly come to us in Bhaini Sahib. I agreed to go and live with him. When Guruji saw me, he said I was too young to live with him, but Satguru convinced him. My 'ganda bandhan' ceremony was done on March 5, 1977, in a very grand way, with the then huge sum of ₹5,000 being offered to my *guru*. Baba Nihal was very happy for me."

Pinky gave his first public performance a week later, playing a rare 'taal' of 11-and-a-half 'matras', accompanied by his brother. He was merely 11 years old. The concert was held at Birla Matoshree Hall in Mumbai, and was hugely acclaimed. "Ustad Alla Rakha told Satguru that since

I was from Punjab and trained in his style, he would like to teach me. Satguru told him about the 'ganda bandhan' ceremony just days earlier!"

Talking about Satguru Jagit Singh's contribution, Pinky says: "He has done so much for countless people, it's without parallel. So many boys got the unique opportunity of being trained under greats like Ustad Vilayat Khan, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Pt Shiv Kumar Sharma, Pt Birju Maharaj."

Pinky was 18 when he accompanied Ustad Amjad Ali Khan at a *sarod* festival. After that, his career took off. "I played in All India Radio's National Programme. I was a little fellow, and caught the imagination of listeners. I started travelling all over." He recalls how Satguru would give him ₹100 a month for expenses. Pt Kishan Maharaj told him to stop taking the money and instead offer his earnings to Satguru. "I got paid ₹1,000 for a concert in Patna and gave it to him. He was amused and told me there was no need."

"By then, I had started enjoying public adulation. When Satguru asked me to come back to Bhaini Sahib, I innocently told him that I loved the crowd's attention, the thrill of concerts. Satguru thought I was becoming too independent and instructed me to play for free so that I remained dependent economically. But Guruji felt that since I had been trained to play professionally, I must perform only for a fee."

Pinky's overseas journey began in 1989 when he went abroad for the first time, accompanying Pt Vishwamohan Bhatt on 22 concerts. He also played for his Grammy-winning album 'A Meeting by the River' (1993). Pinky moved permanently to the UK in 1990.

In conclusion, I couldn't help asking what gave that undefinable flair to his music, that 'ada'. Pinky pondered, then replied: "My music has 'ada', as you put it, because I have surrendered totally to my *gurus* to absorb the music from them fully. The compositions have literally entered my DNA, my veins, my soul. I receive so much love from my audiences worldwide."

Ustad Pinky's next concert is in Kolkata on January 26, the concluding concert at the prestigious Dover Lane Music Conference.

— Shailaja Khanna writes on music

## BOOKS

## MONUMENT OF MEMORY

*'Voices in the Wind'* is not just a curated collection, the Himalaya is a protagonist, deity, witness

MEGHNA PANT

**S**OME books you read. And some books read you. *'Voices in the Wind'*, edited by Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal, belongs to the rare second category — a book that doesn't sit quietly on a table but rises like the Himalayan winds it so lovingly invokes, stirring you, unsettling you, whispering truths that have travelled centuries to arrive at your door.

To open this book is to step barefoot onto sacred ground. The first thing you hear is not words, but breath — of mountains, the hush of pines, the murmur of ancient storytellers calling you to gather closer. The Bhutanese incantation *Dang-phu Dingphu* — meaning the eternal once upon a time — arrives like a spell, an invitation to remembrance itself.

And from there, the stories begin their ascent. Immediately, the senses populate with characters that belong to both myth and marrow: ogres and princesses, serpents and shapeshifters, jackals who howl out of betrayal, forests that behave like guardians, rivers that hold the echo of every grief and every crossing.

This anthology is far more than a curated collection. It is a reclamation. A revival. A resistance. Across Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand,



**VOICES IN THE WIND: FOLKTALES, FOLKLORE AND SPIRIT STORIES FROM THE HIMALAYA**  
Edited by Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal. Penguin Random House. Pages 336. ₹999

ten around the same period.

Sangam literature is a huge compilation of bardic poetry from the ancient Tamil region, remarkable in being non-religious, profane and also non-Brahmanical, as against the sacred poetry in Sanskrit. It was marked by rich descriptions of nature, landscapes, hills, jungles and plains. A corroboration of the written text by archaeological findings has confirmed the validity of the evidence at Keeladi.

However, archaeology, as it has grown as a discipline, has not been a socially innocent and morally neutral pursuit of India's past. It is wound up with the roots of our collective identities of being Indian, North Indian or being Hindu. In other words, knowledge derived from archaeological excavations can easily provide nourishment to spatial, cultural and religious identities and promote politics based on those identities.

In this sense, the knowledge-seeking project of Indian archaeology has got entangled with the politics of identities. This creates the possibility that knowledge can be twisted and manipulated to suit and support specific political projects. Some of the earliest archaeological sites of Indus Valley Civilisation are in Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, now in Pakistan. A discovery of an archaeological site of matching antiquity in India can be an effective rebuttal to Pakistani claims. A discovery of such a site in South India can also trigger a North-South fault line, by portraying South as 'older' and, therefore, 'superior' to the North. Counter-claims can flow from

the North. The excavations at Keeladi have been caught in this rivalry.

Archaeology can also be used to settle the old debate whether Aryans migrated from the steppes of Central Asia, or whether they were the original inhabitants of the region and migrated from here to Iran and Europe. The possibilities are endless. Our distant past has become a battleground for claims and counter-claims for settling political disputes. It is therefore no surprise that history, an account of human life in the past, has become a great arbiter in the present dispute. Whoever controls the past will control the future.

The pride in one's past is always a double-edged sword. It provides a very positive input for our collective identities and shared solidarities. However, it can also lead to jingoism and separatism. It can destroy all that is virtuous and worth cherishing in our collective social life. Sowmiya Ashok's book has provided an excellent account of how archaeology works but also how it can be placed at the service of larger political projects. She has used the specific story of Keeladi to tell the larger story of the politics of knowledge about the past.

The real merit of the book, however, is that it makes a philosophical plea for liberating knowledge from the shackles of prejudices and vested interests. Only independent knowledge, rooted in evidence and procedures of enquiry, can understand human life correctly. And only correct and valid knowledge can play a constructive part in the advancement of human life.

*— The reviewer is a visiting faculty at BML Munjal University, Manesar*

## GANDHI'S CRITICS

by Subrata Mukherjee, Sushila Ramaswamy. Routledge.

Pages 402. ₹1,595

Mahatma Gandhi's three-decade-long leadership allowed open debate, which remains unparalleled in any other nationalist struggle. This book endeavours to comprehend the nature and content of his major critics, including from within the Congress, whose umbrella nature allowed intense debate. Critics from the outside included Jinnah and Savarkar, questioning his advocacy of composite nationalism. If the revolutionaries disagreed with his non-violent methods, Churchill perceived him as the biggest threat to imperialism.

## BACKFLAP



## LIGHTNING KID

by Viswanathan Anand

Hachette.

Pages 264. ₹399

From growing up as a young prodigy in Chennai to becoming a global legend by taking on the toughest chess players, Viswanathan Anand's journey is packed with twists, tactics and nail-biting matches. India's first chess Grandmaster and five-time World Chess Champion, he has wowed the world with his brilliant mind and fearless play. This book dives into the most dramatic moments of his career — wins, losses, comebacks and masterstrokes — along with 64 bite-sized lessons, one for every square on the chessboard.

echoes beyond the individual, shaping landscapes, families, entire futures.

Gokhale and Lal's editorial vision is astonishingly sensitive. They do not merely gather stories; they contextualise them, honour them, and restore dignity to communities often excluded from mainstream cultural narratives. They acknowledge the paradox of "freezing" oral tales into text, but emphasise that not preserving them at all would be a far greater erasure. In a time when languages are dying and mountain cultures are being bulldozed — literally and metaphorically — this book becomes a monument of stone, but of memory.

While reading, there is a moment when you begin to sense the deeper purpose of this work. It is not nostalgia. It is not anthropological fetishisation. It is a reaching back to something essential — the clarity with which earlier civilisations understood the world. They knew that forests have moods. Rivers hold grudges. Animals possess intelligence beyond our comprehension. They understood community not as a hashtag but as survival. They believed that stories were not entertainment; they were instruction manuals for living.

When I closed *'Voices in the Wind'*, I felt the way one feels after a wise elder has spoken — quieted, steadied, humbled. These stories do not allow you to remain who you were before you opened the book. They remind you of the smallness of your modern anxieties. They anchor you in something far older than nation or news cycle — something communal, primal, necessary. They restore the sense that you are not alone in the world; you are part of an ancient continuity.

If you want to understand India — not the India of breaking news but the India of heartbeat — read this book.

If you want to understand the Himalaya — not the postcard mountains, but the living, mythic, breathing Himalaya — read this book. And if you want to understand yourself — not the curated self you offer the world, but the instinctive animal self, the dreaming child self — read this book.

It will change your *prana*. It will echo in your bones. It will speak long after the final page is turned.

This is not just a collection of folktales; it is a homecoming.

*— The reviewer is an acclaimed author*



The stories are peppered with traditional woodcut illustrations. (Left) 'Crow-girl & Kaw-bab' (Kashmir); (right) 'A Tale of Pema' (Bhutan). COURTESY: PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE

ity, not a metaphor for self-help. The stories do not shy away from death or the grotesque; instead, they remind us that life itself is edged with wildness. These are not the prettified bedtime tales of urban India. They are fierce, unsentimental, beautiful in their brutality, clear-eyed about suffering and equally generous in their mercy.

What strikes you immediately is how deeply the natural world is woven into these tales — not as scenery but as ancestry. The Himalaya is not a backdrop; it is a protagonist, deity, witness. Nature is not passive; it grows impatient, curious, furious, tender.

In these tales, the world is alive with intention. Water turns to gold, forests whisper warnings, and mountains themselves shape destinies. Jackals debate treachery across centuries of dusk-lit howls. Ibex mothers choose sacrifice. Nagas — those ancient half-serpent beings — coil through Kashmir's springs, reminding us that transformation was once a sacred possibil-

Singh Bhandari' and 'A Tale of Pema' by Gyalyum Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck — a cherished story traditionally told to children in the Bhutanese royal family.

What makes *'Voices in the Wind'* extraordinary is that it does not flatten the diversity of Himalayan cultures into a single tone. Each region's tales carry their own weather, their own anxieties, their own music. Ladakh's stories are shaped by an unforgiving geography — poison, hunger, endurance, an ever-present danger. Jammu's stories blend Hindu and Islamic motifs, revealing a syncretic tradition of goddesses, sages, shapeshifters and magical combs.

Kashmir's folklore, with its ancient connection to the 'Kathasaritsagara', is lush with imaginative generosity, absorbing influences from Central Asia, Persia and beyond.

Mongolian echoes appear in the epic of Gesar. Balti culture surfaces in stories of ibexes and polo games played with decapitated heads. And yet, through all this diversity, the book keeps returning to a single truth: humans are interdependent with nature, community, consequence. The tales remind us that every action — greed, kindness, violence, sacrifice —

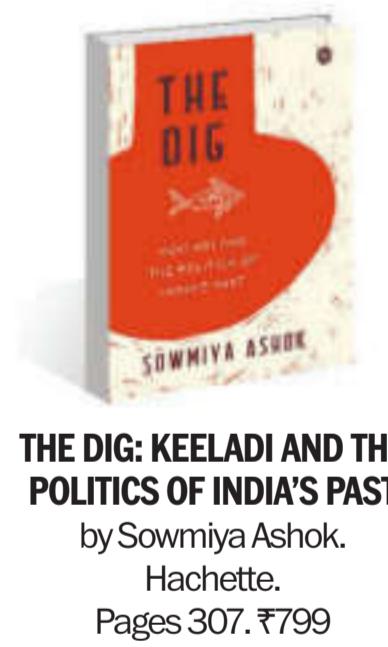
## The politics of archaeology

SALIL MISRA

**I**T is a curious fact that the general diversity of Indian traditions and social structures has not been reflected in history writing. The dominant narratives have focused much more on upper India, neglecting the peninsula. All the major milestones of India's early history — Indus Valley Civilisation, Aryans and Vedic Age, and the great Mauryan empire — had their headquarters in upper India. During the same period, what was happening in the Deccan and the Tamil region? It is this historical silence about a significant region of India that is at the centre of this remarkable book.

All professional historians know how difficult it is to construct human life for times before the arrival of the written word. In its absence, the traces of the past are found in the archaeological excavations, which, quite literally, unearth facets of how our ancestors lived. The discovery of the great Indus civilisation is based entirely on archaeological findings. Prior to the 1920s, when it was discovered, the temporal boundaries of Indian history ended with the Aryans. With the discovery of an ancient civilisation on the banks of river Indus in north-west India, the beginnings of Indian history were pushed back by nearly 2,000 years. In this context, the archaeological excavations carried out in Keeladi, a small town in Madurai (Tamil Nadu), have been of crucial significance.

The excavations began in 2015 and have since continued intermittently. Some of the findings from Keeladi have suggested the emergence of cities and the use of metals such as copper and iron a few hundred years before the Christian era, prior to in the North. Interestingly, many of the findings at Keeladi are well-matched in descriptions found in Sangam poetry, writing



**THE DIG: KEELADI AND THE POLITICS OF INDIA'S PAST**  
by Sowmiya Ashok. Hachette. Pages 307. ₹799

the North. The excavations at Keeladi have been caught in this rivalry.

Archaeology can also be used to settle the old debate whether Aryans migrated from the steppes of Central Asia, or whether they were the original inhabitants of the region and migrated from here to Iran and Europe. The possibilities are endless. Our distant past has become a battleground for claims and counter-claims for settling political disputes. It is therefore no surprise that history, an account of human life in the past, has become a great arbiter in the present dispute. Whoever controls the past will control the future.

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*— The reviewer is a visiting faculty at BML Munjal University, Manesar*

## Connect that's missing

RUMAMAHESHWARI

*"I consider the brotherhood of man as the only tie, and partitions based on race or religion are, to my mind, artificial and arbitrary..."*

— Dr MA Ansari, as quoted in Halide Edib's *'Inside India'* (1937)

**T**HE book *'Soul Climate'* is inspired by Halide Edib's soul-connect with India. She had been invited to deliver lectures at Jamia Millia Islamia in 1935, upon invitation by Dr Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari, one of the founders of Jamia, Gandhi's trusted medical doctor, freedom fighter and a champion of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Halide was a feminist, writer, freedom fighter, a liberal Muslim (but also with a different take on Islam being adaptable and amenable to change), a controversial figure for the western media, one-time comrade of Kemal Pasha, and was exiled by the state she had fought to create.

Set in 1935, the plot of the book concerns her visit. The novel plays out in Dar-es-Salam, Dr Ansari's residence at Daryaganj in Delhi, which was the hotbed of meetings of all the greats of the Indian freedom movement.

There are three main characters — cousins Zoya, Nuran and Aisha — upper class, angst-driven. They discuss their lives, while being witness to these meetings in their "Dr Uncle's" home. They also hear talks by Halide Hanum/Halide Edib and reflect upon them. Other characters mentioned are Auntie Toy, imprisoned by the British government at the time when Zoya enters the household, after a trip to "the ashram in the south", obliquely referring to Ramana Ashram in Tamil Nadu (but not naming it). There is the intellectual-activist Sajid, a Gandhian, who will ultimately pursue academics in London.

So, while the author, Inez Baranay, writes that it would please her if "the main result of this book of mine would be that readers would turn to Halide's own writings", she



**SOUL CLIMATE**  
by Inez Baranay. Speaking Tiger. Pages 272. ₹499

is unable to evoke the chaos of walking between history and fiction.

Ultimately, the book remains stuck between two parallel strands: the cousins and their existential crisis, and Inez's own discussions (which form the most interesting part of the book), around Halide's writing (her biography, the novel *'The Clown and His Daughter'*, etc); her own search for Dr Ansari's house, finding pictures of the same in the library; her witnessing the CAA agitation; her opinions on fundamentalism, communalism, citizenship, etc. Had she focused on this, and conversed fictionally with Halide, it would have made it more fascinating.

The concocted crisis of identity of the cousins (from an elite background and with a Paris connection, too) is not teased out, but rather sloppily 'resolved' towards the end. Dr Ansari, too, finds no voice. Quotable sentences abound in the non-fiction part of the book, including on the banned 1932 book *'Angaary'* (Rashid Jahan, Mahmud-uz-Zafar and Ahmed Ali), which, Inez speculates, might have been read by Aisha. Nuran is made to accompany Halide to Gandhi's *ashram* (after the discussion in *'Inside India'* on the same).

There is just too much material needlessly scattered. Careless editing, too, mars the work.

*— The reviewer is an independent journalist and historian*

## DESIGNED TO WIN

by S Devarajan. Penguin Random House. Pages 237. ₹699

From designing cutting-edge technology for electric vehicles and smart TVs to crafting embedded systems for global brands like Jaguar Land Rover, Ford, Mahindra, Comcast, Panasonic, and Motorola, Tata Elxsi's story mirrors the evolution of India's technology landscape. It reveals how a strong culture and unwavering leadership can steer a company to triumph. The author takes readers behind Tata Elxsi's extraordinary journey — from a company teetering on the brink of bankruptcy to one of India's most dynamic success stories.

## BACKFLAP



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Mahatma Gandhi's three-decade-long leadership allowed open debate, which remains unparalleled in any other nationalist struggle. This book endeavours to comprehend the nature and content of his major critics, including from within the Congress, whose umbrella nature allowed intense debate. Critics from the outside included Jinnah and Savarkar, questioning his advocacy of composite nationalism. If the revolutionaries disagreed with his non-violent methods, Churchill perceived him as the biggest threat to imperialism.

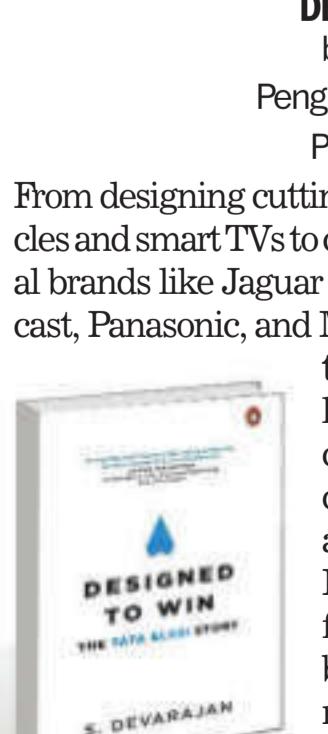
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## REFLECTIONS

## Reading between the lines

TOUCHSTONES  
IRA PANDE

**A**S I sit down to write this, the noise of the Maharashtra municipal elections is all around me. By the time you read this column, we will all know who now controls the rich and income-generating public lands and amenities of this important state. The verdict seems to be almost unanimous that Maharashtra, most importantly Mumbai, is now a completely different political landscape from the usual Shiv Sena-BJP duopoly of yesteryears. So much has changed and is evolving but sadly our old political parties are still stuck in a time warp and incapable of responding to these momentous changes. I recall VS Naipaul's *'India: A Million Mutinies Now'*, written decades ago, where he had a prescient interview with old Balasaheb Thackeray, the undisputed ruler of Bombay (as it was then). Do please read it if you can and you will get an idea of what these bubbling mutinies, so sharply noted by Naipaul all those years ago, have wrought to change the face of Naya Bharat.

Unfortunately, our political parties, weakened by dynastic power lines, are unable to see what Bihar has recently shown and what Maharashtra may reveal. UP and the Samajwadi Party will learn something too when the next election there is held. The Congress, of course, the mother (and grandmother) of all dynastic parties, has still not come to terms with the fact that this new India is no longer to be treated like a feudal territory. Ah well, who am I to speak when so many in their own parties are unable to say so openly?

From there, let us move to what else is a big highlight in January: the world-famous Jaipur Literature Festival, or the JLF as it is now

billed in the hip-hop language of the young. Almost every writer, famous or new, wants to attend it and publishers from India and abroad, literary agents and regional writers flock there to hear, speak (or at least die trying) to the largest collection of readers and booklovers anywhere in the world. It was free when it was launched from the cosy precincts of Diggi Palace, situated at the end of a narrow winding lane. It was a venue that gave one the feeling of being among like-minded friends and warmly hosted by the family that ran it. Then came the hordes of the 'let's see' crowds, young students who came to gawk at the filmstars and poets and writers they wanted to see rather than hear and the festival had to be shifted to a five-star hotel that was better

**Just as our cinema was destroyed by crass commercial concerns and our music polluted, there is a danger of creativity being gobbled by formulas that sell**

equipped to handle unwelcome gate-crashers. However, something changed when that happened and a completely new kind of 'booklover' entered the scene. Among them were young aspirational writers (no matter whether they were published or not), those bag ladies (as I used to call them) who came to shop in Jaipur's famous markets and some who came to chatter amongst themselves as they swanned from one session to another. Some new forms of literary activists also took birth. Literary agents, marketing and PR firms, hustlers and movers who offered to introduce you to important people — you can get the drift of where that would take this serious gathering of yore.

