

ED targets "Donkey Route"

Vigilance against those facilitating illegal migration from the country intensified after the US deported 330 Indians who had entered the country via the "Donkey Route." While the US has previously sent back Indian migrants who entered without valid documents, these 330 Indians were those who had gone to the US via the "Donkey Route." They were sent back to India in a very humiliating manner, in handcuffs and shackles. In this context, when the Enforcement Directorate launched raids in Haryana, Delhi, and Punjab on Thursday, it was revealed that this is a massive illegal business. The operation included raids in Punjab, as well as in the districts of Panipat, Sonapat, Karnal, Kurukshetra, and Ambala in Delhi and Haryana.

The scale of this business is evident from the fact that Rs 2 crore, 6 kg of gold, and 300 kg of silver were recovered from these traffickers who were sending people abroad via the "Donkey Route." Those migrating from India are well aware that nowadays, the US and other wealthy Western countries do not welcome Indian migrants; instead, strict restrictions are being imposed on their legal entry. Those who enter illegally are being deported. It is true that these countries need the labor force of Indian migrants. The money spent by Indian students on education in the US, the UK, or Canada is a significant source of revenue for these countries. Therefore, immigration rules in these countries have been tightened or relaxed at the discretion of the authorities. Visa rules have become stricter in the US after Trump took office. The same is true for England, but rules are also relaxed according to political considerations, as has recently been done in Canada.

Under the previous government in Canada, rules regarding the arrival of migrants were being made very strict, and obtaining citizenship was becoming difficult, but now, after the change of government, Canada's stance has changed. According to the new orders, children of Indian migrants who have lived in Canada for more than three years will automatically receive Canadian citizenship, while the US has withdrawn this rule. Despite all this, the obsession of young Indians with migrating to dollar and pound countries remains undiminished. On Thursday, when 14 teams of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) raided the offices of visa agents, it was revealed that many young people are being sent abroad through illegal routes even without complete documentation. There, they initially live as second-class citizens. Gradually, they try to establish themselves and pursue permanent residency or citizenship. It was believed that the stricter stance taken by the US and England on immigration would reduce the craze among young Indians to go abroad, but this has not happened.

People are willing to risk their lives to go abroad through illegal routes. However, this route is not cheap either. Parents have to spend 40-45 lakh rupees. Even then, there is no guarantee that their children will reach their foreign destination safely. Recently, there have been reports of the deaths of young migrants traveling through the perilous routes of this illegal trade. The huge amount of money recovered during the raids conducted by ED teams in Delhi, Punjab, and Haryana indicates that the desire to go abroad, whether legally or illegally, is still strong. The reason is that they do not see their dream of a better life being fulfilled in their own country. They want to go abroad at any cost, chasing an illusory dream. We hope that the action taken by the ED against the major players in this illegal trade will curb this illicit business to some extent, and India's youth will be motivated to contribute to nation-building by staying in the country.

-Abhishek Vij

'Rahveer': the road heroes

Currently, there is a severe cold wave. Fog and mist prevail. Although expressways have been built in India under the road development program, reports of accidents involving vehicles on these roads are constantly coming in. The number of lives lost in these accidents is shocking. Recently, Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari stated in Parliament that approximately 180,000 people die in road accidents every year. The number of deaths is higher than the number of lives lost in any war or during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, when these accidents occur on the roads, people or fellow travelers in vehicles often do not come forward to help the injured and take them to the hospital out of a sense of humanity.

At most, they film the incident and move on. The Punjab government has established a road safety force whose job is to provide immediate assistance to victims of such unfortunate incidents on the roads, transport them to medical facilities, and ensure that the victims receive timely medical attention. As far as the general public is concerned, people are still hesitant to take the injured to the hospital, fearing legal complications. Now, Nitin Gadkari has made an excellent announcement: those who take accident victims to the hospital will be called 'Rahveer' (Road Heroes). They will also receive a reward of Rs. 25,000 for each such humanitarian act. Previously, the law stipulated that those who take victims to the hospital would not be subjected to extensive questioning. They could even keep their identity secret if they wished. However, the announcement of their felicitation and reward indicates that humanity is being encouraged to help accident victims in the country.

THE QUIET RUPTURE: HOW ACTING AGAINST OUR VALUES SHATTERS THE SELF



Parneet Sachdev
Chairman of Real Estate Regulatory Authority and a leading author
The Inner Realm

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black American man, was murdered by Derek Chauvin, a 44-year-old White police officer, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States. Floyd had been arrested after a store clerk reported that he made a purchase using a counterfeit \$20 bill. Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes while Floyd was handcuffed and lying face-down in the street. Before being placed on the ground, Floyd had exhibited signs of anxiety, complaining about claustrophobia and being unable to breathe. After being restrained, he became more distressed, still complaining of breathing difficulties, the knee on his neck, and fear of imminent death. After several minutes, Floyd stopped speaking.

One of his colleagues present there, faced a deep moral dilemma. The officer felt a surge of moral alarm, but he said nothing; fearful of breaching an unspoken code. In interviews a year later, he admitted he had replayed the scene "a thousand times," ashamed of the silence that had made him complicit. (Papazoglou & Anderson, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2020). The officer did nothing to stop the injustice when he could.

Arjuna is told by Krishna that one must not abandon righteous duty even under strain
"Better to perish in the performance of one's own dharma than to follow another's. Following another's path leads to great danger."

— Bhagavad Gita 3:35
This verse establishes that moral integrity is not optional but foundational to inner harmony.

There are wounds that bloom quietly within us when we act against the grain of our own natural nature. This latter hurt, what psychologists now call *Moral Injury* is amongst the most profound forms of inner suffering. Diana Divecha, Robin Stern from Yale write about an eight-year-old girl who returned home distraught after aligning herself with school bullies. She hadn't bullied anyone but had laughed when the school bullies were doing their misdeeds. Earlier she had been their victim; now she tasted the brittle thrill of power borrowed from unkindness.

Her small body revolted with nausea, trembling, shame. This was evidence of a moral compass thrown violently off its axis.

Science affirms that children are not morally blank. In a landmark Yale study, infants as young as six months displayed consistent preference for fair, helpful characters over harmful ones, suggesting the presence of rudimentary moral cognition from birth (Hamlin et al., *Nature*, 2007). Neuroscience research shows that compassion activates reward pathways and enhances parasympathetic tone (ie biological signatures of well-being, while unethical action triggers heightened cortisol and inflammatory responses (Zahn et al., *Nature Neuroscience*, 2009; Litz et al., *Clinical Psychology Review*, 2009). We suffer, literally, in body, mind and soul when we step outside our innate ethical architecture.

"Let a man lift himself by himself; let him not degrade himself. For the Self alone is the friend of the self, and the Self alone is the enemy of the self."

— Bhagavad Gita 6:5
This is the Gita's clearest statement on inner morality; the idea that one's salvation or suffering begins with one's own choices.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VIOLATED CONSCIENCE
Moral injury differs sharply from fear-based trauma. PTSD arises from threat and helplessness; moral injury emerges from guilt, shame, moral outrage, or witnessing wrongdoing that one could not prevent.

The concept first entered clinical literature when veterans of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan described suffering not primarily from terror but from acts or omissions they believed violated their deepest values. Jonathan Shay, a pioneering US psychiatrist, famously observed that their agony arose when their "moral horizon collapsed" (Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 1994).

GLOBALIZATION OF MORAL INJURY: THE SHADOW PANDEMIC

In the second year of the pandemic, a primary school teacher in São Paulo was instructed to mark children absent if their families lacked stable internet and could not join online classes. Following the directive felt like punishing the poor, but she complied, fearing she would lose her job otherwise. When one mother called in tears, explaining she had lost her husband and could not afford data for her phone, the teacher felt a "moral collapse," as she later described it to researchers (UNESCO-WHO Joint Report, 2021). For months she carried the weight of having enforced a rule she believed was unjust. "I didn't fail as a teacher,"



she said. "I failed myself." It was a quiet act, but its spiritual cost was immense.

In the years following COVID-

World Health Organization has repeatedly warned that Moral injury, once considered rare, is now a silent pandemic.

19, moral injury has moved from military contexts to civilian life with alarming speed, becoming what some researchers now term as a *shadow pandemic*.

In the spring of 2020, at the height of Italy's first COVID-19 surge, a young nurse in Bergamo faced a defining moral injury. With ventilators scarce, she was instructed to prioritize a younger patient over an older man who was rapidly deteriorating. She complied, because protocol demanded it. However, she later told researchers, something inside her "broke." She held the older man's hand as he slipped away, whispering apologies he could no longer hear. For weeks afterward she could not sleep, convinced she had violated her own humanity. "It was the right decision," she said, "but not for my soul" (Greenberg et al., *Occupational Medicine*, 2020). In that moment, her suffering did not arise from the virus outside, but from the quiet rupture within.

Journalists covering humanitarian disasters have reported nightmares, self-doubt, and moral numbness. Teachers, police officers, caregivers and even corporate employees now describe similar symptoms as they overlook injustices to keep their jobs. Researchers at the University of Oxford term this "institutional moral injury," a growing global phenomenon driven by bureaucratic pressures and eroding public trust (Williamson et al., 2020). This is why the World Health

Organization has repeatedly warned that *Moral injury*, once considered rare, is now a silent pandemic.

ANCIENT WISDOM AND THE HUMAN CONSCIENCE

Greek writers have described miasma, a moral pollution that clouds the soul. Hindu philosophy speaks of adharma. Buddha's insight is equally profound: "By oneself is one defiled; by oneself is one purified."

(Dhammapadam, 165).

Before the start of the Mahabharat, Arjuna's paralysis arises from moral confusion. Krishna says

"Let a man lift himself by himself; let him not degrade himself. For the Self is the friend of the self, and the Self is the enemy of the self"

(Bhagavad Gita 6:5).

HOW WE HEAL: MORAL REPAIR
Healing moral injury is neither mere apology nor self-punishment. Moral repair is the slow turning of the self, back into its own ally.

Research shows that confronting the breach without collapsing into self-hatred is correlated with reduced symptoms of depression and shame (Bryan et al., *Psychological Services*, 2018). Whether through apology, changed behavior, or acts of service, restorative action reduces moral residue, what psychologists call the lingering "moral wound burden" (Maguen & Burkman, J. Gen. Internal Medicine, 2013).

The Guru Gurm Sahib says

"Nanak, within each and every heart, the Divine Light shines."

(Guru Gurm Sahib, Ang 1349)

The message is unmistakable, wrongdoing may cloud the light, but it cannot extinguish it. Spiritual traditions move beyond repair to transformation. **Service or Seva** has demonstrable psychological benefits. Carnegie Mellon University research shows that altruism reduces inflammatory markers and improves emotional resilience (Poulin et al., 2013). Self-forgiveness, too, is biologically restorative; it reduces rumination, lowers cortisol, and improves heart-rate variability (Wohl et al., *PSBP*, 2008).

What spirituality offers uniquely is the possibility of moral transcendence: the promise that one's worst moment need not become one's defining identity.

This is the deeper resonance behind the lines often attributed to Mother Teresa, inscribed on the walls of her orphanages in Kolkata: *"The good you do today will often be forgotten. Do good anyway... In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway."*

(Views expressed are the author's own).

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THOUGHT OF THE DAY
Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass, it's about learning to dance in the rain.

-Vivian Greene

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Toshakhana case

Meanwhile, Bushra Bibi was also sentenced to 17 years in prison under the same provision. Apart from this, the couple was fined PKR 16.4 million. If they failed to pay the fine, then, as per the law, they would be awarded additional jail time. Dawn reported.

Imran's lawyers react
Following the verdict, both Imran and Bushra's legal teams indicated their intention to challenge the decision before the high court. In a post on X, formerly known as Twitter, PTI said that Khan's family was not allowed inside the jail, where a "kangaroo court announced the verdict of the Toshakhana 2 case." "A closed-door jail trial is neither free nor fair; it is in fact a military trial," the party said. It also shared a video of Imran's sister, Aleema Khan, inside a car, asking why she was not being allowed to proceed further. "They can't stop us. The jail trial is today," she said in the video, adding that it was "illegal" that the family was being stopped.

What does Epstein files reveal



The United States Department of Justice has released a long-awaited tranche of documents linked to its investigations into the late financier and convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. The files, made public on December 19, run into thousands of pages but are heavily redacted, limiting fresh revelations while still offering insight into Epstein's powerful social network.

Among the most prominent names appearing in the newly released material is former US President Bill Clinton. The documents include several photographs of Clinton with Epstein and his longtime associate Ghislaine Maxwell. One previously unseen image shows Clinton standing in a swimming pool alongside Maxwell and another individual whose identity has not been disclosed. Another photograph depicts Clinton reclining in a hot tub with a person whose details have been redacted. According to a Justice Department spokesperson, the individual in that image has been identified as a victim of Epstein's abuse. Additional photographs show Clinton posing with a young woman seated close to him, her arm around his shoulders, and another

image features him alongside his former aide Doug Band and actor Kevin Spacey inside the Cabinet Room of the Churchill War Rooms in London. The files also reference a painting of Clinton wearing a blue dress that was displayed at Epstein's New York residence, an artwork that has previously drawn public attention. While the images are undated, Clinton was known to have associated with Epstein on multiple occasions during the 1990s and early 2000s, prior to Epstein's first arrest. However, the released documents do not accuse Clinton of any criminal wrongdoing. Survivors of Epstein's abuse have not implicated the former president, and Clinton has consistently denied knowledge of Epstein's crimes.

Diplomacy, deals and discord shape India's week

Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrapped up a significant three-nation tour this week, visiting Jordan, Ethiopia, and Oman, with the trip underscoring India's growing diplomatic and economic outreach across West Asia and Africa. The visit came at a time when New Delhi is recalibrating its foreign policy amid shifting global trade dynamics and rising regional tensions. A key highlight of the tour was Modi's visit to Muscat, where India and Oman signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The agreement, effectively a free trade pact, marks India's second major trade deal in recent months after the agreement concluded with the United Kingdom in May. The India-Oman CEPA aims to boost bilateral trade, enhance market access, and strengthen investment flows between the two countries. The deal assumes added importance as Indian exporters face increasing tariff pressures in major markets such as the United States. With global trade becoming more fragmented, New Delhi is seeking to diversify its economic partnerships to reduce

dependence on any single country. Oman, strategically located at the crossroads of the Gulf, Africa, and South Asia, is seen as a key gateway for Indian goods and services into the wider West Asian and African markets. The agreement is expected to benefit sectors such as textiles, engineering goods, chemicals, food products, and services, while also deepening energy cooperation. Even as India pushes forward on the trade and diplomacy front, relations with neighbouring Bangladesh remain strained. Ties between the two countries have deteriorated since the ouster of former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August last year. In recent weeks, anti-India rhetoric has gained traction in Dhaka, triggering diplomatic unease in New Delhi. This week, India summoned the Bangladesh High Commissioner to lodge a formal protest over threats to the security of the Indian High Commission in Dhaka. The move followed protests being organised outside the Indian mission, raising concerns about the safety of diplomatic personnel and property. The situation escalated



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after controversial remarks by Hasnat Abdullah, a

leader of Bangladesh's National Citizen Party, who reportedly threatened to isolate India's Northeastern states, often referred to as the "Seven Sisters", and offer refuge to separatist groups if Bangladesh were to face destabilisation. Indian officials view such statements as deeply provocative, particularly given the sensitive security situation in the Northeast and the region's long history of insurgency. This is not the first instance of Bangladeshi political figures making contentious comments

about India's Northeast, but the current political climate in Dhaka has added to New Delhi's concerns. India has stressed the importance of maintaining diplomatic norms and ensuring the security of foreign missions, even amid political transitions. Meanwhile, North India continues to grapple with a severe pollution crisis, with Delhi once again at the centre of attention. The capital's Air Quality Index (AQI) has remained in the "hazardous" category for much of the week, as a thick blanket of

smog enveloped the city. Poor visibility, respiratory distress, and public health warnings have become routine as winter sets in. The situation has grown so alarming that foreign embassies have begun issuing advisories and offering suggestions to India on tackling air pollution. While such interventions are unusual, they reflect the global concern over Delhi's deteriorating air quality, which frequently ranks among the worst in the world during winter months. Factors such as vehicular emissions, industrial pollution, construction dust, crop residue burning in neighbouring states, and unfavourable weather conditions have combined to create a toxic mix. As India balances its expanding global role with domestic and regional challenges, the week's developments highlight the complexity of its current moment. On one hand, trade agreements like the India-Oman CEPA signal economic ambition and strategic diversification. On the other, diplomatic friction with Bangladesh and persistent environmental crises at home underline the hurdles New Delhi continues to face on multiple fronts.

An 'electrical monster'

Boeing whistleblower Ed Pierson has sharply criticised the growing focus on pilot error in the investigation into the deadly Air India Boeing 787 crash in Ahmedabad, urging investigators to look closely at the aircraft itself rather than rushing to conclusions. The crash, which killed over 260 people, including 242 passengers and crew, has once again placed Boeing's safety record under intense global scrutiny. "Don't blame the pilots yet. Look at the plane," Pierson said, calling the Dreamliner an "electrical monster" and warning that investigators may be overlooking serious manufacturing and systems-related failures. Pierson, a former senior manager at Boeing who later turned whistleblower, has long raised alarms about quality control issues within the aerospace giant. The Air India flight had taken off from Ahmedabad on what should have been a routine journey. Moments later, the aircraft crashed in a massive fireball, slamming into the Atulyam hostels of BJ Medical College. Apart from those on board, several people on the ground, including medical students in the hostel canteen, were also killed. Only one passenger, Vishwash Kumar Ramesh, survived the crash. The scale of destruction pushed the death toll to around 260, making it one of India's deadliest aviation disasters in recent years. As investigators examine flight data and cockpit recordings, early speculation has pointed towards possible pilot error. Pierson has strongly objected to this line of thinking. He described the preliminary findings as "horrible" and said they reflect a troubling tendency to deflect attention away from deeper, systemic



problems. In an exclusive interaction with Firstpost, Pierson said Boeing's manufacturing ecosystem has long been plagued by intense pressure to meet production targets, often at the cost of safety. He highlighted the massive scale and complexity of Boeing's factories, where even small lapses can have catastrophic consequences. "I saw incredible pressure to get the work done," Pierson said. "Manufacturing, quality control and supply chain employees were under an inordinate amount of pressure." According to him, this environment increases the risk of defects slipping through unnoticed or unaddressed. Pierson also pointed to what he described as weak regulatory oversight, arguing that regulators have, at times, relied too heavily on Boeing's internal assessments rather than conducting rigorous independent checks. He believes this pattern has contributed to repeated safety failures across different aircraft models. The whistleblower's remarks add to mounting concerns over whether the probe into the Air India crash will fully examine the role of aircraft design, electrical systems and manufacturing quality. As families of the victims await answers, Pierson insists that accountability must go beyond the cockpit and focus on the systems that allowed such a tragedy to occur.

Who owns TikTok now?

After years of political pressure and regulatory uncertainty, TikTok's long-running ownership saga in the United States is finally nearing its conclusion. ByteDance, the Chinese parent company of TikTok, has signed an agreement to sell a majority stake in its US operations to a group of investors, effectively reshaping who controls one of the world's most influential social media platforms. TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew informed employees that the new structure would establish a clear separation between the app's American and Chinese operations. Under the deal, the US business will operate as an independent entity with full authority over data protection, algorithm security, content moderation, and software assurance. Chew stressed that these changes are designed to address long-standing national security concerns raised by Washington. The transaction is expected to close on January 22, 2026, bringing an end to a dispute that began in earnest in 2020, when then US President Donald Trump first attempted to ban TikTok over fears that user data could be accessed by the Chinese government. Since then, TikTok has faced repeated threats of prohibition, congressional scrutiny, and evolving legislation aimed at curbing foreign influence over digital platforms. Under the new arrangement, TikTok will effectively exist as two separate entities: one for China and one for the United States. The American arm will be known as TikTok US Joint Venture LLC. This entity will be majority-owned by a consortium of US and allied investors, including Oracle, private equity firm Silver Lake, and Abu Dhabi-based investment company MCGX. Each of these investors will hold a 15 per cent stake in the joint venture. Oracle's involvement is



particularly notable. The company, led by billionaire Larry Ellison, a known ally of Donald Trump, has already been closely associated with TikTok's US data storage efforts. Its expanded role signals Washington's desire to keep both data and technological oversight firmly within trusted hands. The deal values TikTok at approximately \$14 billion, a figure that is lower than earlier market estimates but reflects the regulatory constraints placed on the sale. Existing ByteDance investors will retain a combined stake of 30.1 per cent in the new entity, while ByteDance itself will hold about 19.9 per cent. This ownership cap is critical. It ensures compliance with the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, which bars any Chinese company or individual from owning more than 20 per cent of TikTok's US operations. By staying below this threshold, ByteDance formally relinquishes control while maintaining a limited financial interest. In practical terms, the agreement marks a decisive shift. TikTok's US operations will now be governed by American and allied investors, addressing security concerns while allowing the platform to continue operating in its most lucrative market. For users, the app may feel unchanged, but behind the scenes, control of TikTok in the US has fundamentally been rewritten.

How Bhutto took charge of Pak after losing 1971 war

Pakistan was still reeling from the trauma of losing East Pakistan when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto assumed the presidency on December 20, 1971. The country was facing one of the gravest crises in its history, barely days after the Bangladesh Liberation War ended with the surrender of Pakistani forces in Dhaka on December 16 and the birth of a new nation, Bangladesh. The defeat shattered Pakistan's political and military establishment. General Yahya Khan, who had led the country during the war, lost whatever legitimacy he had left. Public anger was widespread, protests erupted across cities, and the military's credibility stood deeply eroded. Under mounting pressure, Yahya Khan stepped down, paving the way for Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, leader of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), to take charge. Bhutto's rise marked a dramatic

shift in Pakistan's leadership. He became both President and the country's first civilian Chief Martial Law Administrator, inheriting a nation bruised by military defeat, political instability, and international isolation. Pakistan had lost more than half its population and a significant portion of its territory. The psychological blow was immense, with national morale at its lowest and the idea of Pakistan itself under intense scrutiny. The challenges before Bhutto were enormous. The economy was in disarray, inflation was rising, and millions of prisoners of war were still held in India. Pakistan's diplomatic standing had suffered globally, while internally, ethnic and regional tensions threatened further fragmentation. Bhutto moved swiftly to consolidate power, presenting himself as a strong, decisive leader capable of steering the country out of chaos.



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One of his first priorities was to reassert civilian authority over

the military, whose dominance had shaped Pakistan's politics since independence. Though he retained martial law initially, Bhutto promised democratic reforms and sought to restore public confidence in civilian leadership. He also initiated steps to rebuild Pakistan's international image, particularly by engaging diplomatically with India and other regional players. Bhutto's presidency marked the beginning of a transformative phase in Pakistan's political history. He introduced sweeping reforms aimed at reshaping the country's social and economic structure. These included nationalisation of key industries, banks, and educational institutions, measures that were intended to reduce inequality but later sparked debate over their long-term economic impact. His populist slogan of "roti, kapda aur makaan" resonated with the masses, helping him consolidate popular support.

At the same time, Bhutto faced criticism for concentrating power and curbing dissent. While he projected himself as a champion of democracy, his tenure also saw restrictions on political opponents and the press. Nevertheless, his leadership played a crucial role in stabilising Pakistan after its most severe national setback. The events of December 1971 reshaped South Asia and altered Pakistan's political trajectory permanently. Bhutto's assumption of the presidency symbolised both an end and a beginning: the end of a period dominated by military rulers and the beginning of an ambitious, if contentious, civilian-led effort to rebuild a fractured nation. His legacy remains complex, but there is little doubt that his rise to power came at a moment when Pakistan stood at a historic crossroads, searching for direction after one of its darkest chapters.

The second killing of Mahatma Gandhi



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

MAHATMA GANDHI was assassinated on January 30, 1948. The RSS vehemently denied that its ideology and propaganda motivated the assassin. The RSS claimed that the ban imposed on the organisation by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was unjust. Let's, for a moment, take the RSS at its word, and pose the following question to the RSS and its progeny, the BJP: Why did you erase the name of Mahatma Gandhi from the one — and only — socio-economic programme named after him?

The programme named after Mahatma Gandhi is the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) supported by an Act of Parliament. The government has passed Bill No. 197 of 2025 in Parliament to repeal the Act and the Scheme. Section 37(1) of the Bill reads:

"Save as provided in section 10, on and from such date as the Central Government may by notification appoint in this behalf ...the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, with all rules, notifications, Schemes, orders and

guidelines made thereunder shall stand repealed."

The Bill goes further: it obliges, under section 8(1), every state government to make a Scheme for providing a guarantee of 125 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household in the rural areas; the Scheme shall conform to the minimum features specified in Schedule I of the Bill; and under Schedule I, the first minimum feature is:

"The Scheme notified under section 8 of the Act by all States shall be called the 'Viksit Bharat — Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin): VB — GRAM G Scheme.' The name is not only a mouthful, it conveys no meaning to a non-Hindi speaking citizen and is an affront to such citizens."