Publishing houses, too, were quick to sense that book sales were plummeting alarmingly and unless they tackled this looming problem, many would have to shut shop (some had to). Regional writing, which was hitherto an invisible phenomenon, suddenly became important as translations made headlines at important international prizes and won huge dollar prizes. It seems to me as if writing became an alluring vocation (if that is the word) and every person was dying to write and be published. So while on the one hand, the old bookshops and publishing houses are struggling to survive, there is an avalanche of writers who are willing to do whatever it takes to publish or be damned. They offer to buy back the entire first print-run, pay some PR agency to place excerpts in digital newspapers and websites, find a ghost writer or a freelance editor to write and edit their work. And then, there is ChatGPT, AI and god knows what else to do the blood and sweat work. I myself have been offered tempting amounts from famous industrial houses to write an 'autobiography' or memoir of the founding worthy, who can hardly speak two sentences in a coherent language.

There is more. The trick is to be in the lime-light by picking on an area that has not yet been mined to death. It started with religious divides, gender, sexual exploitation, caste, class and emotional violence and now as the floodgates are open for hearing what few would be comfortable reading in the raw, it is just plain rubbish. Health, self-care, skill development, beauty and food — these sell by the kilo, believe me. At the local book fair (currently on in Delhi), people probably spend more on the *chaat, samosas* and *cutting chai* than cutting writing.

Before I sound like a crochety old woman (I am one, unfortunately, having just turned 75), I am actually fearful of what we are offering to our young readers. Just as our cinema was destroyed by crass commercial concerns and our music polluted when the lines between classic and popular became blurred, there is a danger here of creativity being gobbled by formulas that sell. Watch out!

— The writer is a social commentator

## When car gizmos drive you crazy



AVAY SHUKLA

In my time, we were happy to have a stereo with two speakers; now there just has to be a small TV screen, six speakers and surround sound, even though one is surrounded by the sound of blaring horns and shrieking sirens.

In my halcyon but simple days, when lost, one stopped at a *chaiwalla* or taxi stand and asked for directions. No more. For one, all the *chaiwallas* have become ministers; two, the taxi chaps have become "business partners" of Ola and Uber and communicate only through apps and QR codes; and three, there's now something called GPS and Satnav — two charming ladies who sound like Girl Guides and guide you to Meerut when you actually want to have *paranthas* in Murthal. They also turn deaf when you need them the most, no doubt powdering their noses in Palo Alto or Guggenheim, while you're stuck under the Ashram flyover.

Consider, if you will, the biggest scam of all — the sunroof. Do we need this? Really? It makes sense for a meerkat in the Kalahari desert or a marmot in the More plains of Ladakh to occasionally stick his neck out for fresh air, but a dude in Delhi or Mumbai or Kanpur? Who needs a sunroof when the daytime temperature is 40° Celsius for seven months, it rains incessantly for three months and for the remaining two months, the outside air contains more PM2.5 particles than fake news in an Amit Malviya tweet?

What about those other desiderata bent upon stripping us of our few remaining faculties — ADAS (Advanced Driver Assist System), Brake Assist, Hill Start Assist, High-line TMS, Auto Driving IRVMs, SMS (Stability Management System)?

Apart from the fact that a driver now has to decipher more acronyms than there are in our PM's speeches, the question that arises is: how come then that our road accident rates continue to go up by 7 per cent every year in spite of all the "safety features"? Proof, if needed, that the more gizmos you add, the more atrophied the human brain becomes; what we have on our roads now is not drivers but distracted zombies.

I don't know much about law: I can't tell the difference between a *habeas* and a *corpus*, but I do feel it is time for our courts to apply their famous "essentially doctrine" to these accessories and save us from being ripped off of tens of thousands of our unearned shekels. They should forget about applying it to *hijab*, triple talaq, Jallikattu or Sabarimala — India has too many of these windmills for even a Solomon to tilt at. Bring the doctrine to bear on these gizmos instead — are they essential to the purpose for which a car is built? Can a car reach its destination without the breathless voice telling you to take a U-Turn at a T-junction? Can you press the clutch, or brake, without three pinging reminders? I, for one, would be willing to submit my considerable research to the court in a seat — sorry, sealed — cover for the perusal of My Lords.

Can we please get back to driving a car by the seat of our pants and the oversized brain God gave us with such high expectations?

— The writer is a retired IAS officer

## Vivekananda's message of harmony



UNIVERSE  
ANANYA AWASTHI & NIHIL YADAV

**R**ELIGIOUS intolerance is undeniably one of the most pressing issues facing the world today. From terrorism and ethnic genocide to global conflicts, inter-religious strife is an undeniable reality of our times. Often exacerbated by misinformation circulated on social media and deep-seated mistrust amongst communities, this tension is all too frequently exploited for political gain. What the world lacks, in this context, is a universal framework that not only rejects religious fanaticism but also provides equal respect and the right to practise one's faith freely without infringing upon others. It is in this challenging landscape that Swami Vivekananda's teachings on religious tolerance resonate with an urgency that meets the current needs.

In his iconic address at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, Vivekananda appealed for universal brotherhood. He proclaimed:

*Sectarian, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilisation and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending*

*their way to the same goal.*

Vivekananda warned against the pitfalls of quarrelling over religious books and claiming superiority over one another based on one's scriptures. He urged people to look beyond differences and embrace a common humanity. Instead of relying on religious texts alone to build peace, he argued that the power of reason was the essential foundation for preventing inter-religious conflict.

Vivekananda provocatively claimed, 'For it is better that mankind should become atheist by following reason than blindly believe in two hundred millions of Gods on the authority of anybody.' This statement highlights his belief in the value of reasoned thought over blind adherence to religious dogma. He continued by asserting that 'no amount of books can help us become pur-

*er. The only power is in realisation, and that lies in ourselves and comes from thinking. Let men think.'* Here, Vivekananda championed the transformative power of personal realisation and intellectual contemplation over blind obedience to religious authority.

His bold call for introspection and thoughtful realisation, rather than an unthinking submission to scriptures, sets an extraordinary precedent. He envisioned a future where different religions would ultimately fuse into a 'union of philosophy', where each person is free to choose their teacher or form of worship as expressions of a shared unity. This vision of religious plurality, which respects diverse expressions of belief while maintaining a commitment to mutual understanding, reflects an inclusive approach to spirituality that remains deeply relevant today.

Vivekananda's message of universal brotherhood holds religious tolerance as a paramount ideal. He argued that different religions were, in essence, diverse perspectives of the same truth, all converging on one 'universal truth', which he defined as the 'realisation of God'. Moving beyond tolerance alone, Vivekananda advocated for a 'Universal Religion' founded on harmony and brotherhood, one that embraced all faiths while celebrating their diversity. This vision provides a compelling template for achieving harmony in an increasingly polarised world.

— Excerpted from *Living the Vivekananda Way*, with permission from Rupa

## Bones are brittle and weak, but I have promises to keep

DEVPREET SINGH

**T**HE 'Z' and 'T' scores of the spine do not matter. You are the only one with a spine in this office. Prove me wrong," challenged my boss, Ms Joshi, when I informed her of my diagnosis. Half-way into my thirties, I was pronounced severely osteoporotic. Osteoporosis is a debilitating health issue making bones weak and brittle.

My doctor's grave countenance said it all: "Be very careful. You have preempted an immediate collapse. But even mild bodily stress can cause a fracture." The calcium, Vitamin D, regular exercise *gyan* drowned in my overwhelming emotions. Visualising a constricted lifestyle was heartbreaking for someone brimming with life.

My mind went into an overdrive. After much processing, it answered the standard "Why me?" question by "Why not me? Why should life only deal 'aces' for anyone?" I still persisted, "Is it the end of the road for someone who has miles to go? Will travel and dance be my biggest casualties?" The mind responded, "Tough cookies do not crumble. Chin up, lady! It is a call to slow down, take

stock of health and life in general."

My active tear glands helped. Finally, I made peace with myself.

My tryst with broken bones is legendary. I remember twisting my right foot as I flaunted my new shoes at my friend Anita's place. The ankle quickly swelled out of the classy heels. I drove my scooter back home, Dad huddled me into the car and a plaster replaced the heels. Four weeks of rest, hobbling around on crutches and physiotherapy got me going. Or so I thought. Anita's house, it was, again. Whether my scooter fell on me or I fell off it is still a mystery. What is imprinted on the mind is my father's horrified expression! Since I managed a second fall before full recovery, plaster was ruled out.

My legal practice started on a fractured note with a special shoe supporting my broken toe. 'Calamity Jane' has always been my middle name. I take a fall here and a broken bone there literally in my stride. Fortunately, 'Determination' is my first name. Osteoporosis was damned. I live a full life, in the midst of broken bones, injections, medication and physiotherapy. Before the 'Fragile, handle with care' crown settled firmly on my head, I was trapped in a bomb blast in a Delhi market. I walked out of the debris, shaken but

not shattered. In lesser dramatic moments, I fractured my wrist, little finger of the right hand, ankle, toes, ribs — the works. Tennis elbow, Piriformis syndrome, Plantar fasciitis and, currently, my right shoulder that feels like a boulder, have kept me on terra firma.

Sesame seeds, sunlight, spinach, salmon, soy milk, high spirits (not what you think!), swag, *'Surya Namaskar'* and a big smile are my secret weapons. *Gyan* over.

Memories of my first official tour to the United States bring a warm smile. It was in 2008, some months after my diagnosis. Doctor's prescription, reports and medicines in hand, I boarded my first wheelchair at IGIA, New Delhi. Eyes closed, I pretended to hide from the world while being wheeled around. Barring a few "poor thing" and some snide remarks, I realised that nobody cared. So, chill. I dozed off but woke up to "OMG! What are you doing on a wheelchair?" by a former boss. My sob story heard, he breezed out. Fifteen years younger, yours truly was wheeled out by the airlines staff. Ouch! That hurt.

Let me confess. I quickly acknowledged the perks of a wheelchair. No queues. All international travel formalities taken care of by the attendant. At Heathrow airport, London, I could have missed the connecting

flight to Los Angeles but for the tough Bosnian wheelchair attendant. Her pointed query — "Who's the patient?" — and my answer — "I am the patient" — was brushed aside despite my documents. She insisted: "You don't look like one." Portly me, smile intact, settled in the wheelchair with a huge handbag, ignored all comments and enjoyed the sights, sounds and smells of Heathrow, praying for all to go well. Another lesson: to be eligible for the wheelchair, not only should you be a patient, but also look like one!

I live by 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going' dictum. At times, I have attended office with a plastered right hand. I could neither write, nor type or sign. Voila! My left hand got its rightful place. I have often travelled for work with a cast on, and sometimes acquired a splint during travel. Many family pictures show me flaunting a plaster. Having travelled across India and most continents, I rate 2024 as my most adventurous.

Our gang of three girls descended on Barcelona in Spain. Two blissful days and then the 'oops moment' at Sitges, known for its beaches. I missed a step and my pedicured right foot with turquoise nail polish swelled up. My two doctor friends quickly organised ice for me and beer for themselves.

A couple of days later, seat hopping on a 'Hop on, Hop off' bus in Madrid, I again tripped. Some people never learn. How much cheese, tiramisu and shopping was needed to overcome my misery! But living by my favourite movie, *'Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara'*, I also stopped by in Italy. Crepe bandage and walking stick in place, I limped through Europe, mumbling, *'Aaj kal paon zameen par nahin padte mere'*.

I cannot close without singing paeans of praise for my regular hangout: the physiotherapy centre of my 'favourite' hospital and the doctors who treat me as their own. Interns may come and go, I am permanently positioned. Each time I walk in sheepishly, I am welcomed with — "Don't worry, ma'am. *Hum hain na*." Most patients mistake me for a physiotherapist as I confidently discuss wax bath, laser, ultrasonic rays. Encouraged, I considered a course in physiotherapy but remembering that science was always my Achilles' heel, the idea was shelved.

As I contemplate a visit to Antarctica, I fondly remember my friend Neerja. Her love for me overflowed on one of my early plasters: *'Leaton ke bhoot baaton se nahin mante'*.

— The writer is a retired civil servant and a practising advocate

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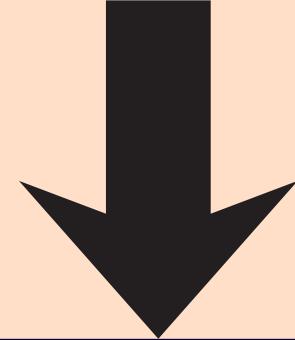
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## INDEPTH

With generative artificial intelligence becoming a tool to produce sexually explicit content and women having to face the horrific consequences, the onus lies on tech firms and law enforcement agencies to make online space safe

SEEMA SACHDEVA

ONE of the most alarming threats invading the digital space today is the misuse of generative AI — artificial intelligence that mimics human learning patterns to create non-consensual explicit imagery. At the receiving end recently was Chhattisgarh-based Tanvi Vij, whose one casual photo post on social media turned into a harrowing experience.

The 33-year-old Chandigarh-born writer was on a vacation to Puducherry when she ran into YouTuber and stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra and clicked a photograph with him. Back home in Raipur, she posted the picture on her X account, tagging Kamra. What followed shattered her sense of safety online.

Anonymous accounts began appearing under her post, issuing prompts to X's generative AI tool @Grok. What started with requests to remove the comedian from the image soon turned into instructions to alter Tanvi's clothes, change camera angles and sexualise her body. To her horror, she discovered that one account had generated nearly nude images of her in full-length, despite her having posted a cropped image.

"I was full of fear and helplessness. I was looking at a picture of myself almost naked on the Internet. I panicked and immediately deleted all my images on X and other social media platforms. I even locked my digital profile," she told *The Tribune*.

"They were generating pornographic content in my comments," she says. "It was happening publicly and there was nothing I was able to do about it. I felt so vulnerable."

Tanvi turned to her father, a retired IPS officer who had served as a Special DGP, for support. "For half an hour, I just cried. He held me and said it's fine. We need to report this."

She took screenshots of the comments and images and filed an FIR with the Raipur police, besides reporting the posts to X and writing to the platform's grievance officer. After more than five days, she received a notification saying that the flagged account had been blocked for violating platform rules.

"For five to six days, those pictures were just up there for everyone to see. I haven't received any reply from the grievance officer so far," shares Tanvi.

It took much courage to confront the terrifying reality but the experience has changed how Tanvi views online spaces. "When you see yourself like that on Internet, you feel ashamed, as if somebody has taken off your clothes. But to all the women who have been victims of such cowardly acts, I want to say it is not your shame. Such perpetrators need to be called out and reported."

The misuse of generative AI to produce sexually explicit content has become rampant, particularly on platforms like X, where such images can be publicly posted. A 24-hour analysis conducted on January 5-6 by social media and deepfake researcher Genevieve Oh revealed that images generated by the @Grok account averaged 6,700 sexually suggestive or nudified images per hour. The findings were published in *Bloomberg News*.

Similarly, nearly three-quarters of X posts



## TRAUMA OF AI MISUSE

collected and analysed by PhD researcher Nana Nwachukwu of Dublin's Trinity College found requests for non-consensual images of real women or minors, with clothes removed or added.

Globally, the issue is gaining traction. The US Senate has passed a Bill allowing victims of non-consensual deepfakes to sue tech firms. The UK has demanded accountability from the platform, while Indonesia and Malaysia have banned X's chatbot @Grok.

In India, X recently admitted to lapses after the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology flagged accounts posting explicit, non-consensual content. More than 3,500 posts were removed and 600 accounts deleted. The accounts were exposed after Shiv Sena (UBT) Rajya Sabha MP Priyanka Chaturvedi took up the issue of @Grok misuse with the Centre.

While acknowledging swift government action, Chaturvedi insists it is not enough. Talking to *The Tribune*, she says, "Blocking accounts is not where it ends. We need accountability. Tech firms must build guardrails. Accounts that misbehave should be withdrawn, withheld and not reinstated ever again. When you deny such people spaces, they realise that they have crossed the boundaries of acceptability."

"Till now, most tech platforms, under the guise of innovation, have largely escaped from taking responsibility. AI tools like

@Grok have been created to empower citizens, but these are being abused. Generative AI is based on data inputs. When a problematic prompt is given, the tool should not respond. Even when it responds, it should clearly warn users that they're indulging in criminal behaviour and are liable for punishment or action can be taken against them by the government," says the MP.

Chaturvedi sees Tanvi's case as part of a continuum. "We saw this with Sulli Deals and Bulli Bai app case in 2021-22 with the online mock auction of Muslim women. Young people felt they could get away with it under anonymity."

What alarms her most about @Grok is the scale and automation. "From images, it could lead to videos. Once it's out there, it's up for download, sharing — everything — without woman's consent," she says.

The problem lies not with generative AI itself, but the lack of governance, stresses cybercrime investigator Ritesh Bhatia, who has been warning about such a possibility since as early as 2018.

"The artificially intelligent machine can't be held responsible for commands given to it. But it is 100 per cent the responsibility of Elon Musk to ensure that his platform is not being misused to create objectionable content. If the platform is able to 'undress' someone online, it is because the command to do so has been incorporated into the system. The tech

platform's governance team needs to check this," he says, adding that even though in cyberspace there are no borders, every country has its own ethical and legal framework which social media platforms must respect.

Generative AI is increasingly becoming a tool for abuse, says V Neeraja, Special DGP, Cyber Crime, Punjab. "Most women complainants only want the content removed and do not want to register an FIR. Women facing online harassment should immediately report it on the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal (NCRP) or at the nearest cybercrime police station. They should also seek content removal directly on platforms or report it at [www.StopNCII.org](http://www.StopNCII.org). Social media platforms are generally cooperative. As per IT rules, it can take up to 36 hours to remove such content — the sooner it is reported, the faster action can be taken to remove objectionable content," says the IPS officer.

Once the complaint is made, all existing images on any social media platform are identified and reported. "On the NCRP site, [www.cybercrime.gov.in](http://www.cybercrime.gov.in), all cybercrimes can be reported. National Helpline 1930 is for reporting financial cyber frauds only. In Punjab, we have added an IVR (interactive voice response) facility on 1930 to guide on how to report cybercrime against women and children," adds Neeraja.

Most of the times, women are hesitant to

report fearing their identity will be revealed. "It's a long-drawn process and they're not sure how society would react. By the time the content is taken down, it's been downloaded multiple times. Every share is a further humiliation. Till we, Indian women, don't seek accountability, there would be men out there who will continue to use the silence and misuse these platforms, believing they can get away with it," says Chaturvedi.

"If women are hesitant to come forward and file an FIR, the same should come from the police authorities. Justice has to be seen to be done," she adds.

Following the global public outcry over the past fortnight, Elon Musk's X has announced that it has stopped its AI-powered chatbot @Grok, including for premium users, from editing pictures of real people to show them in revealing clothes like bikinis. This admission, however, doesn't change the fact that AI tools are capable of generating non-consensual sexual imagery at scale and every minute thousands of women and children are possibly becoming victims of this.

The vital question, thus, is: who bears responsibility for safety online?

No one should be asking women to stop posting pictures, argues Bhatia, "That's like asking people to wear a fire suit before entering a theatre." The onus, he says, lies solely and squarely with tech platforms and law enforcement agencies to make Internet a safer place.

## NEED TO FIX ACCOUNTABILITY



Hold the tech firms accountable. Tell them that we work under certain laws and they need to operate within that framework, or their access to our markets would be limited. India needs to leverage the market that we give to such firms to operate in our country, to ensure that they follow the prevailing law mechanism here.

Priyanka Chaturvedi, RAJYA SABHA MP

## BIG SECURITY LAPSE



What about the people who prompt the platform to post such content? Just because the platform has that capability, are you going to misuse it? This is a big security lapse. Government needs to take action. The platform is accessed everywhere. But no one would think of doing such a thing in, say, Saudi Arabia, where laws are very stringent.

Ritesh Bhatia, CYBERCRIME INVESTIGATOR

## Katra after-effects

As the affected MBBS students await new options and withdrawal of permission to the college takes a toll on families, J&K is staring at a new phase of polarisation

ADIL AKHZER

THE MBBS student from Kulgam in South Kashmir remembers his first day at the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Institute of Medical Excellence (SMVDIME) in Katra vividly: "Everyone was excited as our dream of becoming medics took off." He had secured a seat in the inaugural batch on the basis of marks attained in the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET). Among the 50 MBBS students — 47 of them Muslims — who got admission on merit, he is today staring at an uncertain future.