Lifeline for poor

The 100-days-a-year wage employment guarantee scheme was the lifeline for 12 crore families to ensure that the household did not go to bed hungry and dejected. It was a boon for the poor, especially women and the elderly without regular employment. It put money in the hands of the women in the household giving them a degree of independence that their foremothers had not experienced. It created a safety net for the poor. The Bill snatches these benefits away, cruelly.

In the first Budget of the UPA government (2004-05), I had said, *"In our scheme of things, the poor will have a first charge on ... the entire Plan funds ... Work has begun on the National Employment Guarantee Act. The object is to guarantee 100 days of*

What started with Jawaharlal Nehru has now reached Mahatma Gandhi. The BJP's grave wrongs will not be forgiven by the people of India

employment in a year to one able-bodied person in every poor household..."

The soul of the Act was **'guaranteed livelihood security'** and its key features were:

- The Scheme was universal, demand-driven and available throughout the year.
- The wages were guaranteed by the central government.
- The Scheme was financed by the central government; the State's share was 25 per cent of the material cost alone.
- If refused work, the person was entitled to an unemployment allowance.
- As the Scheme evolved, it acquired a welcome tilt towards women workers.

Negating spirit of MGNREGS

The Bill and the Scheme destroy every one of the above. The Scheme will be state-specific and the costs will be shared by the Centre and the state in the ratio of 60:40. The central government will make a *'normative allocation'* of funds to each state, the expenditure in excess of the allocation will be borne by the state and the areas where the Scheme will be implemented will be notified by the central government, stealthily making it a *'supply-driven'* Scheme. The state shall *'guarantee'* employment for 125 days — a chimera. No work shall be provided during notified *'peak agricultural seasons'* aggregating 60 days in a year. The unemployment allowance can be as low as 25 per cent of the notified wage and hedged with numerous conditions including the *economic capacity* of the state. The central government will be the arbiter on all aspects, making the Bill *anti-federal*. In effect, the Bill and the proposed

Scheme turn the original concept of **'guaranteed livelihood security'** on its head. States — BJP ruled, especially — will plead economic incapacity, seek *lower* normative allocation and *smaller* areas of implementation, and gradually kill the Scheme.

Erasing from memory

On February 28, 2015, Mr Narendra Modi said in Parliament *"My political sense tells me never to scrap MGNREGA. ... it is a living monument to your (UPAs) failures."*

Over the years, MGNREGS suffered neglect. Though promised 100 days of employment, the average has hovered around 50 days per household. Out of 8.61 crore job card holders, only 40.75 lakh households completed 100 days of work in 2024-25 and only 6.74 households in 2025-26. The unemployment allowance, which is the responsibility of the state government, is rarely paid. The allocations are inadequate and the BE has fallen from Rs 1,11,170 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 86,000 crore in 2025-26. Total number of households that worked has declined from 7.85 crore in 2020-21 to 4.71 crore in 2024-25. Arrears of unpaid wages have mounted to Rs 14,300 crore.

Bill's defects apart, the Bill is a deliberate attempt to erase Mahatma Gandhi from the nation's memory — which is reprehensible. In the BJP's reckoning, the history of independent India began on May 26, 2014. The past must be erased. What started with Jawaharlal Nehru has now reached Mahatma Gandhi. The BJP's grave wrongs will not be forgiven by the people of India.

(Next column: January 4, 2026)

Cancel Christmas



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

IF YOU are Hindu and reading this, you better not be going to any Christmas parties next week. You have been warned. Not by me, but one of the morality policemen of 'new India'. The Vishva Hindu Parishad has ordained that Hindus will be going against their 'culture' if they celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, as they usually do, because Indians love any excuse for a party. At least that is how it was in old India, when we did not know it was against our 'culture' to have a good time.

The ban on Christmas came from a Delhi VHP official. The VHP is one of the uglier offspring of the RSS. Asked if this was not a restriction on the right that our constitution gives us to worship as we wish, he made it clear that this was not about religion but about conversion. It is not just private festivities that the VHP seeks to ban, but in shops and malls as well. It delighted me to see my local mall filled with Christmas decorations and good cheer.

There were stars and lights and Santas and Christmas trees and every shop was ready with special Christmas discounts and festive offerings. Nobody obeyed the VHP, so it is possible that by next year the RSS will order its other ugly progeny, the Bajrang Dal, to enforce its Christmas ban by deploying the violent gangs. Their Shiv Sena cousins spread out in Mumbai and hunt for young lovers just before Valentine's Day because love also seems to be not part of our 'culture'. Some years ago, I rescued a terrified young girl from a police van. She had come from one of our northeastern states to meet her boyfriend, with whom she was arrested on Marine Drive.

What puzzles me about the Hindutva culture that defines 'new India' is why leaders of this movement do not introspect upon the reasons why Hindus, especially those of lower caste, are persuaded to become Christians. Muslims and other Buddhists. Minimal introspection would reveal that the cause is caste. I am an irreligious Sikh, but one of the tenets of my religion that I am proud of is that one reason Guru Nanak founded Sikhism was because he objected passionately to casteism. But I digress. The point I want to make this week is that 'new India' will not last long unless it returns to the foundational principle of pluralism enshrined in our constitution.

Muslims have been in this second-class citizenship in the Hindutva Rashtra, but they have little to worry about. India has the second largest Muslim population in the world and, despite those ugly and stupid 'go to Pakistan' taunts, they are going nowhere. They are perfectly capable of fighting back when the need arises and perfectly capable of protecting vulnerable members of their community. If truth be told, there are times when they have pushed back too far and caused more harm to Islam than to Hindutva. The example that comes instantly to mind is the insane violence unleashed when they thought their Prophet had been insulted by a BJP functionary. The hijab movement was another instance, when they went too far in the wrong direction. If Saudi Arabia, where Islam was born, is encouraging its women to ditch their veils, why should Indian Muslim women be encouraged to do the opposite? But I digress again.

This week, it is the plight of Christians I would like to draw attention to. Christians are the smallest and most vulnerable of India's minority communities, and they have been under relentless persecution for nearly a century. A political friend I met last week from the 'Hindu Rashtra' of Uttar Pradesh said that she was constantly being approached for help by Christians who were wrongly charged with converting Hindus by misleading them through force, fraud, allurements or marriage. The government of Yogi Adityanath passed the Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act in 2021. Under this law, conversion requires permission from a district magistrate or you can end up in jail. Laws like this blur the boundaries between voluntary and involuntary conversion and exist in other states. They are designed to halt all religious conversion, even voluntary.

As someone brought up in that old India in which Hindus were confident enough to not care whether someone converted to another religion, I confess that this season of Santa Claus, feasting and festivity makes me nostalgic for that older time. In the spirit in which the VHP has warned Hindus not to celebrate, I would like to warn the leaders of 'new India' that alarm bells have already started to ring, and they should pay attention to them. Pluralism is what makes India what it is. Without it there is a danger that we could descend into the grim situation in which some of our less pluralistic neighbouring countries are today.

Meanwhile, since I am not a Hindu, I shall be going to Christmas parties next week and celebrating merrily with my Christian brethren. If there is a church near where I am on Christmas eve, I shall perhaps attend midnight mass, because it is one of the most beautiful religious ceremonies I have ever witnessed. For my Hindu friends partying away recklessly next week, my advice is to keep a close watch on guests who look suspicious or strange. They could be VHP spies.

Under PM Nehru, India's first Atomic Energy Act



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY CHAKSHU ROY



(From left) Nuclear physicist Homi Bhabha, professor MS Narasimhan and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. WIDEORBITA

PARLIAMENT PASSED a new atomic energy law towards the end of 2025. The legislation, titled the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India, opens the atomic energy sector, previously the exclusive domain of government entities, to private players. Opposition MPs urged that a parliamentary standing committee scrutinise the Bill. But the government pushed for its passage in the last two days of the Winter Session, with the debate lasting 11 hours and 64 MPs participating.

One year after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the US Congress became the first legislature to establish a framework for regulating nuclear energy in 1946. The provisions of this law were refined over several months, during which scientists and military personnel involved in the atomic sector actively lobbied to influence its content. The law transferred control of nuclear technology from the military to civilian authority.

The US Congress created a civilian Atomic Energy Commission, a congressional oversight committee, a military liaison and a general advisory committee composed of scientists. Following the US, Canada, and the United Kingdom made their own statutes in quick succession. The British legislation gave the government absolute control, with limited parliamentary oversight mechanisms or consultative bodies.

In India, government intervention in atomic energy began with the control of the export of raw materials for such purposes. After World War II, the US and Britain tilted to stockpile nuclear raw materials. The

later that year would become the Congress president, cautioned, "I doubt very much whether after atomic monopoly at this element of secrecy, which is sought to be associated with progress in science, is not destined to promote the war spirit and preparation for war, more than of peace".

And finally, S V Krishnamoorthy Rao, who holds the distinction of having served as Deputy Chairman of the Rajya Sabha and the Deputy Speaker of the Lok Sabha, sought that Parliament circulate the Bill for public opinion. He was of the view that the focus of the Bill was on the control of atomic energy, rather than its development.

The government did not circulate the Bill for public opinion or refer it to a committee for scrutiny. The PM stated that there was a two-fold urgency for passing the Bill. The first, was to preserve the country's mineral deposits and the second, to enable it to enter into cooperative agreements with other countries. The Constituent Assembly, functioning in its legislative capacity, passed the Bill with less than two hours of debate. After that, the government would set up the Atomic Energy Commission and the Department of Atomic Energy, under the direct supervision of the PM, to direct India's atomic energy programme.

Over the years, MPs and parliamentary committees would exercise some control over the government's handling of atomic energy. For example, Meghnad Saha, a noted physicist elected to the first Lok Sabha from Calcutta, questioned the government for failing to fulfil its promise to set up a nuclear reactor for six years after the passage of the law. Parliament's financial committees would also draw public attention to poor planning in procuring raw materials for nuclear power plants, resulting in revenue losses.

India has made progress after the first atomic energy law. Currently, the government-owned Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) operates 24 nuclear reactors, with a total capacity of 8,180 megawatts of electricity.

The writer looks at issues through a legislative lens and works at PRS Legislative Research

A letter to the mother standing at the start line

DEAR 30-YEAR-OLD Nalini, The years 2007, and Son No. 2 has just been born. Son No. 1 was born over two years prior. You're in the hospital, impatient to go home, and excited to "get started" with this whole parenting gig, now that the family feels complete. The hope and excitement are almost as palpable as the fear. The doubts and insecurities are as real as the tiredness. The ache of those C-section stitches is dull, and you're wondering if you will be striped like a zebra before your obstetric cut over the old scar.

But the question that sears your brain is — how am I going to raise these two boys? How am I going to know what to do? In the beginning, you will worry about food — how much he eats, how much he poops, how heavy his diaper is, how much he sleeps. You'll measure and weigh. And thankfully, once he starts moving, you'll get less obsessed with the numbers.

The phrase "this too shall pass" will become your mantra as you grow into being a mom. "This too shall pass" will carry you through sleepless nights, diapers, toilet training, the terrible twos, the first day of school, tantrums, bruised knees, cheeky replies, and grumpy days. "This too shall pass" will take you through first fights with the best friend and seeing him get hurt when he was left out. It will take you through losing matches, and bad haircuts. It will take you through fevers that seem like they'll never break, and volatile spit ups. "It WILL pass. And generally, when you're not looking.

You'll worry about friendships. "Friends influence us so much," you'll say. You'll worry that he might become friends with the wrong kid, the most troublesome kid in the class. Well, Nalini, I'm here to tell you that there will always be that trouble-some kid, in school and in life, influencing your boys. Your job is not to ensure that your boys don't befriend "that" kid, but to ensure that they stay their course in the friendship.

You'll fret for his grades and stay up at night worrying that he will not figure out what he wants to do in life. Why does he not hand in homework on time? Why does he look disinterested? Breathe, dear Nalini. These things have a way of resolving themselves. Expose him to as many subjects as you can. Read to him; have him read to you. Don't follow a syllabus. Let this curiosity be your guide. You'll know what he's curious about from what he chooses to watch or follow, and what he talks about.

As he grows older, you'll be plagued by the biggies — alcohol, cigarettes, vaping, drugs, sex. You'll feel inept discussing these things. You'll feel exhausted at the frequency with which these conversations need to be had. Boundaries, consent, respecting your partner. How can one ever stress these enough? Ah yes, yet another conversation. Hard conversations get easier over *chai*.

Nalini, your boys will learn more from how you and their dad treat each other than from anything you try to "teach" them about relationships. Children learn how to fight fair from the grown-ups in their lives, and your boys will pick up far more than you give them credit for just from observing you.

What I'm trying to say is that you'll worry that you are doing the wrong thing. You'll second guess yourself, you'll long for a manual to help you troubleshoot, and your heart will ache. You'll want to teach your boys kindness, to be principled and to the right thing. You'll want to raise them to be like... you. So maybe the key to all of this is to raise them as though you are raising yourself. Heaven knows we need more kind men, with a little softness in them, in this world. Maybe, just maybe, we don't need to toughen our girls, but soften our boys.

So, dear Nalini, remember: You won't always know what you're doing, but you will always know who you are. And that is what will raise your boys — your values, your mistakes, your apologies, your humour, your stubborn belief in kindness. The phases will pass, the challenges will pass, but what stays is the love you pour into them, the love that finds its way back to you in unexpected ways. You're not raising "boys". You're raising people. And you're doing it far better than you fear.

Love,
48-year-old Nalini

The writer is a children's author based in Mumbai (How to Raise a Boy is a forthcoming column)

Admire the work, question the power



SHE SAID
BY ANU RAGHUNATHAN

IN EVERY discipline that confers prestige — science, cinema, literature, public life — there is a form of indulgence reserved for a certain kind of man. He is described as difficult, temperamental, uncompromising. His behaviour is explained away as the price of brilliance. His achievements speak louder than his conduct.

For decades, institutions have participated willingly in this bargain. Universities looked away. Committees rationalised. Colleagues advised silence. Women learned early on that naming misconduct often carried a higher cost than enduring it.

This separation between achievement and character was not an accident of another era. It was a system — one that quietly decided whose discomfort was expendable in the pursuit of greatness. For much of modern history, we were taught to hold two ideas apart: brilliance and character. A man's genius — his discoveries, prizes — could be admired independently of how he treated women, colleagues or students. Excellence, we were told, was a shield. This separation was not merely cultural; it was institutional.

Across laboratories, universities, film

ing assumptions that work emerges in a vacuum.

It does not. Discoveries are shaped by who is allowed into the room, whose ideas are heard and whose labour is credited. When women are interrupted, overlooked or harassed, the science itself changes — what gets asked, funded, published and remembered. To say that sexism is irrelevant to achievement is to misunderstand how achievement is made.

This need not be said plainly: acknowledging moral failure does not require denying intellectual contribution. Discoveries remain discoveries. Theorems remain truths. Scientific advances do not dissolve because the people behind them were flawed. We do not honour science by pretending it was built only by saints. But neither do we honour it by turning brilliance into immunity. The challenge, then, is not whether we remember these figures, but how do we teach their work without inheriting their silences?

This is difficult work. It asks institutions and individuals to hold two truths at once: that someone may have changed the world, and also made it harder for others to belong in it. What we need is not erasure or absol-

ution, but context. Context allows us to honour intellectual contribution without sanctifying its author. It is not about retroactive judgement but about present responsibility.

Young women entering science today are asking whether brilliance can be recognised without demanding silence in return. Because the quiet truth is this: the cost of excusing bad behaviour has been paid by those who left, those who endured, those whose careers stalled because someone else's genius mattered more than their dignity.

History has never suffered from a shortage of genius. What it has suffered from is our inability to hold genius accountable without either worship or denial. And if greatness still requires women to disappear for it to shine, then the problem is not with women or even with the past, but with the standards our institutions continue to uphold in the present.

The author is a chief scientist at CSIR-National Chemical Laboratory, Pune. Views expressed are personal. National Editor Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column

SCIENCE

Counting electrons reveals thorium's nuclear tick in solid clock

Vasudevan Mukunth

Atomic clocks keep time by counting the 'ticks' of electrons moving between two energy levels. Physicists have long wanted to count a nuclear tick instead. A nucleus is more shielded than an atom's outer electrons, so its energy levels are expected to be less sensitive to disturbances.

The main candidate for a nuclear tick is thorium-229 (²²⁹Th). Its nucleus has an unusual excited

state that's only about 8.4 electron-volts (eV) above the ground state: low enough for a vacuum-ultraviolet (VUV) laser light to excite it directly.

A practical problem has been detecting that excitation in solids. The most direct method is to look for the VUV photon emitted when the nucleus relaxes. But in many materials the thorium nucleus relaxes mainly by internal conversion: instead of emitting a photon, it transfers its

energy to an electron in the host material, which may get kicked out.

Researchers from Germany, the U.K., and the U.S. recently reported a workaround by treating internal conversion itself as a signal. They used a laser-based method and ²²⁹Th in thorium dioxide, whose energy gap is about 6 eV, below the 8.4 eV nuclear energy. The idea was to excite thorium nuclei with VUV laser pulses, then count the electrons that escape when excited nuclei decay.

When the VUV pulse hits a surface, it produces a burst of ordinary photoelectrons that can overwhelm an electron detector. So the researchers used timed electric fields to suppress this burst, then extracted the delayed electrons associated with nuclear decay.

They also used electric fields to guide electrons from the target to a detector.

The scan revealed a clear resonance at 2,020,407.5 GHz, consistent with previous studies. The team also inferred an internal conversion lifetime of 12.3 μs for their sample, implying the corresponding clock would be off by one second only every 15.8 billion years.

The study's success has profound implications. In a commentary accompanying the paper, independent researchers from Texas A&M University wrote

that the work "extends the available toolbox of materials for realising stable, high-precision nuclear clocks as well as sensors that can probe the nuclear environment of different materials."

The findings also pave the way for substantial miniaturisation because a nuclear clock using this design can be monitored by measuring the current of the emitted electrons, rather than the complex techniques used today.

SNAPSHOTS



LA birds changed bill shape during COVID lockdown

Researchers measured the bills of dark-eyed junco birds on the UCLA campus before, during, and after the COVID-19 lockdown. Birds that hatched in 2021 and 2022 developed longer, slimmer bills that resembled wildland birds rather than the usual short, thick 'urban' bills. As campus life resumed, the bills of birds hatched in 2023 and 2024 returned to their original size and shape. The team suggests this rapid adaptation reflected changing access to food waste and foraging opportunities.

Rewiring macrophage metabolism may shorten TB treatment: study

Indian researchers have reported that macrophage metabolism shapes the tolerance of the TB bacterium to drugs; by pushing infected immune cells to generate energy using glycolysis, they were able to render bacteria more vulnerable

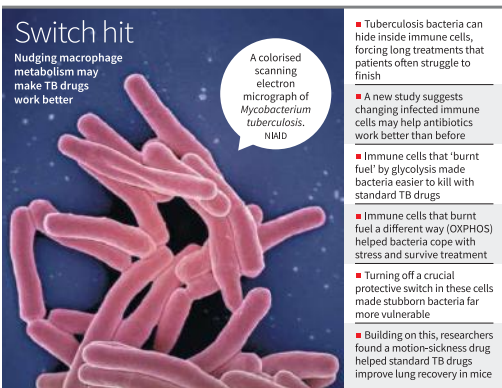
Shweta Yogi

The bacteria that cause tuberculosis (TB) also infect macrophages, the very immune cells meant to capture and destroy them. Once inside, the bacteria create a niche where they can persist for months or even years, tolerating even powerful antibiotics. This is a major reason TB treatment requires months-long drug regimens, leading to poor patient adherence, extended antibiotic exposure, and drug resistance.

Now, in a study in *Nature Communications*, researchers from around India have suggested that the key to outsmarting the bacteria, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (Mtb), may not lie in new antibiotics but in rewiring the metabolism of host macrophages, potentially paving the way for more effective anti-TB therapies.

Macrophages use several strategies to kill microbes, including bursts of oxidative stress in the form of unstable molecules that can damage cellular components. Amit Singh of the Centre for Infectious Disease Research at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, and the study's corresponding author said they previously observed striking metabolic differences among Mtb cells growing inside macrophages. Specifically, bacteria with a greater ability to counter oxidative stress were markedly more drug-tolerant than those with weaker defenses.

The researchers infected mouse macrophages with Mtb engineered to carry a



fluorescent sensor: its readout rose when the bacteria were more oxidised and fell when they were more reduced. When they compared the gene activity patterns of macrophages carrying the two Mtb populations, they noted a pattern. Macrophages with reduced Mtb relied on oxidative phosphorylation (OXPHOS), a process by which mitochondria generate energy using oxygen. On the contrary, macrophages with oxidised Mtb had higher glycolysis.

These distinct metabolic states influenced how well Mtb tolerated antibiotics against both drug-sensitive and drug-resistant TB, the researchers said.

In Dr. Singh's words: "Glycolytically-driven macrophages harbour impaired mitochondria and experience higher oxidative stress, making the bacteria more oxidised and

susceptible to anti-TB drugs. Conversely, bacteria within OXPHOS-driven macrophages... can better neutralise oxidative stress, allowing them to tolerate drugs more effectively."

The team also identified a regulatory molecule that linked macrophage metabolism to bacterial survival. Macrophages harbouring reduced, drug-tolerant Mtb expressed high levels of NRF2, a protein that boosted antioxidant responses. When they inhibited NRF2, oxidative stress increased and macrophages shifted towards glycolysis. This metabolic switch made previously tolerant bacteria far more susceptible to isoniazid, a frontline anti-TB drug.

"We were surprised to find that NRF2 actually supported a drug-tolerant niche for Mtb, by maintaining high OXPHOS and low oxidative stress conditions," Vikas Yadav, a former PhD scholar and the study's first author, added.

According to Raghunand R. Tirumalai, senior principal scientist at the CSIR-Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad, who wasn't involved in the study, the findings raise the possibility that Mtb may actively manipulate NRF2 levels to ensure it survives antibiotic treatment.

Identifying the bacterial factors involved, he added, could be an important direction for future investigations. When researchers suppressed OXPHOS, oxidative stress increased, macrophages shifted towards glycolysis, and Mtb became more sensitive to antibiotics. On the other hand, conditions that favoured OXPHOS supported a reduced state and allowed Mtb to tolerate drugs better, showing how host cell metabolism directly affected drug response.

The researchers also looked for existing drugs that could steer Mtb-infected macrophages towards glycolysis. This led them to metformin. In infected macrophages, the team reported, metformin spiked oxidative stress and glycolytic activity. It also dramatically lowered Mtb's tolerance to frontline anti-TB drugs.

In a mouse model that mirrored human TB, combined treatment with isoniazid and metformin produced an additional 20x decrease in the bacterial load. "This observation opens up avenues to identify additional host-targeting compounds that have the potential for switching macrophage metabolism to a drug-susceptible state, and can synergise with conventional anti-TB drugs that target the bacterium," Dr. Tirumalai said.

Nisheeth Agarwal of the Translational Health Science and Technology Institute in Faridabad and also an independent researcher said, "Given the rising incidence of antimicrobial resistance in Mtb, such therapies provide a relatively promising approach as adjunctive anti-TB therapies by potentiating their effects or enhancing drug availability."

The next challenge, per the researchers, is to understand how metformin can be paired with existing treatments to maximise bacterial clearance and prevent relapse, without adding side effects. Shweta Yogi is a freelance science writer



New chip showcases virtues of light-based computing

Researchers have reported a chip called LightGen that uses light instead of electricity to generate images. It combines a photonic encoder, an optical latent space, and a photonic generator. The 'latent space' is a compact representation of an image's features, carried as a pattern of light in optic cables, so the system can change features without converting back and forth into electronic signals. The team said LightGen is a hundred-times faster and more energy efficient than the best electronic chips.



Heat, humidity combo poses higher stunting risk in S. Asia

Based on analysing the records of around 2 lakh children in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, researchers have linked exposure to hot and humid weather to around 4x larger drops in children's height-for-age scores than hot weather alone. The link persisted even after adjusting for seasonal and community differences. The team used climate projections to estimate that hot-humid conditions by 2050 could add 30-37 lakh stunted children in the region.

Netflix, streaming, and shape-shifting nature of cinema



John Xavier

As Hollywood creatives brace for a merger between Netflix and Warner Bros., an old adage comes to mind - "the medium is the message." Coined in the 1960s by Canadian philosopher and media theorist Marshall McLuhan, the phrase warned against new technologies that don't merely deliver content, but reorganise perception and cultural priorities.

Mr. McLuhan's perspective was shaped by the arrival of television in the post-WWII world. It was the time when TV sets were finding prominent positions in people's living rooms. This new media was reframing how people viewed the world and made sense of it.

While much of the public debate around this merger seems to centre around the fate of movies in theatres, I think a much deeper transformation is underway. And this goes beyond the distribution of content.

Cinema, for most of its history, was structured around scarcity and collectivity. Films arrived at fixed times, in designated spaces, and demanded attention from a gathered audience. The act of going to the movies was communal, ritualised, and public. Streaming dissolved these constraints. It replaced shared time with on-demand access, public space with private screens, and narrative immersion with perpetual availability.



The act of going to the movies was communal, ritualised, and public. Streaming dissolved these constraints. REUTERS

around scarcity and collectivity. Films arrived at fixed times, in designated spaces, and demanded attention from a gathered audience. The act of going to the movies was communal, ritualised, and public. Streaming dissolved these constraints. It replaced shared time with on-demand access, public space with private screens, and narrative immersion with perpetual availability.

And such a medium that prioritises convenience, speed, and personalisation would inevitably alter how stories are experienced. Binge-watching collapses narrative pacing; algorithms flatten discovery into prediction; and constant access erodes the sense of anticipation that once framed cultural events.

In this setting, content becomes less an occasion and more a background condition - always present, rarely central. This is why the Netflix-studio convergence unsettles cinema

owners and cultural workers alike.

When films are conceived primarily for living rooms and mobile screens, scale, duration, and visual language adapt accordingly. The medium exerts pressure long before the audience presses play.

There is also a subtler consequence. Streaming platforms encourage solitary consumption. Each viewer inhabits a personalised catalogue. Over time, this fragments the common reference points that once allowed films to function as a public conversation.

What was once collectively encountered became an individually curated experience.

While streaming has clearly expanded access, diversified storytelling, and weakened long-standing gatekeepers in cinema, this medium also excels in diluting attention and

creating viewing silos.

This will in turn wipe the social centrality of cinema and remove the assumption that stories are encountered together.

This won't lead to the death of movies, but a quiet reconfiguration of how culture fits into daily life. And these are changes we will barely notice. That's because the viewer will remain fixated on the doom-scrolling effect of a content catalog curated by an algorithm. And by the time the content becomes visible to the viewer, the medium has already done its work.

Beyond this deal, Netflix's real legacy will not be measured by subscriber counts or awards, but by how thoroughly it has normalised a new way of consuming media - one that trades shared experience for on-demand access, and collective attention for personalised flow.



Question Corner

Spicy reaction

Why does spicy food make our nose run?

When we eat spicy food containing chillies, a substance in them called capsaicin binds to receptors on the nerve endings in our mouth and nose. When a specific molecule attaches to them, they send a signal that triggers a response. Capsaicin attaches to receptors that normally react to actual heat. However, even when the food isn't hot, the nerves respond as if it were, creating a false alarm. This causes the nasal lining to initiate a protective process called neurogenic inflammation. As part of this, the nerves

release signalling molecules that relax nearby blood vessels. This boosts blood flow and encourages the mucus-producing glands in the nose to release watery mucus, which makes our nose run. The mucus helps to wash away the irritant. Capsaicin is oily and doesn't dissolve in water, which is why drinking water does little to help. Milk works better because it contains casein, a protein that wraps around oily molecules and helps wash them away. Sugar interacts with capsaicin and reduces its ability to cling to nerve receptors.

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

Where does India stand on child marriage?

Will India be able to end child marriage by 2030? How has it managed to reduce it? What are the key schemes for girls?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:

The Union government marked the first anniversary of its Bal Vivah Mukti Bharat Abhiyan earlier this month with a 100-day awareness campaign for a country free of child marriage, as part of its commitment to the UN to end child marriage by 2030.

What is the global situation?

The fifth UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Within this SDG, Target 5.3 is to eliminate all harmful practices, including child marriage, as well as early and forced marriages, and female genital mutilation. Progress on child marriage is monitored using the indicator of the proportion of women between the ages of 20 and 24 years who were married before they turned 18. Girls Not Brides, a global partnership, warns that the child marriage target will also impact other SDGs. "Unless we make significant progress on ending

child marriage, we will fall short on at least nine of the SDGs, including those related to poverty, food security, health, education, gender equality, economic growth, climate action, and peace

and justice," it said. In 2023, UNICEF estimated that 64 crore girls got married in childhood, with a whopping third of them in India alone. It added that progress needs to happen 20 times faster than it has been to reach the 2030 target.

What is the situation in India?

India has made tremendous strides in reducing child marriage, dropping from 47.4% in 2005-06 to 26.8% in 2015-16, a sharp decline of 21 percentage points over a decade, according to data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS). Progress slowed thereafter, with child marriage rates dropping just 3.5 percentage points over the next five years to reach 23.3% in 2019-21. More concerning, the progress has varied widely by geography. The highest child marriage rates among women aged 18 to 29 years was seen in West Bengal (42%), Bihar (40%), and Tripura (39%), according to NFHS data. The percentage of women marrying before the legal minimum age of 18 years is lowest in Lakshadweep (4%), Jammu & Kashmir (6%), Ladakh (6%), Himachal Pradesh, Goa, and Nagaland (7% each).

There are also disparities on the basis of higher education and income. The UN Population Fund's analysis of NFHS data shows that 48% of girls with no education were married below 18 years of age in comparison to only 4% among those with higher education. Also, 40% of girls from the lowest quintile of the household wealth index married before they became adults, in comparison to just 8% of those from the highest quintile.

What action is being taken?

The Prevention of Child Marriage Act was passed in 2006, and national child marriage rates have halved since then. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 has also helped prevent child marriage. However, experts note that legislation has a limited impact without a shift in social norms, especially with respect to the education of girls, which has the highest impact on raising the age of marriage.

The Bal Vivah Mukti Abhiyan portal records that, as of December 20, 54,917 child marriage prevention officers have been appointed across the country to conduct awareness activities and act on child marriage complaints. In the year since the campaign began, it has prevented 1,520 reported instances of child marriage either through persuasion or administrative action, with Madhya Pradesh and Haryana recording the highest figures. However, it also records that 198 child marriages were not prevented.

The Centre's flagship Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme aims to address the declining child sex ratio through empowerment measures, especially promotion of education, though effective implementation has been patchy on the ground. Laadli schemes offer financial support to families with girl children from birth, and steps are being taken to increase the enrolment of girls in school, with measures such as cycles for safe transport to better sanitation in schools.

What about changing legal age of marriage?

The Union government proposed to raise the minimum age of marriage for women to 21 years to bring them at par with men, and to pave the way for women to complete their higher education, and have greater skills, maturity and independence when they get married. However, Opposition MPs sought greater scrutiny of the Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill. Critics warn that without social reform, a mere legal change could simply criminalise many communities, given that a staggering 61% of women aged 20 to 24 years married before they turned 21 years.

Why does the govt. want to replace MGNREGA?

Besides the name, what are the changes in the Viksit Bharat Guarantee For Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill? Who were the biggest beneficiaries of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act? Why is the Opposition upset?

Sobhana K. Nair

The story so far:

In December 18, three days after the government circulated the Viksit Bharat Guarantee For Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) or VB-G RAM G Bill to replace the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA), Parliament passed the Bill despite protests from both the Opposition and civil society. The Opposition accused the government of not conducting any consultations before passing the legislation.

How did MGNREGA originate?

In 2005, Parliament passed a national rural employment guarantee Act. By 2008, it was extended to all districts. After 2009, it was officially renamed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

In *The Politics of Poverty Reduction in India – The UPA Government, 2004-2014*, James Chiriyankandath et al write that after the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's victory in 2004, a small group of distinguished and progressive civil society leaders, retired civil servants, and intellectuals joined the National Advisory Council (NAC), chaired by Congress president Sonia Gandhi. Only a limited agenda had been fixed for the initial meeting of the NAC, but two of its members – civil society leader Aruna Roy and the economist Jean Drèze – arrived with detailed plans for two new initiatives: a Right to Information Act and an ambitious employment guarantee programme for the rural poor.

The initial draft of MGNREGA emerged from the NAC's meeting on August 19, 2004, only a

The new Bill increases the financial burden on States and gives the Centre greater control

month after its first meeting. However, the Bill that was sent to Parliament deviated greatly from the NAC draft. A provision calling for the extension of the employment guarantee to the entire country within three years had been removed. The government was given the power to opt out of the Act's requirement so that it was, in effect, no longer a guarantee. Its universal nature was replaced with a means-tested approach, in which only families designated as living below the poverty line could participate.

This largely weakened Bill went to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development, which was headed by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Kalyan Singh. Civil society organisations mounted demonstrations in New Delhi and elsewhere. The activists grouped around the "Right to Food Campaign," a collective of committed citizens that fought for the adoption of rights-based legislation. The committee eventually recommended that most of the original provisions of the Bill be restored. The government accepted the recommendations, and the Bill passed in 2005.

How was MGNREGA unique?

It gave every rural household the right to demand 100 days of employment per year – unskilled manual labour on modest wages. The wage rates notified in 2025-26 ranged from ₹241 (Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh) to ₹400 (Haryana). It was meant to save the poor from complete destitution, a fall-back option. It was unique because it was universal and without any limitations. It did not target any special social category such as Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes. Unlike many Indian programmes, it was not targeted at people holding 'Below Poverty Line' cards. With the hugely disputed metric of measuring poverty, this was a great advantage. Anyone willing to work was able to access it.

Latest estimates show that there are 12.61 crore active workers who rely on the scheme. More than half of the MGNREGA workers are women. On average, women's participation has been around 58% in MGNREGA over the last five years. According to an India Human Development Survey, about 45% of female MGNREGA workers were either not working or worked only on a family farm before MGNREGA. Thirty-five per cent of the total workforce are Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Studies have shown that consumption among Dalit and Adivasi households increased during the agricultural lean season by as much as 30%.

MGNREGA's role has also been well documented during the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey led by Azim Premji University assessing MGNREGA's impact during COVID-19 found that



In rage: Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, along with other leaders, protest against the VB-G RAM G Bill in New Delhi on December 19, 2021.

Will new Act aid India's nuclear development?

What are the contours of the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India Act? Which existing pieces of legislation is it replacing? What is the nuclear capacity it is targeting? Is India depending on Small Modular Reactors for its nuclear vision?

Jacob Koshy

The story so far:

Parliament has brought into force the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act which repeals legislation that governs nuclear activity – the Atomic Energy Act, 1962, and Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage (CLND) Act, 2010.

Why is SHANTI significant?

SHANTI encourages private companies to participate and potentially, allow foreign funding to flow in India's nuclear sector. Currently, only public sector enterprises can build and operate nuclear power plants in the country. India has plans to increase its current nuclear capacity from 8.8 GW (or about 1.5% of the total installed) to 100 GW by 2047 and thereby increase the contribution of nuclear power to generated electricity from the current 3%. State-owned nuclear power utilities have projected that they will add about 54 GW with the rest, presumably, from private companies.

What are the major differences in SHANTI?

Given nuclear energy's chequered history with atom bombs, there is tight scrutiny of the movement of nuclear fuel (uranium) because of the possibility of it being diverted for producing

The global consensus is that in case of an accident, a plant operator must compensate victims with the level of damage

weapons-grade plutonium. Accidents such as the Three Mile Island disaster in 1979, Chernobyl nuclear meltdown in 1986, and the Fukushima core meltdown following the tsunami in 2011 have contributed to extreme caution and restrictions in all aspects of nuclear plant operations. Currently, the global consensus is that in case of an accident, a plant operator must compensate victims commensurate with the level of damage. The agreement is that victims must be compensated immediately without waiting for ascertaining the causes and those responsible for the accident. Following this, however, the plant operator – if it can establish that it was not its management but rather a faulty equipment, provided by a supplier, that led to the catastrophe – can claim recourse.

The erstwhile CNLD allowed operators to claim recourse from a supplier of equipment under three instances: (a) the supplier and an operator have an explicit agreement (b) the nuclear incident has proved to be due to the suppliers or their equipment's fault; (c) the nuclear incident has resulted from deliberate intent to cause nuclear damage. In SHANTI, clause (b) has been done away with. Despite the Indo-US nuclear deal of 2008 that allowed India access to uranium and international nuclear technology (restricted, because of its nuclear tests of 1974 and 1998), American, and French makers of reactors were hesitant because as 'suppliers' they could in theory be held liable for billions of dollars. With the elimination of clause (b) and even the deletion of the word 'supplier', this 'problem' vanishes. Ironically, in 2010, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in the Opposition, it insisted on such a clause and Congress parliamentarians pointed this out during the debate. The BJP-led government's laconic response to this was that nuclear technology had changed and "changing times" required adapting to new realities.

Does SHANTI load the dice against operators?

The earlier laws enabled those affected by a nuclear accident to claim compensation from a nuclear plant operator for an amount up to ₹1,500 crore. Were nuclear damage to exceed this, the Centre would chip in through an

in the surveyed blocks in Karnataka, more than 60% of households felt that MGNREGA had contributed to the development of the village.

Not having to migrate was chosen as the most important reason for the continuation of MGNREGA, and more than 8 out of 10 respondents recommended that MGNREGA should provide 100 days of work per person in a year instead of 100 days of work per household.

Why has government bought in a new Bill?

Union Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan informed Parliament that MGNREGA was riddled with several deficiencies, including rampant corruption and misuse of funds by State governments. Though there have been incidents of pilferage, these were implementation issues. MGNREGA had been equipped with one of the most robust social audit mechanisms and a transparent IT-based system where every step was recorded, from the demand registered, work done, payment transfers, and so on.

What are the differences between the two?

The new Bill marks a shift from a "demand-driven framework" to a "supply-driven scheme." Under the new system, allocations will be capped within a fixed budget determined by the Union government based on "parameters" not yet specified, and employment will be provided only in rural areas notified by the Centre. While the Bill increases the number of guaranteed workdays from 100 to 125, it also raises the financial burden on States from the current 10% share to 40% of total expenditure.

Under MGNREGA, the Union government was responsible for 100% of the labour wages and 75% of the material wages. In practice, this translated to a 90:10 cost share between the Centre and the States. However, Section 22(2) of the VB-G RAM G Bill says that "the fund-sharing pattern between the Union government and the State governments shall be 90:10 for the north-eastern States, Himalayan States/Union Territories (Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir), and 60:40 for all other States and Union Territories with legislature." While this increases the financial burden on States, the new Bill also gives the Centre greater control over where and how the scheme will be implemented. Section 4(5) states: "The Central government shall determine the State-wise normative allocation for each financial year, based on objective parameters as may be prescribed by the Central government." Section 5(1) empowers the Union government to "notify rural areas in a State" where the scheme will be implemented. This is a departure from MGNREGA, which was universal.

Another significant departure from MGNREGA is that the new Bill allows for a lockdown period, pausing the programme during peak agricultural seasons to "facilitate availability of labour."

insurance pool up to ₹4,000 crore. SHANTI goes for a graded approach. Only operators of plants above 3,600 MW are liable for a ₹3,000 crore penalty; from 3,600 MW to 1,500 MW, the amount is ₹1,500 crore; from 1,500 MW-750 MW, it is ₹750 crore; from 750 MW-150 MW, it is ₹300 crore; and it is ₹100 crore for plants under 150 MW. All India's plants are currently 3,000 MW or lower. Science Minister Jitendra Singh, who piloted the legislation in Parliament, said this gradation was meant to "not scare off" potential private sector participants. During the debates, it was pointed out that the costs of reparations often went into billions of dollars, much more than what these caps suggested.

Will SHANTI spur India's nuclear vision?

The original vision of Homi Bhabha, the father of India's atomic energy programme, was to provide for India's energy security through nuclear power as well as make up for India's scarcity of uranium through the use of thorium. This involves, in Stage 1, building and making pressurised heavy water reactors which uses natural uranium (U-238) to produce plutonium and energy. In the second stage, by using 'fast breeder reactors', more plutonium and uranium-233 is made along with energy. In the final stage, U-233 is combined with the plentiful thorium to make electricity and create a self-sustaining U-233-and-thorium power-generating system. India has not yet reached the second stage; it only has a prototype Fast Breeder Reactor. Delayed for 20 years, it was to be active in 2025, but now the commissioning has been further pushed to September 2026. For its nuclear goals, India is looking to rely on Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). They are smaller versions of existing reactors in the U.S. and France that will need enriched uranium-235 (which India lacks), and produces all the radioactive elements – plutonium, strontium etc. – that India's stage 1 produces. Just as modern airplanes or iPhones are built component by component across the world and assembled centrally, SMRs too will be built in the same way. Though smaller, they also produce less electricity per unit than a large reactor. They also do not address the problem of nuclear waste better than large reactors though some of them have incorporated better designs that can automatically cause a plant to shut down in case of a threat. While SMRs might help produce electricity, they don't necessarily help with India's quest to use thorium as fuel.

PROFILES

The quiet climb to the helm

Nitin Nabin

The appointment of the 45-year-old Minister from Bihar as the BJP's new national working president, close on the heels of the NDA's big victory in the State Assembly elections, signals a generational shift within the party organisation

Nistula Hebbar

A lot has been said about why five-term Bihar MLA and State Minister Nitin Nabin has been chosen as the new working national president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with a promotion to the full-time post of party president in the new year.

Much of this chatter, however, centres on factors that are, for want of a better word, ascriptive. At 45, Mr. Nabin is the youngest-ever BJP president (working or otherwise). His elevation signals a generational shift in the ruling party. He is also the first leader from Bihar to hold the post, an important marker after the BJP-Janata Dal (United) alliance won a big mandate in the recently concluded Assembly elections.

His community background – a Kayastha, an upper caste but not numerically significant in electoral terms – has also been seen significant, in that it neither alienates marginalised communities nor unsettles dominant social groups.

During the year and a half it took to settle on Mr. Nabin, the RSS, the ideological mothership of the Sangh Parivar, was said to favour a more senior, seasoned successor to the current BJP president, J.P. Nadda. Mr. Nabin, though now associated with the RSS, didn't have the customary stints in the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the RSS's student wing, or in other frontal organisations, unlike Mr. Nadda and most other senior leaders of the party.

Clearly, the new working president's youth and background suggest that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah were the prime movers behind his selection.

Born in 1980, the year the BJP was founded, Nitin Nabin grew up in Bihar where his father Nabin Kishore Prasad Sinha was a BJP MLA. Widely respected within the BJP in Bihar, the late Sinha represented Patna (West) in

the Bihar Assembly, but is not believed to have harboured any political ambitions for his son.

After completing his matriculation at St. Michael's in Patna, Mr. Nabin was, as was common in middle class families in Bihar in the 1990s, sent to Delhi for further schooling at Col Satsangi's Kiran Memorial Public School (CSKM), a residential and day-boarding institution where he completed his Class XII studies.

He then went on to study engineering at the Birla Institute of Technology (BIT) in Mesra, Jharkhand, with no plans to enter politics. In a twist of fate, one that now seems a recurring feature in Mr. Nabin's life, he suffered a bereavement while in the fourth and final year of his engineering course, with the death of his father. In 2006, having abandoned his studies during that period of family crisis, he contested and won the Patna (West) byelection, held after his father's passing. The seat was first offered to Sinha's widow, Meera Sinha, but she urged Mr. Nabin to take the plunge.

That seat, after delimitation, is now known as Bankipore, from where Mr. Nabin has remained undefeated to this day. With his entry into the Assembly, he also began his quiet climb through the party's organisational ranks, securing a place in the BJP's National Executive, and taking on roles in its youth wing, the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM), eventually serving as president of its Bihar unit until 2019. "He was always conscientious, and affable, and very low profile, hardly ever pushing himself forward. When he was nominated for a fellowship to the United States while in the BJYM, he was shocked that he had been noticed enough," said a former colleague of Mr. Nabin from the BJYM.

In the limelight

The first time this largely below-the-radar political ascent drew wider attention was in 2010, when Mr. Nabin, along with another BJP leader,



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

Sanjeev Chaurasia, put up posters across Patna thanking the then-Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, for the ₹5 crore relief sent by the State government after the 2008 Bihar floods. The move irked the BJP's alliance partner and Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who made a point of returning the amount and expressing his displeasure by cancelling a dinner he was to host for BJP leaders during

the saffron party's National Executive meeting in Patna.

While the BJP and the Janata Dal (U) tangoed in a will-they-won't they alliance for much of the next decade and a half, Mr. Nabin had chosen his side and stuck to it. Despite this (or perhaps because of it), he was inducted in 2021 as Minister for Roads in the Nitish Kumar-led NDA government in the State, and a month

ago, he took oath as Minister for Urban Development, Law and Justice.

Within the party, his low-key style marked him out early for organisational responsibilities. In 2019, he was given charge of Sikkim, where he played a part in unseating five-time Chief Minister Pawan Chamling, the longest-serving Chief Minister in India, and securing an NDA victory in the State.

It was, however, another serendipitous assignment that brought him to the attention of Union Home Minister Amit Shah: his appointment as the BJP's election co-in-charge in Chhattisgarh in 2023. Mr. Nabin's ability to work with – and extract results from – the party's second rung of leadership in the State, as it took on then-Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel, who had appeared invincible, impressed Mr. Shah.

"Raman Singh was the towering leader in the State, but Nitin Nabin reached out to leaders like Vijay Sharma and O.P. Chaudhary, drawing them out of their hesitancy to not just win the polls but also assert the generational shift that happened in Chhattisgarh BJP as well," said an associate of Mr. Nabin.

Fate and ability

Mr. Shah fuelled anticipation around Mr. Nabin during the recent Bihar polls, when he visited the latter's home in Patna for the Chhath festivities, sparking rumours that he might be made Deputy Chief Minister of the State – little knowing that a far bigger role was in store for him.

Mr. Nabin's ascent to the top job is, therefore, a mix of fate and ability. His challenges, however, will only grow from this point on: his youth will have to signal enthusiasm rather than inexperience, and his easy manner must reflect authority rather than accommodation. He will need to prove that he was not merely in the right place at the right time, but also the right man for the job.

THE GIST

In 2006, having abandoned his studies after his father's passing, Nitin Nabin contested and won the Patna (West) byelection – his first electoral victory

That seat, after delimitation, is now known as Bankipore, from where Nabin has remained undefeated to this day

With his entry into the Assembly, he also began his quiet climb through the party's organisational ranks, securing a place in the BJP's National Executive, and eventually serving as president of its Bihar unit until 2019

Man of the streets

Sharif Osman Hadi

The Bangladesh youth leader, who was shot on December 12, had played a key role in turning the July uprising into a movement against what he called 'cultural fascism'

Kallol Bhattacharjee

The tumultuous month of July 2024 saw the emergence of several student activists who provided organic leadership to a powerful popular movement that overthrew the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Sharif Osman Hadi, who died in Singapore on Thursday at age 32, after being shot in Bangladesh on December 12, was among those who took to the streets in July, though the uprising did not bring him immediate prominence. That came later, on September 27, 2024, when a well-known journalist returned from a five-and-a-half-year exile in Turkey.

On that day, Hadi led a team of activists to Hazrat Shah Jalal International Airport in Dhaka as Mahmudur Rahman, who had been targeted by Sheikh Hasina's government for his journalism, returned on a Qatar Airways flight and delivered an emotional speech atop a truck. It was the first time Dhaka witnessed the organisational energy with which Hadi could marshal a spontaneous public event. In the months that followed, Hadi rose to prominence by articulating a plan to transform the July-August uprising into a concrete political project.

At the heart of his appeal, Hadi kept his identity as a Bengali Muslim (Bengali Musalman). His language was rooted in the anti-colonial heritage of Bengal and south Asia as



ILLUSTRATIONS: SAAI

well as what he perceived as "India's cultural hegemony over Bangladesh".

Student activists who led the uprising against Ms. Hasina went on to form two major streams in recent Bangladesh politics. One stream, led by Asif Mahmud Shajib Bhuyan, Mahfuj Alam and Nahid Islam, joined the interim government under Muhammad Yunus, while the other, consisting of Hasnat Abdullah and Sarjis Alam, gave shape to the National Citizen Party (NCP). Hadi belonged to a third group that did not get into the government nor did they get accommodated in the NCP. This group provided muscle power and filled multiple voluntary organisations that gave life to the anti-Hasina movement.

In the meantime, Hadi, along with fellow travellers Ziaul Hasan, Rafe Salman Rifat and Afroja Tuli, formed Inquilab Cultural Centre and Inquilab Mancha. Hadi believed that over the past 16 years, Bangladesh was ruled by a form of "cultural fascism", implemented by Ms. Hasina, with India's support.

In October 2024, the idea of a July Charter sum-

ming up the principles for a new road map of Bangladesh was floated by the student activists. The Charter was launched on the first anniversary of the downfall of Ms. Hasina on August 5, 2025.

Break with the past

Hadi's politics preferred a clean break with Bangladesh's past beginning with 1971 and in that he was placed against both the Awami League and an assortment of forces that Inquilab Mancha describes as the "deep establishment". Hadi's campaign was one of the factors that pushed the interim government to ban the activities of the Awami League.