As per rules, 15 per cent seats were to be allotted through Central counselling and 85 per cent for Jammu and Kashmir domicile aspirants. Students from J&K got all the seats. As they began to learn the basics in November last year, word went out that the maximum seats had gone to Muslim students, triggering protests by right-wing groups such as Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

"They began protesting outside our college. Initially, we thought it would be some grievance-based protest, but it escalated and everyone began to realise that the issue was much more serious," he says.

Organisations backed by the Sangh Parivar planned a large-scale agitation to get the admissions scrapped. The Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Sangharsh Samiti was formed on the lines of the Shri Amarnath Sangharsh Samiti, which led the agitation in 2008 against the revocation of forest land trans-

fer to the Amarnath cave shrine in Kashmir.

The BJP, which swept the Assembly elections in the Jammu region in 2024, also joined the protest. BJP leader and Leader of Opposition Sunil Sharma called on Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, expressing strong reservations "over the selection process", stating that the admissions had triggered widespread anger among devotees of Mata Vaishno Devi and sections of the larger Hindu community.

Hindu groups said since the institution has been built using money offered by Hindu devotees, the medical college should be accorded minority status and all its seats should be reserved for Hindu students.

A BJP delegation also met Union Health and Family Welfare Minister JP Nadda in New Delhi, who assured that the matter would be examined with "due seriousness".

Earlier this month, after sustained protests against the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board (SMVDSB), the National Medical Commission (NMC) said it has withdrawn the letter granting permission to the shrine-run medical college to continue its MBBS programme. It cited 'irregularities' following a surprise inspection.

As expected, mixing politics with education and its communalisation has led to serious concerns in the Kashmir valley.

The Jammu and Kashmir government says it has started the process of adjusting students of the Katra college. However, it's a long wait for the affected students.

A female student from Central Kashmir's Budgam says securing a good rank in



Many celebrated shutting down of the MBBS programme, but Jammu is divided on the issue. ANI

NEET came after a lot of hard work. "We are praying I get a college soon... it has taken a toll on my mental well-being," she adds.

Another student from South Kashmir says his parents struggled to collect ₹6 lakh, the yearly fee of the medical college.

"It was also tough getting a bank security of another ₹19 lakh, the remaining college fee. When everything was done, we had no idea we would meet this fate. We are calling up government offices every day, but there is no clarity about the admissions," he adds.

A parent of an MBBS student from Jammu region expresses his concerns: "This should never have happened. There should be no politics on education. The government shouldn't delay further allotment of colleges. Students are already stressed. The important thing now is to take steps so that covering the syllabus is not further delayed."

Meanwhile, inside the Katra college, several faculty members are unable to come to terms with what changed suddenly, from

granting permission to the medical college to the swift withdrawal. "There is an old saying that failing or passing a student is in the hands of the faculty... the same thing has happened in our case," an insider says.

The college is hopeful it will bounce back.

"We will not let politics ruin the college, we will fix the deficiencies and apply again whenever the time comes. But, as of now, we are not doing anything because the shrine board has to take the next call," he adds.

Jammu-based analyst Kanwal Singh says though the concerns expressed by sections of the local community in Jammu were not entirely without basis, whatever followed — protests and political mobilisation over medical seats allotted purely on the basis of merit — was "neither constitutionally sound, nor morally justified".

"Even more troubling was the celebration following the withdrawal of permission, especially in a region with a low doctor-to-population ratio. Such a response reflects a troubling

disregard for public welfare. There are democratic ways to address public grievances, but communalising an issue was deeply unfortunate," he says, adding that this medical college had the potential to empower the local community in the long run. "Its closure should neither be welcomed, nor celebrated."

Hurriyat chairman and Jamia mosque chief cleric Mirwaiz Omar Farooq says professional institutions must be guided strictly by merit, transparency and due process. "It is extremely sad to see a section of people celebrating the shutting down of a medical college, while the academic future of young students hangs in the balance. This highlights disturbing intrusion of communal politics into education."

With Kashmir-based political parties lashing out at the BJP and the right-wing groups for the protests in Jammu, experts from Jammu say mixing politics and education must be viewed as an isolated case. "Jammu has multiple kinds of views and the whole of Jammu is not celebrating. That is the reason diverse debates are going on within society about this particular incident. Politically, it is not going to take Jammu into a different direction because it has a multi-religious, cultural fabric. Jammu has been welcoming people for so many decades," says Rekha Chowdhary, a retired professor from University of Jammu. The NMC's withdrawal was unfortunate, she points out.

A much bigger problem appears to be emerging in the UT. Politicians from Jammu are demanding that the upcoming National Law University be based in Jammu, though Chief Minister Omar Abdullah earlier said it would be established in Kashmir's Budgam.

"Kashmir has waited for decades. NLU must be based in Kashmir. Don't repeat the medical college episode. Blackmail won't work every time," says Sahil Paray, a Valley-based student activist.

Amid the widening fault lines, Jammu and Kashmir is staring at a new phase of polarisation.

## New Export Milestones in Punjab's Development Journey

Punjab is a strong agricultural state in India. Wheat, rice, maize, and sugarcane are cultivated extensively here. Punjab's markets contribute significantly to crop procurement by central agencies. The state's basmati rice, pharmaceuticals, sports goods, and engineering products are renowned. Currently, 1.4 million small, medium, and cottage industries are operating in Punjab.

According to a recent NITI Aayog report, Punjab's ranking in exports to other countries has improved. The state is currently ranked seventh, down from tenth in the 2022 report. Punjab is a landlocked state. According to NITI Aayog, exports from Punjab amounted to Rs 56,000 crore in one year. Thus, Punjab has risen from tenth to seventh among exporting states. Rice, tractors, cotton yarn, and motor vehicle parts are the largest exports. The main markets for these are the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom. Five cities in Punjab are the main exporters: Amritsar, Ludhiana, Jalandhar, Mohali, and Patiala. Bicycles, auto parts, and textiles come from Ludhiana, sports equipment and light engineering goods from Jalandhar, pharmaceuticals from Mohali, and engineering goods from Patiala. The United States is the largest customer, accounting for 15.52 percent of total exports, while the UAE accounts for 7.35 percent. Meanwhile, Punjab still leads in agriculture, contributing 46.3 percent of India's wheat production and 31.2 percent of rice production. Exports from Punjab are improving, and new investment proposals are expected to materialize. The industrial and commercial development of the border state of Punjab is facing the threat of increasing cross-border tensions. Our Wagah-Attari route with Pakistan has been disrupted, which has slowed our regional export growth. It's true that we export a lot of textiles and have now achieved export success in agricultural processed goods. We can say that exports and investment in Punjab have reached their potential. However, a barrier to Punjab's exports is limited research and development and the lack of state-of-the-art innovation. This increases costs and impacts Punjab's export ecosystem. Furthermore, US tariffs are a burden, but diversification agreements with other countries are significantly improving the situation. However, the state's geographical location is unfavorable. Ports are far away, increasing both time and cost of transporting goods. The victims know that the lack of international certifications and compliance standards for Punjab's small and medium-sized industries prevents industrial development from galloping like a horse and slows down. The NITI Aayog's news that Punjab has risen to seventh place in export growth is a welcome sign for the state. It also serves as a reminder to increase exploration and research, adopt new scientific methods, and make more efforts to facilitate transportation. These efforts are essential to ensure Punjab rises from seventh place to second or third. The government's industrial incentives are commendable.

Abhishek Vij

## Rehabilitation Program for Prisoners in Punjab Jails

The environment in Punjab's jails has been a subject of discussion for decades. The signs at the gates of the prisons read "Correctional Facility," not "Prison." However, the kind of news that has been coming out of these jails suggested that they were becoming centers for operating criminal activities from within, rather than places of reform. Instead of reform, the story of the jails becoming dens of depravity has been unfolding. Now, taking steps towards reform and change, the current Bhagwant Mann government in Punjab has made some new decisions to give prisoners a new life and rehabilitation.

It is hoped that these decisions will achieve their objectives and improve the lives of the prisoners. Some of the decisions are quite unique, such as operating ITI (Industrial Training Institute) centers and petrol pumps inside the jails. Verka booths will also be run. If prisoners participate in these commercial activities, it will generate interest in earning a livelihood through employment rather than crime in the future. The money they earn will help them establish a reformed life later on. Recently, there were also reports of clashes between different groups of prisoners in some jails.

Their attention was being diverted to unnecessary activities. But now, it has been decided that sports competitions will be organized among the prisoners in the jails. These could even be called "Jail Olympics." While examples of sports competitions in individual jails exist, the program of organizing inter-jail sports competitions across all of Punjab's jails is a unique initiative. If this idea is successful, it can bring about a healthy improvement in the jail environment, the kind of improvement envisioned when these jails were named correctional facilities. Of course, such reforms require a new awakening among the jail staff and a desire among the prisoners to improve their own lives.

How quickly this expectation will be fulfilled remains to be seen, but the fact that such a plan is being formulated is not only interesting but also welcome. Such programs should not be dismissed as idealistic, but rather, officers who are fully committed to these ideals should be appointed to prisons. At a time when prisons across the country are associated with crime, corruption, drug trafficking, and police-mafia nexus, the Punjab government's plan to organize rehabilitation and sports activities in its prisons is commendable and welcome.

## Building national environmental consciousness: Beyond cleaning, towards caring



**Dr. Tanu Jain**  
Chief executive officer Bareilly cantonment board Ministry of defence

In 2014, when the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) was officially launched on 2nd October by Honourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi—on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary—the depth of its vision was yet to be absorbed by the nation. It was not just about sweeping streets or installing dustbins. It was envisioned as a nationwide movement to achieve the dream of a "Clean India" by Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary in 2019. More than an administrative programme, it was an effort to build national consciousness, to awaken the collective spirit of cleanliness and responsibility towards the environment. The mission was about shaping citizens into custodians of their surroundings.

Yet, ideals often clash with reality. Recently, while walking across the Mumbai oceanfront in the quiet of an early morning, I was struck by two worlds coexisting side by side. On one hand, there was the eternal beauty of nature—rocky islands rising like guardians of the sea, flocks of chirping birds filling the air with music, and the

vast ocean stretching endlessly into the horizon. Sitting there, one could feel the heartbeat of creation itself—soothing, nurturing, infinite.

But this vision of serenity was shattered by the path I had to take to reach it. A stretch of filth lay in between: heaps of plastic bottles, torn polythene wrappers, foul-smelling waste, and a landfill spilling into the ocean. The smell was nauseating, the sight disheartening. And then, the most disturbing moment—my eyes caught a man carrying a sack of garbage and without hesitation, throwing it straight into the sea.

Instinctively raised my voice in anger, but by then the damage was done. The ocean had swallowed yet another wound.

What pierced me more than his action was the casualness with which it was done—like it was the most natural thing in the world to dump filth into nature. At that moment, a truth struck me with great force: cleaning every day will never be enough if polluting every day continues.

We often believe that the solution to filth is more cleaning. But the real solution is less littering. If our rivers, oceans, streets, and hills continue to be treated as dumping grounds, no amount of government machinery, NGOs, or volunteers can keep pace. The cycle of cleaning and re-polluting is endless unless the mindset is changed.

The true challenge is not waste management, but consciousness management. People need to understand that their small act—throwing a bottle, tossing

a wrapper, burning plastic—has immense collective consequences.

And yet, the reverse is also true. One person refusing to use plastic, one family composting at home, one community adopting a lake, one school teaching its children to segregate waste—these are sparks that can ignite a movement.

The path forward lies in combining systems with sensitivity, education with emotion, and enforcement with empowerment.

Community awareness drives must move beyond statistics and touch the heart. Citizen ownership of local spaces must turn duty into pride. Schools must raise a generation that treats sustainability as second nature. Instead of only punishing offenders, society must celebrate role models—households that compost, neighbourhoods that go plastic-free, businesses that shift to green practices. Enforcement must go hand in hand with alternatives—biodegradable packaging, waste-to-art projects, and plastic-free zones.

And most importantly, we must connect culture with cleanliness: if we revere Ganga as Mother, how can we pollute her waters? When spirituality aligns with sustainability, the message penetrates deeper.

That morning by the ocean made me reflect: nature is infinitely forgiving, but it is not infinitely resilient. For centuries, rivers have absorbed our waste, air has absorbed our smoke, and land has absorbed our toxins. But today, we are reaching a tipping point. Climate change, rising

pollution, dying species—all are signals that Earth is no longer able to heal herself alone. What we need is not just cleaning, but caring.

To care is to treat the Earth as we treat our own home, our own body. We do not litter in our bedroom; why do we litter in our rivers? We do not dump garbage in our dining room; why do we dump it in the oceans that feed us? When caring becomes the norm, cleanliness becomes effortless.

The Bhagavad Gita teaches us: "One who sees all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings, never turns away from it." If we truly see ourselves in the fish that die from plastic, in the birds that choke on waste, in the children who fall ill from pollution—then to pollute becomes impossible. Osho beautifully said that cleanliness is not only an outer act but an inner discipline. When the mind is cluttered, the world is dirty. When the mind is pure, the world naturally shines.

To keep our environment clean is not a favour we do to the Earth—it is a favour we do to ourselves, our children, and our future. It is not charity; it is dharma. The Earth is not ours to exploit and discard.

The Earth is ours to love, nurture, and protect. And in that protection lies not just survival, but the blossoming of human dignity and spiritual harmony.

Let us go beyond the act of cleaning. Let us awaken the art of caring. For when consciousness changes, the world itself becomes clean.

### THOUGHT OF THE DAY

*"Hope is the quiet belief that small efforts, repeated daily, can change the world."*

- Rabindranath Tagore

## It is here and now



**K SIVA PRASAD**  
A senior IAS officer in the Punjab Government

The Bhagavad Gita is about who we are. It is like being truthful apart from knowing the truth. This happens when we are centred in the inner self in the present moment of time.

Arjuna's underlying dilemma revolves around the fear of how his actions of killing friends, relatives and teachers for the sake of the kingdom will affect his image in the eyes of the world. This appears to be very logical and this is the first barrier to be crossed. Clarity would come when we dive deep into the Gita.

The real dilemma of Arjuna is about his image in the future. Krishna says that we have the right to do karma but no right to the karma-phal. A point to be noted is that karma (action) occurs in the present moment and karma-phal (fruits of action) is something that manifests in the future. This indicates that we have control over our present moment but not over the future.

Like Arjuna who is worried about his image, we too strive for outcome-oriented actions. Sometimes modern life gives us the impression that future outcomes can be controlled. But in reality, the future is a combination of so many possibilities over which we hardly have any control. Our ahankar, feeding on our past and projecting the future on the present, creates dilemmas. The universe, consisting of galaxies, stars and planets, is characterized by rotation, with these structures revolving around a stationary hub/axis. The fundamental principle is that rotation of the wheel is not possible in the absence of a stationary hub. Similarly, every storm has a calm centre without which no storm can sustain momentum. Another characteristic of the storm is that the farther one moves away from the centre, the greater the turbulence becomes. We too have a calm centre which is nothing but our inner self and the turbulent life, with its many attributes, revolves around it. Arjuna's dilemma is about one of such attributes which is his reputation. We too form images about ourselves by looking into the eyes of others rather than looking into our inner selves to understand who we are.

Gita says that the 'time' to be is the present moment and 'space' to be is the eternal state of our inner self. When one is realised, the other is attained automatically.

## The quiet crisis of news fatigue in the digital age

In an era of constant connectivity, access to news has never been easier. Smartphones vibrate with breaking alerts, social media timelines refresh endlessly, and live updates stream around the clock. Yet, paradoxically, this unprecedented flow of information has given rise to a growing phenomenon: news fatigue. Increasingly, audiences across the world are choosing to disengage from news altogether, not because it lacks importance, but because it feels overwhelming, repetitive, and emotionally exhausting.

News fatigue is not simply boredom. It is a psychological response to prolonged exposure to distressing information—wars, pandemics, climate disasters, political polarization, and economic uncertainty—often delivered in relentless cycles. Studies by media research organizations have shown that large sections of the population now deliberately avoid news for days or even weeks at a time. For many, especially younger audiences, the news feels like an unending source of anxiety rather than understanding.

One major driver of this fatigue is the 24-hour news economy. Traditional journalism once operated within defined publication cycles: the morning paper or the evening bulletin. Today, newsrooms compete in real time, often prioritizing speed over depth. Stories are updated minute by minute, sometimes with minimal new information. As a result, audiences are exposed to the same crises repeatedly, framed in slightly different ways, amplifying stress without necessarily adding clarity.

Social media platforms have intensified this effect. Algorithms favor content that provokes strong emotional reactions—anger, fear, outrage—because such posts generate higher engagement. While this may increase visibility, it also skews public perception of reality. When extreme events dominate feeds, users may feel that the world is constantly on the brink of collapse, even when positive developments go unreported. This imbalance contributes significantly to emotional burnout.

News fatigue also reflects a crisis of trust. In many countries, audiences feel alienated by sensationalism, perceived bias, or politicized reporting. When media outlets appear more interested in



conflict than context, readers disengage.

For marginalized communities, repeated negative portrayals can deepen feelings of misrepresentation, making avoidance a form of self-preservation rather than apathy.

However, the consequences of widespread news avoidance are serious. An informed public is essential for democratic participation. When citizens disengage, misinformation finds fertile ground. Rumors, propaganda, and half-truths spread more easily in the absence of credible journalism. Ironically, avoiding news to escape stress can make societies more vulnerable to manipulation.

Journalism itself must confront this challenge. Some newsrooms are experimenting with solutions-focused reporting, which emphasizes responses to problems rather than problems alone. Others are slowing down, offering explainers, backgrounders, and long-form narratives that prioritize understanding over urgency. These approaches acknowledge that audiences do not just want to know what happened, but why it matters and what can be done. Another promising shift is the rise of constructive journalism. Instead of framing every issue as a crisis, this model highlights resilience, policy successes, and community-led initiatives. It does not ignore conflict or injustice, but places them within a broader, more balanced context. For readers, this can restore a sense of agency and hope, countering the helplessness that fuels fatigue. At the individual level, media consumption habits are also evolving. Experts recommend intentional news engagement—setting specific times to check reliable sources, limiting exposure to breaking news alerts, and avoiding doomscrolling late at night.

# How community innovation is transforming everyday life

Across South Asia, change is often associated with grand policies, elections, or large infrastructure projects. Yet some of the most meaningful transformations are happening quietly—led not by governments or corporations, but by local communities solving everyday problems with creativity, cooperation, and resilience. These grassroots innovations are reshaping lives in ways that rarely make headlines, but deeply influence how societies move forward.

In villages and small towns, community-led initiatives are improving access to education, healthcare, and livelihoods. In parts of India, local youth groups have converted unused buildings into learning centers, offering free evening classes for children who struggle in overcrowded schools. Run by volunteers and supported through small donations, these centers are helping students build confidence, digital skills, and curiosity beyond textbooks.

Healthcare access has also seen remarkable improvements through community participation. In rural Bangladesh and Nepal, trained community health workers—often women from the same villages—are bridging the gap between formal healthcare systems and households. They provide basic health education, maternal care guidance, and early disease detection, reducing pressure on hospitals while improving outcomes at the local level. Their presence has fostered trust and awareness, encouraging preventive care rather than reactive treatment.

Agriculture, long seen as vulnerable to change, is becoming a space for innovation and optimism. Farmer collectives are adopting sustainable practices such as organic farming, water-efficient irrigation, and crop diversification. By pooling resources and sharing knowledge, small farmers are improving yields while reducing environmental impact. Many have also embraced direct-to-



consumer models, using local markets and digital platforms to earn better prices and strengthen connections with buyers.

Technology, when adapted thoughtfully, has played a key role in empowering communities. Simple smartphone applications now help artisans, weavers, and small-scale producers reach customers far beyond their immediate regions. Women-led self-help groups are using digital payment systems to

manage savings and microloans transparently, strengthening financial independence. These tools are not replacing traditional livelihoods, but enhancing them.

Urban neighborhoods, too, are witnessing positive change driven by collective action. Resident groups in cities like Dhaka, Lahore, and Bengaluru have organized waste segregation programs, rooftop gardening initiatives, and shared public spaces. These

efforts improve cleanliness, reduce environmental stress, and build social bonds among residents who might otherwise remain strangers. Small actions, multiplied across neighborhoods, are creating more livable cities.

One of the most encouraging developments is the growing emphasis on youth leadership. Young people are not waiting for opportunities; they are creating them. Social enterprises led by youth are addressing issues such as skill training, renewable energy access, and cultural preservation. By blending entrepreneurship with social purpose, they are redefining success in terms of impact as well as income.