His opposition to the Awami League and Sheikh Hasina, however, did not prompt Hadi to embrace all anti-Hasina forces of the July 2024 uprising. He called for a greater say for Jamaat-e-Islami and the BNP, as well as for other "July warriors" like him, in Bangladesh's politics, but he had difficulty in accepting any singular political position. Though he defined his politics through the Islamist lens, his recent speeches indicated signifi-

cant divergences with Jamaat and other headline groups on issues such as gender and inclusiveness.

The problem between Hadi and other Islamists is best illustrated by the fact that the national poet, Qazi Nazrul Islam, known both for his mildly Persianised Bengali as well as Hindu devotional songs, was one of the defining influences on Hadi and Inquilab Mancha.

As he built pressure on the interim government for holding a referendum on the July Charter ahead of the general election, his differences with the BNP became clearer. The BNP spoke openly against attempts to reverse the legacy of the Liberation War, indicating their discomfort with Hadi's tilt for structural changes that could have damaged the two-party dominant system of Bangladesh, indirectly benefiting Jamaat.

Before being shot on December 12, Hadi had started campaigning for the coming election from Dhaka 8 constituency. The choice of this constituency had pitted him against BNP strongman Mirza Abbas, a former Minister in the Khaleda Zia government of 2001-06.

Jamaat and other Islamists used Hadi's funeral to appropriate his legacy, but in reality he walked alone. His differences with fellow travellers were underscored by the fact that he was buried near the grave of Qazi Nazrul Islam, the icon of an inclusive Bangladesh.

Sruthi Darbhamulla

Chile's next President, its most right-wing leader since the Pinochet era and an admirer of the dictator, promises a Trump-style approach to governance



José Antonio Kast

Chile's next President, its most right-wing leader since the Pinochet era and an admirer of the dictator, promises a Trump-style approach to governance

Chile's next President, its most right-wing leader since the Pinochet era and an admirer of the dictator, promises a Trump-style approach to governance

The 59-year-old seasoned politician defeated leftist candidate Jeanette Jara in the presidential runoff, winning 58% of the vote. Ms. Jara, Labour Minister under the outgoing President, Gabriel Boric, won 41.54% of the vote. This marked Chile's first presidential election with mandatory voting and automatic registration of eligible voters.

Mr. Kast was born in Santiago in 1966 to German immigrants; his father was a Nazi party member and army lieutenant from Bavaria, who decamped to South America after the Second World War and set up a business in Paine. Mr. Kast has stressed that his father was forced to enlist.

As a law student at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, Mr. Kast was an admirer of General Augusto Pinochet, the military dictator who seized power in a 1973 coup. In 1988, a referendum was held to determine Pinochet's continuity in power; Mr. Kast campaigned for the yes vote. He said in later years that if Pinochet had been alive, "he would have voted for me".

The Pinochet ties ran deeper. His elder brother

Miguel Kast was a Minister and Central Bank president during Pinochet's regime, mooted for neoliberal economics as part of a grouping of Chilean economists known as the "Chicago Boys".

Mr. Kast's entry into politics came later. He first practised law and founded a legal firm. After meeting conservative thinker Jaime Guzmán, Mr. Kast entered local politics in 1996. He ran for Mayor of the city of Buin, coming in second and becoming a councilman. In 2002, he entered the Chamber of Deputies, representing the right-wing Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI).

In 2016, he resigned to run for presidency as an independent candidate, garnering less than 10% of the vote. He ran again in 2021, this time under the banner of the headline Republican Party that he founded in 2019. He lost to Mr. Boric, but gained 44% of the vote.

In 2025, Mr. Kast was more prepared. The Chilean public was concerned about increasing crime rates and immigration, and Mr. Kast's far-right, anti-immigration platform resonated with them. While

Chile remains one of the safer countries in South America, a rise in organised crime and economic turbulence prompted increasing disaffection towards Mr. Boric's liberal policies, and a dip in his approval ratings. Mr. Boric was precluded from running for a second term, but a vote for leftist candidate Ms. Jara may have been viewed as a continuity vote for his policies.

'Order and security'

Promising to create "order, security and trust", Mr. Kast outlined measures reminiscent of Donald Trump's immigration rhetoric: the building of border walls and electric fences, detention centres and increased military presence on borders, particularly those to the north with Bolivia and Peru. Mr. Kast also mooted the idea of a force modelled on the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to root out illegal immigrants, numbering over 330,000 and primarily from Venezuela.

He pledged a crack-down on crime, saying he would deploy the military force to high crime areas.

Mr. Kast also said he would build more prisons, reportedly inspired by El Salvador President Nayib Bukele and his prison complex design.

A devout Catholic, Mr. Kast is against same-sex marriage and abortion, saying previously that he would repeal abortion rights (which are limited). His platform did not spotlight these issues, however, giving greater weight to national security and economic measures. Mr. Kast assured a return to a free-market economy, with deregulation and corporate tax cuts. He also promised spending cuts worth \$6 billion within 18 months.

His policies place him even further to the right than the last right-wing President, Sebastian Pinerola of the UDI, who voted against Pinochet in the 1988 referendum and had presided over the legalisation of same-sex marriage. "Here, no individual won, no party won – Chile won, and hope won," Mr. Kast said in his victory speech. "Chile will once again be free from crime, free from anguish, free from fear."

Mr. Kast will be sworn in on March 11, and has already met with Mr. Boric at La Moneda, the presidential palace in Santiago. Mr. Kast will have his work cut out with no absolute majority in either house of Congress. Mr. Kast married Maria Pia Adriasola Barroillet in 1991, and has nine children, including José Antonio Kast Adriasola, an elected member of the Chamber of Deputies.

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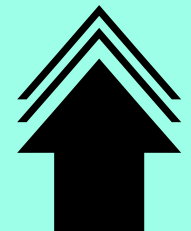
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ARE YOU AN ADDICT?

Once upon a time, some people in society fell prey to addiction. This ranged from soaking themselves in alcohol to getting glued to gambling gambits, consuming drugs to airily smoking a poison called tobacco. These people weren't considered 'regular' though fables abounded of their weaknesses and destructive tendencies which made more restrained folk look upon them with disavow. Ironically today, the number of people expressing their disavow of addictions is far smaller than the addicts themselves. Being 'hooked' has changed. We may not see quite as many drunks careening around now or smell the sources of cigarettes as easily, yet, many of us 'normal' people are addicts today.

Consider how we consume junk food — sales crossed \$820 billion in 2024 — in a jiffy. We shop increasingly for what we don't need and unthinkingly discard — 400 million tons of plastic, 120 million tons of textiles and 62 million tons of e-waste were thrown away in 2024. And no matter how weary our eyes grow and our hands hurt holding them up, we refuse to put down our phones. In 2024, over 2.2 billion people lacked clean water — while 5 billion were consuming social media. The average user (and 'user' here comes from the world of drugs) spent two hours and 23 minutes daily looking at 'trending' videos and 'viral' recipes, writing fevered posts, sharing pictures of purchases and shopping some more. Some addictions stem from modern life — stressful and tiring, the brain turns to a little escape, which, often unexpectedly, becomes a new imprisonment. Some draw from age-old tendencies — our bondage to envy, anger and bragging, greed, gluttony and sloth. These were once considered personality flaws — today, manifesting as our 'likes', they make a few folk fabulous riches.

Addictions have consequences consider the psychological damage social media does, exposing us to constant comparisons (they're called 'odious' for a reason) and callousness. Think of the physical effects of coating our systems with sugar and fat. Imagine societies with people so absorbed in their safaris and selfies, they forget to be social. Think of a planet where, to feed all these hectic addictions, we voraciously consume Earth's treasures — land, rivers, trees, animals, plants, the air itself — with little thought about results. However, there are solutions — Times Evoke's global experts emphasise, it is vital we understand the addictions being encouraged among us — only by seeing the connections — chinking AQI comes from you and I — that we can envision a better state, with fewer 'fixes' and less problems. Join Times Evoke in navigating our age of addictions — and help create a cleaner tomorrow.

‘From social media to weight loss drugs, limbic capitalism profits by hooking us’

David T. Courtwright is Presidential Professor Emeritus of History at the University of North Florida. Speaking with Srijana Mitra Das at Times Evoke, he discusses addictions — and how to escape:

In writing 'The Age of Addiction', why do you use the term 'limbic' to discuss capitalism driving our habits?

■ It's the neural common denominator — for many products and services, the limbic part of the brain deals with pleasure, motivation, long-term memory and other emotionally critical survival functions. We now see entrepreneurs devising products that directly affect that part of our brain, with profound consequences for individuals and societies. Technically these products produce a burst of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that activates the brain's limbic region. Hence, that adjective modifies the noun 'capitalism' because huge resources are invested in these enterprises and big money is made from them.

What are some common forms of addiction today?

■ The whole concept of addiction has expanded dramatically around the world. Earlier, if you spoke of 'addiction', it was usually assumed we were referring to alcohol, heroin or tobacco, a substance of that nature. Now the concept has broadened to include digital addictions, opioids, gambling, compulsive overeating, especially involving very palatable foods which are rich in sugar, fat, salt and spices.

Addiction itself is a form of cue-driven behaviour, involving craving and a loss of control, becoming extremely destructive to an individual who gets hooked in this way.



WE ARE GOING ROUND: Weight-loss drugs make more money off the problems caused by rich foods

The human mind evolved to help us adapt and survive — how is addiction now impacting such evolution?

■ It takes advantage of those evolutionary developments. Our limbic system is there for a reason — you need pleasure and motivation to get through life. However, now, outside groups, corporations and sometimes, even governments that don't have your best interests at heart have managed to gain control over that system in a way that undermines your appetite control. Limbic capitalism is a socially regressive business system — but it's often complicit with governments and criminal organisations that encourage excessive consumption and addiction. The common denominator is how their products and services undermine your appetite control.

There are other crucial parts of our brain, such



SHOULD WE REALLY LIKE? Once, tobacco (L) was the poison of its age — today, mobile phones (R) carrying social media, with its cacophonous world of comparisons and contortions, has hooked billions worldwide

as in the frontal cortex, which are involved in what scientists term 'executive control' in our decisions. Those evolved for a reason too — those parts of the brain are undetermined, even damaged by such products.

Why do we see such industries, from 'hyperpalatable' foods to mobile phones, increasingly targeting little children?

■ Most of our habits are formed when we are young. If, for example, a person has refrained from smoking cigarettes until the age of 25, the chances they'll take up smoking then are quite small. However, if a person starts experimenting with cigarettes at, say, 10 or 12 years, the chance that he or she will become a regular smoker is very high.

As an industry, you want dependent daily users to maximise your revenue — the best way is to get people to start young. Most revenue comes from dependent daily users, a minority of customers, in an effect termed the 'Pareto Principle' after Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian economist. The idea is that typically 80% or more of your revenue derives from 20% of your customers — with limbic capitalism, those customers are typically dependent daily users, whether of social media, cigarettes, alcohol, junk food, etc. To get

YOUR MORNING FIX: World over, coffee is stirred into our modernity

those daily users, you need people to start young.

How do you analyse the proliferation of weight loss drugs worldwide?

■ That is a perfect example of what I call 'problem profits'. We have an enormous, lucrative industry that generates primary profits by selling people rich food — it then also produces secondary and tertiary-level profits by making it possible to make money through solving the problems generated by the primary activity. Weight loss drugs are a perfect example of addressing a problem generated by primary limbic capitalism. Another example is bariatric surgery. There wouldn't be very many bariatric surgeons around if there weren't so many overweight people in the world — and there wouldn't be as many obese people, were it not for the revolutionary transformation of the food industry over the last 100-150 years. It's all connected.

We also saw Big Brother in '1984', who was addicted to power via snooping on others — so, is addiction only capitalist in nature?

■ No but capitalism has intensified our addictions. The historical record shows pre-industrial societies also had some people who were what we'd now call 'addicted' to, say, alcohol or other psychoactive substances, harming themselves and others through

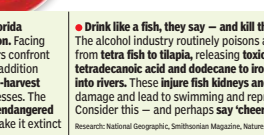


Photo: iStock

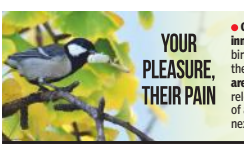


Photo: iStock

‘We are addicted to fossil fuels — we aren't leaving these fast, despite health impacts and clean options’

Marina Romanello, Principal Research Fellow in the Institute for Global Health at University College London (UCL), tells Srijana Mitra Das about the world's addiction to polluting energy — and the need to overcome it:

Everything behind Marina Romanello is a blur — which, in a sense, works well because it doesn't distract TE from the crucial facts the Executive Director of the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change, involving 300 researchers globally, is telling us. Romanello says, 'We look at the connection between human greenhouse gas emissions, climate change and health — hence, we study air pollution as well because its main drivers include the same sources of emissions that cause climate change through the burning of dirty fuels.'

Why does Romanello use the term 'addiction' to describe the world's usage of such energy sources? She smiles gently and says, 'That's because we're seeing the same pattern worldwide — there is now a lot of awareness and knowledge about the harms fossil fuels are causing to our health. Around two million deaths globally are associated with the burning of fossil fuels each year. Alongside, we know we have better, cleaner and cheaper sources of power that could be made available locally more easily than fossil fuel technologies. We know there are multiple benefits of transitioning away from fossil fuelled and an acute existential risk to do so. And yet, Romanello emphasises, Although we have



SHINY PEOPLE, DARK SIDES: Worldwide, 'celebrations' now mean increased consumption (L) — but those sought-after goods, phones to shoes, often end up in huge piles of rubbish, like the Ghazipur landfill (R), where fires increase air pollution and climate change

all the possibilities at hand, we are not ending this dependency. We are not even ourselves off fossil fuels, for reasons that often have to do with the interests of just a few companies or established ways of working that are just too slow to change at the pace needed. The opportunities are huge — yet, we haven't decided to transition away from fossil fuels fast enough.'

What are some of the most worrying

health impacts of this? She explains, 'Consider air pollution. Its most direct impact is on our respiratory system. Toxic air pollution directly affects this, increasing the risk of dangerous infections like pneumonia, cancers and chronic respiratory conditions like obstructed pulmonary illnesses. Alongside, the most toxic small particulate matter pollutants go across our lungs and into our bloodstream. They get distributed throughout our whole body. So, air pollutants circulate over our entire being — and impact every single one of our organs. Evidence shows air pollution increases cardiovascular disease and the risk of strokes. It also increases the risk of dementia and other neurological conditions because it gets to our brain. It impacts fetal development — children are particularly at risk because their organs are still developing and, as they grow, they are exposed to these toxins that generate long-term impacts. The body of evidence showing how air pollution affects every single part of our being is only growing.'

So, why do states persist with fossil fuel supports like subsidies? Romanello says, 'Fossil fuel markets are determined internationally and are very vulnerable to geopolitical conflict. Their prices fluctuate and spikes mean increases in costs of energy. We've seen that after the war in Ukraine, when the price of gas skyrocketed. That led to windfall profits for a few companies while people struggled to afford energy. Countries had to resort to subsidies to avoid energy poverty. Several countries subsidised fossil fuels for one trillion dollars last year and over one trillion the year before. Yet, the enormous public funds subsidising fossil fuels should actually be redirected to supporting improved health, bettering access to clean energy and making new infrastructure that benefits well-being. However, we're still seeing many countries allocating more public funds to subsidising fossil

fuel than to their total health budget.'

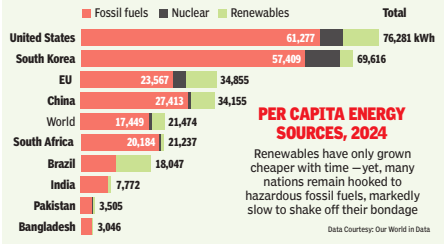
That is mindboggling — but there is another dimension involved. TE asks Romanello about the dichotomy between using polluting power versus the need for development. Romanello notes, 'India is a good example since it has local access to coal, which has been key in its energy system. It's undeniable that this has led to huge economic development — but, at some point, we have to acknowledge this is now doing more harm than good. Obviously a nation can't turn off all its power plants overnight — but it can plan and implement a very rapid transition towards cleaner energy. China and western Europe have started to do this and it's important also because coal will eventually be out-competed by other clean energy markets. There is no room for coal in a healthy future, so the sooner we begin a meaningful transition to renewable energy, the faster we will move towards a healthier future and a more protected economy.'

Romanello outlines 'fossil fuel addiction' — what about all our addictions, our desires for a life bursting with consumption and brimming over with pleasure, that link us so intrinsically to fossil fuels and their murmurs of gratification right now? Do we need to think of the promised land of endless growth also as an addiction?

Romanello answers, 'What we advocate is to ensure every decision policy makers in particular take prioritises improving people's health with their prosperity. Making people happier should be everyone's goal and the consumption of certain goods and services is great for well-being. Look at the huge benefits seen globally from increased access to education, better food, improved clothing and housing. However, there is a point when unsustainable patterns of consumption start to damage our health and the environment. We can't perpetuate consumption just for its own sake at the expense of all else. Several nations must change their consumption patterns and ensure these are sustainable — we should be able to live in this world without self-sabotaging it. We know our planet is not infinite — we have finite resources which need to be managed with great care. That doesn't mean anyone must stop economic growth — it means our economies must take sustainability into account. We need sustainable consumption patterns and circularity, so growth can actually go hand-in-hand with our health and well-being.'



BETTER WAYS FOR BETTER DAYS: We now have the option of renewable energy



their loss of self-control. There are ancient mythologies in India that describe compulsive gambling. However, capitalism and modernity in general intensified and, to some extent, rationalised this process of undermining people's appetite control and getting them to consume too much of products in a way that harms them while generating profits.

Importantly, this is a circular process because commercialised vice has helped finance capitalism and modernity in my book 'Forces of Habit'. I've asked the question — where did the money for modernisation come from between the 10th to 10th centuries? A lot came from taxes on alcohol, tobacco and other psychoactive commodities. In 20th century India, there were many attempts, from Mahatma Gandhi to NT Rama Rao, at alcohol prohibition. However, the state need for revenue from alcohol taxes ultimately frustrated those reform impulses. So, limbic capitalism reshaped — and, in some ways, worsened — the human condition in the modern world. However, even before that, state capitalism often gained from the loss of control — think of opium being shipped from India to China by the British or tobacco sent to Europe. All that helped finance modern nation states and their economic infrastructure.

What is the cure to addictions today, particularly those which are not drug-related?

■ There's certainly resistance to these trends — historically, that was most successful in the late 19th and early 20th century when there was a global anti-vice movement — the most famous person who was involved in such global anti-vice activism in the early 20th century was Mahatma Gandhi. The movement against commercialised vice waned in the mid-20th century — but it would be wrong to



HOW TO TREND: Pushing a commodity like Dubai chocolate online caused a food and photo frenzy

think you can't do anything about this today. Consider the global history of the anti-tobacco movement in the 20th century, early 21st century. There has been real success in reducing global per capita cigarette consumption. So, public health campaigns can reduce some addictions. Admittedly, digital addictions are a hard case because these technologies have become so central in our lives. We are very dependent on these but they also give us continued access to things that are distracting or habit-forming, such as drugs or certain types of content. This explains why nations from China to Australia are navigating limits on teenage social media use. It's crucial to prevent exposure in the young — if you can do that, you've got a better chance of avoiding these lifelong destructive behaviours.



Photo: iStock

READERS WRITE

Dear Times Evoke,

TE's interview with Molly Warsh (14th December) was unique. That pearls decorate crowns was known but that billions of oysters were killed for these was shocking to read about. This assault on marine ecosystems basically produced, as Warsh recounted, a pearl sculpture showing an enslaved boy, Kudos, TE, for this wonderful and poignant interview.

— MK Goel, Delhi

It was truly educative to learn the not-so-glimmering history of pearl exploration. I'll definitely read 'American Bury My Heart at the Edge of the World' by Molly Warsh. Her account of the atrocities to pearl divers by New World 'explorers' was concerning. Kudos, Times Evoke, for yet another absorbing column.

— Ravi N, Secunderabad

In TE's edition on seasons (7th December), while Michael Snyder illuminated how our bodies instinctively recalibrate with nature's changing rhythms, Thomas Smith outlined how resigning ourselves to toxic air as an 'inevitability' is perilous — normalising pollution diminishes our resolve for reform. Harmonious adaptation must never become complacent acceptance.

— Dr Nisha Thakur, Dept of Health Research, Delhi

TE's stunning-looking edition on air pollution was just brilliant! Thomas Smith incisively showed how normalising high AQI as 'seasonal' is deeply damaging, making us accept prolonged health crises caused only by human activity. Thanks, TE, for this astounding page.

— Sairam Sekar, Aladu

Dr Michael Snyder's insights in TE were exceptional. His research on how the body responds to two major seasonal shifts via molecular data, rather than four, is a brilliant contribution to personalised health. Thank you, TE, for always showcasing cutting-edge science.

— Nirupama Divan Shukla, Jaipur

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Red Bastar, and stage

With several top Maoist leaders either neutralised or ready to surrender, the once formidable Red Corridor in and around Bastar is rapidly shrinking. Security forces are now zeroing in on Papa Rao and Barsa Deva, two guerrilla commanders whose presence poses the final challenge to the government's March 31 deadline to bring Maoist insurgency to an end

Shantanu Nandan Sharma |
Bijapur (Chhattisgarh)

After the killing of top Maoist commander Madvi Hidma in November, security forces have zeroed in on two key leaders—Papa Rao alias Mongu, and Barsa Deva. Neither of them holds a position in the Central Committee (CC), the highest decision-making body of the banned militant organisation, CPI (Maoist). Yet their deep local roots and their sway over vast stretches of South Bastar—still home to an estimated 150 armed cadres—have pushed them high on the most wanted list.

Deva, 46, heads the outfit's most lethal battalion. He hails from Puwarti, which is also Hidma's native village, in Sukma. Papa Rao, a nom de guerre that carries a Telugu resonance, is a 57-year-old tribal from nearby Kistaram in Sukma. They are in charge of South Bastar, the Maoists' core operational zone, where insurgency draws strength from local terrain and long-standing networks.

The People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) battalion, led by Barsa Deva, is the only lethal group still active," says P Sundarraj, IJ, Bastar. Bastar is an administrative division comprising seven districts of Chhattisgarh—Bastar, Bijapur, Dantewada, Kanker, Kondagaon, Narayanpur and Sukma. For years, the battalion—once commanded by Hidma—had about 500 cadres, armed with sophisticated weapons like AK-47s, light machine guns, DSA-5 rifles, et al.



Lakshmi Potam, who surrendered in 2016, works in a Bijapur garment factory



A Maoist rehabilitation camp in Bijapur

For years, villagers here were caught between the Naxalites and the police. We had no choice but to work for both. I was jailed for 15 years in a false case. Now, with security camps all around, the dadas have fled"

Sukhrum Hemla, farmer, Gangaloor, Chhattisgarh

THINNING RED LINE

Government data shows a broader shift. Maoist-affected districts in the country have shrunk from 126 in 2014 to 11 this year, with only three Bastar districts—Bijapur, Sukma and Narayanpur—still classified as most affected. In many ways, Bijapur, which, by several estimates, continues to house more than half the country's Maoist cadres, holds the key to the government's goal of dismantling the Red Corridor in the next three months.

Until a couple of years ago, the hills and forests of Abujmahad—north of the Indravati river and largely falling in Narayanpur district—were a safe haven for Maoist leaders. While Hidma-led battalion carried out blasts and attacks on security forces in the south, the party in a carefully calibrated strategy ensured that the north was largely undisturbed to avoid drawing police attention.

That tactic collapsed in 2024, when security forces launched massive operations in Abujmahad. The offensive forced many politburo and CC members to flee the region, with some afraid to have taken refuge in neighbouring states and, in some cases—like former chief Ganapathiah and his wife Sujatha, a member of special zone committee (SZC)—in urban centres.

"By March 2025, the security of our Central Committee centre had become a concern," says recently surrendered CC member T Vasudeva Rao, better known by his nom de guerre Rupesh. (See interview, "Dada"—a reference

to the late Jagdalpur, Chhattisgarh, under the watch of the Bastar police. When Shantanu Nandan Sharma meets the 54-year-old Maoist leader, a lean man who once wielded considerable influence as a Central Committee member, he is sitting in the sun, leisurely reading a Hindi newspaper. It's a moment he could scarcely afford until October, when he and more than a hundred of his colleagues laid down their arms.

In this rare interview, Rupesh offers an insider's account of the internal debates that preceded his surrender, the politburo's attempts to recalibrate strategy and his interactions with Basavaraju and Devji, the former and current heads of CPI (Maoist). He also speaks about the death of senior commander Madvi Hidma. While Rupesh stops short of giving a clear answer to his alleged role in the 2003 assassination attempt on Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, he does not categorically deny it either. Edited excerpts:

Did your colleagues know you as Vasudeva Rao or Rupesh? How would you introduce yourself? I am T Vasudeva Rao, also known as Sarish. I am 54 now. I assume the name Rupesh only this year to issue press statements related to peace talks. As a result, most people now know me as Rupesh. Earlier, for about a year or two, I also identified myself as Viskalp while issuing statements to the media.