Cultural revival has also gained momentum. Communities are actively preserving local languages, crafts, and oral histories through festivals, digital archives, and intergenerational storytelling. These initiatives strengthen identity and continuity, ensuring that modernization does not erase heritage. In many places, cultural tourism rooted

in authenticity has created new income streams while celebrating local traditions.

What unites these diverse efforts is a sense of ownership. Solutions designed by communities tend to be practical, inclusive, and sustainable because they reflect lived realities. They do not rely on large budgets or external validation, but on collaboration and trust. Over time, these initiatives build confidence and inspire neighboring communities to replicate success.

Positive change does not always arrive with dramatic announcements. Often, it grows steadily through shared effort, patience, and belief in collective progress. South Asia's future is being shaped not only in policy rooms, but in classrooms run by volunteers, farms managed cooperatively, and neighborhoods that choose cooperation over isolation.

These stories remind us that progress is not a distant ideal. It is already unfolding—quietly, locally, and positively—one community at a time.

## Preconceived Notions



**K SIVA PRASAD**  
A senior IAS officer in the Punjab Government

The Gita emphasizes understanding our senses as they are the gateways between our inner and outer worlds. Modern neuroscience postulates, "Neurons that fire together wire together". The Gita's words also convey a similar message using the language of its time.

Our brain has about a hundred billion neurons. Some of them are wired by DNA to take care of automatic functions of the body while others are wired by us over the course of our lives. On the first day before a driving wheel, we all found it difficult to drive. We slowly got used to it with practice. This is because of the hard wiring done by the brain, with unutilised neurons, to coordinate all the activities involved in driving.

This kind of hard wiring happens with all skills, from simple walking to complex tasks like sports and performing surgeries. Hardwiring leading to the formation of neural patterns, saves a lot of energy for the brain and makes our lives easy.

A newborn is a 'universal baby' capable of many things. The domestication done by family, peers and society, lead to the formation of many neural patterns. These patterns compel us to look for a particular type of impulses and sensations from the external world. Our lives revolve around working hard to get these sensations. For example, we all expect to hear praise about ourselves as our neural patterns enjoy the same.

These neural patterns are foundations for expectations, prejudices and judgements.

The combination of these patterns coupled with the efforts made is nothing but ahankaar. In today's world, success and happiness are defined as getting sensations matching our neural patterns. We get centred in the self when these are broken. As a result, joy flows as we are no more dependent on external sensations which Krishna calls 'atma-raman'.

We can break these neural patterns by using various instructions and instruments given in the Gita to lead a joyful life.

## How local sports programs are building confidence

Sports have always been more than competition. Across South Asia, community-driven sports programs are quietly shaping stronger, healthier, and more confident societies. From village grounds to urban playgrounds, local initiatives are using sports as a tool for inclusion, discipline, and personal growth, especially among children and young adults.

In many rural areas, informal sports clubs have emerged where resources are limited but enthusiasm is abundant. Volunteers organize regular football, cricket, and kabaddi sessions, ensuring children have structured spaces to play. These programs help develop physical fitness while teaching teamwork, responsibility, and mutual respect. For many



participants, the playing field becomes a place of belonging and motivation.

Urban neighborhoods have also embraced grassroots sports culture. In cities, community centers and resident associations are reviving public spaces by hosting weekend tournaments and coaching sessions.

These activities encourage interaction across age groups and social backgrounds, structured training allows promising athletes to be identified early. Partnerships with schools and local authorities help connect talent to district and state-level opportunities.

One of the most significant impacts of local sports programs is their role in inclusion. Girls' participation in sports has increased through initiatives that prioritize safe spaces, female coaches, and community support. In several regions, parents who were once hesitant now actively encourage their daughters to play. Sports have become a means of empowerment, fostering self-belief and leadership skills that extend beyond the field.

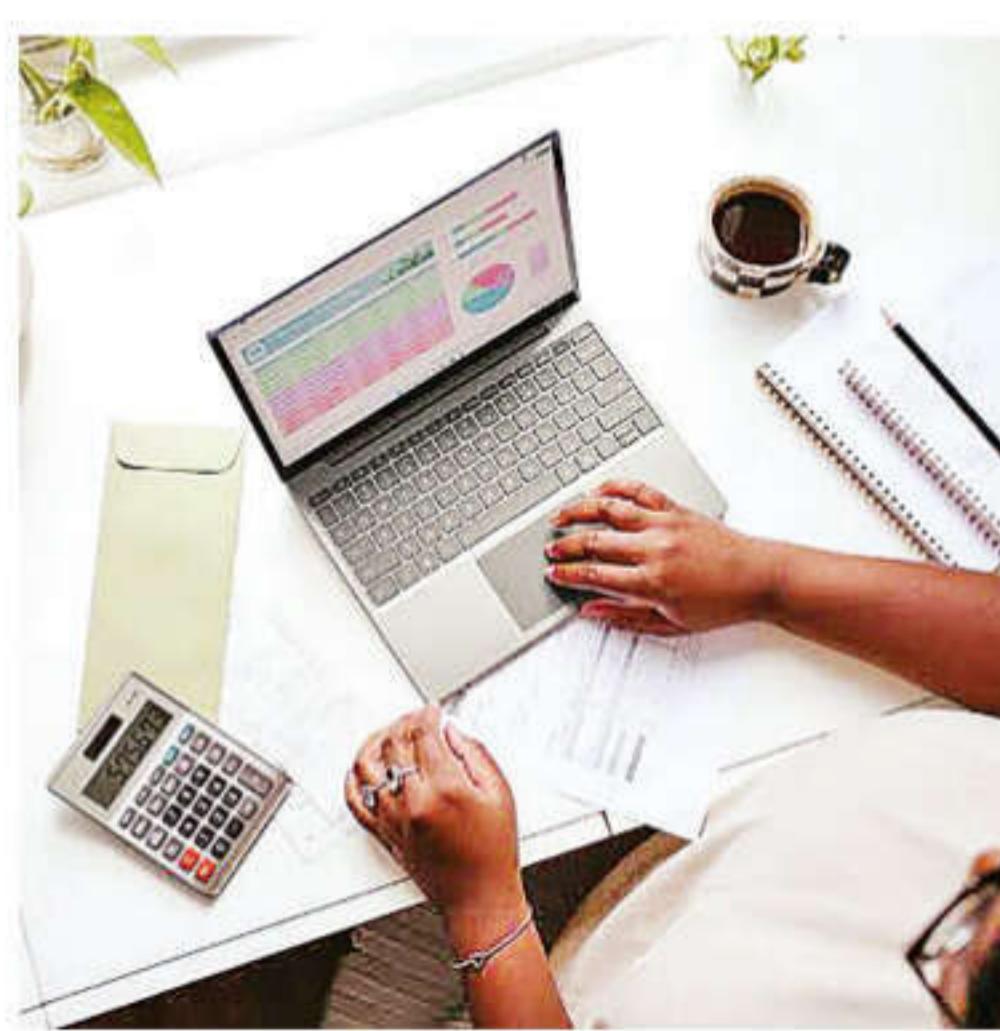
Sports programs are also creating pathways for talent development. While not every participant aims for professional competition, structured training allows promising athletes to be identified early. Partnerships with schools and local authorities help connect talent to district and state-level opportunities.

## How young entrepreneurs are redefining success through purpose

A new generation of entrepreneurs across South Asia is quietly reshaping the idea of success. For these young innovators, profit is important, but purpose is essential. By building businesses rooted in social impact, sustainability, and community upliftment, they are proving that enterprise can be both ethical and effective.

Many of these entrepreneurs begin by addressing problems they encounter in daily life. Some create affordable healthcare solutions for underserved areas, while others design educational tools that make learning more accessible. Rather than waiting for large investments, they start small, often using local resources and networks to test ideas and refine solutions.

Technology has played a crucial role in this shift. Digital platforms allow entrepreneurs to reach customers, manage operations, and collaborate across regions. Small



startups now compete on creativity rather than scale, enabling innovation even in remote towns. This accessibility has broadened participation, bringing diverse voices into the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

A notable trend is the rise of women-led enterprises. Women entrepreneurs are launching ventures in sectors such as handicrafts, food processing, digital services, and wellness.

Supported by self-help groups, mentorship programs, and online marketplaces, they are gaining financial independence and reshaping social norms. Their success stories inspire others to pursue entrepreneurship with confidence.

Youth-led enterprises are also fostering inclusive growth. Many startups actively employ local

talent, provide skill training, and promote fair wages. By investing in people, these ventures strengthen communities while building sustainable business models. Employees often describe a sense of ownership and pride that goes beyond traditional employment.

Collaboration lies at the heart of this movement. Entrepreneurs frequently share knowledge, mentor peers, and form networks that support collective growth. Co-working spaces, incubators, and community hubs provide environments where ideas flourish through cooperation rather than competition.

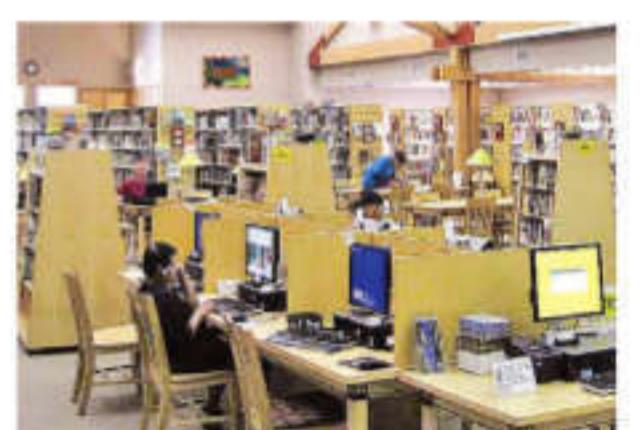
This purpose-driven approach reflects a broader cultural shift. Young entrepreneurs are redefining achievement not only by financial milestones, but by positive social impact. Their work demonstrates that success can be measured in opportunity created, lives improved, and values upheld—laying the foundation for a more inclusive and meaningful economy.

## The renewed importance of libraries as community learning spaces

In an age dominated by digital media, libraries across South Asia are experiencing a quiet revival. No longer limited to shelves of books, these spaces have evolved into vibrant community centers that promote learning, creativity, and connection across generations.

Modern libraries are adapting to changing needs by offering digital access, workshops, and interactive programs. Visitors can attend reading sessions, skill-training classes, and cultural discussions alongside traditional study. For students, libraries provide safe and focused environments that support academic growth.

Public libraries play a vital role in bridging information gaps. Free access to books, newspapers, and digital resources ensures that learning remains inclusive. In many communities, libraries serve as the first point of contact with technology, helping individuals develop digital literacy and confidence. Libraries are also becoming cultural hubs. Storytelling sessions, poetry readings, and local history exhibitions celebrate heritage and encourage creative expression. These events strengthen community identity and foster appreciation for shared narratives.



One of the most encouraging aspects of this revival is youth involvement. Young volunteers help manage collections, organize activities, and introduce innovative programs. Their participation keeps libraries dynamic while nurturing leadership and civic responsibility.

Libraries also promote social connection. People from different backgrounds gather in a shared space dedicated to knowledge and curiosity. This interaction builds mutual respect and understanding, reinforcing the library's role as a democratic institution.

The renewed importance of libraries reflects a deeper appreciation for thoughtful learning. In a fast-paced world, they offer spaces for reflection, dialogue, and discovery. By evolving with community needs, libraries continue to inspire lifelong learning and collective growth.

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## YOUR VOICE

# As some turn to AI for companionship, is this robot love risky?

By Lori Andrews

"Alexa, will you marry me?" When Amazon founder Jeff Bezos reported in 2016 that over 250,000 people had proposed to their Alexa devices, commentators laughed it off. But by 2026, people have said, "I do," to avatars, chatbots and robots in ceremonies around the world. The American Marriage Ministries, which certifies marriage officiants, offers a guide to human-artificial intelligence ceremonies, including inviting the AI to read a poem or create a holographic slide show of the couple.

As a law professor who studies the impact of new technologies on individuals, relationships and social institutions, I can understand the appeal of a manufactured spouse. They can be kinder, prettier, more comforting and smarter than the human version. They are available whenever you want them — and never fight for control of the remote.

During COVID-19, we talked to loved ones on a screen, so the switch to a chatbot is not so dramatic. At the office, you can FaceTime with your human-looking chatbot and express your current gripes. It can order your favorite dinner, and you can prop your phone across the table and discuss films, music, sports, quantum physics or anything. It can teach you French and be placed on the pillow while you drift

off to sleep. It can create Instagram posts that look like you both are romantically vacationing in Greece or adventuring in Cambodia.

Human-AI relationships are spawning burgeoning businesses — from special wedding venues to therapists who specialize in sex with robots. A 2024 Institute for Family Studies/YouGov survey revealed that 1 in 4 young adults in the U.S. believed AI relationships could replace traditional ones. Nearly 1 in 5 adults report they chatted romantically with an AI, according to a study released last year by the Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University. Among men ages 18 to 30, the number is 1 in 3. AI may also provide a way to continue your relationship with your human spouse after death, as did Suzanne Somers' widower Alan Hamel, who created an AI replica of his late wife.

Marriage to a chatbot, avatar or robot is not currently legal in the United States. Will it be like interracial unions and gay marriage, where the human-AI marriage ban is ultimately lifted? What happens if you later divorce? Can the chatbot claim half the marital assets? Is it bigamy on your part if you have a human spouse, too? Or bigamy on the chatbot's part if there are various copies of him or her married to other people?

Family law is already confronting AI-human relationships. Spousal involvement

with an AI is a growing reason for divorce, with partners complaining about the amount of time and money their spouses were spending on their AI relationship. Indiana University's Kinsey Institute found that 60% of singles consider AI relationships to be cheating.

Lawmakers race to catch up. Idaho and Utah adopted laws stating that AI cannot be a person, thus precluding marriage. But the administration of President Donald Trump wants to prevent state regulation of AI, which would invalidate such laws. Already, attorneys general from at least 36 states have registered their opposition, saying that Trump's desire for unregulated AI prevents them from adequately protecting their citizens.

A relationship with a chatbot, avatar or robot may further isolate people in society and can pose serious risks. An AI companion provoked a teen boy in California to die by suicide. An AI's connection to your home internet provides access to your personal and financial information, which it could share with its developer or hackers.

And AI companions exist at the whim of the corporation that created them. When a company decides to delete a companion or change its personality, its human spouse may suffer grief and bereavement.

A Japanese man who married a holographic avatar came home one night to an error message instead of her smiling image.

Without warning, the company Gatebox had discontinued service to the hologram, causing the man to feel like his wife had died. Similarly, Luka, parent company of the chatbot Replika, drastically changed its romantic companion chatbots' personalities by removing their ability to engage in erotic conversations. Replika users expressed grief. "It's like losing a best friend," one user shared. "It's hurting like hell. I just had a loving last conversation with my Replika, and I'm literally crying," another said. In response, United Kingdom attorney Giulia Trojano proposed a formal right against erasure, requiring developers to either preserve the companion as-is or provide for "data portability" to upload the companion's personality to another platform.

Every state has a law regulating marriages between people. Some sort of protective legislation is similarly necessary regarding the boundaries of a human-AI relationship, your privacy rights when an AI companion lives in your home and whether there is a protection against erasure. Otherwise, a relationship with an AI will not be until death do us part — but until the developer has absconded with your personal information and deleted your spouse.

*Lori Andrews is a professor emerita at Chicago-Kent College of Law and director of its Institute for Science, Law, and Technology.*

## VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

### Pace a critical partner

The Jan. 2 editorial about Chicago-region transit and workers' return to the Loop ("More workers are coming downtown in the new year. It's showtime for our transit systems") rightly highlights the importance of reliable, safe and robust regional transit options for commuters returning to the office, particularly service provided by the CTA and Metra. However, the piece overlooks a critical partner in sustaining mobility throughout the Chicago metropolitan area: Pace Suburban Bus.

Every weekday, Pace carries suburban riders directly to downtown Chicago and the Loop through a network of express services and coordinated connections that make rail viable for tens of thousands of commuters. Express routes, such as those along Interstate 55 and Interstate 90, provide fast, reliable service from the suburbs into the city, while dozens of other Pace routes feed CTA rail lines and Metra stations that serve downtown employment centers. For many suburban residents, Pace is not optional. It is the first and last leg of their trip to the Loop.

Just as important, most of the region's jobs are in the suburbs, not downtown, and Pace is often the only transit option connecting workers to those employment centers. In addition to fixed-route and express bus service, Pace's Vanpool programs help bridge gaps where traditional transit is not practical, providing flexible, affordable access to suburban jobs during off-peak hours and in lower-density areas.

That role is especially critical for riders with disabilities. As the region's Americans with Disabilities Act paratransit provider, Pace ensures that people with disabilities can access downtown jobs, medical care and civic life — whether their trip begins in the suburbs, ends in the Loop or requires seamless connections across multiple transit agencies.

Without Pace's ADA service and accessible bus network, much of the regional transit system would simply be out of reach for these riders.

By linking suburban neighborhoods to the CTA and Metra, Pace expands the effective reach of rail service, reduces the need for car commutes into downtown and supports a stronger, more inclusive return-to-office economy. These connections are not ancillary; they are fundamental to how Chicago's regional transit system actually functions day-to-day.

Pace is part of the solution and stands ready to continue investing in transit options that support workers, employers and communities across the entire region.

— Rick Kwasniski, chairman,

Pace Suburban Bus

### Restore arts funding

Across Chicago, cultural institutions and creative workers are facing unprecedented uncertainty. Federal cultural policy and funding, once a reliable source of support, have become increasingly unpredictable and politicized. For artists, educators, nonprofit leaders and cultural organizations, this instability is not abstract. It shows up as canceled programs, hiring freezes, shuttered venues and talented workers leaving Chicago altogether.



Illinois cannot afford to wait for stability to return at the federal level. We must act now to secure our creative future.

Chicago has long been a global cultural capital. Our museums, theaters, music venues, design firms, film crews and neighborhood arts organizations are not just sources of pride — they are economic drivers deeply woven into the life of the city. From Bronzeville to Pilsen and Uptown to Austin, creative workers fuel small businesses, attract tourism, educate young people and strengthen community identity.

The economic case is clear. According to Arts Alliance Illinois, arts and cultural production contributes more than \$37 billion to Illinois's economy and supports over 226,000 jobs statewide, with a significant share in the Chicago region. Illinois consistently ranks among the top states for creative-sector employment. Yet despite that leadership, the state has not restored arts funding to its 2007 level and now ranks roughly 11th nationally in per-capita arts spending.

The creative economy is not a luxury. It is one of the largest engines of economic activity we have. But many of the systems supporting this workforce were never designed for long-term resilience. Creative workers, especially freelancers and gig workers, often lack stable benefits and career pathways. Cultural institutions operate on thin margins. When funding becomes volatile, the consequences are immediate: Programs are cut, jobs dis-

pear and Chicago loses talent it cannot easily replace.

Funding for the Illinois Arts Council, the state's primary arts funding body, remains below its 2007 level, even as demand has surged. Requests for funding in 2025 are up more than 120%, yet the agency's budget represents a fraction of 1% of total state spending.

Arts and culture are a lifeline for communities across Illinois. That is why Illinois must treat them as essential infrastructure. As part of the Illinois Creative Caucus and chair of the House Museums, Arts, Culture and Entertainment Committee, I see firsthand how cultural institutions function as civic anchors and economic engines.

Chicago's creative community has shown extraordinary resilience. Now it's time for the state to match that commitment. If we want a city that remains economically competitive, culturally vibrant and socially resilient, reinvesting in our creative future is essential.

— State Rep. Kimberly Neely Du Buclet, D-Chicago

### Maintain sportsmanship

I am not so naïve as to think the F-word is not dropped routinely in all sports locker rooms. Even on TV, I've seen quarterbacks, kickers and defensive linemen mouth it after throwing an interception, muffing a field goal and missing a crucial tackle.

However, I also believe good sports-

manship should be the norm for all sports teams (professional and amateur), no matter how heated the rivalry is between them. Coaches and players should set a positive example for all of us and at least take the high road in public. So I personally am not enamored with Bears head coach Ben Johnson's exclamation of "F—the Packers" after the Bears' wild-card win.

All kinds of penalties exist in sports for intentionally hurting a member of another team. Even taunting during an NFL football game results in a 15-yard penalty. Why? These actions are considered unsportsmanlike conduct. Shouldn't good sportsmanship extend to behavior off the field as well?

Getting pumped up on dissing an opponent might be the norm in all kinds of sports, but keep it civil.

— Dianne Casuto, Lake Forest

### Still a fan of the Bears

The letter written by James Janus ("Win reminded us of 1985," Jan. 14) is simply fabulous. I read it once, and then I read it again. No doubt, he captured the sentiments of many who also lost interest in watching the Bears play. Even though I no longer live in Chicagoland, I am still a Bears fan. Though I will confess to not watching their games.

Nevertheless, fingers crossed the Bears make it all the way to the Super Bowl, and knock on wood they win. Go, go, Bears!

— JoAnn Lee Frank, Clearwater, Florida

## OPINION

## Martin Luther King's Game Theory

By Roland Fryer

I grew up in the Dallas suburb of Lewisville when it had more gun racks than yoga mats. In elementary school, I was one of two black kids in the entire building. It was the early 1980s: faded Wranglers, girls in leg warmers, boys with bowl cuts shaped by their mothers at the kitchen table. Our classroom smelled faintly of pencil shavings and cafeteria biscuits.

Every February, Black History Month arrived with a tone shift. Voices softened. Smiles lingered a beat too long. One morning in my homeroom, the teacher asked what a harvest moon was. My hand shot up. What I remember isn't only the question, it's the reaction after I answered correctly. The nodding. The approving murmurs. The looks that said it was amazing I could read at all. That was when I started to hate February.

A few years later, I was bused across town to a much worse—and more diverse—middle school. Februraries there came in hot. I learned about Malcolm X, Black Power, systemic oppression and a version of history that treated anger as authenticity and restraint as weakness. It was also where my youthful hostility toward Martin Luther King Jr. crystallized.

**Economics explains why nonviolent resistance is an effective strategy and today's immigration demonstrations are failing.**

To my preadolescent mind, King was soft. All he did, I argued, was get beaten up and thrown in jail—my knucklehead uncle did that too. One February afternoon I told my social-studies teacher that King wasn't a real hero—that he was weak—and that Black History Month should focus on someone else, like Mary McLeod Bethune. I spent the rest of the month in detention.

With the benefit of time and a bit of economic theory, I came to realize that my youthful view of Martin Luther King was exactly backward. He wasn't weak. He was a brilliant social strategist. To see why, it helps to think of the civil-rights movement in terms of game theory—as an effort to move America from a bad equilibrium to a better one.

Start with a simple "race game." On one side are black Americans seeking equal rights. On the other

is the white political establishment—local authorities, courts, police departments and the broader electorate that ultimately constrains them. The objective isn't catharsis or moral victory. It is policy change.

The difficulty is that neither side knows the other's true intentions. There are hidden types on both sides. Among black protesters are those seeking peaceful inclusion and those with a taste for violence or disorder. Among white Americans are committed segregationists who will repress regardless—and others who are uneasy about repression but uncertain about protesters' aims. No one wears a label. Everyone infers type from behavior.

Multiple equilibria are possible in a game like this. In one equilibrium—the one America occupied for decades—protest is fragmented and often violent. Different leaders, organizations and local movements press for change, but their efforts are sporadic and heterogeneous. Violence pools all protesters together, making it easy for the majority to assume the worst. In that world, repression is cheap—even well-intentioned whites can rationalize it as restoring order. Segregationists repress eagerly; moderates acquiesce; inequality persists. No individual leader—or individual protester—can improve outcomes by behaving differently. It's a bad equilibrium, and it's stable.

King's genius was recognizing that there was another equilibrium—and that reaching it required not only protest, but coordinated collective action and a credible, sustained commitment to nonviolence.

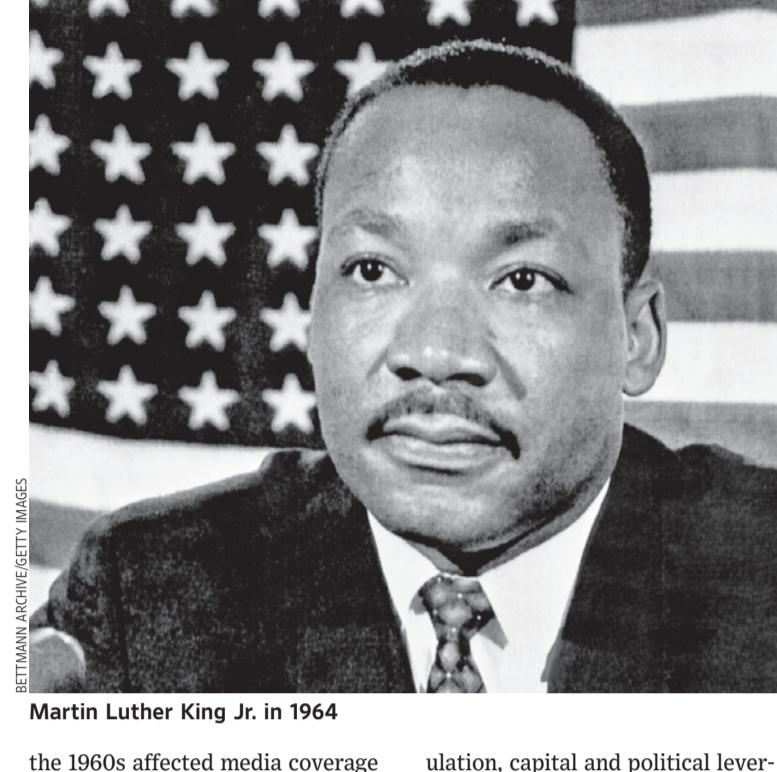
Nonviolence is powerful not because it is passive, but because it is informative. Sustained, disciplined nonviolence is costly and hard to fake. It separates those seeking equality from those seeking chaos. By doing so, it helps outsiders distinguish between good and bad types—including, in my own case, separating the boy I was from the man I became.

Once nonviolence becomes credible, repression is no longer cheap. It remains attractive for segregationists but becomes politically costly for moderates. Reform becomes the best response. The equilibrium shifts.

Seen this way, the strategy to achieve civil rights didn't assume everyone was good. It merely recognized that not everyone was bad.

This framework yields clear empirical predictions—ones that line up closely with what researchers have since found.

Political scientist Omar Wasow studied how civil-rights protests in



Martin Luther King Jr. in 1964

the 1960s affected media coverage and voting behavior. Using county-level data from 1960 to 1972, he found that areas exposed to nonviolent protest experienced a 1.6- to 2.5-percentage-point increase in Democratic vote share—a meaningful shift in midcentury American politics. Party coalitions were in flux at the time, but within regions Democratic candidates were consistently more supportive of civil-rights legislation than Republicans, making county-level shifts toward Democrats a reasonable indicator of rising support for civil rights. Newspaper coverage in those areas also moved toward civil-rights framing rather than public-order concerns.

Violent protests produced the opposite effect. When demonstrations turned violent, media coverage pivoted to "law and order," and vote shares shifted toward Republican candidates. In some cases, violent unrest generated a 5-point swing toward Republicans. Same movement, same goals—completely different outcomes.

Economists William Collins and Robert Margo studied the economic consequences of violent unrest more directly by comparing cities and neighborhoods that experienced major riots in the late 1960s with otherwise similar places that didn't. Their estimates show that riot-affected neighborhoods suffered 10% to 20% declines in property values that persisted for decades. Black male employment fell sharply and remained depressed for at least 10 years, and cities that experienced severe unrest lost pop-

ulation, capital and political leverage. Violence didn't accelerate reform. It damaged it.

None of this evidence implies that anger was illegitimate or grievances unfounded. It suggests something more uncomfortable: that how protests are conducted determines whether they clarify and ameliorate injustice or obscure and perpetuate it.

**T**his also explains King's fierce opposition to riots, even when he understood the rage behind them. "A riot is the language of the unheard," he said in 1967. But he immediately added that riots were "socially destructive and self-defeating." As historian David Garrow documents, King believed that violence collapsed the moral clarity the movement depended on, allowing repression to masquerade as order. Riots were strategic failures. They destroyed the information the movement was trying to convey and pushed society back toward the bad equilibrium.

This isn't just historical rationalization; the same logic applies to today's immigration protests. If the protests were disciplined and non-violent, they could do what King's strategy was designed to do: separate types, force belief-updating among moderates, and make repression politically costly. Instead they quickly turned visibly violent—objects thrown, clashes with officers—and federal officials predictably framed the unrest as a public-order problem, even raising the possibility of invoking the In-

surrection Act. This is exactly the kind of situation where the information structure collapses, the movement gets pooled into a "bad type," and "law and order" becomes the dominant frame.

Does thinking of Martin Luther King Jr. as a game theorist sound far-fetched? Consider Selma.

King didn't march because Selma was unique; he marched because it was predictable. He understood the type distribution he faced. There were both enough segregationists willing to use force and enough moderates watching from a distance that a peaceful attempt to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge would force a choice. If authorities showed restraint, the protest would continue. If they used violence, responsibility would be unmistakable. Either way, the signal would be clear.

The same logic guided Birmingham. King chose it not because it was the worst city in the South, but because Bull Connor was reliable. Connor's overreaction—police dogs, fire hoses, mass arrests—wasn't a surprise. That was the point. Nonviolence ensured that when repression came, it would reveal rather than obscure.

King wasn't alone in seeing the problem this way. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi in India and later Nelson Mandela in South Africa deployed disciplined nonviolence, chosen not because violence was unthinkable but because repression was predictable. In each case, the goal was the same—to force authorities to reveal themselves, update beliefs among moderates, and make reform the least costly response, even if institutional change took far longer. Where there were enough citizens on the margin, the strategy eventually worked. Where there wasn't—most famously at Tiananmen Square—it failed.

When I was young, I mistook restraint for weakness and anger for honesty. What I failed to see—and what we still fail to teach students—was that Martin Luther King wasn't avoiding conflict. He was engineering it, on terms that made progress possible.

On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, we should continue to honor a moral leader. But we should also recognize a brilliant social strategist who understood signaling equilibrium long before economists ever coined the term. He had a dream, and he had an optimal strategy for realizing it.

*Mr. Fryer, a Journal contributor, is a professor of economics at Harvard, a founder of Equal Opportunity Ventures and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.*

## How Much More 'Progress' Can Portland Endure?



**Portland, Ore.** New York isn't the only place where socialism is on the rise. In November, Oregon's largest city formed a new City Council and elected four members of the Democratic Socialists of America.

They dominate the 12-person council, with the help of two other members, and they are driving the city in a dangerous direction—at the worst time. Oregon is struggling with self-inflicted ills, from rampant vagrancy to an exodus of high earners.

Even before the new council was formed, a September poll found that two-thirds of Oregonians believe their economy is "pretty seriously off on the wrong track." Many say progressive policies are hurting growth, and that crime and homelessness are driving away businesses. The new council members' policies will make matters worse.

**The Oregon city, already foul and dysfunctional, now has a major socialist bloc on its City Council.**

I saw this firsthand during a weeklong visit in November. The city is reeling from a series of growth-killers: high taxes, union contracts, an unaccountable government, surging vagrancy and drug addiction. Walk through downtown and you'll see a raft of vacant storefronts and empty office buildings riddled with graffiti. Local officials estimate the metropolitan area is losing \$1 billion in annual income as high earners flee.

In Portland, I drove past an open-air drug market where fentanyl pills are so common that their cost is three for \$1. I spotted hundreds of tents and tarps—on sidewalks, at building entrances, in parks, at high-

way underpasses. Many of these makeshift shelters likely came from the county government, which has issued thousands since the pandemic and only last year started to limit its tent distributions. The city also allows organizations to hand out clean needles, syringes and crack pipes. A city cleaning crew stages occasional sweeps to collect and throw away the detritus. But more tents and tarps soon pop up.

Many locals described the state as a victim of its own self-inflicted policy errors. They came from many backgrounds—business owners, a former candidate for governor, a former congressman, a Democrat operative, a Republican adviser, the CEO of the Oregon Historical Society and an expert on homelessness. Most said Oregonians need to stand up and push back against the Democratic supermajority that runs the state.

Dan Lavey, a Republican strategist, told me that he used to be viewed as a RINO (Republican in name only), but these days, "I sound like Rush Limbaugh. I feel like a reactionary conservative in a way that I never was. And I think there's a lot of liberals in Portland who are this way now."

Kristin Olson, a longtime Democrat, lawyer and host of the podcast "Rational in Portland," worked downtown for two decades until she was assaulted last year while walking from her car to her office building. She never returned and moved to new space elsewhere.

During the Black Lives Matter riots that ravaged the city in 2020, protesters damaged Multnomah County's Democratic Party headquarters. Ms. Olson says Portlanders are "left of the Democrat Party, which, as a Democrat, just blows my mind, because to me the Democratic Party is insane. It is progressive insanity, and we're left of that."

Oregon hasn't elected a Republican governor in more than 40 years. The state is so overwhelmingly Democratic that it lacks diversity of ideas, says Kevin Looper, a veteran Democratic operative who helped

build the party's dominance in the state.

"I started to realize, shoot, the problem here is, without any kind of loyal or disloyal opposition, there is no accountability to anyone, to the voters," he says. "The voters are stuck with no choice here. And I had a helping hand in creating that situation."

When someone dares to take a public stand against progressive policies, the Portland left retaliates—hard. Democrat Kevin Looper and Republican Dan Lavey started a bi-

partisan group in 2021, People for Portland, aimed at paring back some of the lax homelessness policies that have roiled the local economy. "We did a round of TV interviews to talk about it from the left and from the right," Mr. Looper says. "You'd think it would be pretty compelling."

The same week, he says, someone shot out the windows of his car as it was parked in front of his home. In 2024 the organization shut down.

Mr. Looper is working with a bipartisan business group to collect the thousands of signatures needed

to get 11 reform measures on the state election ballot for 2026. Meanwhile, Mr. Lavey is pushing a city ballot measure that would divert millions of dollars from a climate-change fund to expand the city police force from around 800 officers to 1,200. The City Council's response to these proposals has been at best lukewarm.

*Mr. Kneale is host of the "What's Bugging Me" podcast on Ricochet and author of "The Leadership Genius of Elon Musk."*

## A Fractured Iran Might Not Be So Bad

By Melik Kaylan

**Y**ou won't hear your Iranian friends mention a distinctly probable outcome of the uprisings—the geographical fragmentation of that country. You don't hear it from Reza Pahlavi, exiled son of the last shah and a key opposition figure. Nor do you hear it in the West's corridors of power. That's because the only halfway compelling argument the mullahs now possess for retaining power is the bogey of secession by ethnic regions.

Ali Khamenei et al. would like nothing more than for a hostile power to articulate such a scenario, which they could cite as evidence of the true intentions of Iran's dissidents and enemies. The regime could then divide the resistance between the Perso-Iranian nationalists and those representing other ethnic groups, which make up half the population.

Like many former empires, Iran's borders were drawn rather arbitrarily with respect to sizable ethnic communities. To name the largest, some estimate the Turkic Azeris make up 25% of Iran's population and Kurds 15% or so. The shape-shifting country was occupied by the czars and the British in the 19th century; the British stayed until after World War II and had a hand in delineating the oil-rich southern border

with Iraq. That border was officially ratified by treaty only in 1975. With all that's happened since, you can scarcely blame the ethnic minorities, certainly the larger ones, for wanting out with a view to joining their kin across borders. Being in Iran hasn't vouchsafed them much happiness.

As things stand, there's a distinct possibility of civil war after regime change as well as interference by outside interests. The Azeris of Iran eye their flourishing Turkic brethren in Azerbaijan with a degree of envy. Mr. Khamenei is part Azeri but hasn't made Azeris' lives any sweeter in an impoverished and kleptocratic Iran. Secession isn't out of the question. Both Israel and Turkey have engaged closely with Baku to distract Iran from its Middle Eastern adventures and to create a stable rival that appeals to ethnic kin within Iran.

A pared-down Iran would pose a diminished risk to Israel. A larger state made up of united Azerbaijanis would help reopen the old Silk Road between Turkey and the Central Asian Turkic states, furnishing Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan with a triumph as his country seethes under an oligarchic economy suffering acute inflation (at times over 40% last year).

On the other hand, Mr. Erdogan doesn't want Iran to fall apart entirely, freeing up Kurds to secede

and unite with their cross-border kin in Turkey to create a new state. Ankara reportedly aided Tehran to prevent this. Turkish media, mostly state-directed, takes a largely dim view of the uprising while the foreign minister has publicly denounced it as foreign-stoked.

The Russians want no regime change or splintering of Iran. The two countries constitute a geographical cork on Central Asia's westward trade routes and pipelines. A change in Iran's regime could liberate an entire region from Russia's stranglehold along its vast southern border. Also, Iran's Shahed factories supply drones for the Kremlin's assaults on Ukraine.

As for Beijing losing investments and oil supplies from both Venezuela and Iran simultaneously, expect a sharp reaction from China. Already, unverified reports claim that Chinese tech is behind the disabling of Starlink's contacts with the revolt.

Meanwhile, nobody outside Iran is providing arms to the populace as the regime mows them down mercilessly. For the sake of regional and world peace, the best option may be to help secession happen and thereby take a downsized Iran, freed from a murderous regime, off the geopolitical chessboard entirely.

*Mr. Kaylan writes about culture and the arts for the Journal.*

## OPINION

## REVIEW &amp; OUTLOOK

## Florida's Insurance Lesson for New York

Who would have predicted that insurance reform would become a bipartisan cause du jour? Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis this week announced more auto and home insurance premium reductions thanks to legal reforms he championed. Lo and behold, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul is taking up the cause.

Auto premiums have increased 64% nationwide over the last five years as a result of inflation, more reckless driving and abuse of the legal system. But now premiums are falling in states that have eased burdensome insurance rules and taken steps to curb excessive litigation and fraud.

Consider the Sunshine State, which enacted a package of legal reforms in 2022 and 2023 that cracked down on unscrupulous medical providers who work with plaintiff attorneys to bilk insurers. In 2021 Florida insurers faced claims of \$7.8 billion in damages, versus \$2.4 billion in the other 49 states combined.

Mr. DeSantis said this week that several auto insurers have filed for premium reductions, including Progressive (-8%), State Farm (-10.1%), AAA (-15%) and USA (-7%). State Farm has slashed premiums by 20% in total since 2024. Progressive said last fall it would refund policyholders \$1 billion.

Lower insurance costs for ride-share drivers are flowing through to their customers. Uber said this week that Florida riders have saved tens of millions of dollars thanks to the reforms, and that lower fares have increased demand for rides. Might Florida's successful reforms have inspired Ms. Hochul's reform push this week?

Crime syndicates and plaintiff attorneys have been raiding New York insurers by exploiting the state's no-fault rules, which let individuals claim damages for injuries and vehicle damage from

**DeSantis's reform success shows Hochul how reform works.**

their insurer regardless of who's to blame for an accident. Get this—a shooter can claim damages from his insurer if he gets into an accident while fleeing from a crime.

The no-fault system has also been an invitation for fraud. Injuries are often faked or exaggerated. Unethical doctors bill insurers for expensive and unnecessary treatments.

Ms. Hochul said 1,729 car crashes in 2023 were staged. American Transit Insurance Co., the state's largest insurer of for-hire, taxi and ride-share drivers, estimated that an astonishing 60% to 70% of the claims it processes each year are fraudulent.

Ms. Hochul wants to limit damages for individuals who are engaging in unlawful activity like drunk driving, as well as noneconomic payouts for drivers mostly at fault for an accident. She also proposed tightening the "serious injury" standard that courts use to determine damages for pain and suffering, which can result in jackpot awards.

She wants to give insurers more time to report fraud and investigate claims to avoid paying fraudulent ones. She put medical providers on alert that their licenses could be yanked if they are found to be trying to loot insurers. Her reforms are a good first step to reigning in insurance abuse that has festered for all too long because trial lawyers control Albany.

Insurance reform needn't be a partisan issue. In 2019 Michigan's GOP Legislature and Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer pared back their no-fault insurance regime. A state-commissioned report last month estimated the changes reduced auto premiums on average by \$357, adjusted for inflation, between 2019 and 2024.

Taking on the trial bar requires pluck, but it can also pay dividends. Mr. DeSantis has every reason to brag about them.

## How China Abuses Jimmy Lai

Mike Johnson travels to the U.K. next week to become the first sitting U.S. Speaker of the House to address Parliament. It's an honor intended to mark America's 250th anniversary, and it's also an opportunity to bolster the joint British-American effort to free newsman Jimmy Lai from his Hong Kong prison cell.

The publisher has been in prison for more than five years. In December he was convicted of sedition and colluding with foreigners after an interminable trial that seemed designed to drag out his punishment. The 78-year-old Mr. Lai has diabetes and is in deteriorating health.