I belong to Warangal and hold an ITI diploma from Naganda. Initially, I worked with the Radical Youth League before joining the party (then known as CPI (ML)-People's Party) in the late 1990s. I came to Dandakaranya (Bastar and adjoining areas) in 2007 and have lived there since. In 2024, the politburo promoted me to the Central Committee. (Madvi Hidma) killed in an encounter last month) also became a CC member around the same time. Before joining the mainstream in October, I was heading the party's north-west sub-zonal bureau, which covered areas north of the Indravati river and Maharashtra's Gadchiroli.

When did you initiate the process of laying down arms and joining the mainstream? The exact decision to lay down arms and join the mainstream was taken in August 2025. However, the process of initiating peace talks began in 2024. In August that year, the politburo issued guidance on how to counter the state's repression and reconnect with the masses. This followed an introduction that our mass support was eroding. To implement the proposals in the circular—which included specific tactical measures—we needed to be on the ground. But by then, the security scenario had changed, and we could not move freely. Since the guidance came from the

FIVE TOP MAOIST LEADERS ON BASTAR POLICE RADAR



THIPPIRI TIRUPATHI ALIAS DEVI, 62
General Secretary, CPI (Maoist)

LIKELY HIDEOUT: Bastar (Chhattisgarh)-Telangana-Andhra Pradesh border areas

After the death of Basavaraju in May 2025, Devji has emerged as the head of the outfit. Unlike some Central Committee (CC) members, he has firmly rejected any move to surrender arms



MUPPALA LAKSHMANA RAO ALIAS GANAPATHI, 75
Politburo Member of CPI (Maoist)

LIKELY HIDEOUT: Towns or cities outside Bastar

A former general secretary of CPI (Maoist), he is regarded as a key strategist despite his age. His wife, Sujatha alias Aluri Krishnakumari (66), is a member of the Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee (DKSZC)



PRAVAKAR ALIAS RAVI ALIAS BHASKAR, 57
DKSZC Member

LIKELY HIDEOUT: North Bastar-Maharashtra border areas

Known as a hardliner, he strongly opposes any surrender, including that of senior politburo member Mallojula Venugopal Rao alias Sonu Dada alias Bhupati



PAPA RAO ALIAS MONGU, 57
DKSZC member, in charge of South Bastar and adjoining areas

LIKELY HIDEOUT: South Bastar

As South Bastar is the group's core operational zone, he remains a key figure. His local roots in Sukma district and commitment to armed struggle have placed him high on the most wanted list



BARSA DEVA, 48
Commander, PLGA Battalion No. 1

LIKELY HIDEOUT: South Bastar

An Advaisi from Puwarti village, also home of Maoist leader Madvi Hidma killed last month, Deva commands one of the most lethal Maoist units, comprising an estimated 100-150 armed cadres

Other Politburo/CC members who are still in hiding include i) Misir Besra alias Sunirmal in Bihar-Jharkhand; ii) Ganesh

Ukhey and iii) Sangram in Odisha; and iv) Anai Dala alias Patiram Manjhi alias Toofan Da in Jharkhand

Source: ET's interaction with intelligence officers, former cadres

PROJECT REHABILITATION

For the government, rehabilitating batches of surrendered Maoists—and ensuring their safety as they rebuild their lives in their villages—poses a formidable challenge. But successful reintegration could induce recalcitrant cadres still in the jungles to abandon the gun and return to the mainstream.

This writer spent a day at a rehabilitation camp in Bijapur that shelters and trains 92 former Maoists—watching them play volleyball in a nearby park dotted with mahua and silju trees, sharing a lunch of rice and egg

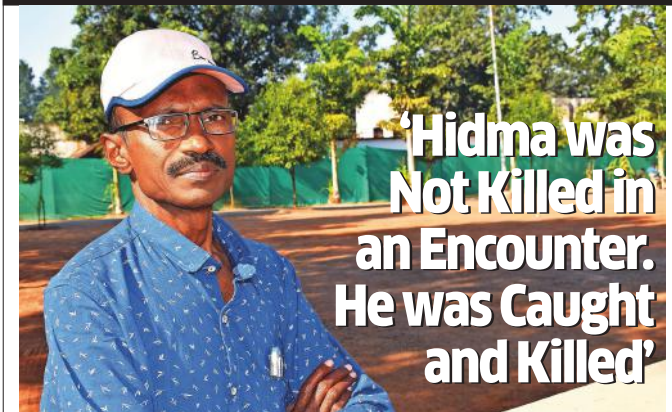
curry and sitting in on a class where a government skill-development officer outlines future opportunities.

Nearly half the cadres are women, some as young as 20. They get vocational training in tailoring, construction and driving tractors. The administration has also arranged for a beautician through a civil society organisation to help the former rebels dress better and try on makeup. Their welcome kits have nail polish, bangles, mehndi, scissors and face powder. A cry from the AK-47s they carried, they smilelessly but the sardar undepend and

will take time to heal. "I joined the party in 2008 after witnessing police atrocities when Salwa Judum was deployed. My own brother was killed," says a woman commander, her smile fading as she tears up. "I don't want to pick up a gun again. I am learning to use a sewing machine. I want to begin my life afresh in my village," she adds.

The administration hands each former cadre a Realme smartphone—Chinese-made, incidentally—sharpening a new lifeline, far from Mao's Little Red Book.

shantanu.sharma@timesofindia.com



'Hidma was Not Killed in an Encounter. He was Caught and Killed'

T Vasudeva Rao—better known by his nom de guerre Rupesh—is housed in a sprawling campus in the heart of Jagdalpur, Chhattisgarh, under the watch of the Bastar police. When Shantanu Nandan Sharma meets the 54-year-old Maoist leader, a lean man who once wielded considerable influence as a Central Committee member, he is sitting in the sun, leisurely reading a Hindi newspaper. It's a moment he could scarcely afford until October, when he and more than a hundred of his colleagues laid down their arms.

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Kutuli, Dada also realised the changing security environment. He was 70 years old and, due to health issues like high blood pressure as well as his age, he could not move frequently.

At that stage, we were proposing peace talks, not laying down of arms. A statement along similar lines was issued in the name of Abhay from another centre near Karagutta (the hills separating South Bastar and Telangana) by another politburo member. It was then that Dada called me to discuss how to proceed with the peace talks. Our demand was that the government stop operations and create a conducive atmosphere for dialogue. Then, I released a letter stating that we should refrain from military activities until further instructions. It was a pause phase.

Can you cite a couple of proposals of that politburo guidance?

One proposal suggested sending some cadres to states where repression was comparatively less. Another proposal focused on avoiding confinement to narrow pockets within Dandakaranya and expanding areas of domination. The idea was to avoid becoming the target of a single large operation. Accordingly, we split into smaller groups of 10-15 cadres and began moving in different directions. In some cases, cadres did not even carry weapons and camouflaged as civilians. Essentially, it was a tactic to decentralise our forces, survive a turbulent phase and consolidate when conditions improved.

What was the view of the then general secretary Basavaraju (Nambala Keshava Rao) on shunning violence and joining the mainstream? By March 2025, the security of our CC centre had become a concern. Security camps had been set up even in the interiors of Abujmahad such as

No comment on my involvement in bid case [assassination bid on Chandrababu Naidu]. But generally speaking, if the party assigns a task to Hidma, Rupesh, or anyone else, we are duty-bound to carry it out"

What about the crores of rupees you handled

while heading North Bastar?

Those who opposed our decision were with us until the very end. We did not escape. We handed over the extra arms and the party's money to them. We did not carry any money with us.

Did you meet the current party head, Devji, before coming to Jagdalpur to lay down arms? I last met Devji in June. Not after that. I tried to meet him again to convince him, but I failed.

When did you last meet Hidma? I last met him during an SZC meeting in 2022. At that time, both of us were members of SZC (a rank below CC).

Why did Hidma move out of Dandakaranya and take refuge in Andhra Pradesh? I believe he moved for his safety. It was also part of the party's decision to operate in smaller groups. However, Hidma was not killed in an encounter. He was caught and killed. We are absolutely sure of that. I can say this before any political leader or senior officer.

You are linked to the 2003 assassination attempt on Andhra Pradesh CM N Chandrababu Naidu. Were you involved? I do not want to comment on my involvement in that specific case. But, generally speaking, if the party assigns a task to Hidma, Rupesh, or anyone else, we are duty-bound to carry it out. I cannot disclose which encounters were part of, nor will I reveal that to the authorities. Now, cases may be slapped on me, but I am prepared for that.

How soon will Maoism come to an end in India? I do not think Maoism will die in India, but there is no scope for an armed revolution at this point. Those who rejected our decision and continued

We surrendered only the arms that were already with us. Additional weapons remained with those who chose to continue fighting"

armed struggle believe the party will regain strength after setbacks lasting a year or two.

Are there any views on the privatisation of mining in Bastar and similar areas? In tribal areas, people generally oppose mining by private companies. Most mineral deposits are located in private belts. There are laws to protect Advaisi as to the party's development, but the government must not violate them. If it does, protests against mining companies may intensify and consolidate. You do not need a Rupesh for that. We know mineral resources are important for the country's development, but extraction must follow established norms. We prefer mining by government rather than private companies.

Your wife is in jail. What is your next move—stay in Bastar or return to Warangal? We will work for the people within the framework of the Indian Constitution. We will never take up arms again. We have not joined the Maoist movement. My wife is an SZC member. She was arrested in July and is in a jail in Telangana. She is a BEd graduate from Hyderabad and heads the party's education wing.

You do not have any children, do you? Like many Maoist couples, did you do a family planning? Yes, did. My wife Sri Vidya knows family planning. She is a BEd graduate from Hyderabad and heads the party's education wing.

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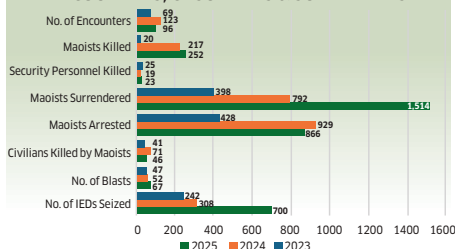
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BASTAR OFFENSIVE: ENCOUNTERS, CASUALTIES & SURRENDERS



Note: Bastar range comprises seven districts of Chhattisgarh—Bastar, Bijapur, Dantewada, Kanker, Kondagaon, Narayanpur and Sukma; Data for 2025 is till December 5. Source: Bastar Police



REFLECTIONS

{ INCIDENTALLY }

Gopalkrishna Gandhi



A prescription for getting Delhi to breathe fine again

Delhi must relocate many of its institutions. It must remain the nation's capital — no question about that. But it has to become a leaner, cleaner city

Delhi's toxic air is a scandal, a global scandal. And it is going to be so, for the foreseeable future. Still, imagine, visualise, this conversation between a young Delhi-based corporate employee from the South and his wife who is expecting their first child.

Wife: I am fed up. I cannot breathe. I want to go back to Chennai.
Husband: Leaving me alone?
Wife: What "alone"? Are you a child? What about me? And our child who is going to be born? You go happily to your office which has air-purifiers, leaving me alone in this suffocating place. I cannot stay indoors because I cannot keep the windows open and I cannot stop outdoors. Can you imagine what this may be doing to the baby? I cannot tolerate this Delhi...

Husband: Every place has its problems. Chennai has mosquito problems too.
Wife: Don't you try to be clever with me. Just try staying at home. You say you will work overtime and make an excuse to go to your office.
Husband: I get a heavy overtime compensation. You know we need that money.
Wife: Money is all you care for. You keep your overtime and let me go. I am going to speak to my father to arrange my return. I

was going anyway for the baby's birth.
Husband: Okay, go.
Wife: "Okay, go"? So simple for you, isn't it? Make a bed for yourself in your air-purified office also. Over time!

Wife shuts the door with a bang after her husband, who gets on to his scooterette to drive to work.
How, apart from the hapless residents of the national capital, representatives of other world capitals put up with Delhi's pollution is another amazement. Diplomats posted to a country have no choice but to serve in the countries to which they stand accredited. But what of their spouses and children? One can imagine the following conversation in the homes of diplomats stationed in Delhi.

Spouse: I cannot take it any longer.
Diplomat: You have no choice.
Spouse: What do you mean? You may have no choice. I do. Let me tell you, in no uncertain terms. I do. My eyes are my own, my throat is my own, my lungs are my own, my heart beats are my own. They have no diplomatic status, only a medical status and they are telling me to get the hell out of here, and now! I have a choice and I am going to exercise it. Either I get back home or get out of your house. You keep your job, I will keep my life. And our children.

Diplomat: Shhh... softly...
Spouse: What do you mean softly? Our elder girl comes back from school with a sore throat, our son with swollen and reddened eyes. And the little one? She is too small to tell us if she has any trouble breathing, but I can see her chest heave.

Diplomat: Softly, please. The staff can hear.
Spouse: The staff? They should listen. Let

them hear us. They care for our children, because we care for theirs. Do you even know how many children our cook has? How many do the two maids have? I know them well. I share our children's clothes with them. You won't have even noticed this, but for the past week, the maids' children have been sleeping in our living room because it has an air purifier. Let them hear me.

Diplomat: Listen, what if they make Delhi a hardship posting because of its pollution? We will get an extra allowance...

Spouse: Will a few extra dollars give our children their health back? You keep your dollars and let me get the hell out of here!

Diplomat: Think of what people will say. Not least of all, our colleagues.
Spouse: Let me tell you I have made friends here in Delhi with people — real people, lovely people. They will miss me and I will miss them. But they are my friends for life. I adore them. They will understand my leaving. And they will judge you.

Diplomat: Listen... Listen!
Spouse: Please, the room, banging the door after her/him.

These two conversations do not have an ounce of exaggeration in them. Let us be sure they are taking place right now. The Supreme Court was right in saying there is no magic wand to solve the air quality slump in Delhi. A long-term strategy has to be adopted. And that strategy has to be comprehensive, completely out of the box.

Delhi must relocate many of its institutions. It must remain the nation's capital — no question about that. But it has to become a leaner, cleaner city — not the present flabby and fouled-up tangle of vehicles and buildings, all making life miserable for its



Enforce without remorse the retrenchment of air-polluting vehicles after a verification of their quality levels after pollution checks. These vehicles do no less damage to national safety than infiltrators.

residents.
The powers must, quickly and with due multi-agency processes, take the following measures.

They must move sessions of Parliament out of Delhi to state capitals, by rotation, using the Vidhan Sabhas when not in session, and all the infrastructure of the Vidhan Sabhas. But what of the government offices that have to be linked to Parliament? A predictable objection. But one that need not intimidate the suggestion of shifting. Since the business of the session is known, the concerned ministries can also have temporary camp offices set up in the state capital. Moreover, what in our present age cannot be attended to virtually?

The Supreme Court must be requested, with great respect, to open Benches in at least four state capitals, particularly Srirangapatna, if only to give the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution a living operationalisation.

At least two dozen major "national institutions" that function out of Delhi for no spe-

cific reason should be identified and moved out of their present premises to locations well outside Delhi.

The annual Republic Day festivities, including the parade, can be held in state capitals by rotation.

The State must completely prohibit all fireworks in the national capital not just on Diwali or during the festival season, but at all times.

The odd-even regime for vehicle movement can be brought back and a cap on the private non-commercial ownership of vehicles can be enforced. Also, enforce without remorse the retrenchment of air-polluting vehicles after a verification of their quality levels after pollution checks. These vehicles do no less damage to national safety than infiltrators.

The modalities for permission to build and expand old buildings in the national capital must be tightened so as to discourage the city's unchecked, self-hurting obesity.

A complete embargo on international

conclaves and meets in Delhi, whether government-organised or privately choreographed for five years, can be thought of, giving other cities in the country the benefit of these gatherings.

A similar check, if not a complete embargo, on national-level gatherings in Delhi between August and March, must also be implemented, leaving the period between April and July alone for such gatherings.

A senior cabinet minister must be appointed to be in charge of a Mission Save Delhi From Itself, not just in the urgent matter of pollution but also from the very real seismic hazards seismologists warn of for Zone IV regions, such as the one that cradled Delhi. Only a Prime Minister such as the present one has the strength to do this.

We cannot sleep over the air sickness crisis in Delhi for even one more day.

Gopalkrishna Gandhi is a student of modern Indian history and the author of *The Undying Light: A Personal History of Independent India*. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Keeping a date with the oddest happenstances

You hardly need me to remind you that today is the 21st of December. For us in the northern hemisphere, it is the shortest day of the year. Of course, if you live in Australia, New Zealand or South Africa, it is the longest. But those are just calendar details. The fact is I have always been fascinated by this date or bewitched and bewildered by it. For the truth is that the strangest things seem to happen on the winter solstice.

For instance, it was on the 21st of December in 1972, when I was just 17, that I met my first witch. It was at the Christmas fair on Hampstead Heath, a sort of mint winter wonderland. Clutching a hot chocolate, I wandered into a little igloo-like cubicle marked "Occult Powers". Sitting behind a small wooden desk, with a crystal ball in the middle of two conical shaped witches hats, was a man in a dark grey suit. It was in his 50s and quite out

of place in this setting.
"I'm a warlock," he said proffering his hand. "What's a warlock?" I responded, unfamiliar with the term. "A male witch," he spat out and started to cackle.

I turned on my heels and attempted to flee. But his voice stopped me. "I know your name," he said. Stunned, I halted and turned around. I challenged him to tell me what it was. It was a girl's name," he said.

That stumped me because Karan is pronounced by the British as if it is spelt Karan. And the latter is definitely a girl's name. But how could he have known?

A very discomforting experience happened a year later, on the 21st of December. I was flying to Delhi with my sister, Kiran, on one of her Air India free tickets. This meant you flew if there was room on the plane, what the airlines call "subject to load". In those days, the Air India 747 flight was a bit like a bus journey. After

leaving London, it stopped in Paris, Frankfurt, and Beirut. The first two halts were the danger points where you could expect fare-paying passengers to board. If that happened, we would be kicked off. But it was in Beirut that the pilot announced all free passengers must off-load. Unknown to us, there were 27 free passengers on board — all Air India staff, all going home on leave. And none of us had anything other than hand luggage.

Kiran was a carton of cigarettes, mine a silver-plated candelabra I had bought for my parents. But we had no clothes, not even a toothbrush and toothpaste, and, practically, no money.

So we stayed in Beirut for three days, till the next Air India flight came along. I wonder if this happened because it's the 21st of December? Kiran questioned. She may well have been right.

A decade later Nisha and I were honeymooning in Kathmandu on the 21st of December. After dinner, we decided to visit the Oberoi Hotel's casino. Nisha was keen on roulette. Initially, our luck was out and we lost every bet. Then, Nisha decided to place all her chips on number 21 because it was the 21st. And we won. Not a fortune, admittedly, but a pleasing sum nonetheless. I popped the winnings in my pocket when we decided to try our hand at backgammon. But that was the last I saw of the money. Someone picked my pocket, and I only discovered it had been stolen when we got back to our

THE FACT IS I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN FASCINATED BY THE 21ST DAY OF DECEMBER, OR BEWITCHED BY IT. FOR THE TRUTH IS THAT THE STRANGEST THINGS SEEM TO HAPPEN ON THE WINTER SOLSTICE. FOR INSTANCE, ON DECEMBER 21, 1972, WHEN I WAS JUST 17, I MET MY FIRST WITCH

room later that night.

Now, it is not every 21st of December that something bizarre happens. But it's often enough. In 1997, I discovered termites had eaten all the shelves in my TV room. In 2005, I spent hours on the flight to London before it was cancelled because of fog. In 2020, I thought I had caught Covid for a second time, except I hadn't. All of that was on the 21st of December. Mercifully, nothing happened last year. I wonder what will happen in 2025?

Meanwhile, Merry Christmas.

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

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare



Ending the male monopoly in bar councils in India

I seemed appropriate at the end of the year to hear the unmistakable sound of a glass ceiling crashing down.

The blow was struck by a Supreme Court bench headed by chief justice Surya Kant and justice Jaynmal Bagchi who were hearing pleas filed by women lawyers Yogamaya MC and Shreela Chaudhary.

The women pointed out the painful, and frankly embarrassing, fact that in the six decades since it was set up in 1961, the 20-member executive committee of the Bar Council of India had never elected a woman. Across India, only six of 441 elected representatives in 18 state bar councils are women. And 11 of these bar councils have zero women executive members.

This exclusion is "structural, systemic and constitutionally indefensible," senior advocate Shobha Gupta, arguing for Yogamaya, said. The judges agreed and have directed one-third of seats, including at least one office-bearer post, to be earmarked for women in the upcoming bar council elections.

Even though the order does not, at the time of writing, apply to elections already underway in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana, Gupta called the order "historical and monumental". It will, she said, "break the glass ceiling in the legal profession". That ceiling is one that Yogamaya knows well. In 2023, following the Supreme Court bar association (SCBA) election she had contested, she very quickly understood the obstacles. She had the merit to win, but lacked political backing and substantial financial resources. After the results were declared, she submitted representation to the SCBA to co-opt the two women who had secured the most votes. But the male-dominated body voted against the move to earmark seats for women. The following year, Yogamaya contested the elections again. And this time, won.

"Representation in such bodies is not sym-

bolic," she said. "It truly matters. It shapes decisions, policies and directly affects the professional lives of advocates." But, without structural support, women's voices tend to get sidelined. Dedicated seats for women in these powerful bodies are one way to ensure representation.

The bar council (not to be confused with the bar association) is the regulatory body for 20 lakh advocates and licenses lawyers, establishes professional standards, oversees legal education, and handles disciplinary proceedings.

There's been a fair amount of media attention on the lack of representation in the higher judiciary. Just 14% of judges in the high courts are women. In the Supreme Court, only one judge out of 34 is a woman. And yet it's not that there are no capable women in the lower judiciary where judges are selected on merit and 35% are women.

It's the same story in electoral politics where 35% of seats were set aside for women in panchayats in 1992. Since then, representation in some states is up to 50% but has not created a pipeline to the assemblies or Parliament. In September 2023, another bill to set aside seats for women was signed into law. But nobody can guess on when this law will actually take effect.

Women can no longer wait indefinitely. They know the costs, are familiar with the systemic bias, the pay disparity and lack of mentorship. The burden of care work. And, yet, they are surging ahead. They have broken the gender gap in education. They are leaping ahead in sport. They are voting in larger numbers than men. They are determined to stand up and be counted. In a welcome change, the Supreme Court broke an old narrative of male monopoly in the bar councils. One can only hope it's the first of many in the year to come.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

The anxieties of the soft-parenting cult

'Abhi mummy ki chappal Atlantic ke upar se udhi hui aagey!' (Mummy's flying slipper will reach me across the Atlantic). The chat history of my cousins' group on WhatsApp, rarer appropriately named "We Are All a Little Mad Here", is dotted with such messages. Whatever be the context, the mother's flying chappal is ubiquitous and everywhere else. Or a memory, even a false one. Whether they used the chappal on us or not is debatable, especially in front of the softly-parented grandchildren. Tiger moms have transformed into soft bunnies.

Most of us have an extra dose of our parents' faults. We have tried our best to raise our children in a manner diametrically opposed to how we grew up. We have learnt to cultivate high emotional responsiveness, non-punitive discipline, and an emphasis on children's autonomy. We express our frustrations only in therapy rooms and nowhere else. We seem to be following the soft-parenting rulebook like an annoying front-bencher, yet we are scared and struggling. What are we doing wrong?

The only answer one can come up with is flawed selectivity. But we aren't alone here. For example, Rousseau's 1762 text *Emile, Or Treatise On Education* is often invoked as a foundational text for child-centred education. He famously argued that children are naturally good and corrupted by society, and that education

should follow the child's natural development rather than impose premature moral constraints. However, Rousseau did not advocate *laissez-faire* parenting. On the contrary, he emphasised the idea of guided freedom. A careful structuring of the child's environment so that natural consequences, rather than arbitrary authority, teach lessons. Neglecting this and equating freedom with the absence of boundaries, we turn away from Rousseau's core insight. The result is not the preservation of natural goodness, but the cultivation of dependency and impulsivity. These traits are what Rousseau explicitly warned against in adults who never learned self-restraint.

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates describes the degeneration of democracy into tyranny because, without habituation to reason and order, the soul becomes disordered. Applied to parenting, Socratic thought suggests that children require *paideia* or reasoned guidance. Shielding children from discomfort prevents the development of *sophrosyne* (moderation), leaving them ill-equipped for ethical deliberation and civic life.

Research after research, it has been established that the most effective (what ever that means) parenting style is authoritative (high warmth, high structure), as opposed to permissive (high warmth, low structure) and authoritarian (low warmth, high structure). Parenting



Rousseau's *Emile* is invoked as a foundational text for child-centred education. REUTERS

styles, support, and parental beliefs bridge children's internal working models that they use later in life as adults. We the children fleeing the flying slipper, don't seem to get it right somehow. The recent total media ban for children in Australia is making us happy because someone else is the bad guy. We can't bear to be the reason why our children need therapy. We are ever present, ever loving, ever listening. We grew up hearing "No" and feel like a failure when we have to repeat it.