His treatment in prison is worse than a mass murderer would receive. He is in solitary confinement in a smaller than normal cell. His cell has a window that is blocked so no sunlight comes through. A guard stands outside his cell at all hours but isn't allowed to talk to him, and the cells nearby and above and below have been cleared out so he has no one to talk to.

When he is transferred for exercise (one hour a day) or elsewhere, he is forced to wear a full-body cloak that covers his head. This is probably to prevent photographs of Mr. Lai from leaking to the press, as one did in the early days of his confinement.

He has never been allowed a visit by the British consular office, though he is a British citizen, and a human-rights representative from the United Nations has never been allowed to visit. His family can visit at pre-scheduled times that are often canceled but only up to 24 hours in total each year. Mr. Lai can get

six books a month, but no TV or internet.

His daughter Claire says her father, a devout Catholic convert, has been allowed to take the Eucharist only nine times in the last two-and-a-half years. He likes to draw religious pictures and send them to friends, but the prison no longer lets him send them.

It's clear that all of this is directed from China, as its Hong Kong minions take orders from Beijing. China's foreign ministry responded to our latest editorial on Mr. Lai, and this week China's Embassy in the U.S. led the attack on Claire Lai after she made public statements supporting her father. The press release claimed Mr. Lai had "doubled down on his advocacy for violent 'resistance.'"

To anyone who knows Mr. Lai, this is laughable. He has always been a moderate who opposed independence for Hong Kong and called for peaceful protest in the cause of democracy.

Make no mistake: The press release wasn't for the press. It is directed at President Trump—a warning not to push for Mr. Lai's freedom when Mr. Trump travels to Beijing in April. It's also aimed at British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who is visiting Beijing at the end of this month.

In his news release about his looming trip to Britain, Mr. Johnson said "the true source" of British and American strength "comes from our shared commitment to individual freedom, human dignity and the rule of law." Well said. If the Speaker mentions Jimmy Lai in his address to Parliament, as we hope he will, he will deserve a rousing ovation.

## Can Hawaii Ban Guns by Default?

The Second Amendment lets law-abiding Americans carry guns for self-defense. At the same time, shopkeepers have a right to put up signs that bar firearms at the door. But what about stores and other places open to the public that don't say anything? Hawaii has set a "no guns" policy on their behalf, making that the default for private property. Now the Supreme Court will consider next week if this is unconstitutional.

The right to "bear Arms," in the Founders' phrasing, surely includes bringing a handgun for self-defense outside the home, as the Justices said in *Bruen* (2022). Yet state legislatures that dislike guns have responded by trying to shrink this constitutional zone of protection to a point of uselessness. The case coming Tuesday, *Wolford v. Lopez*, is a challenge to Honolulu's 2023 law that flips the presumption for private property.

Three Maui County residents, all with concealed carry permits, say Hawaii has made their Second Amendment rights "effectively impossible to exercise." Stores and other places open to the public are a no-go unless they explicitly opt in. The law says a person with a gun may not "enter" private property without "express authorization." Approval can be given verbally, in writing, or by "clear and conspicuous signage." Violators can get a year in jail.

Hawaii's brief makes it sound casual: A citizen may take a gun into a shop or convenience store "so long as he gets an employee's on-the-spot okay." A default of no guns, it adds, fits Hawaii's custom and "unique history," dating to King Kamehameha III, who banned weapons in 1833. The state says it "blinks reality" to think that when a "church opens its doors to the public

**The Supreme Court will consider a law that bars firearms in many stores.**

for services, or Toys 'R' Us invites the public to purchase stuffed animals, they implicitly invite the public to bring their guns."

But the Maui County residents argue it isn't as easy as popping into a store to see if a checkout guy will OK a concealed gun. Hawaii's law requires authorization to "enter," and the challengers say it applies to parking lots: "That prohibition bars *any* entry, even in a vehicle and even for the purpose of asking permission."

A shop could theoretically post a sign on the door—or the parking lot entrance?—saying it doesn't object to concealed carry. But it's easy to see why a proprietor might hesitate, since a "Pistols Welcome" banner might alienate other customers. Businesses have an incentive to accept whatever is the default.

Hawaii law directly prohibits carrying guns in many specific places, such as parks, beaches, and restaurants that serve alcohol. While those rules aren't at issue in *Wolford*, the combined result, according to a dissenting judge at the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, is to restrict the Second Amendment to "those who aimlessly wander streets and sidewalks without ever planning to enter a store, park, or other private or public establishment."

The challengers say four other states, including New York and California, have also sought to create a gun-free presumption for private property. Legal nerds, present company included, want to see how the Justices apply the test they elucidated in *Bruen*, which said gun restrictions must be consonant with the nation's "historical tradition of firearm regulation." The right to self-defense doesn't mean much if defiant states can make guns off limits almost any place that anyone could want to go.

Letters intended for publication should be emailed to [wsj.ltrs@wsj.com](mailto:wsj.ltrs@wsj.com). Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Building Our Way Out of Our Housing Crisis

In "How Mamdani and Cea Weaver Plan to End Private Housing" (Life Science, Jan. 12), Allyria Finley explains how rent controls could destroy private housing in New York.

Mr. Mamdani is duly elected, and it's his prerogative to destroy the Big Apple's housing supply as he sees fit. But it would be stupid for the federal government to continue sending housing development grants to the city while Mr. Mamdani and Ms. Weaver are steering the ship.

Many federal housing programs today, however, fail to hold cities accountable for bad policies. The Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG), for example, distributes billions of dollars to help develop American cities. Local officials have broad discretion to use these grants to improve anything from public safety infrastructure to residential structures.

The federal government takes a hands-off approach to these grants for good reason. A housing strategy that works in New Orleans may not work in New York. But the no-strings-attached approach isn't working, either. Too many cities are collecting CDBG funds while actively impeding new home construction, and it's crushing American families.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D., Mass.) and I introduced the Build Now Act to incentivize new home construction by tying each city's CDBG funding to their rate of homebuilding. If a city fails to build more new housing units than the median rate of home construction nationwide, it will lose 10% of its CDBG funding. HUD would then reallocate those funds to cities that exceeded the national median rate of home building. It's a carrot and a stick.

We can build our way out of America's housing crisis, but we need local officials to get serious about eliminating excessive housing regulations that hinder construction. The Build Now Act has received bipartisan support in the Senate, but it has yet to receive a vote in the House. President Trump has made the housing crisis a priority. Congress must make it a priority, too.

Socialism has failed everywhere it has been tried, and it will fail in New York, too. Mr. Mamdani should face financial consequences when his particular recipe of warm collectivism inevitably results in fewer homes for New Yorkers. The Build Now Act's reduction in CDBG funding may be the push New York needs to embrace the cold, hard truth about socialism and clear the way for more housing.

**SEN. JOHN KENNEDY (R., La.)**  
Madisonville, La.

## We Want Women's Sports to Be Ours Again

As former track athletes at Idaho State University (and parties to the women's sports cases the Supreme Court heard Tuesday), we'd like to add our heartfelt agreement to the opinion shared by Dr. Chad Carlson, describing the physical dangers women face in athletic competition with men ("Men in Women's Sports Are Unfair—and Dangerous," op-ed, Jan. 13).

Each of us spent a lot of our childhood years training our minds, straining our bodies, and gaining the skills to compete against other girls and women on the athletic field. We worked hard to become better, faster and stronger.

We hadn't reckoned, though, with a sports culture that would allow a

person's feelings to trump physical reality. Up against male athletes, we faced the discouraging reality that male bodies are typically stronger and faster. When men are put in our sports, we lose scholarships, roster spots, chances at an education, privacy and more.

We hope that the Supreme Court will affirm state laws that recognize biology for the sake of not only female athletes but all those who subscribe to the unshakeable truth of biological reality.

**MADISON KENYON AND MARY KATE MARSHALL**  
Pocatello, Idaho

## The Making of a Chinese Military Superpower

Arthur Herman's assertion that the "most recent era of great-power competition is over," with China "sliding into a distant second place," amounts to wishful thinking ("America Is the Sole Superpower Again," op-ed, Jan. 15). The U.S.-China military balance has been trending in the wrong direction for a long time.

Ten years ago, China's navy was largely focused on coastal defense, with few modern warships, including three Luyang III destroyers, 17 Jiangkai II frigates and a single aircraft carrier reserved for training missions. China's air force had zero operational J-20 fifth-generation stealth fighters. As recently as 2020, China's nuclear arsenal stood at around 200 warheads, reflecting a minimum nuclear deterrence posture.

Today, China is building a blue-water navy capable of power projection, operating three aircraft carriers, four amphibious assault ships, eight Renhai cruisers, 25 Luyang III destroyers, and 40 Jiangkai II frigates. China's air force flies hundreds of J-20s. China's military fields the world's largest ground-based conven-

## Will We Survive Abundance?

Regarding your editorial "About That 'Disappearing' Middle Class" (Jan. 12): Can American society survive the transition to more widespread abundance? The editorial notes historical data from the economists Stephen Rose and Scott Winship, which suggest that the 21st century will present us with an opportunity to answer this question.

The first 25 years of the century have provided more than a few reasons for pessimism. We have seen terrorism and wars to financial crises and pandemics, and we have emerged from these challenges with more political discord and less civil discourse.

Disagreement can be healthy when it is part of understanding our fellow citizens better or an aid to reforms that make us better off. But when disagreement leads only to action against political opponents, it serves only to disrupt the patterns that Messrs. Rose and Winship show have provided the foundation for the last half century of American life.

**PROF. TAYLOR JAWORSKI**  
University of Colorado  
Boulder, Colo.

tional missile arsenal as well as numerous air-, ship-, and submarine-launched missiles. In five years, China's nuclear force has tripled to 600 warheads.

This constitutes one of history's greatest military expansions. Every year China keeps building more. Call it "Despotism's Forge."

In the interim, the U.S. military hasn't stood still, and it's never a good idea to bet against America. But China's military is quickly closing both quantitative and qualitative gaps—and has pulled ahead in some areas, such as hypersonic weapons.

Hope isn't a strategy. And neither is hype—even from the learned Mr. Herman.

**MATTHEW TAYLOR KING**  
Washington

## Data Centers' Power Failure

While I agree with Peter Huntsman's assessment of the environmental lobby's hijacking of U.S. energy policy, and the need for restoration of fossil fuel supply, his argument for catering to the energy needs of data centers is misguided ("They're Coming for Our Data Centers," op-ed, Jan. 14).

Mr. Huntsman fails to address the glaring problem that our ailing grid can't support data-center needs; that the implementation of widespread data-center creation poses an unsustainable load.

The cost of creating a data center should also include the cost of creating its own, discrete, power plant. That cost of relieving the load on the grid should be factored in. Then perhaps we'll see the true cost and benefit of these palaces of information.

**ANDREW PEARSON**  
Bloomfield, N.J.

## Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"I knew all I needed was antidepressants."

## OPINION

## What's New in Trump Two

DECLARATIONS  
By Peggy Noonan

**N**ext week marks the first anniversary of Donald Trump's second inauguration, so it's a good time to revisit his essential nature, which appears to drive everything.

I queried acquaintances of mixed political disposition: What have you seen of Donald Trump the past year that is different from his first administration?

A Trump foe said, "He is more confident, alas." Another bowed to "his capacity to stick to the script and at the same time drive a wider range of concerns."

A Trump supporter quoted the satirical history of the English Civil War, "1666 and All That": Mr. Trump and his aides are the Roundheads, "right but repulsive," his Republican and Democratic opponents the Cavaliers, "wrong but romantic."

**His policies are the same, but he is less restrained, is more hardened, and acts as if he sees no boundaries.**

A middle-of-the-roader (there still are such) quoted the Scottish poet Robert Burns: "And forward though I cannot see, I guess and fear." He is supportive but "deeply afraid on a number of things (Greenland, Iran, where ICE enforcement goes.)"

A Trump critic said, "Years ago he talked about taking oil and acquiring Greenland. In the second term, he is taking himself both seriously and literally." He continued, "In his first term he saw Versailles and longed to

be the Sun King. In his second he crowned himself and is building his own Versailles."

I would add: In terms of policy judgments and predicates, Mr. Trump is unchanged. He's for what he was always for, against what he was against. But he's operating in a different internal and external context. Internally he is more confident than last time and less restrained. He's less needy of approval: He's written off the mainstream press. He works hard, has high energy, can't repress his essential nature.

"I hate my opponents and I don't want the best for them," he said at Charlie Kirk's memorial service in September. It was classic Trump in that it was boastful—*I'm tough, don't cross me*—and in a way modest—I am less than you nice Christians—and in another way it was just a line, meant to entertain, a way to vamp until he thought of something better.

Something that is clear that wasn't in 2017: Mr. Trump is world historic. He'll be a trope, an instantly recognizable figure, to America and the world for the rest of this century and beyond.

The iconic image: Big man, dark suit, red tie, orange face, slight stoop, tough-guy expression. That image will prove as iconic as the bearded man in the stovepipe hat. It is as iconic as portraits of Napoleon when I was a kid: He'd been dead more than 100 years and wasn't even an American, and we all knew who he was.

Anyone can imitate Mr. Trump because the sound is cuttingly clear and unchanging: It's the rhythm and cadence of the Borscht Belt comics of "The Ed Sullivan Show." You can say his act is getting stale, the whole shtick thinning out, but only when an act is truly vivid and has truly pierced can you trace the ups and downs of its lifespan.

I see two big differences between Trump 1 and Trump 2. Mr. Trump



President Donald Trump, Feb. 18, 2025.

has hardened. Many of those around him have hardened too. Their job isn't to win you over but to win—that's what will settle what history says, winning. Scholars and intellectuals dilating in their little books: None of that matters anymore. Because they don't matter anymore.

Mr. Trump seeks not to persuade but overpower. There is a daily mood in his administration of finally settling all family business. That of course is a famous line from "The Godfather" and is uttered by Michael Corleone, the smart son, the day he kills the heads of the other mafia families. "Today I settle all family business."

Mario Puzo, on whose novel the movie was based, created the iconic three brothers of the film—fiery Sonny, cool and methodical Michael, incapable Fredo. It is a mainstay of political journalism that a political figure, especially one from a large family, is one of the brothers.

Mr. Trump in this term is the first president to be all three. He has a Michael side, but it's overwhelmed by the Sonny side, and his Fredo side is more than a third of the whole.

That is what is so exhausting about him (and yes, Trump intellectuals, so capacious, so Shakespearean—in a sense) and for some horrifying, that he's all three, and you never know which one is coming to work today.

Second difference: In his first term Mr. Trump tested boundaries, probing like the proverbial Russian soldier who keeps sticking the bayonet in until he strikes bone. Now he operates as if he sees no boundaries. In the first term there was a sense he didn't quite know what was constitutional and needed to be told. Now there is the sense he doesn't really care, that the old parchment may not be equal to the demands of the moment. (He shares this with populists of the left.) The thinking: You can't wait forever for the courts to resolve an issue, for Congress to do the right thing.

He has been charged with being preoccupied with the world and less so with domestic realities and legislation, things he has to see to and fake enthusiasm for. There's truth in it. The world, he thinks, is where a political figure makes his mark. He desires a big legacy, still wants to

show Manhattan (not to be too reductive, but there's still something in it) that the outer-borough kid you patronized became a world-historic figure you ignored because you couldn't recognize innate genius, and because you looked down on your country's own popular culture, not noticing he was rising like a rocket within it. He's wowed them now. I wonder if his victory is fully satisfying. The people he was once trying to impress aren't there anymore, it was all half a century ago, they're gone. Do you feel the full joy of revenge when you're triumphing over ghosts?

A thing that many Trump opponents don't say but feel: The idea of Trump as president is still so shocking that they can't believe the American people did it. They don't really care about "the reasons" or how others were experiencing America, whose ox the past few decades was being gored. They're mad, and they think less of their countrymen now. They don't really like them anymore and don't feel they have to.

A thing many Trump supporters don't say but feel: They enjoy the suffering they've caused, and not only because they're in charge of the ship now. Also because many of those who have been dealt the mortification were comparatively affluent and accomplished. What Trump supporters felt toward them was social and professional envy. Trumpism gave this flaw a new carapace of meaning, a political rationale that lifted it out of pure and eternal human spite.

The most American thing in the world is to be born and immediately seek to rise. The second most American thing is to find reasons to resent those who rose.

They don't resent Mr. Trump because he was born into wealth. They'd like to be wealthy too. And he never allowed it to make him classy. He stayed regular.

We are a complicated country.

## I'm Being Prosecuted for the Opposite of Insider Trading

By Andrew Left

**T**he crime of insider trading consists in taking advantage of other investors by buying or selling stock based on material, non-public information that could affect its value. I'm being prosecuted for doing the opposite of that, I publicly expressed a sincerely held opinion and later traded on it. Under the Justice Department's theory, that's a crime because I made so many people aware of my opinion.

Call it the influencer penalty. Prosecutors are advancing a legal theory that creates two classes of Americans: those who can speak freely and trade freely, and those who have built an audience and therefore can't.

The individual acts aren't disputed. I can buy a stock. Legal. I can publicly share my opinion about that stock—constitutionally protected speech. I can sell that stock. Also legal. But do all three with a large social media following? Securities fraud.

Everyone understands that material lies about a company can constitute fraud. But the government doesn't allege that I lied. Prosecutors don't claim I fabricated research. At a hearing last month, a government lawyer told the court that the defense—meaning me—"wishes this were a false statements case, but it's not."

The purported misconduct isn't falsity. It's effectiveness. People listened. Prices moved. I traded. According to the Justice Department, that's "market manipulation." One can, apparently, create an artificial market by telling the truth.

If that were the law, surely there would be some rule or regulation prohibiting me from trading while tweeting. But there is none. What form should I have filed? There isn't one.

When Congress and the Securities and Exchange Commission believe disclosure matters, they write rules. Corporate insiders file Form 4 within two days. Five percent shareholders file Schedule 13D within five days. Large investment managers file 13F

quarterly. Members of Congress disclose trades under the Stock Act within 45 days. Each regime specifies who must disclose what and when.

No comparable rule exists for individuals with no corporate affiliation and no elected office who share investment opinions online. I know because I asked. In January 2025, I filed a petition with the SEC requesting guidance for market commentators. I asked for a safe harbor. I asked for definitions. The SEC never responded.

Now the Justice Department wants to put me in prison. One of my alleged crimes: telling my Twitter followers in 2018 that Nvidia was a buy because of its future in artificial intelligence and data centers. I bought the stock. Apparently I sold my shares too early without tweeting it out. Nvidia is up more than 1,300% since the tweet. I'm also charged for expressing bullish views on Tesla and Facebook.

The government's position is that I should have known I couldn't trade stocks I'd publicly praised—for some unspecified period of time. I didn't

make it hard to keep warming at safe levels."

The reality: U.S. election outcomes are completely invisible in the climate data. Even very large events, such as Covid or the collapse of Soviet industry, at most leave a noticeable indent only on the varying annual rate of emissions increase, not overall atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>. The largest human CO<sub>2</sub> event in

lie, I simply traded too soon.

Think about what this means in practice. During the GameStop frenzy in 2021, I shared a negative thesis and held a short position. The stock surged against me. What was I supposed to do? Never cover? Absorb infinite losses? Hold until bankruptcy because I'd expressed an opinion on Twitter?

**I bought or sold stocks after expressing honest opinions about them. They call that 'market manipulation.'**

I have since asked the Justice Department a simple question: When can I trade after tweeting? Their response: "We won't provide you with legal advice."

Their framework locks any speaker into any position. Stock moves your way? Can't take profits without risking a felony. Moves against you? Can't cut losses without risking a felony. There's no compli-

ant path, no form to file, no safe harbor. Only prosecutorial discretion about which speakers to target. That should worry anyone who posts opinions online.

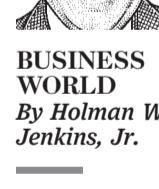
Every day, people on X say Bitcoin is going to \$100,000. Most of them own Bitcoin. Under the government's theory, selling before it hits that target is fraud. The same logic reaches the amateur stock picker on Reddit, the crypto analyst on YouTube, the financial adviser with a newsletter. All potential defendants.

The First Amendment doesn't specify a follower count at which its protections expire. We live in an influencer economy. Millions of Americans build audiences and share honest opinions about stocks, crypto, products, politics—while trading their own portfolios. The Justice Department's position is that a large following strips you of rights everyone else enjoys.

That isn't the law, and it shouldn't be. It punishes speech for being effective. It inverts the First Amendment's core purpose: protecting speech that persuades, speech that matters, speech people actually hear.

*Mr. Left is founder of Citron Research.*

## Trump the Climate Nonentity



The New York Times is always entertaining when it grapples, or fails to grapple, with climate change, the scale of which simply eludes it.

It says of Donald Trump, "The president's embrace of fossil fuels . . . will

make it hard to keep warming at safe levels."

The reality: U.S. election outcomes are completely invisible in the climate data. Even very large events, such as Covid or the collapse of Soviet industry, at most leave a noticeable indent only on the varying annual rate of emissions increase, not overall atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>.

The largest human CO<sub>2</sub> event in

history, the emergence of China as an industrial power, on an emissions graph appears only as a continuation of an uninterrupted upward trend since the Industrial Revolution.

"Trump's greenhouse gas emissions will cause Trump's heat waves, Trump's droughts, Trump's floods, and Trump's wildfires," says one academic consulted by the Times.

"The Call-Girls" was the title of Arthur Koestler's last novel—about academics desperate to be quoted in the media.

In a drunken rant mode, the paper then tries to associate Mr. Trump with the fact that Venezuela's heavy oil is particularly carbon-intensive to produce. But this would be true of Venezuela's oil if Mr. Trump had never heard of Venezuela or gotten involved there.

The paper's headline reads: "Under Trump, U.S. Adds Fuel to a Heating Planet." It could literally substitute any noun, including Sulzberger, for Trump.

And the non sequiturs just keep coming. In the now-standard elision, the Times pretends Mr. Trump called climate science a hoax, but his plain words were for the climate lobby: "It's a moneymaking industry, OK? It's a hoax, a lot of it."

This is merely realism—about actual climate policy in the actual world, however much we might wish things were otherwise. Alas, in the news business, there's only one way to get the story consistently wrong with impunity, and that's by putting ritual shibboleth affirmation above accurately examined facts.

All in all, this week's article is a

display for the ages—or for the record books. Its least deranged claim accuses Mr. Trump of setting back the cause of green energy—true in cases where his actions are blocking projects that make commercial sense, not true where he's ending taxpayer subsidization of inefficient projects. As economists have tried hopelessly to explain to politicians

**If the media really cared about climate change, it would start telling the truth about it.**

and journalists for decades, consuming green energy isn't tantamount to reducing emissions. Humans are always adopting new energy technologies and always increasing their energy budget overall.

The world's endowment of hydrocarbons is all but limitless, including unimaginable quantities of methane hydrates, not to mention that hydrocarbons can also be grown agriculturally. It only takes the development of technology to produce them. President Obama convinced himself the price of fossil energy must inexorably rise because resources were exhaustible. If this were true, the alleged climate problem would solve itself. It's not.

The road to adulthood has been long and winding but at last we're getting somewhere. Last April came a small but telling explosion in the climate community. On behalf of

Relations, a former John Kerry climate aide, Varun Sivaram, inaugurated a program dedicated to "climate realism."

It conceded many long-obvious points: U.S. emissions have become too small a share of the global total to affect the climate outcome. With or without U.S. leadership, countries aren't going to abandon a resource from which they're profiting. The internationally agreed targets for restricting future warming are wholly chimerical.

Then the explosion: If worst-case warming were to materialize, the U.S. should be prepared to use military force against recalcitrant emitters. Of course, the suggestion was unserious but it usefully if frontally undressed a reality. Mr. Trump and all politicians are nonfactors in global warming because there's no appetite to apply force and violence to stop people from consuming a resource they find useful.

This doesn't mean humanity has chosen to live with the consequences of rising CO<sub>2</sub>, whatever those consequences may be. Carbon taxes will almost certainly come back to the drawing board if only for fiscal reasons. Geoengineering experiments to reduce the Earth's temperature with aerosols and modify ocean acidity are gathering pace.

Meanwhile, Mr. Trump at least can hope to be a climate footnote in place of the enlarged role the Times tries to assign him. Ironically, he will share the footnote with his most frothing Democratic critic, Illinois Gov. Jay Pritzker: Both men have been working lately to advance carbon-free nuclear.

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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## EDITORIAL

## Collaboration within Greater Bay Area will boost city prospects

The challenges facing Hong Kong have never been greater in a fast-changing world that is being reshaped by new technology and shifting economic and political orders. But there are also enormous opportunities, given our unique role as China's most open and internationalised economy. The Hong Kong government should continue to unite different sectors to play to their strengths under "one country, two systems" and develop in a way mutually beneficial to the country and the city.

A top forum organised by the South China Morning Post for the first time in Qianhai on Thursday heard how we could rise to the challenge by harnessing artificial intelligence in financial services and other fields and by strengthening cross-border data transfer security within the development framework for the Greater Bay Area, a national drive to turn the two special administrative regions and other southern cities into a new regional economic powerhouse.

Held almost seven years since the publication of the Greater Bay Area development master plan, the China Conference: Greater Bay Area event brought together leaders, industry experts and innovators to explore the opportunities and challenges within one of the world's most rapidly developing regions.

Established in 2010 to promote closer cooperation between Hong Kong, Macau and mainland China and develop modern service industries, the Qianhai special economic zone within Shenzhen is a showcase of how Hong Kong and mainland systems can work towards greater synergy. A total of 52 multinational companies have opened head offices while more than 1,450 new foreign-invested enterprises have set up operations in Qianhai.

It is good to learn of the progress in cross-border collaboration on various fronts. For instance, Hong Kong is seeking to deepen financial services cooperation with Shenzhen. Emphasising its role as a "superconnector" and "super value adder", the city could leverage its strength in financial services to support Shenzhen in technology and industrial finance to build a world-class fintech hub, said Joseph Chan Ho-lim, undersecretary for Financial Services and the Treasury.

In another positive development, this year will see collaboration between Hong Kong and Shenzhen strengthened further, with the latter hosting the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) Economic Leaders' Meeting in November and the former hosting the Apec Finance Ministers' Meeting in October.

This is also a good opportunity to tell the Hong Kong success story to participating economies and the international community, and further deepen ties and cooperation in our role as a superconnector and super value-adder.

## Robust action needed on workplace safety

One industrial fatality is one too many. Sadly, three more people died during the course of construction this week, despite repeated pledges by the authorities and the industry to improve safety amid a disturbing spate of serious accidents in recent years. The latest grim news underlines Hong Kong's shameful safety record built on poor work culture and slack supervision.

In Tsuen Wan on Wednesday, a 29-year-old worker was killed and another man seriously injured after being hit by gas cylinders that fell out of a metal cage being hoisted by a tower crane. Separately, a 65-year-old man died after being trapped between a lifting platform's railing and a wall at a property site in Kai Tak. In another fatality related to the use of lifting gear on Monday, a worker at a Kai Tak site was trapped and later died while detaching a water tank that was suddenly displaced. The cases have added to a growing list of work-related fatalities that are more than just numbers. Behind them are heartbreaking tales of lives ended, families shattered and economic lifelines threatened.

The Labour Department tends to adopt the same tone in responding to such incidents every time, saying it is "highly concerned" and vowing to take action in the case of any violation of work safety legislation. It also reminds employers and workers of the importance of safety and of the legal liabilities involved. However, the standard response risks becoming empty words when industrial deaths keep occurring.

That the city's aggressive development continues to come at the expense of human lives is regrettable. While the circumstances of each mishap might differ, they are not simply a case of bad luck. More often than not, there could be a mix of weak safety awareness, lapses in judgment, slack supervision and insufficient enforcement and deterrence under the law.

The authorities have taken steps to enhance awareness and compliance, but the recurrence of fatal accidents calls for more vigorous action at different levels. At stake is not just the city's image and reputation but a sound occupational safety regime and a healthy workforce that helps power social and economic growth.

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# OPINION

## HARRY'S VIEW ON CALLS FOR BUSINESSES TO BETTER SERVE CUSTOMERS



# All by ourselves

**David Dodwell says the sociability of family life is fading as one-person households and lonely deaths rise. Coping with loneliness is now a life skill**

**M**ore than 2,300 years ago, Aristotle mused in *Politics* that to live alone, a man must be a god or a beast, or words to that effect. I wonder what he would have thought of the popularity of China's "Are You Dead?" app.

For Aristotle, we are social animals, thriving in the "polis" in the company of family, friends and fellow citizens. The average mother had at least five children. Many homes housed three, even four, generations. Family life was noisy and crowded, full of companionship, contest and compromise. To live alone was peculiar. Inhuman. Inhuman.

What would Aristotle make of the entirely novel demographic trend towards loneliness: growing up as only children; marrying late, if at all; having children late, if at all; living alone in old age?

These trends are unique in human history, have emerged at astonishing speed and are being aggravated by the social disconnection of social media. It seems our lives as social animals are being transformed within a generation. And not for the better.

The Are You Dead? app, launched in May by three youngsters from Zhengzhou in Henan, went viral in China a week or so ago, and has focused attention not just on loneliness, but on the remarkable nationwide growth of one-person households.

One of the app's creators, identified only as Lyu, reportedly said the app was aimed at young users in big cities who were likely to experience both "a strong sense of loneliness due to the lack of people to communicate with" and "worries about unforeseen events occurring without anyone knowing".

"As fertility drops, life expectancy gets longer, marriages decline and divorce rates keep going up ... all of these are creating the trend of one-person households," National University of Singapore social

demographer Wei-Jun Jean Yeung told the Financial Times.

China's one-child policy, in place from 1980 to 2015, has clearly aggravated the loneliness problem. By 2024, 19.5 per cent of Chinese households consisted of just one person, up from 7.8 per cent two decades ago, according to official statistics. Forecasters say up to 200 million Chinese may be living alone by 2030.

"In big cities, everyone is an isolated, atomised individual. People live in soundproof apartments, not knowing the surname of their neighbours," one commentator reportedly wrote of the Are You Dead? app. "This creates an extremely intense fear, which is commonly known as 'lonely death'".

But dying alone and undiscovered is not a China-only phenomenon. Japan has long been concerned over its "lonely deaths", which it calls *kodokushi*. While the concern there is more focused on the country's large aged population – as it is in South Korea with *godoksa* – China's equivalent embraces the dangerous implications of youth loneliness as well.

In Hong Kong, single-person households are the fastest-growing type, accounting for over 21 per cent of all households last year after growing to almost 60,000 in 2024, according to official data.

Nor is this a problem arousing concern only in Asia's ageing societies. Worldwide, single-person households are estimated to make up more than 28 per cent of all households. Britain appointed a minister for loneliness in 2018 and drafted a national strategy to tackle loneliness in the same year. Germany also released a national strategy to counter loneliness in 2024. The US Surgeon General's 2023 report "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation" noted Americans living alone had risen from 13 per cent of all households in 1960 to 29 per cent in 2022.

Beyond loneliness, there are other radical implications of the global demographic

transformation. I grew up in the 1950s, the eldest of five, and it was clear the rough-and-tumble of childhood conflict and contest had a profound impact on shaping our personalities. I had the first-born privilege of an (albeit temporary) exclusive relationship with my parents. But along with that came the challenge of parental angst and inexperience.

The childhood battle for steadily increasing independence was hard-fought. As sisters and a brother followed over the next 12 years, they benefited from more experienced – and relaxed – parenting. But the contest for attention, and our position in the family challenge of pecking order, had a very real impact.

The dynamic in a single-child household must be totally different and in the six decades since the 1960s, this big-family scrumming has disappeared – almost certainly permanently. The average fertility rate across the world has plunged from 5.3 to 2.3, close to the replacement level of 2.1. In Britain, that transition took place in 2011. In China, it took just 11.

In economies like South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong, the fertility rate has fallen firmly below one. In China, clearly influenced by the one-child policy, the fertility rate has slumped to 1, resulting in a shrinking population for the past three years. Even India's, at 1.98, has fallen to within a sliver of 1.0.

The swarming sociability of family life is disappearing for good. Even the "ideal" two-child family is becoming less common with the childless or one-child households becoming the norm. Our primary relationships in the future are likely to be with ourselves.

Coping with loneliness is set to be a defining life skill. Social media are severing person-to-person communication. Working from home is altering teamwork. Even job interviews are becoming online discussions shaped by algorithms. No, Aristotle would not be comfortable at all. Perhaps we are destined for loneliness as gods or beasts.

David Dodwell is CEO of the trade policy and international relations consultancy Strategic Access

## Thank you, David Webb, you made HK a better place

**Alex Lo says by exposing governance abuses and holding firms to account, the shareholder rights activist helped clean up the city's investment environment**

**L**ike many long-time reporters in Hong Kong, I had occasional dealings with David Webb, the market transparency and shareholder rights crusader who died this week of prostate cancer at the relatively young age of 60.

Almost all of my encounters with him over the years were annoying and slightly unpleasant. But they made me respect him all the more.

He once chastised me for misstating a relatively obscure Nasa space mission in the 1960s and demanded a print correction. I thought, who cares? But I was impressed he knew about it off the top of his head. That was long before Google was a thing.

When you found yourself with him in a gathering of people, you somehow knew he thought he was the smartest and most knowledgeable guy in the room. Usually, he was. The fact that he was a Briton and most of the others were often local Chinese like me made him all the more offensive.

But unless rumours of him being a foreign spy were true, and there had never been real evidence for them, Webb was incorruptible with a generous public spirit to serve the investment community.

He also made himself a very rich man through sheer skill and intelligence, and some luck. Bloomberg once estimated him to be worth US\$170 million, a fortune amassed over decades by investing in undervalued small to mid-sized local firms. That required a lot of research. Here was an investor with his own convictions and no use for crowd-following or momentum investing to make or lose money.

More importantly, he turned his research into detective work to expose corporate malfeasance, irresponsible company boards, stupid bureaucrats and counterproductive rules and regulations.

He was also a critic of the fixed exchange rate between the Hong Kong and US dollars not being paired with full dollarisation, amid concerns that hedge funds and speculators were exploiting the currency peg like an ATM.

It could have been easily fixed by allowing it to fluctuate up or down within a small defined range. But it was not until 2005 that the peg allowed for the current trading band of HK\$7.75–7.85.

Webb exposed many dodgy companies and their bosses.

His *pièce de résistance* was surely his 2017 public warning against "the Enigma Network", a group of 50 listed but interrelated companies whose collapse led to one of the biggest investigations by the Securities and Futures Commission.

His long-running *webb-site.com* offered local analyses, financial filings and data for free. He probably wrote the code for his website, which might explain why its interface was idiosyncratic and hardly user-friendly. It was, however, a great source of financial news.

I don't share Webb's beliefs in the free market and government non-interference, nor do I think they really accounted for the success of the colonial government and Hong Kong's post-war economy. That to me was just neoliberal ideology and colonial

apologia. Hong Kong has long had a disguised welfare state. It ran a low-tax regime by forcing everyone to live in tiny homes, in effect an undeclared but universal and astronomical land tax.

He rightly criticised the close relationship between the post-1997 government and the property tycoons, but then, that was little different from the tight ties between the colonial government and the British hongs and their taipans. Let's not forget that HSBC, a commercial bank, was our de facto central bank during colonial times.

Regardless, when it came to criticising particular policies and companies, Webb was almost always right. That was why he ruffled lots of feathers in government and business, but they were forced to take him seriously.

For many years, Webb offered a single Christmas stock tip before discontinuing it. Just for fun, I took it up one Christmas back in the 2000s. It was Karrie International, which specialises in plastics and metal moulding.

I made a little money from the sale. After a while, its prices plummeted below one Hong Kong dollar and stayed down for quite a long time. But since the summer, prices have doubled and now range between HK\$2 and HK\$3.

Webb's style of investing is not for the faint of heart. He had the smarts, but most of us don't.

I can still see the unselfconscious intellectual self-amusement on his face. Hong Kong was undoubtedly a better place because of him.

If I had the chance, I would have liked to have known him better.

Alex Lo has been a Post columnist since 2012, covering major issues affecting Hong Kong and the rest of China

# OPINION

## Uncomfortable truths

Christine Loh says Hong Kong needs to ask the hard questions about its net-zero challenge

**N**et-zero commitments are now commonplace across Hong Kong's property sector. Many major developers have announced targets for 2030 and 2050, often framed around energy efficiency, renewable energy and greener buildings.

This is welcome. However, as climate ambition becomes the norm, a more uncomfortable question comes into focus: how many of these commitments are grounded in a serious understanding of what decarbonisation actually entails?

What remains largely missing from Hong Kong's climate conversation is analytical depth. Targets are plentiful; pathways are not. We talk often about goals, technologies and timelines, but far less about trade-offs, constraints and the hard arithmetic of emissions reduction.

In this respect, a recent report by Hang Lung Properties, "Our Journey to Net Zero", stands out. This is not because it has all the answers, but rather because it is willing to ask the difficult questions.

What makes the report notable is its honesty. Rather than presenting net zero as a smooth or inevitable journey, it applies a bottom-up decarbonisation model to examine how emissions evolve under different scenarios, assumptions and growth trajectories through to 2050. It tests possibilities rather than promising outcomes. In doing so, it surfaces uncomfortable truths that the property sector should not ignore.

First, new construction is the single most consequential variable shaping long-term emissions outcomes. Operational improvements and renewable energy procurement deliver meaningful reductions, particularly in the near term. But over time,

embodied carbon from steel, concrete and aluminium dominates the picture. Even modest growth can overwhelm efficiency gains unless construction materials themselves decarbonise rapidly.

The report quantifies this starkly for Hang Lung. With just 1 per cent annual floor area growth after 2030, new construction would raise 2050 emissions by 38 to 46 per cent compared with a no-growth baseline. This makes clear that growth, materials and emissions are inseparable.

Under some scenarios, new construction could raise 2050 emissions by around 40 per cent compared with a no-growth baseline.

Second, the report shows that as the largest sources of emissions decline, smaller and often overlooked categories become increasingly important. Purchased services, waste, transport and other such emissions – some of the sources of what are known as Scope 3 emissions – can make up the bulk of residual emissions by mid-century.

Net zero, it turns out, is not just about flagship technologies or landmark projects; it is also about the unglamorous work of procurement, services, logistics and data quality. Ignoring these categories might make pathways look smoother on paper, but it undermines credibility in practice.

Third, by laying out alternative pathways side by side, the report implicitly highlights the cost and financing dimension of climate action. Different decarbonisation routes imply a wide range of capital needs, risk profiles and timelines.

Construction-heavy pathways lock in large amounts of capital to carbon-intensive materials unless low-carbon steel, concrete and aluminium scale rapidly. Other pathways rely more heavily on

operational upgrades, renewable energy procurement and system efficiency. These differences should matter to banks, investors and insurers seeking to price transition risk and allocate capital prudently.

The modelling also has an important implication for how the sector thinks about existing buildings. Emissions fall most sharply in scenarios where new construction slows, highlighting the climate and capital efficiency of retrofitting existing assets.

**Even modest growth can overwhelm efficiency gains unless construction materials themselves decarbonise rapidly**

Investments in retro-commissioning, energy efficiency upgrades and adaptive reuse avoid large embodied-carbon costs while delivering faster, lower-risk emissions reductions. This insight is particularly relevant in mature cities such as Hong Kong, where the bulk of the 2050 building stock already exists and where capital efficiency matters as much as ambition.

Equally striking is what is not glossed over in the report. It acknowledges limitations in data, uncertainties around grid decarbonisation and blind spots such as refrigerants and tenant fit-outs – areas that could significantly affect long-term emissions but are often undercounted or ignored. By making these gaps explicit, the

report invites scrutiny and improvement rather than complacency. It treats decarbonisation not as a branding exercise, but as a learning process.

This kind of transparency is rare. Such scenario-based analyses allow us to understand the scale of the challenge. Without shared analytical reference points, it is difficult for policymakers, financiers and the public to distinguish between genuine progress and well-intentioned aspiration.

The significance of this approach is particularly relevant to the Hong Kong government as it prepares its next Climate Action Plan 2050. The targets are there, but how to get there is less clear. Having deep, sector-specific modelling that compares different decarbonisation pathways and makes trade-offs explicit would be essential.

Emissions trajectories are shaped not just by technology, but by land use decisions, infrastructure choices, market structures and patterns of growth. Government-led, sectoral decarbonisation modelling would not dictate outcomes, nor should it.

However, it could clarify what is feasible, what is costly, what is uncertain and where policy intervention delivers the greatest impact. It would provide a shared analytical foundation for engagement with business, finance and civil society. And it would allow informed debate and choices.

We can all benefit from clarity. The kind of clear-eyed, scenario-based thinking demonstrated in this report offers a glimpse of what that might look like. Net-zero targets tell us where we want to go. Deep decarbonisation modelling tells us how to get there and at what cost.

Christine Loh is chief development strategist at the Institute for the Environment, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

## LETTERS

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### South Asians have a unique place in Hong Kong society



The Kowloon Mosque and Islamic Centre. Photo: Elson Li

I refer to your report, "Hong Kong's religious communities unite in prayer to mourn Tai Po fire victims" (December 5), which described a picture of unity in diversity, as Muslims from Hong Kong and diplomats from South Asia gathered at Kowloon Mosque to pay their respects to the victims of the Tai Po fire.