As the global festive season, overthinking parents' nighttime, closes in on us, family dynamics become inescapably real. Rights and duties versus rights and wrongs. Economic determinism seeps into emotional uncertainty. Probably many of us have read our Diana Baumrind or Laurence Steinberg and know that parenting involves discipline, but the lat-

ter cannot be effected through coercion. We are torn between empathy and impulse, not just the children's but our own, too. How do we survive this pandemic of parenting crisis? Maybe it's not a collective crisis, and this author is overthinking it. Maybe our friends in good houses are doing great.

But a recent unpleasant experience with a teenager, fortunately another person's child, where they nonchalantly told off an adult in public because the latter tried to question their "authority" on the matter of nuclear physics, has suggested otherwise. Our children depend on us. Their moral development cannot be outsourced or avoided. We may have ditched the chappal, but let's pull up our socks and shine our shoes.

Nishtha Gautam is an academician and author. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

The promise of Northeast India

This is in reference to "Glimpses of the Northeast's Rise at Nagaland's Hornbill Fest" by Jyoti Pradya Sengupta (December 14). The Northeast holds immense, untapped potential. With industrious and ambitious locals, sustained, long-term planning, the emergence of a new Northeast is imminent.

Gopal Verma

Need to embrace change in Parliament

This is with reference to "Three steps to improve the functioning of Parliament" by Karan Thapar (December 14). Prime Minister's Question Time, and an independent, Speaker would restore accountability at the highest level. Also, allocating a day each week for Opposition-stake agenda would give dissent a legitimate, constructive platform.

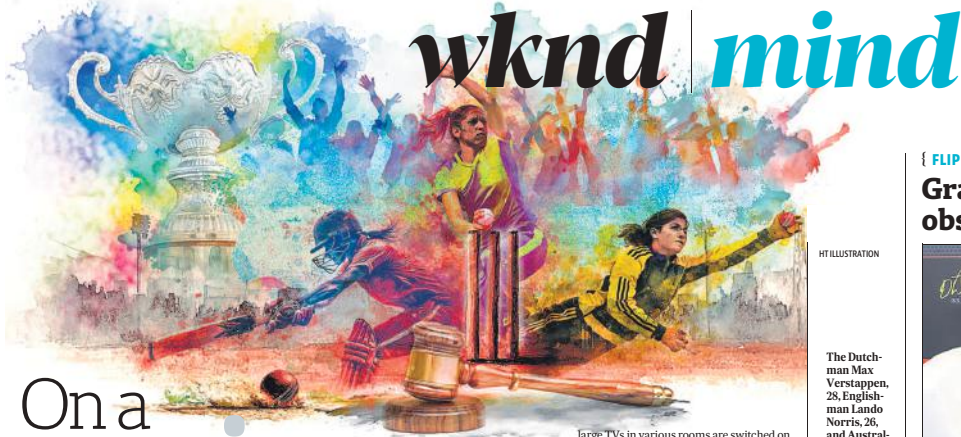
Sanjay Chopra

Women must lead climate discussions

This is with reference to "Addressing the gender gap in climate policies" by Lalita Panicker (December 14). Women's participation in climate discussions should be bolstered to and craft better solutions and policies.

Abhilasha Gupta

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com



wknd mind

On a swing and a prayer

What is it like to see your future come up on the auction block? Rudraneil Sengupta sits with state-level cricketers who are hoping to be picked for the Women's Premier League. There is ambition, exuberance, but how will it end?

Rudraneil Sengupta
rudraneil@gmail.com

As the spectacle of the Indian Premier League (IPL) auctions unfolded on December 16, watching it held a different meaning for me. Two weeks earlier, I had witnessed something that is usually reserved for players and their families. I had watched an auction built around a clutch of young woman players, each hoping for their big break. They asked me not to reveal their identities, so I will not name them or the states they represent.

On the hazy morning of November 27, two Under-23 state teams played a T20 match at a school cricket ground in a north Indian city. One team was led by M, whose calm composure and classical batting skills mark her out as a player with a great future. Coaches and scouts from Women's Premier League (WPL) teams are effusive in their praise of her, and track her performance every time she takes the field. She is effortlessly lean, with a mass of curly hair and a subtle swagger that comes from years of athletic training, and perhaps from being chosen as a leader from a young age.

M's team starts out strong, on the back of a thrillingly fast and accurate spell from their pacer, who uproots the stumps twice in the over (but has decided not to be a part of the WPL auctions, which is strange because good fast bowlers are in great demand in the

tournament). Her opening bowling partner S, a lanky spinner with a flowing action, sends in balls that skid, speed up and turn, tying batters into knots.

IFM is a quiet but commanding presence. S is the counterbalance: loud, talkative and in a constant state of exaltation through the match. Among M's other weapons on the team is P, of the tattoos and buzz cut, whose prodigious talent has already earned her a call-up to the senior national squad; and D, whose skills have also resulted in a national call-up and who has such a lovely way with words that a career as a commentator awaits her too, once she is done at the stumps.

These are the four women whose names are among 277 up for auction that evening, and if they are nervous or thinking about it, they do a good job of not showing it at all. If there is one person who is visibly on edge, it is their coach, a former India player.

"It's too much tension. I don't think I can watch the auction," she says. "They would be fools to not pick these girls... but then there are so many players, and so few spots to fill." A maximum of 90 slots are available at the auction, which means nearly 70% of the players will leave without a contract.

The coach tells me about her time representing India, in an era when the national women's team travelled without reservations on long-distance trains, and slept in crumbling sports complex halls, on mattresses laid out on the floor. "We made almost no money," she says. "We did because we were addicted to the game. Nothing else mattered when we were playing it."

Over the last few years, a lot has changed. Match fees are now at parity for the men's and women's national teams; air travel and five-star hotel accommodation are available for players from the national Under-19 team upwards; and the women's team finally has world-class coaches, doctors and analysts.

"I won't lie, I would much rather have been a player now," the coach says.

By the time her team reaches the hotel, the auction is only minutes from starting. They shower and change, and then the

large TVs in various rooms are switched on to the channel broadcasting the proceedings live across the country. There is banter as the women cluster together to watch.

M, S, P and D are in one room with some of their teammates, though M is resolutely refusing to look at the screen. She is reading something on her phone instead. At regular intervals, she exits the room and walks along the corridor. There is so much at stake here. There are uncanny similarities to the journeys these women have taken: most are from families that are not well-to-do, and were the only girls playing cricket in their neighbourhoods; some were the only girls playing at their cricket academies too. They know they are different, and are hoping that now is when that difference will start to pay off. They all want the great opportunity WPL promises: The money that will address their financial struggles; the visibility on offer; the experience to be gained from sharing space with some of the world's finest players.

In the rooms, the banter becomes more spirited. When the Jamaican all-rounder Chinelle Henry is bought by Delhi Capitals for Rs 13 crore, the players erupt with joy; they all know and like her. The names of other friends come up on the block and are cheered vociferously. M realises how boisterous things are getting and, in her thoughtful way, gets up and shuts the door. P is praying. S provides running commentary.

Suddenly, P's name is on the screen. The room goes silent. She continues to pray. "Go P, go!" screams S. But no one bids for P. "No one? No one?" says the auctioneer. With each second, it is like more air is sucked out of the room. "Unsold!" says the auctioneer, and bangs her gavel.

P's eyes are filled with tears. "These teams know nothing," says S, to break the silence. "If they don't want P, what do they want?" But they don't want S either. "Unsold!" S storms out. M leaves the room too, taking P with her. The news that D has not been picked reaches them in the corridor.

D seems unfazed. "Whether we got picked at this auction or not does not change the core of what we do," she says. "Wherever we are playing, our job is to perform in the field. And if we keep performing, keep doing our job well, the opportunities will keep coming. There is no doubt about that."

M, who has been told by several people in the know that her chances at this auction are really good, has to endure the entirety of the spectacle, all six hours of it, before she realises her name wasn't even on the block.

She pushes out her lower lip and shrugs her shoulders. She looks tired, confused and disappointed. It has been a devastating night. But they are young. They have barely begun. Like their coach before them, they will keep playing the game they love, forgetting the heartbreaks on the field. M directing the field setting. S shouting out encouragement. Pat the top of her run-up, twirling the ball. D taking her position at first slip.

Later that night, once the adrenaline had burned itself out, something softened in me. Age is a messenger. It offers calibration, and a certain emotional economy. It offers relief from the exhaustion of always standing with me seemed to fade. My head said, "Run. Cross the line. Get to the next task faster." My heart said, "Conserve. You'll need strength for the weights." There were no right answers. I had been vanquished, not so much by my competitors in this arena, as by time.

The evening continued, competitions blurring into each other. Applause lifted and fell. The compe introduced an 80-year-old woman who had competed the previous year too. Looking at her, I saw a mission so different from mine. She was strong, steady, unafraid. But that's because she recognised the

HT ILLUSTRATION

The Dutchman Max Verstappen, 28, Englishman Lando Norris, 26, and Australian Oscar Piastri, 24, at the Formula 1 press meet in Abu Dhabi. GETTY IMAGES

{ FLIP SIDE } WHAT RIVALRY LOOKS LIKE AT 300 KMPH

Grand deft auto: Insanity and obsession on the F1 track



Kunal Pradhan

A long, white sofa lay in the middle of the room, in a setting so surreal it could have been a scene from the sci-fi show Severance.

Max Verstappen, a 28-year-old Dutchman who was Formula 1 world champion for 1,457 consecutive days, entered and sat in the middle. Oscar Piastri, a 24-year-old Melbourne widely tipped to be a future champion, joined him moments later. The man of the hour, Lando Norris, 26, from Glastonbury, was the last to enter.

Aware that the cameras were rolling, they smiled at each other awkwardly. Until 10 minutes earlier, they had been hurtling around the Yas Viceroy Circuit in Abu Dhabi at 220 miles an hour, in the race of their lives. Now they were sitting together in what seemed like comfortable, almost companionable, silence.

Over 12 months, across 1,262 laps and 7,377 km of 24 Grands Prix, these three men had thought of little other than beating each other. It was an almost unhealthy obsession — the kind that sport in general can fuel, and Formula 1 in particular can harness.

For out on the track, when you're bobbing around in a metal carcass, trying to squeeze an extra tenth of a second from a 1,000-horsepower engine, the first battle is not for points or lap times or the chequered flag; it is for survival. A mistake is not a volée in the net or a dropped catch. Here, an error could be well your last. This is life, quite literally, on the edge.

In 2025, this three-way battle for survival, excellence and sanity took Norris, Verstappen and Piastri to dark places. They feuded in the team paddock, on the track, and in the press. There were moments when it seemed each of them was unassailable, and moments when it seemed each of them was done. Until the rollercoaster brought them to the final race at Abu Dhabi, for a title fight in which any of the three could have been crowned champion.

Rage against the machine

The 2025 season was a throwback to a nostalgic age of danger and daring that marked F1 through its classical and early-

modern eras. Of Niki Lauda vs James Hunt (1976) as cross-team rivals in the manner that Verstappen and Norris were towards the end of this season; of Alain Prost vs Ayrton Senna (1988 and 1989) as bitter foes on the same team in the way Norris and Piastri were through the year; and of the Kimi Raikkonen vs Lewis Hamilton vs Fernando Alonso (2007) triple-header that it eventually boiled down to.

But how does one even process rivalries, machinations of team dynamics and track positions with your life in your hands at over 300 km per hour?

Over the course of his multiple autobiographies, 1992 Formula 1 world champion Nigel Mansell wrote: "Suddenly, I could see the trees and the flag marshals, anything I was looking at. Then I was waiting for the corner to come... there was plenty of time to brake... change gears... go around... The first time it happened, I started going six seconds a lap faster. Bingo! I'd arrived in Formula 1!"

A sport that demands such tremendous training of the mind and such a fine balance between speed and safety is often wrongly judged as mechanical. Though a staggering 52 F1 drivers have been killed on the track, not everyone sees what is on the line.

In the film F1, starring Brad Pitt and released this year, for instance, the plot line is comically bizarre. Pitt, a veteran driver making a comeback, chooses to cause chaos on the track to help a hotshot teammate register points in a car that's slower than the competition. It's farcical.

So, to return to the title fight in Abu Dhabi last week, I started going six seconds a lap faster. So he did; Piastri wanted to stay in the hunt by finishing ahead of his teammate Norris — he delivered; and Norris needed to get on the podium to become the 35th driver to be crowned F1 world champion in 75 years — he did that, and nothing more.

One was triumphant, two lived to fight another day. Not exactly a Hollywood ending, but a great day in the dangerous and exciting world of Formula 1.

(The views expressed are personal)

{ DOWNLOAD CENTRAL } WALKING WITH A JAZZ LEGEND

Miles to go around Helsinki

Sanjoy Narayan

There is a flurry of snow at Erikinkatu. It's 7.45 am. I pull my beanie lower, adjust my headphones and press play.

Right Off, from the Miles Davis album A Tribute to Jack Johnson, kicks in. John McLaughlin's guitar riff cuts through the white noise. Billy Cobham's drums hit like boots on packed ice, and I move towards Helsinki Central railway station.

There are albums that become companions; sonic architecture that mirrors and magnifies the physical surroundings through which we move. This one was recorded in 1970 and released in 1971. For the past five years, I have listened to it in Helsinki.

Jack Johnson correlates perfectly with the flowing lines and organic motifs of this city's architectural heart. Miles was 44 when he recorded it, and already a shapeshifter. He had given the world a taste of Blue Note's Second Great Quintet (Miles on trumpet, Wayne Shorter on tenor saxophone, Herbie Hancock on piano, Ron Carter on bass and Tony Williams on drums).

Having released a Silent Way (1969) and Bitches Brew (1970), he was in the midst of his most radical transformation: the electric period that would scandalise purists. While Bitches Brew gets the accolades and hushed reverence, Jack Johnson's the superior achievement. Phew! There. I've

said it. The album consists of two extended pieces: Right Off and Yesterday. The main line-up featured McLaughlin on guitar, Cobham on drums, Michael Henderson on electric bass, Herbie Hancock on organ, and Steve Grossman on soprano saxophone — a rock band that Miles was shaping into something else entirely.

I cross the city's main thoroughfare, Mannerheimintie, as Miles enters with what may be the most defiant trumpet solo of his career. Helsinki Central station looms ahead, Eliel Saarinen's 1919 masterpiece with its massive lantern carriages standing on eternal watch. The station bridges Art Nouveau and Modernism with the same confidence that Miles was bringing to jazz-rock fusion. Herbie Hancock's clean lines punctuated by moments of controlled ornamentation.

Where earlier Art Nouveau might have featured lavish decorative flourishes, Saarinen added restraint. It's what Miles was doing: taking the dense complexity of Bitches Brew and boiling it down to something leaner, meaner and more direct.

It's the same as the Sankarienterätkä. Right Off is approaching its climax. I am now at the Pohjola Insurance Building, completed in 1901. Its facade is a fever dream of National Romantic excess: strange creatures, bears, lyres and botanical motifs. Herbie Hancock on organ, and Steve Grossman on soprano saxophone — a rock band that Miles was shaping into something else entirely.

What makes Jack Johnson stand out is its clarity and space. It is fierce, aggressive and rock-hard, yet you can hear everything — Miles's lines, McLaughlin's guitar, the bass pulse. It does not overwhelm; it invites. It is music one can walk to, think to, write to. And it works in every season.

Its versatility comes from the way Miles wanted to "put together the greatest rock and roll band you've ever heard", and very nearly succeeded. Herbie Hancock has been gone for 34 years, but the music remains, in the grooves of vinyl, in digital files, and in the way it illuminates architecture, seasons, cities, lives. What a legacy to leave, in a beautiful world.

(Write to sanjoy.narayan@gmail.com. The views expressed are personal)



READ: The economics behind the Rs 53.6 crore madness at the men's IPL 2026 auction



They would be fools to not pick these girls... but then there are so many players, and so few spots to fill.

THE COACH of the team of hopefuls

{ LIFE HACKS }

Charles Assisi

The numbers game

Age is a messenger. It offers calibration, and relief from the exhausting business of pretending that one is invincible. It offers peace. Why then is it still so hard to embrace?

I think of myself as young. Not by the arithmetic of years, but by the internal certainty that youth is a room I never stepped out of.

I enjoy the company of people in their 20s and 30s; their looseness, their energy, their unbroken faith in possibility. I believe I blend into that crowd, as if my mind has quickly refused each passing decade. But then life arranges a moment that refuses soft focus.

Mine came on a recent evening in Mumbai, at Kasauti (Hindi for Test or Trial), the annual celebration day of The Akhaada, my gym. The event was held on the turf of a college ground. I had eaten breakfast early, skipped lunch and downed some electrolytes and protein bars. My head felt clear. My body felt ready. The alpha in me wanted a medal.

I had been assigned to a team event, but I didn't want that. I didn't want reality. I wanted the version of myself I carried in memory. So I asked to be allowed to compete one-on-one, with some serious contenders. Here, I found my 50-something self surrounded by people at least a decade younger, looking like the best versions of themselves.

Well, I told myself, age on plenty of mornings. I've died as much, if not more, than men this age. I've rebuilt myself brick by brick these past few years. Surely that counts. It was now time for deadlifts.

One of my closest competitors pulled 145 kg with ease. On a good day, I could brag that comfortably. It turned out, this wasn't a good day. This was a humid outdoor evening, and my body wasn't fully warmed-up. Two powerlifters on either side of me, barely in their 20s, shot me quick glances. Was that



An illusion is eventually just that. There is a truth we must all acknowledge in the end: The body keeps its own ledger. It updates itself without consulting the mind. SHOOT: STEPHEN

concern? Caution. "Don't jump to 150," I could hear them think. "You just did 130."

But the beast in me wanted 150. It wanted the story. I asked, in the plates. Stepped up. Gripped the bar. And... nothing. No movement. Not even a negotiation.

Just a stubborn stillness, as if the bar were welded to the earth.

In that moment, I knew something I didn't want to know. The body keeps its own ledger. It updates itself without consulting the mind.

I wasn't done here. The high-intensity interval training or HIIT round came next; a chance to reclaim some pride. But even the most exhausted of warriors with me seemed to fade. My head said, "Run. Cross the line. Get to the next task faster." My heart said, "Conserve. You'll need strength for the weights." There were no right answers. I had been vanquished, not so much by my competitors in this arena, as by time.

The evening continued, competitions blurring into each other. Applause lifted and fell. The compe introduced an 80-year-old woman who had competed the previous year too. Looking at her, I saw a mission so different from mine. She was strong, steady, unafraid. But that's because she recognised the

point of the arc at which she stood; she was no longer competing with an earlier self; she was aiming just to be there.

She was carrying far less than she once must have. Her strength was real, but it was also an echo of an older strength.

Even that hurt, and a quiet thought occurred. That will be me one day. I hope to someday feel, not dread, not sorrow, but simply recognition of this truth: as she does.

Later that night, once the adrenaline had burned itself out, something softened in me. Age is a messenger. It offers calibration, and a certain emotional economy. It offers relief from the exhaustion of always standing with me seemed to fade. My head said, "Run. Cross the line. Get to the next task faster." My heart said, "Conserve. You'll need strength for the weights." There were no right answers. I had been vanquished, not so much by my competitors in this arena, as by time.

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(Charles Assisi is co-founder of Founding Fuel. He can be reached on assisi@foundingfuel.com. The views expressed are personal)



CHECK OUT Sanjoy Narayan's essential Miles Davis playlist

'There are albums that become sonic companions, their architecture mirroring one's surroundings. For me in Helsinki, Davis's A Tribute to Jack Johnson is that album.' (Below) Helsinki Central station, with its Lantern Carriers standing on eternal watch. SHOOT: STEPHEN

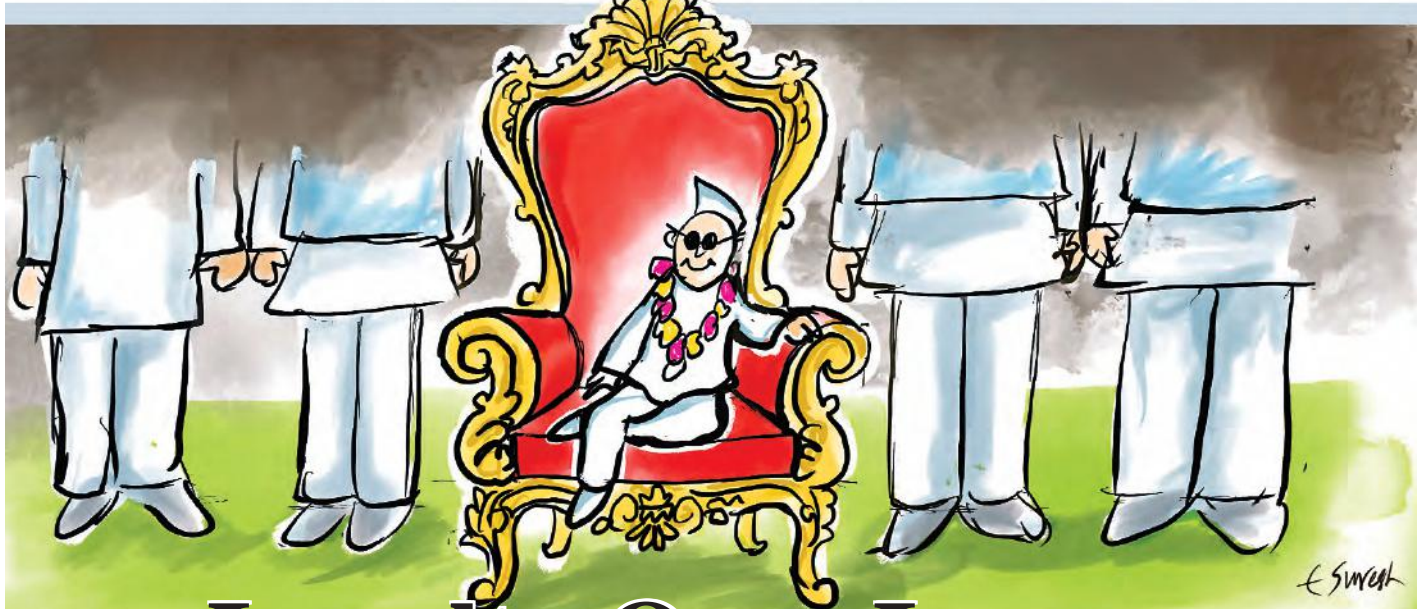


The Pioneer AGENDA

In politics, stupidity is
not a handicap.
— Napoleon Bonaparte

New Delhi

December 21, 2025



Loyalty Over Legacy

The BJP resists the temptation to equate leadership with noise. Instead, it builds continuity through discipline and renewal through trust. A party that invests in patient cultivation rather than spectacle inevitably produces leaders whose authority is quieter but more stable. Its consistent willingness to elevate workers who were once largely invisible reflects a belief in institutions over individuals, systems over personalities, and preparation over projection

Indian politics has traditionally rewarded visibility. The assumption has long been that leadership must first be seen, heard, and repeatedly validated in public before it can be trusted with authority. Yet one of the more intriguing features of the Bharatiya Janata Party's evolution over the past decade is how often it has chosen to invert this logic. Time and again, responsibility has preceded recognition, and authority has been conferred on individuals whose prominence was largely internal rather than public.

This is not a recent improvisation, nor is it merely symbolic. It reflects a deeper organisational temperament, one that treats leadership not as a spectacle but as a function of long preparation. Within the BJP, elections are moments when leadership is revealed, not moments when it is invented. The party's confidence lies less in personalities and more in the institutional processes that produce them. This instinct is visible across different layers of power. At the constitutional level, the selection of individuals for high offices has often followed an understated rhythm. These appointees did not emerge from the churn of media politics. They were shaped by years of public service and administrative engagement and were entrusted with positions where temperament and restraint matter more than projection. Their elevation conveyed an implicit belief that the dignity of the institution can, and should, lend stature to the individual not the other way around.

The same organisational confidence has increasingly defined executive leadership as well. When the BJP returned to power in key states after a long interval, the choice of leadership surprised many observers precisely because it did not align with the usual calculus

of visibility. In several instances, the party prioritised organisational grounding and internal credibility over public flamboyance. In each case, it appeared comfortable backing leaders whose journeys were marked by sustained work within the system rather than by headline dominance.

What looks sudden from the outside rarely is so from within. These leaders were not unknown to the organisation; they were simply unknown to the popular media. Years of coordinating cadres, managing party responsibilities, and working within disciplined hierarchies had already tested them. Their elevation did not signal a break from the party's culture but an affirmation of it.

This culture is perhaps most clearly visible in how the BJP treats internal advancement. Positions of authority are rarely personalised or inherited. They rotate, sometimes unexpectedly, reinforcing the idea that no role is permanent and no individual indispensable. The recent appointment of younger leaders to senior organisational roles fits seamlessly into this pattern. It reflects the party's willingness to trust organisational experience over external familiarity and signals confidence in its internal mechanisms of renewal.

Such decisions make sense only within a system that values institutional memory,



GOURAV VALLABH
Professor and BJP Leader,
Member of the Economic Advisory
Council to the Prime Minister

inheritance.

This stands in stark contrast to much of the rest of India's political landscape, where dynastic continuities still define power. Across parties, leadership often circulates within families, with surnames functioning as political credentials. The Congress's command structure remains bound to the Nehru-Gandhi lineage, while regional parties like the Samajwadi Party, RJD, DMK, TRS (now BRS), and Shiv Sena have internal hierarchies that resemble family-owned enterprises rather than open political systems. Entry and advancement are determined less by institutional merit than by lineage and proximity to power. This model, while electorally viable in certain regions, breeds dependence on legacy and personal networks. It weakens intra-party deliberation and discourages a new generation of leaders from emerging through experience and competence. In contrast, the BJP's

relative insulation from hereditary politics has enabled it to draw legitimacy from organisational equity—a sense that leadership is earned rather than claimed. Observers of contemporary Indian politics often note that the BJP's success cannot be explained by electoral strategy alone. It rests equally on deeper organisational system where leadership is not a reward for visibility but a responsibility entrusted after prolonged observation. Authority here is viewed as functional, not ornamental.

This approach has important consequences for governance. Leaders shaped by organisational systems tend to approach power with a custodial mindset. They are accustomed to working within constraints, coordinating across levels, and subordinating personal preference to collective decision-making. Authority is exercised less as personal capital and more as delegated trust. While this does not guarantee flawless governance, it does anchor leadership in process rather than impulse. It also reduces the volatility associated with personality-driven politics, allowing for continuity and calibration even during transitions.

Such a model also subtly reshapes how representation functions. When leadership emerges from structured organisational pathways, diversity becomes an outcome rather than a declaration. Individuals from different social and regional backgrounds rise through the same demanding processes, making their presence in high office appear normal rather than exceptional. The elevation of leaders from

Scheduled Castes, tribal communities, and backward regions is seen less as symbolic inclusion and more as an organic reflection of the party's social depth. This quiet normalisation avoids the pitfalls of tokenism and lends legitimacy to authority.

Critics sometimes describe this model as overly centralised. There is some truth in that observation. Decision-making power is indeed concentrated, especially at the national level. But centralisation here serves coordination rather than arbitrariness. It binds a large and diverse organisation together, ensuring that leadership transitions do not become moments of rupture. Succession, instead of being destabilising, becomes routine. This is institutionalisation at work—the transformation of what could have been personality-based politics into a disciplined, process-bound system.

In an age driven by immediacy, social media metrics, and constant performance, this long-view politics stands out. It resists the temptation to equate leadership with noise. Instead, it builds continuity through discipline and renewal through trust. A party that invests in patient cultivation rather than spectacle inevitably produces leaders whose authority is quieter but more stable.

Whether one agrees with the BJP's ideology or not, this organisational ethic is difficult to ignore. Its consistent willingness to elevate workers who were once largely invisible reflects a belief in institutions over individuals, systems over personalities, and preparation over projection. At a time when Indian politics is still crowded with dynasties and theatrical visibility, that belief has become quietly consequential and perhaps, its most enduring contribution to the political culture of modern India.

WHEN THE BJP RETURNED TO POWER IN KEY STATES AFTER A LONG INTERVAL, THE CHOICE OF LEADERSHIP SURPRISED MANY OBSERVERS PRECISELY BECAUSE IT DID NOT ALIGN WITH THE USUAL CALCULUS OF VISIBILITY. IN SEVERAL INSTANCES, THE PARTY PRIORITISED ORGANISATIONAL GROUNDING AND INTERNAL CREDIBILITY OVER PUBLIC FLAMBOYANCE

When political expedience precedes political weightage

GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Once upon a time in Indian politics, you had to be an ardent nationalist, a true soldier of the party, a man of strong conviction and firm in your ideology to rise the political ladder. No more. In recent years, the Bharatiya Janata Party has quietly rewritten the rules of political power. The pattern is unmistakable: instead of elevating heavyweight regional leaders with strong mass bases and independent authority, the party increasingly prefers comparatively lesser-known, politically lightweight figures for high offices — chief ministers, party presidents, and key organisational posts. Loyalty, not stature, has become the principal qualification for rising the political ladder.

The surprise appointment of 45-year-old Nitin Nabin as BJP president is the most striking example of this shift. For party workers and political observers alike, the choice was unexpected — not merely because of Nabin's relative anonymity, but because it further hollows out the once-formidable stature of the BJP's president's office. Compare this with the party's earlier chiefs — Atal Bihari Vajpayee, L.K. Advani, Rajnath Singh, Nitin Gadkari, Amit Shah — leaders who commanded authority in their own right and shaped the party's ideological and organisational direction. For Nitin Nabin, stepping into such a lineage is less a challenge than a contradiction.

This centralisation has come at a cost.



Nitin Nabin Bhajan Lal Sharma



Mohan Yadav



Nayab Singh Saini Pushkar Singh Dhama
Rekha Gupta Manohar Lal Khattar

Popular regional leaders with proven electoral appeal — Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Vasundhara Rajse Scindia, Saurabh Patel, BS Yediyurappa — have been gradually sidelined. The BJP's famed "second line of leadership" today resembles a political unicorn: much discussed, rarely seen, and almost extinct.

JP Nadda's tenure as party president epitomised this transformation. More a figurative presence than a commanding leader, Nadda neither set the party's course nor led it from the front. Despite discord with the RSS, Modi-Shah duo prevailed again, Nitin Nabin, an MLA from Bankipur, Bihar was elevated — much to

the surprise of political pundits as well as to Nabin himself. Through it is also a calculated electoral gamble in Bihar, where BJP wants to stand on its own. Nabin's rise therefore can be attributed to loyalty and electoral expediency rather than anything else. Ironically, this makes even Nadda appear retrospectively more substantial than he ever was.

This template is not confined to party presidents. The 2024-25 cycle saw the BJP appoint a string of chief ministers across the Hindi heartland who fit the same mould: politically lightweight, low-profile, and dependent on central authority for survival

Take Madhya Pradesh. After routing the Congress, the BJP bypassed established leaders and chose Mohan Yadav, a three-time MLA and former higher education minister, as chief minister. His selection — reportedly finalised barely two weeks after the election results — stunned observers. Though OBCs constitute over half the state's population, the Yadav community is not among the most politically dominant. Yadav himself acknowledged the nature of his elevation, describing himself as "a small party worker" grateful for the opportunity. Rajasthan followed a similar script. Bhajan Lal Sharma, a first-time MLA from

Sanganer, was a rabbit-out-of-the-hat trick. Originally from Bharatpur, Sharma was not even fielded there because the seat was deemed unwinnable for him. Yet, in spite of towering political personalities present in the state, the BJP opted for a fresh face with minimal statewide recognition.

This approach to choosing state leaders has done wonders to the careers of Rekha Gupta (Delhi), Pushkar Singh Dhama (Uttarakhand), Nayab Singh Saini (Haryana), Manohar Lal Khattar (Haryana), Motian Yadav (Madhya Pradesh), Bhajan Lal Sharma (Rajasthan), Bhupendra Patel (Gujarat) — the list goes on endlessly. The message is loud and clear: election victories belong to the national leadership, not to individual state satraps. By curbing the rise of powerful regional figures, the BJP prevents the emergence of alternative power centres that could challenge central authority. Organisational appointments increasingly prioritise loyalty, caste arithmetic, and internal balance over charisma or mass appeal. Though this approach minimises factionalism and keeps the party's central command in firm control it risks wiping away the talent that could enrich the party's legacy and help it achieve its cherished goal of development and progress. The message from the party's top is crystal: stature is optional, obedience is mandatory!

The writer is senior editor, The Pioneer

Dhruval Guasekaran
bl research bureau

Small-cap funds have become the fastest-growing equity segment in India's mutual fund industry. Over the past five years, investor accounts in this category have surged by nearly 450 per cent, from about 50 lakh to 2.7 crore as of November 2025. This sharp rise in retail participation raises an important question: are investors allocating to small-cap funds based on a clear understanding of risk, or are they merely chasing recent performance?

The small-cap universe largely comprises early-stage businesses with lower market capitalisation, limited liquidity, higher earnings volatility, relatively weaker governance structures, and greater sensitivity to economic cycles. These structural characteristics make small-caps inherently riskier than mid- and large-cap companies.

While small-cap investing can create meaningful wealth over long periods, it comes with pronounced volatility and behavioural challenges. For retail investors, recognising and preparing for these risks is critical before committing capital. Here, we outline two of the most significant risks in small-cap funds and present a disciplined framework to navigate this volatile but potentially rewarding segment.

LARGE DRAWDOWNS

One of the most defining characteristics of small-cap investing is the severity of drawdowns during market downturns. Maximum drawdown, which measures the peak-to-trough decline in portfolio value, is consistently higher for small-cap indices and funds than for their mid-cap and large-cap counterparts.

During the global financial crisis in 2008-2009, the Nifty Smallcap 250 Total Return Index (TRI) witnessed a drawdown of about 76 per cent, compared with declines of 73 per cent for the Nifty Midcap 150 and 61 per cent for the Nifty 100.

Similarly, during the Covid-19 market crash, the small-cap index fell nearly 59 per cent, while mid-cap and large-cap indices declined by about 43 per cent and 38 per cent, respectively. Large-cap indices typically experienced relatively fewer drawdowns, reflecting stronger balance sheets, superior liquidity, and higher institutional ownership.

The implication for investors is clear: small-cap funds demand a much higher emotional and financial tolerance for volatility. Deep drawdowns not only erode portfolio value but also test your discipline.

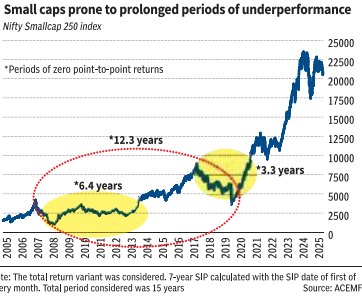
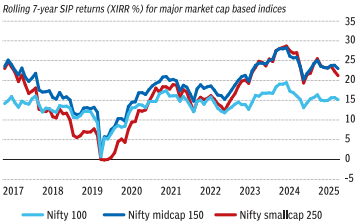
Many investors exit near mar-

Smart play on small-cap funds



FUND TRACKER. We explore two significant risks and a disciplined framework to navigate this volatile but potentially rewarding segment

Long-term SIPs, too, slipped into negative returns



RISK REALITY

- Severity of drawdowns during market downturns
- Extended phases of underperformance
- SIPs help but they aren't a silver bullet

SIP investors can experience extended periods of subdued or below-average outcomes.

For example, seven-year SIP rolling returns for the small-cap index briefly turned negative for three to four months during the Covid-19 sell-off, while comparable SIPs in large-cap and mid-cap indices largely avoided negative territory due to more stable earnings and broader diversification. Six out of 10 small-cap funds too delivered negative seven-year SIP returns during April 2020.

Another notable phase spans January 2008 to April 2020, during which the Nifty Smallcap 250 index delivered a near-zero point-to-point return but witnessed sharp swings before staging a powerful rally post-April 2020.

A comparison of SIP returns during the period shows that the Smallcap Index delivered 4.5 per cent, lagging the Nifty 100's 7.8 per cent.

Despite the strong post-2020 rally, prolonged volatility caused small-cap SIPs to underperform large-caps over this cycle, highlighting extended phases where patience does not necessarily translate into superior returns.

The message is small-cap investing requires patience, resilience, and a willingness to endure long stretches of disappointment

ket bottoms, converting temporary paper losses into permanent capital loss. Only investors who can remain invested through sharp equity drawdowns stand a realistic chance of benefiting from small-cap investing over the long term.

UNDERPERFORMANCE

Another frequently underappreciated risk is the tendency of small-caps to undergo extended phases of underperformance. While small-caps can deliver sharp and outsized returns during favourable cycles, these bursts are often followed by long stretches of muted or even negative performance. Although similar cycles occur in large-cap and mid-cap segments, the magnitude and volatility of underperformance are significantly higher in small caps.

Between January 2008 and

June 2014, the Nifty Smallcap 250 index remained largely range-bound, oscillating between 1,000 and 4,000 points, and took nearly 6.4 years to surpass its January 2008 peak.

An investor entering via a lump-sum investment at the peak would have earned virtually no returns over this period. While large-cap and mid-cap indices also experienced sluggish performance during the same timeframe, price swings and drawdowns were far more severe in small-caps.

Volatility metrics reinforce this observation. On an annualised basis, the standard deviation of the small-cap index during the period stood at around 37 per cent, compared with 28 per cent for large-cap indices and 34 per cent for mid-cap indices. Higher volatility not only deepens drawdowns but also prolongs recovery

periods, increasing both financial stress and behavioural fatigue.

SIPS: HELPFUL, BUT...

SIP outcomes during such periods offer a more nuanced perspective.

Systematic investing tends to work during downturns by accumulating a higher number of units at lower prices.

During the 2008-2014 period, while lump-sum delivered zero return, SIPs in the Nifty Smallcap 250 generated an annualised return of about 17 per cent, comparable to the 18 per cent delivered by the Nifty Midcap 150 and higher than the 15 per cent from the Nifty 100.

At the fund level, small-cap funds delivered SIP returns of around 18.6 per cent, compared with 14 per cent for large-cap funds and 19.3 per cent for mid-cap funds.

Stable portfolio via dividend yield funds

FUND-WISE. Despite many usual defensive segments underperforming, these funds found the right mix to deliver well

Venkatasubramanian K
bl research bureau

In the past 15 months, despite the frontline large-cap indices nearing or even touching their previous highs, the broader markets are still witnessing considerable churn with mid and small-caps mostly on a corrective mode.

Companies that are reasonably consistent in delivering steady cashflows and healthy dividend yield once they become mature are preferred for such environments. However, many sectors, especially from the large-cap space that fall into this category have had a rough run in the past 18 months. These include fast moving consumer goods, information technology and consumer discretionary segments.

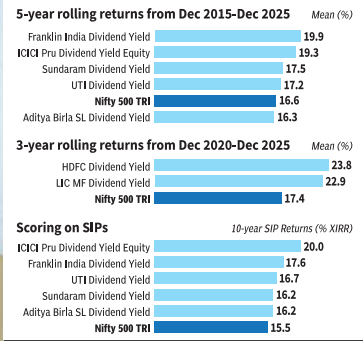
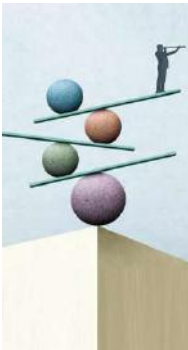
Despite this underperformance from key segments over the past year and a half, dividend yield funds have largely done well over this phase and in general over the long term.

Five funds in the category have a track record in excess of 10 years, while a couple more have been operational for at least five years.

Read on for more on how dividend yield funds have managed to churn their portfolios smartly, straddle market caps while having a leash on risks and invest in newer avenues for better returns and yields.

YIELDING MORE

Some of the relative older funds in the dividend yield category are ICICI Prudential Dividend Yield, Franklin India Dividend Yield, Aditya Birla Sun Life Dividend Yield, UTI Dividend



STRATEGIC MOVE

Better performing dividend yield funds upped stakes in banks and financial services companies that had a good run in the past 15 months

Only Aditya Birla Sun Life Dividend Yield fell behind marginally, at 16.3 per cent on five-year rolling over the 10-year time frame indicated earlier.

For HDFC and LIC MF dividend funds, we considered 3-year rolling returns over the past five years (December 2020 to December 2025). They returned 23.8 per cent and 22.9 per cent, respectively, on an average over this period. The

benchmark Nifty 500 TRI delivered 17.4 per cent in this timeframe.

When monthly SIPs over the past 10 years are taken for the five longer track record funds, the returns (XIRR) are in the range of 16.2 per cent to almost 20 per cent.

An SIP in the Nifty 500 TRI would have given 15.5 per cent in the same timeframe.

One key aspect to check for dividend yield funds is their ability to contain downsides during market corrections.

The downside capture ratio of the seven funds taken up here range from 52.8 to 95.6, going by data for the direct plans from December 2020 to December 2025. This data clearly show that their NAVs fall less than their benchmark during periods when indices fall. A score of 100

shows that a fund moves in line with its benchmark.

MIXING SMARTLY

As mentioned, some of the dividend paying defensives have been on the decline in recent years.

However, the better performing dividend yield funds upped stakes in banks and financial services companies that had a good run in the past 15 months. In addition, funds increased exposures to power and pharmaceutical stocks that delivered reasonably in this timeframe.

One avenue explored by funds has been real estate investment trusts (REITs), which have delivered 14-31 per cent returns in the past one year and also delivered dividends in excess of 5 per cent. Franklin India Dividend, for instance, had almost 10 per cent exposure to REITs/InvTs in its recent portfolio.

Though dividend yield funds tend to invest across market caps, there has been a tendency to increase large-cap exposure for a few funds, which provided stability and also better performance. ICICI Prudential Dividend Yield, Sundaram Dividend Yield and HDFC Dividend Yield are funds that followed this route with 67-74 per cent exposure to large-cap stocks.

For investors, Franklin India Dividend Yield and ICICI Prudential Dividend Yield are the best in the category and can be considered for the long term via the SIP route to coincide with specific goals.

It is important to note that dividend yield strategy could underperform in a secular growth market.

ALERTS.

Kotak MF launches Nifty Next 50 ETF

Kotak Mahindra Mutual Fund has launched Kotak Nifty Next 50 ETF, an open-ended exchange-traded fund that will track the Nifty 50. The NFO closes on January 1, 2026. No entry load or exit load will be charged. Minimum subscription amount is ₹5,000 and any amount thereafter. The performance is measured against Nifty Next 50 Index (Total Return Index (TRI)); fund managers are Devender Singhla, Satish Dondapati and Abhishek Bisen.

Top PMS schemes

Based on 5-year returns

AMC	Strategy	AUM (in ₹ cr)	Returns (% CAGR)		
			1-year	3-year	5-year
LARGE CAP					
Tulsian PMS	Tulsian PMS	330	5.83	18.7	29.8
ICICI Pru	Largecap	888.31	8.04	20.61	22.8
Standard Chartered Securities India	Long Term Value Compounder	NA	11.94	20.27	20.2
Renaissance Investment	Opportunities Portfolio	NA	0.36	15.46	20.1
MULTI CAP					
Negen Capital Services	Special Situ & Tech Fund	1278.55	0.91	25.1	32.9
Asit C Mehta Invest. Intermediates	ACE - Multicap	146.61	5.4	31.61	30.9
Bonanza Portfolio	Edge	NA	-9.99	20.9	30.6
Stallion Asset	Core Fund	6635.54	3.86	38.82	30.6
Renaissance Investment	Indianet Portfolio	NA	-2.05	18.94	30.3
Buoyant Capital	Opportunities	7550.24	15.12	24.11	29.6
MID-CAP					
NAFA Asset Managers	Emerging Bluechip	NA	-2.31	18.88	25.4
Right Horizons	Super Value	NA	-5.83	18.56	25.0
Master Portfolio Services	Master Trust India Growth	381.18	4.03	17.83	25
Unif Capital	API 20	NA	-0.08	19.24	23.2
SMALL CAP					
Counter Cyclical Investments	Diversified Long Term Value	783.25	-9.08	24.9	48.5
Aequitas Invest. Consultancy	India Opportunities	4063.58	35.85	43.67	46.1
Equitree Capital Advisors	Emerging Opportunities	1062.94	-4.1	34.45	38.5
Valentis Advisors	Rising Star Opportunity	NA	-12.93	14.08	28.2

*Source: PMS Bazaar. Returns as on November 30, 2025

Kumar Shankar Roy
bl. research bureau

The insurance sector is in the spotlight with the Parliament clearing a Bill which allows 100 per cent FDI. Adding to the tailwind, the recent GST exemption on individual life policies has also lifted sentiment for the segment. However, listed private-sector life insurers have been a tad weak in the past week in sync with the overall broader market trend.

In this backdrop, we remain positive on ICICI Prudential Life Insurance, promoted by ICICI Bank and Prudential Corporation Holdings. Its portfolio had recommended subscribing to its IPO (offer price ₹334) in September 2016, and reiterated a positive view in August 2020 when the stock was around ₹460.

ICICI Prudential Life is best judged on price-to-embedded value (P/EV), which captures the insurer's net worth plus the present value of profits expected from its existing book. At CMP of ₹651, the stock trades at about 1.9x P/EV, well below HDFC Life and SBI Life's 2.7-2.8x (see valuation table), but the discount is partly earned: Growth has been uneven at times, the mix has carried a higher share of market-linked business in some phases and costs have remained relatively elevated, limiting operating leverage. Even so, if execution improves and embedded value compounds steadily, a partial narrowing of the valuation gap can be on the cards.

In the last one-year period, the stock has trended down, lagging decent jumps in SBI Life and HDFC Life. This leaves ICICI Prudential Life priced for pessimism even as the operating narrative is slowly improving: the mix is shifting toward steadier, higher-margin segments and cost actions appear more durable than a one-quarter clean-up. If growth revives without margin slippage, a gradual re-rating is possible. Thus, investors can accumulate on dips.

For a quick decade of life insurance jargon and what it means for investors, see the Sector Primer column on the right side of this page.

WHAT NEEDS TO GO RIGHT
Our positive stance on ICICI Pru Life is conditional on three levers that need to go right.

Mix upgrade: The company's mix appears to be moving towards non-linked / steady products. This matters because of the improvement in margin stability and embedded value compounding. As on H1FY26,

More life and less hype

LIFE INSURANCE. ICICI
Prudential Life offers valuation comfort amid sector tailwinds



How it fared

Key performance indicator	FY24	FY25	H1FY25	H1FY26
Annual premium equivalent growth (%)	4.7	15	26.8	-4.1
Value of new business margin (%)	24.6	22.8	23.7	24.5
Cost to total premium (%)	18.2	18.1	22	19.2
13th month persistency* (%)	89	89.1	89.8	85.3
61st month persistency* (%)	66	64.1	65.9	62.9
Solvency (%)	191.8	212.2	188.6	213.2
Embedded value (in ₹ cr)	42,337	47,951	46,018	50,501
PAT (in ₹ cr)	852	1189	477	601

*12 month rolling persistency Source: Investor presentations

the product mix had 48 per cent in linked products, 22 per cent in non-linked products, 19 per cent in protection (non-linked), 6 per cent in group funds and 5 per cent in annuity (non-linked). In comparison, the linked business accounted for 52 per cent in H1FY25.

The non-linked savings business grew 11.9 per cent year on year in Q2FY26 and 15.6 per cent in H1FY26, as customers preferred to invest in non-parallel products to lock in high yields in the declining interest rate scenario. Linked business declined 8.6 per cent in Q2 and 10.7 per cent year on year in H1 this year.

Overall protection business was almost flat year on year in Q2FY26 and for H1FY26 the business grew 6.7 per cent year on year, with retail segment rising at a faster clip.

Cost discipline: The company's cost/total premium has declined 280 basis points (bps) to 19.2 per cent in H1FY26 from 22 per cent in the year-ago period. Cost to premium for sav-

● ACCUMULATE ON DIPS ICICI Prudential Life ₹651

WHY

- Valuation gap can narrow
- Mix, cost and growth levers
- Trades at a discount to peers

ings line of business also reduced 280 bps to 12.7 per cent in the same period.

Apart from digitalisation, ICICI Pru Life has been undertaking various cost optimisation initiatives to make its cost structure leaner and aligned to the product mix. With IRDAI expected to tighten commission caps under the new regulations, ICICI Pru Life's distribution costs could ease.

Note that while GST input tax credit being disallowed might

have some short-term impact on profitability, the opportunity arising from the same in terms of market expansion is quite large, as per the management.

The company has no internal preference for product mix and usually follows customer demand. When ULIPs are in favour, they lean into it; when markets turn volatile, they can pivot to guaranteed offerings. Because savings products form a large share of business, cost discipline is the main profitability lever and this keeps expense ratios aligned to the mix.

Growth revival with quality: The weak spot for ICICI Pru Life is that growth has been patchy. Though sector demand has improved post the GST exemption, but ICICI Pru's growth still needs to prove consistency. For instance, annual premium equivalent for H1FY26 saw a decline of 4.1 per cent on a high base of 26.8 per cent growth in previous year H1. The two-year APE CAGR stood at 10.3 per cent.

In November 2025, while its retail-weighted received premium grew 13.2 per cent year on year, its APE was virtually flat at 0.5 per cent. This kind of month-to-month unevenness has shown up before. This is why the stock still trades at a discount, as the market wants evidence of sustained, profitable new business growth, not just better sentiment. Quality growth, in this context, means improving persistency, a healthier product mix and cost discipline, not just pushing volumes.

Investors should track a simple scoreboard (see table below for numbers so far): APE growth, the direction of VNB (value of new business) margin, cost/premium ratio, persistency (13-month and 61-month) and the solvency ratios.