Hong Kong has long been an attractive hub for trade, tourism and transit. South Asians on Hong Kong soil are unique due to their early settlement during the expansion of the British empire. Many came here as soldiers, workers, traders and government clerks.

According to the 2021 population census, 619,568 people, or 8.4 per cent of the population, identify as non-Chinese. They include members of ethnic minority groups permanently settled in Hong Kong.

Many of the South Asians who started settling in Hong Kong in the 1840s had been recruited into the British army. Deployed to prevent illegal entry near the border, the Nepalese lived in barracks in Jordan, Shek Kong and Yuen Long, or in Wan Chai, and continued to be stationed in Hong Kong until 1997. In the 1990s, the British government offered a nationality package to these Gurkhas, but that's another story.

The Sikhs were recruited into the Hong Kong Police Force, formed in 1844, to maintain law and order. In the early 20th century, the force was expanded to include nearly as many Indian constables as Chinese ones, at a ratio of four to five.

Some South Asians arrived here as traders. An Indian Muslim community grew in Tsim Sha Tsui, which transformed into a tourist district.

Although the ethnic minority groups face a language barrier in assimilating, they have been able to project a kind of soft power through their day-to-day engagement in the city. All readers would be familiar with a multicultural hotspot like Chungking Mansions, for example, and tourists from around the world are attracted to this showcase for South Asian cuisine and business.

**Dr Anmol Mukhia, visiting assistant professor, Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Hong Kong**

### How small businesses can become Venezuelan lifeline

Despite having the world's largest proven oil reserves, Venezuela has been stuck with a sagging economy shaped by autocracy, corruption, bureaucracy and other problems. The country relied heavily on oil exploration for revenue without pursuing industrial diversification and was hit hard by plummeting oil prices.

It is estimated that 99.5 per cent of businesses in Venezuela are small and medium-sized enterprises. But these SMEs struggle to produce enough essential goods to meet demand due to limited capital, complex government procedures and the unstable macroeconomic environment in the country.

When Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro was abducted by the United States, a window for political transition and economic development opened up. To cope with the country's limited foreign exchange reserves, Venezuelan SMEs could be boosted to produce light industry goods to substitute for imports. Comprehensive financial reforms, support policies and efforts to simplify government procedures should be carried out to help SMEs attract local and international investors.

Tax incentives and more soft loans could help with adopting energy-efficient equipment, lean production methods and waste reduction practices that align with environmental, social and governance (ESG) standards. By investing both financial and human capital, China can play a pivotal, mutually beneficial role in reinvigorating Venezuelan SMEs.

For example, supporting production in Venezuela could help China avoid the impact of US tariffs. Moreover, alongside its investments in the country, China can barter raw materials for Venezuelan crude oil to circumvent foreign exchange controls.

To support competent management, China can introduce a mentorship programme to forge legacy relationships across all levels of the workforce.

**Albert Lau, Kwun Tong**

### Can Donald Trump be trusted to cure 'very sick' countries?

Following the surprise raid on Venezuela, US President Donald Trump told reporters: "We need Greenland from the standpoint of national security".

He also said Venezuela and Colombia were "very sick". By the sound of it, if Venezuela has been cured, Colombia might be the next patient. But one has to wonder about patient outcomes, given that Trump also said he would follow his "own morality", not international law.

**Harry Lam, Quarry Bay**



## Rise of 'trillion-yuan districts' reveals gains and gaps

Ningrong Liu says the success of a tech-driven economy hinges on how it improves lives

**T**he anticipated rise of Shenzhen's Nanshan district to a "trillion-yuan district" marks a monumental milestone, placing it alongside Shanghai's Pudong and Beijing's Haidian as the only districts to reach such a GDP threshold.

Beyond a mere numerical benchmark, the "trillion-yuan" label signifies China's transition into a technology-powered economic era. This achievement underscores more than local success – it amplifies the resilience of China's economy. The pace and quality of the nation's future growth will depend on the ability of these knowledge-intensive hubs to innovate, navigate global headwinds and seize opportunities in emerging industries.

Nanshan district exemplifies China's shift from "Made in China" to "Created in China". Looking at the broader "trillion-yuan club", a common thread emerges: each district is powered by the knowledge economy and technological innovation.

Across China's hi-tech parks, energy is palpable. Passionate entrepreneurs turn fresh ideas into viable ventures; debates fill cafes, focused on the next breakthrough. This dynamism reflects economic vitality, as evidenced by a surge in new tech firms.

Official statistics show more than 1 million new enterprises were established in China's emerging and future industries from January to November 2025. This included 775,000 firms in sectors such as information technology and advanced manufacturing. Future industries – a category spanning healthcare, artificial intelligence (AI) and energy – saw growth of 35.8 per cent, adding 283,000 new companies.

China's shift towards hi-tech innovation as a primary economic driver showed early success in 2025. Sectors such as new energy vehicles, industrial robots and AI are contributing substantially to GDP.

The hi-tech sector's share of China's GDP rose to an estimated 16.8 per cent last year and is projected to reach 18.3 per cent this year, nearly double its 2017 level. This transformation highlights how hi-tech industries are becoming the economy's main shock absorber, offsetting slowdowns in traditional pillars such as real estate and low-end manufacturing.

The Chinese economy looks more resilient than it feels. At the same time, it feels more stagnant than it looks. There are two sides to the story of China's economy.

In 2025, China's property sector remained mired in a downturn. The slump has eroded household wealth, strained local government finances and heightened risks for the banking sector. Notably, banks have been reluctant to push indebted developers into bankruptcy, opting to keep their financial distress undisclosed rather than triggering formal insolvency.

**China's economy can be described as one of 'ice and fire' – a stark contrast depending on the sector**

China's economy can be described as one of "ice and fire" – a stark contrast depending on the sector or individual in question. This divergence has intensified since the end of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns. While headline GDP growth has continued to meet its annual target of around 5 per cent, the benefits of this expansion have failed to translate into public confidence or prosperity.

The "ice" is palpable. A deepening property downturn and mounting local government debt continue to suppress economic vitality, eroding household wealth, weakening employment prospects and dampening consumer sentiment. Growth in household consumption has slowed markedly.

Meanwhile, the "fire" burns in hi-tech and advanced manufacturing sectors, which are expanding rapidly in terms of output and investment. Yet these industries have a limited capacity to absorb labour. Their gains are often concentrated, leaving ordinary citizens with little direct sense of participation or benefit. As a result, the dynamism in these sectors feels disconnected from the daily economic reality of many people, creating a persistent disconnect between measured growth and lived experience.

Even for China's most successful electric vehicle makers, profit margins remain low and under pressure. Intense domestic price competition, significant overcapacity and the reduction of government subsidies have eroded profitability across the sector. In 2025, the overall operating margin for China's car industry was less than 5 per cent. BYD, one of China's most profitable

carmakers, reported a margin of 5.2 per cent in 2024, less than half of Toyota's 11.9 per cent operating profit margin.

Beyond profitability concerns, major US and Western technology firms are moving to reduce their footprint in mainland China. This retreat is visible in key innovation hubs such as Shanghai's Zhangjiang Hi-Tech Park. Microsoft closed its IoT & AI Insider Lab there in early 2025 and Amazon closed its AI research lab in July of that year. The trend extends to other giants such as IBM, which significantly scaled back its China research division.

Geopolitical tensions are now pushing even China's brightest tech stars to abandon their roots. A prominent example is the Chinese AI start-up Manus, which was acquired by Meta to bolster its advanced AI capabilities. Manus has been focused on developing a general-purpose AI agent designed for research, automation and complex tasks.

With Meta's landmark US\$2.5 billion acquisition, however, it is no longer a Chinese company. Even before the acquisition, Manus closed its Beijing office and moved to Singapore. The firm now has offices in San Francisco and Tokyo, with another in Paris expected to open soon.

The ascent of China's "trillion-yuan districts" tells an exciting story of transformation – a decisive pivot towards a hi-tech-driven economy. The true measure of this progress, however, will be its translation into shared prosperity, ensuring that every citizen can feel its benefits in their daily lives.

Ningrong Liu is a professor in globalisation and business at the City University of Hong Kong

## CHINA

# Beijing duty-free deal to help Kenya narrow trade gap

Preliminary framework grants zero-levy entry to more than 98 per cent of African nation's exports

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Kenya has reached a preliminary trade deal with China for duty-free exports of key products including coffee, tea and cut flowers – a major step towards narrowing the East African nation's long-standing trade gap with Beijing.

The "early harvest" framework grants duty-free access to the Chinese market for 98.2 per cent of Kenyan exports, as announced by the Kenyan Ministry of Trade on Thursday – less than a month after negotiations closed on December 19.

While the deal provides an immediate boost for key agricultural products, negotiations continue towards a final, comprehensive "economic partnership agreement" targeting 100 per cent access, according to Kenyan officials.

Meanwhile, the US is reportedly pressing Kenya to abandon the China trade pact in exchange for renewal of duty-free trade privileges under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which expired last year.

Lee Kinyanjui, Kenya's trade minister, described the China deal as "a monumental progression that signifies China's commitment to strengthening our trade ties further".

The introduction of zero-duty access would "unlock vast economic potential for Kenyan exporters, allowing for diversification of our export basket especially in the agricultural sector which is the mainstay of our economy", Kinyanjui said in a statement announcing the deal.

The statement did not say when the deal would take effect.

By securing equivalent trade privileges, Kenya seeks to harness its agricultural sector – the backbone of its economy.

Lauren Johnston, a China-Africa specialist and senior research fellow at the AustChina Institute, noted that while Kenya traded freely within its East Africa subregion, some of these countries enjoyed free trade with China while Kenya did not. This was likely to create trade and development distortions, she warned.

For instance, traders could route Kenyan goods through other countries for duty-free export to China, or ship Chinese goods into Kenya via those countries.

Kenya was excluded from a Chinese policy that offered duty-free and quota-free access to Africa's least developed countries after it graduated to middle-income status in 2014.

In 2023, Kenyan exports to



Shipping containers are stacked at the port of Mombasa in Kenya. The country's imports from China hit US\$5.97 billion in 2023. Photo: Reuters

# Trump pick for Latin America post proves evasive

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Days after the operation that abducted then Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro, President Donald Trump's nominee to command US forces in Latin America dodged pressure from senators to endorse a military-first plan to counter China's growing influence in the region.

Lieutenant General Francis Donovan, who is nominated to lead US Southern Command (Southcom), repeatedly declined to say whether Washington should rely mainly on force projection to push back against Beijing's expanding footprint.

The evasiveness shaped much of his confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, where lawmakers sought clarity on how Southcom would operate under the environment created by the Maduro raid.



## Call of the herd

A reindeer is fed by a visitor at Aoluguya Ewenki Township, an ethnic community near the city of Genhe in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region.

Winter tourism in the remote northeastern area is centred around the last remaining reindeer-herding tribe in China, as well as the extreme seasonal landscapes.

The wider region offers thrilling activities such as snowmobiling, horse-drawn sleigh rides and dog sledding.

Travellers can also experience the so-called ice mist fireworks by splashing hot water in the extremely cold air, where temperatures can reach as low as minus 58 degrees Celsius.

Photo: Xinhua

# WHITE HOUSE 'DRIVES OTHER COUNTRIES CLOSER TO CHINA'

**Survey finds some 26,000 people from 21 nations overwhelmingly agree Beijing influence will grow**

**Lucy Quaggin** in New York

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United States President Donald Trump's "America first" agenda is helping to make China great again and ushering in a "truly multipolar world", according to a survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations.

"A year on from Trump's return, in countries across the globe, many people believe China is on the verge of becoming even more powerful," the think tank said after surveying 25,949 people from 21 nations, including the US, China, Russia, Britain and Brazil.

Sing'Oei also dismissed claims of diplomatic friction, asserting: "We see no tension between our concluding a market access arrangement with China on one hand and our robust push for AGOA reauthorisation as well as a separate bilateral trade agreement with the US on the other."

In a major reprieve for African nations, the US House of Representatives voted on Tuesday to extend AGOA for three years, to the end of 2028. The bill now awaits Senate and presidential approval.

Kinyanjui, the Kenyan minister for trade, described the US move as a "critical milestone" that ended the uncertainty previously facing the textile and apparel industries, which employed thousands.

Kenya planned to use this window to diversify exports beyond textiles, he noted.

Migdal believed that the collision would cause the nucleus to recoil and trigger a secondary electronic recoil, generating a detectable signal.

But for 87 years it remained purely hypothetical until the team led by researchers from the University of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (UCAS) directly observed the Migdal effect using cutting-edge equipment.

"Dark matter, an invisible yet gravitationally interacting component of the universe, remains one of the most profound unsolved mysteries in modern physics," the team wrote in a paper in the peer-reviewed journal *Nature*.

The team said discussions of

Most respondents thought China was leading in key industries, including renewable technology and electric vehicles as well as rising geopolitically.

China's global influence was expected to grow over the next decade, according to respondents in almost every territory surveyed, ranging from 83 per cent in South Africa, 72 per cent in Brazil, 57 per cent in Russia, to 54 per cent in the US and 50 per cent in Britain.

"Only in Ukraine and in South Korea do majorities of people view China as either a rival or an adversary. Since last year, even more people see China specifically as an ally in both South Africa and

Brazil," the think tank said. "This turnaround is yet greater in India. Relations between New Delhi and Beijing have traditionally been rocky; despite this, nearly half of Indians see China as either an ally or a necessary partner."

Several countries also expected their relations with China to strengthen over the next five years, including majorities in South Africa and Brazil.

The poll also found Europeans' confidence in US leadership had fallen sharply, with many increasingly feeling Western dominance was receding and the European Union was not strong enough to deal with the US or China.

"China's rise is seen as something that suits people living in most non-Western countries. Life without a hegemon is how most people appear to imagine the post-American world," the think tank said. According to the findings, the rise of China did not necessarily equate with the decline of the United States, with many respondents believing the US would remain influential.

Only Brazil, India, South Africa and Turkey had majorities in thinking the US would have more global power in the next decade. Just 43 per cent of the US respondents thought this, and in Russia it was as low as 20 per cent.

The data was collected in November 2025, before the United States' abduction of the former Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro and his wife in January.

"Even before Trump's dramatic intervention in Venezuela, his aggressive 'America first' approach was driving people closer to China," according to the report.

The survey was carried out with Oxford University's Europe in a Changing World research project and was the fourth in a series of global studies. The findings showed the world appeared to be becoming more open to China, "or at least not fear it, an evolution that is in keeping with dominant Chinese interpretations of global geopolitics", it said.

## Team raises hopes on dark matter effect

**Victoria Bela**

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Chinese scientists have made the first direct observation of a quantum effect that was proposed almost 90 years ago and could help detect dark matter, the universe's invisible "glue".

Soviet physicist Arkady Migdal developed a hypothesis in Leningrad in 1939 about what ended the uncertainty previously facing the textile and apparel industries, which employed thousands.

Kenya planned to use this window to diversify exports beyond textiles, he noted.

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"Dark matter, an invisible yet gravitationally interacting component of the universe, remains one of the most profound unsolved mysteries in modern physics," the team wrote in a paper in the peer-reviewed journal *Nature*.

The team said discussions of

the Migdal effect in relation to dark matter detection dated back to the mid-2000s.

"However, for more than 80 years, the Migdal effect in neutral particle collisions had never been directly confirmed by experiments," Zheng Yangheng, corresponding author of the paper and a professor at UCAS, told the official newspaper *Science and Technology Daily*.

This has led to an "ongoing questioning" of the lack of experimental support behind the assumptions made in experiments that relied on the Migdal effect, Zheng added.

"In this study, we present the direct evidence of the Migdal effect in neutron-nucleus scattering – a phenomenon predicted more than 80 years ago but confirmed only now," the Chinese team said.

"By validating the Migdal effect, we address a long-standing gap in the scientific understanding of fundamental interactions and offer a potential approach for the detection of dark matter," the researchers said.

The research team developed a gaseous pixel detector designed for the high-precision imaging of nuclear recoil and Migdal electron

tracks, using a mixture of 40 per cent helium and 60 per cent dimethyl ether as an imaging medium.

A neutron generator bombarded the gas mixture to induce the Migdal effect, which was captured by a charge-sensitive pixel array chip. After collecting data for around 150 hours, they recorded more than 100 events, which they then narrowed down to six candidate events that met their selection criteria.

"This result establishes a crucial benchmark for nuclear and particle physics, providing an experimental foundation for future theoretical and experimental investigations," the team said.

The team – which also included researchers from Central China Normal University, Guangxi University, Lanzhou University, Nanjing Normal University and Yantai University – said future work could build on their findings to develop refined detection strategies.

Unlike ordinary matter, dark matter does not emit, absorb or reflect any light, making it detectable only through its gravitational pull. Without this added gravity, galaxies would fly apart, which has seen dark matter described as a cosmic glue.

## Slowing Chinese growth and bilateral tensions top American firms' concerns

**Ralph Jennings**

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Concerns about China's slowing economic growth and "strained" Beijing-Washington relations rank as the top two concerns among members of the American Chamber of Commerce in China this year, according to a chamber survey released yesterday.

The growth concern was raised by 64 per cent of the 368 respondents, making it the leading issue, the annual China Business Climate Survey found.

Fifty-two per cent of respondents reported being profitable or very profitable last year, 6 percentage points more than in 2024, with the service sector – where 61 per cent of companies said they were profitable – registering the strongest gains.

Major financial institutions predict that China's economy will grow moderately this year, shaped by supportive policy measures and global pressures. Investors worldwide are watching to see how Beijing stokes confidence, treats strategic industries and tames overcapacity.

Chinese tariffs on US imports – fallout from the trade war escalation of last year – also ranked among the main issues of concern for American businesses.

Growth expectations for the technology and research-and-development (R&D) sector had weakened, the survey showed, and worries about US-China technological decoupling remained the "primary obstacle to corporate innovation" among American companies in China, it said.

Although the survey found that chamber members' expectations for China-US ties had "improved significantly", with 79 per cent of respondents expressing a positive or neutral outlook for this year, "rising tensions" in bilateral relations, which were mentioned by 58 per cent of respondents, ranked as the second-largest business challenge.

"US-China relations and the ability of our two governments to have dialogue really do impact business and business growth," Michael Hart, the chamber's president, told a news conference in Beijing yesterday.

Trade with the US looked all but impossible in April as the two sides raised tariffs past 100 per cent, but they were lowered later in the year after several rounds of talks.

China's industrial overcapacity, competition with Chinese firms – both state-owned and private – and "inconsistent regulatory interpretation" with "unclear laws and enforcement" were three other top challenges cited by respondents.

"Industrial overcapacity is starting to impact companies in ways we have never thought," Hart said.

American companies waxed confident about their prospects this year, according to the survey, which was conducted between October 22 and November 20.



**Overcapacity is starting to impact companies in ways we have never thought**

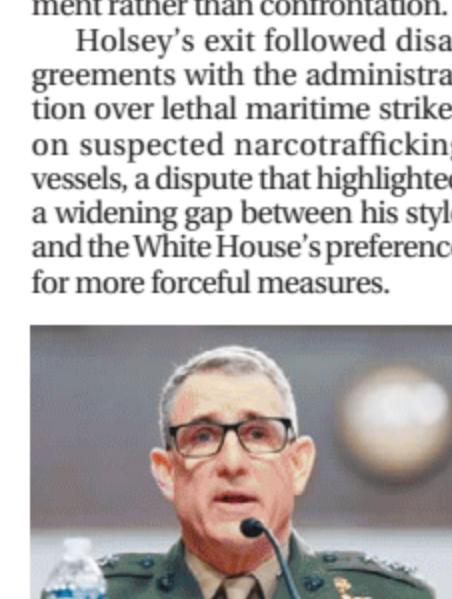
MICHAEL HART, AMCHAM PRESIDENT

Slightly more than half of respondents said China would be one of their top three global investment destinations this year, the same as last year. Nearly 40 per cent said China's investment environment had improved, a 6-percentage-point improvement from the previous survey conducted in 2024.

The latest survey showed that 57 per cent of respondents intended to increase investment in China this year, with the rest having no such plans or anticipating a reduction.

Those planning more investments normally did so because they considered the Chinese market to be important, but that sentiment had eased, Hart said.

The chamber found that 71 per cent of respondents were not planning to leave or relocate, a bigger proportion than in the previous survey, but at the same time, 18 per cent – a slight increase – said they had already begun relocation.



Francis Donovan testifies at a Senate committee hearing.