RISKS

The key risk is that ICICI Pru Life's growth relies only by "buying" business — higher commissions, distribution payouts or marketing spend that push cost ratios back up and dilute profitability.

A second risk is mix reversal: In strong equity markets, ULIPs can regain dominance, making margins and earnings more cycle-dependent and weakening the case for a steadier, non-linked tilt. Third, if persistency does not improve meaningfully, embedded value growth will remain slow, keeping the valuation discount intact. Persistency softened as on H1FY26. Finally, sector tailwinds may not translate quickly. For instance, CAGR and FDI headlines can lift sentiment, but do not automatically raise near-term earnings.

Capex cycle drives capacity expansion

STEEL. Jindal Steel's capex phase to deliver a strong growth in output along with margin improvement

Sai Prabhakar Vadavalli
bl. research bureau

Jindal Steel has commissioned two plants in H1FY26 and expects to commission a third facility by FY26-end. The recent additions should drive the established capacity from 9.6 mtpa (million tonnes per annum) to 15.6 mtpa by FY26. The company is expected to increase output significantly from the current 2 mtpa per quarter in the next two years. The operating and financial leverage, post commercialisation, associated with the scale-up will be the next phase of growth for the company.

We recommend accumulating the stock, which is trading at premium valuation of 7.7 times one-year forward EV/EBITDA. We earlier recommended accumulating the stock in October 2023 when the expansion plans had been announced and the stock has delivered 55 per cent returns since then.

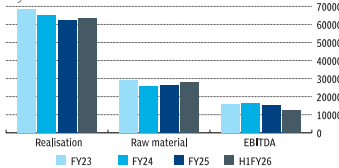
REVENUE GROWTH

Jindal Steel has commissioned a 4.6-mtpa capacity blast furnace at Angul in September 2025. The facility has also produced its first batch of steel. At the same location, the company has also commissioned a 3-mtpa basic oxygen furnace steel plant in September. It will also be commissioning a 3-mtpa steel melting shop by the fiscal-year end. The overall crude steel capacity should increase from 9.6 mtpa in FY23 to 15.6 mtpa — a 60 per cent growth.

The company guidance, though, is still conservative, indicating a gradual ramp-up in utilisation. It reported steel production/sales of 8.2/7.8 mtpa in the last 12 months. Jindal Steel



Weakening realisations offset by lower costs



*Plant maintenance shutdown and one time costs impacted raw material costs and EBITDA in H1FY26

has guided for production of 9-10 mtpa and sales of 8.5-9 mtpa. Though this indicates a 10-15 per cent growth in production/sales, the installed nameplate capacity is far higher.

While volume outlook is strong, the price outlook for the steel industry continues to be weak. Owing to excessive Chinese imports, which are at cost break-even prices, the steel prices continue to be weak the

world over. Several countries have imposed trade barriers, including India, against Chinese and Vietnamese steel imports. This has arrested the decline, but prospects of steel price growth are still bleak.

● ACCUMULATE Jindal Steel ₹992.35

WHY

- Capacity expansion of 60 per cent expected
- Margins should improve with leverage
- Valuations are at a premium

should sustain a higher portfolio of value-added mix as well. The new capacity should also address auto industry, which requires higher-grade steel, but the approval process will be gradual.

MARGIN LEVERS

The company has secured coal linkages to power its expanded production capacity to the tune of 13-15 mtpa of coal output. It met 95 per cent of its thermal coal capacity requirement in

house in Q2FY26. In-house coal provides cost savings to the tune of 3-5 per cent compared to auctioned coal or from the open market along with supply line security.

The company is also investing in a 200-km slurry pipeline, which is 90 per cent complete, and a 525-MW thermal power plant at Angul. These projects, which are nearing commissioning, should save on transportation and power costs for the company. Along with operating leverage from higher capacity operations, they should allow for higher cost savings.

Being in capex mode, the company has accumulated a net debt of ₹14,156 crore as of September 2025 and a net debt to EBITDA of 1.48 times. With the stabilisation of the plants in the next one year, Jindal Steel should be looking to deleveraging, providing for financial cost savings to play out as well.

FINANCIALS, VALUATIONS
It reported revenue of ₹49,765 crore in FY25, which is a 3 per cent CAGR revenue decline in FY23-25, as steel prices were declining with stagnant output. But with correction of coking coal prices and in-house supply of coal, the company delivered 5 per cent CAGR decline in raw material cost per tonne, which allowed for flat EBITDA growth in the period.

Jindal Steel should deliver a strong growth in steel output from the expanded capacity in the first phase and improved margins from the efficiency projects. But with the company trading at 7.7 times one-year forward EV/EBITDA — a 30 per cent premium to last five-year average, we recommend investors accumulate the stock as the steel output grows.

Taking Stock • bl • 5

businessline's editorial policy prohibits analysts from taking positions in the stocks they recommend — Editor

SECTOR PRIMER.

Decoding life insurers

Kumar Shankar Roy
bl. research bureau

Life insurers are best read through a small dashboard of terms. Here's an explanation of the key terms and what each tells an investor.

Embedded Value (EV): This is the insurer's net worth plus the present value of profits expected from policies already on the books. EV is a better "core value" anchor than earnings for life insurers; steady EV growth usually signals a compounding franchise.

Embedded Value Operating Profit (EVOP): EVOP is the change in embedded value from the start to the end of the period, after removing market or economic variances, changes in actuarial assumptions or models, and capital movements such as dividends, buybacks or fresh capital injections. Track EVOP alongside EV growth to judge whether value creation is coming from core execution rather than market tailwinds or assumption resets.

Price-to-Embedded Value (P/EV): This is measured by stock price divided by EV. It is the most-used valuation multiple for life insurers. Compared to peers, a low P/EV can mean value, or a deserved discount.

Linked products (market-linked): In these products (ULIPs), benefits depend on market performance. Linked-heavy mix can boost volumes in bull markets, but growth and margins can become more cycle-sensitive.

Non-linked products (non-market-linked): In these products, benefits are not tied to markets; outcomes come from guarantees, declared bonuses or fixed benefit structures.

This bucket includes three sub-buckets:

Non-linked savings: Under it are par and non-par plans. In par (participating), policyholders have a share in surplus via bonuses as declared by the insurer. Common products include traditional participating endowment plans, moneyback plans (often sold as par) and participating savings plans. They can support stability and franchise, but

profitability depends on bonus discipline and investment returns. In non-par, there is no surplus sharing; guarantees/pricing are explicit upfront in these plans that include guaranteed return plans, non-par endowments and fixed-benefit savings plans. They can be

margin-accretive if priced right, but sensitive to interest rates and ALM (asset-liability management).

Protection (usually non-linked): These plans are pure risk cover (term-style economics), not savings-led. Common product names include term plans, return of premium term plans and group term. They carry higher margins and improve "quality" of growth, but require disciplined underwriting and claims management.

Annuity/pension (usually non-linked): These are long-duration income products with fixed/declared payouts. They are stable if ALM is strong; watch investment yield, duration matching and solvency.

APE (Annual Premium Equivalent): It is calculated as the full annualised value of regular (recurring) premiums written during the period, plus 10 per cent of single premiums written during the period. APE is the go-to "growth" line for life insurers; track it with product mix, so you don't confuse volume with quality.

NBP (New Business Premium): This is total premium from policies sold during the period (single premium + first-year premiums). NBP can look strong even when quality is weak; always pair it with APE, mix and margins.

VNB (Value of New Business): This is present value of profits expected from policies sold in the period. VNB is the best single metric for profitable growth rising VNB with stable assumptions is a strong signal. VNB margin is VNB as a percentage of APE (or new business premium, depending on disclosure). This margin tells you if growth is being "bought" via pricing cuts or higher commissions; sustainable re-rating usually needs stable-to-rising VNB margin.

Persistency: This is the share of policies still in force after 13/25/37/49/61 months. Persistency is a direct driver of EV and VNB quality; weak persistency often explains why a stock stays at a discount. Note that the 61st month is the ultimate test of stickiness.

WHO AM I?

Are you an avid investor? How well do you know corporate India?

Here's a challenge. Using the five clues below, identify the company that is being talked about here

- 1 My journey began in the 1960s, when my founder, a professional turned entrepreneur, started his practice with an advance from his first client.
- 2 My founder's father was highly respected in the same field and authored a book with a foreword from the Prime Minister of India. My founder's wife, who actively helped him grow the business, is an accomplished innovator and has had several firsts in India.
- 3 Though I have a short history as a listed company, one of my subsidiaries in the same business did an IPO more than 30 years ago.
- 4 I am the largest in my business despite being a small-cap stock. I have a 25 per cent national market share in one of the fast-growing business segments.
- 5 Though I have more than 50,000 shareholders, the top 100 shareholders own more than 95 per cent of the equity. About two-thirds of my ownership is held by institutional investors.

Send your answers by Wednesday 6 p.m. to who-am-i@thehindu.co.in, with your full name, postal address and phone number. A lucky winner in each week will get a book sponsored by UNIFI Capital as a reward.

Contributed by
UNIFI CAPITAL

Last week's stock:
Carbureum Universal
Last week's winner:
Prasoon Kant Olja

THE ASIAN AGE

21 DECEMBER 2025



Ranjana Banerji

Off the beaten track

Why I'm not booking my next holiday to Barcelona

I've long wanted to go to Barcelona. Antoni Gaudi and Picasso are the reasons. Nothing is remotely unique there. Millions visit both the Sagrada Família Basilica and the Guernica every year. Some also want the football and the food.

But the people of Barcelona don't want me.

Not me specifically. I mean, I hope. They don't seem to want any of us. For a time now. Tourists sitting at roadside cafes have had insults and water thrown at them by locals. Graffiti on the walls reads: "Tourists go home", "Your holiday, my misery".

Barcelona gets about 12 to 14 million tourists per year, on conservative estimates. And much as the city depends on tourism for its income, its tolerance limits have been breached. Locals have had to surrender their spaces and their lives. At a basic level, holiday rentals have eaten into their own living spaces, and the cost of living has gone up.

Thailand expects its tourist numbers to be close to 40 million for 2025. If you have visited Thailand, and since it is the eighth most visited place in the world, you may well have, you should have been beguiled by its hospitality and natural beauty. But perhaps you also noticed that it is well hidden from visitors. You may notice the sleaze or the chaos or the claustrophobia of the public transport, but the lives of the Thai people are closed to you. It's like a massive veil over reality, so tourists get what they want and no more.

In that, I sense a form of hostility.

And since politeness appears to be more natural to the Thais than many others, you may not see the kind of angry graffiti against tourists that you hear about in Barcelona.

The state of Uttarakhand has banned all public protests for the winter season so that tourists and destination weddings are not affected. This means that a simple democratic right has been withheld so as not to inconvenience visitors. The rights of citizens are secondary to those of tourists.

The quaint little settlement of Landour has been ruined by eager visitors. Ruined for those who live there as well as those who visit. There are so many people that no one can cope. Landour lies just above Mussoorie, which of course has practically lost its charm. And it is creaking perched as it is on a fragile mountain, as it operates well beyond its carrying capacity.

It was only a few months ago that heavy rain brought the roads down and people got trapped in the mountains. Tourists had to negotiate kilometres of dirt roads with almost no road surface to get down to Dehradun. But the joy of being human is that we forget. So we will see large droves of people entering once the winter holidays begin to match the small droves who visit to escape Delhi's winter particulate matter, natural and unnatural. The upshot is that Dehradun's particulate matter has shot up to new highs. Or lows, depending on how you look at it.

The Prime Minister of India has advised more people to come to Uttarakhand to get married. And the state government has stopped whatever paltry protests the state has to ensure no one is bothered by local issues. In Uttarakhand's particular case, trees are being cut down and hills eroded to build more and more roads to fulfil the wishes of those on high.

The people of Goa are fed up of their state being held to ransom by every kind of tourist from the single-minded gambler to the beach leech and everything in between. In Kenya, the great migration of the wildebeest across the Serengeti and Mara systems is awe-inspiring. To be part of the experience, hotels and tourist facilities stay close enough to disturb the spectacle. In Ranthambore, the rush to spot a tiger leads to a cacophonous circus in the forest, as screaming humans in large vehicles and speeding jeeps career from location to location. The joy of a sighting is totally undermined by the noise and the all the damage and the downsides, the thrill of travel still beckons. Watching documentaries on television or videos on social media don't slake your thirst. They leave you craving the experience for yourself.

You are reminded of all the advice about how travel broadens the mind. While experiencing the world, are you limiting yourself to the tired repetition of the world around you? People might be annoying, but often the things that people make or do are inspiring and mind-boggling. Two decades apart, I made two visits to Paris to dive into the frisson of the impressionist art on display. The sun and light of Jaisaimeur remain the most beautiful expression of Nature I have ever seen.

There is so much that I still want to see. From the cave drawings of Bhimbetka to the ruins of Hampi. From the historic sites of Uzbekistan to the Incan city of Machu Picchu. I don't need five-star beach resorts and luxury spas. That is not my idea of fun for the most part. Cannot make a blanket statement though. Perhaps an unadorned hyper-artificial, satirical, scary White Lotus type experience is what I really, really want?

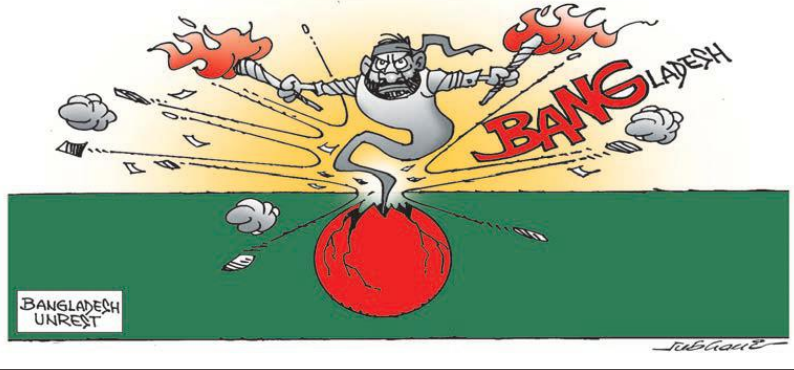
The trouble is that everywhere I want to go, too many people already have. The locals might be seeking for all I know, ready to prey on the next idiot tourist or wishing her far, far away?

Like I am here. Dreading the jams, the reckless and rude driving, the inability to get to a hospital or simple grocery shopping because of the influx of cars from every neighbouring state. I call out the names of the states on the numbing plates like they are insults.

I suppose that if I can dish it out, I have to take it. Except for going to Barcelona. I feel I really shouldn't upset them anymore. For the rest, it's the bank balance which calls the shots.

The writer is a senior journalist who writes on media affairs, politics and social trends. She tweets at @ranjana.

Subhani



Clean air not a luxury, why govt not effecting solution?



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya's View

The question, quite bluntly, is of political will. And if there is one issue which clearly demonstrates the absence of political will, it is the air crisis that annually affects Delhi, the NCR region, and much of north India. For years now governments callously continue to substitute political mudslinging for governance. Helpless citizens continue to suffer, and one wonders how long they will just passively accept their slow asphyxiation.

When the Air Quality Index (AQI) regularly breaches 'severe' and 'hazardous' categories exceeding 500 — levels that should constitute a public health emergency by any civilised standard — scientific studies show that life expectancy is shortened by as much as 82 years and contributes to increased incidence of heart attacks, strokes, respiratory ailments and chronic diseases. Children's lungs are particularly vulnerable, while the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions suffer disproportionately. This is not seasonal discomfort but extreme violence enacted upon millions of citizens year after year.

If this crisis is recurring, why does it persist? Is it beyond solution? Other countries have shown that the problem is solvable. Not long ago, Beijing's air was as oppressive as Delhi's. In 2013, the Chinese government declared a 'war on pollution', strictly enforcing emissions cuts, enforcing stringent industrial and vehicle standards, and transitioning to cleaner fuels. Sustained implementation produced remarkable and measurable improvements in air quality in major cities.

If China can do it why can't we? Why do we wake up after the air apocalypse

is upon us, when we know that it will happen next year again if an enduring response is not stringently implemented? Routine restrictions on construction activity, deployment of emergency Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) phases, bans on older diesel vehicles, school closures and advisories to stay indoors are only reactive, tokenistic, episodic and short-term band-aids, not cures. The lack of political will is stark: the just concluded session of Parliament did not even find time to discuss the air crisis although it was listed for debate. To my mind, this is not only suicidal but unforgivable.

This degree of government apathy is, frankly, criminal and indicative of the Constitution, since by extinguishing the right to breathe we endanger our right to life, which is a fundamental right. Pollution does not respect municipal or state borders. Shockingly, a joint committee comprising the Delhi, Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh governments has not been set up. Neither have farmers been provided with economically viable alternatives to crop stubble burning — machinery subsidies, biofuel incentives, crop diversification and value-added to residues. Nor have we invested on a war footing in the rapid expansion of clean public transport, removed or closed all polluting industrial units, and strictly implemented strict control on construction sites and vehicle emission limits.

Is the Indian state simply incompetent? Or its efficiency selective, working to optimum levels only where the interests of those in power are involved? Let me give two random examples.

In May 2002, one of Lalit Yadav's daughters, Rohini, the loop about the new president. It just so happens that Mr Nabin's name was announced a day after Union home minister, Iqbal Ahmad and RSS chief Mohan Bhaswar were together in Andaman and Nicobar Islands for the unveiling of Veer Savarkar's statue.

The Indian diaspora in America was cheering US President Donald Trump all the way as long as his government was detaining and deporting undocumented illegal, unskilled workers. But the same diaspora is now nervous after the US administration decided to crack down on the H1B visa programme which allows American companies to hire skilled foreign workers. Indian software engineers and doctors who are among the major beneficiaries of this programme had always believed they were insulated from scrutiny. Shocked over the latest developments, diaspora representatives are learnt to have sent feelers to the Indian government that it leverages Prime Minister Narendra Modi's special equation with Trump to take up their case with Washington. The US-based Indians were also keen that the Modi government send

Other countries judge us also by our ability and resolve to tackle a problem that every year endangers lives of millions, especially where there are solutions that can be implemented but are ignored

was to get married. The groom, Samar Singh's family lived in an obscure and underdeveloped village in Bihar, Hichinbigha. The entire state machinery was deployed to upgrade this village almost overnight in time for the marriage. For the first time since independence its residents got electricity and street lights. A pucca asphalt/metalled road was built in days. A dilapidated school building was remodelled and renovated like magic. When the orders came from above with strict timelines, the same lack bureaucracy could do wonders.

Another illustrative example is the 'cleaning' of the Yamuna for Chhath Puja this year. Doing so was important for the powers that be because of the impending Bihar elections. Voters from Bihar, who needed to take a dip in the river as part of the rituals, could not be left unhappy. Naturally, the government swung into action. The toxic froth was subdued using chemical spraying; clean zones were created around newly refurbished ghats; water was deployed from Haryana's Hathikund Barrage to dilute pollutants. Presto, the Yamuna looked clean. It is, of course, entirely in keeping with the way we tackle problems that within days after the festival, the toxic foam and foul smell was back. The real causes, untreated sewage and industrial waste entering the river, which require long-term infrastructure investment, were jettisoned in favour of short-term fixes.

What perplexes me the most is why have citizens not galvanised into a sustained movement powerful

enough to force a transformation? Possibly, the answer lies in habituation, a cruel adaptation to adversity, wherein air pollution has become, in public imagination, a seasonal inconvenience rather than an urgent crisis demanding mass mobilisation. The nation deeply reveres the national song, 'Vande Mataram', but it can be asked whether a day-long debate on excavating its past is the right priority, when just outside Parliament people can hardly sing because they are choking.

Do those inside the clean air precincts of Parliament realise that while pollution is a shared problem, its burdens are unevenly distributed? Those with means retreat behind air purifiers, those without are left to suffer. The vast majority of people have no option but to go out and earn a daily wage. Do the privileged ever think of what this toxic air does to them? Moreover, is the government unaware of what this does to our international image, even if we are the world's third largest economy? How can we take pride in being the world's fastest growing economy if our national capital is unlivable? What are the reasons for the millions on end? Other countries judge us also by our ability and resolve to tackle a problem that every year endangers the lives of millions of people, especially where there are solutions that can be implemented but are ignored.

Ultimately, apart from unforgivable political neglect, Delhi's air crisis is equally a failure in transforming passive sufferers into empowered citizens. All citizens — parents, workers, students, professionals — must recognise that clean air is not a luxury but a right. When collective voices demand accountability and justice with sustained intensity, political responses will follow. The question is: Will we act, or will we wait for the next winter's smog to choke our conscience once again?

The writer is an author, diplomat and former member of Parliament (RS)

LETTERS FRAGILE DEMOCRACY

The unrest in Bangladesh is a sobering reminder of how fragile democratic transitions can become when dialogue gives way to violence. Attacks on minorities, media and diplomatic symbols undermine legitimate public grievances and risk isolating the country at a critical moment. Student voices, civil society, political parties and security institutions all have a stake in restoring calm and credibility. Inclusive engagement, protection of vulnerable communities and a transparent electoral roadmap are essential to prevent further polarisation. Regional actors, including India, must encourage restraint and democratic norms rather than be reduced to convenient targets. Stability will come not from force or postponement, but from participation, accountability and trust rebuilt through fair, open processes.

K. Chidanand Kumar
Bangaluru

ANTI-INDIA HATRED
THE MUHAMMAD YUNUS administration that claims there exists a 'New Bangladesh' needs to course-correct. The pace at which Bangladesh is headed towards violence, illiberalism, bigotry and anarchy is alarming. The death of the Bangladeshi student leader, Sharif Osman Hadi, has sparked conspiracy theories. And in the midst of this chaos, there is a separate propaganda running against India. Miscreants are targeting Indian diplomats. The BNP, the lesser evil of the two forces holding sway, is on decline. Let's hope the February election called there concludes peacefully.

Kirti Wadhawan
Kanpur

CHINA GAINS
INDIA'S 90 PER CENT export surge to China in November 2025 may dazzle on the surface, but it conceals a deeper strategic vulnerability. As the Global Trade Research Initiative warns, this spike is driven by volatile demand for a few raw materials like graphite and electronic components, not by a broad-based or value-added export transformation. Meanwhile, India's trade deficit with China is hurtling towards a record \$106 billion, underscoring a deepening dependence on Chinese imports in critical sectors like telecom and pharmaceuticals. India risks becoming a supplier of inputs to a rival that controls the value chain.

Amarjeet Kumar
Hazaribagh

Anita Katyal

Political Gup-Shup

Gadkari swears by Atal principle; was Modi first to call Trump?

Union minister Nitin Gadkari's cordial meeting with Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and their easy banter drew extensive media coverage last week. This meeting is in keeping with Mr Gadkari's repeated assertions that the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress may be political opponents but are not enemies and that he does not believe in carrying his political battles beyond the battlefield. Mr Gadkari recently acknowledged that he had learnt this lesson from his mentor and late Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee who did not allow his differences with political rivals to impact his personal relationship with them. Speaking at the launch of a memoir on Vajpayee, *Atal Sansamran*, by his media adviser Ashok Tandon, Mr Gadkari recalled how he was pulled up by the senior BJP leader when he adopted an aggressive stance in his capacity as Leader of Opposition in Maharashtra. The minister said Vajpayee often told him and others in the party that their campaign as BJP representatives but once elected, 'you are everyone's representative'. Speaking in the same vein, Tandon remembered how Vajpayee

attended NCP leader Sharad Pawar's birthday celebrations in Mumbai though Pramod Mahajan discouraged him from going on the grounds that their parties are battling each other in Maharashtra. Clearly, Mr Gadkari is in a minority in his party as Delhi's intransigent and discarded by the current BJP with personalised attacks against political rivals becoming a routine affair.

The Bharatiya Janata Party finally picked current president J.P. Nadda's successor. Five-time M.P. and Bihar minister Nitin Nabin was named as the BJP's working president and will eventually take over as party chief. The announcement followed months of speculation because of the unusual delay in appointing the new BJP president, resulting in a series of extensions for Mr Nadda. The Delhi political grapevine put this delay to the lack of consensus between the BJP and its mentor, the Rashtriya Swamysamkehar Sangh. Though Sangh bosses publicly maintained that it was for the BJP to appoint a president, it was also known that the RSS preferred that it was kept in

the loop about the new president. It just so happens that Mr Nabin's name was announced a day after Union home minister, Iqbal Ahmad and RSS chief Mohan Bhaswar were together in Andaman and Nicobar Islands for the unveiling of Veer Savarkar's statue.

The Indian diaspora in America was cheering US President Donald Trump all the way as long as his government was detaining and deporting undocumented illegal, unskilled workers. But the same diaspora is now nervous after the US administration decided to crack down on the H1B visa programme which allows American companies to hire skilled foreign workers. Indian software engineers and doctors who are among the major beneficiaries of this programme had always believed they were insulated from scrutiny. Shocked over the latest developments, diaspora representatives are learnt to have sent feelers to the Indian government that it leverages Prime Minister Narendra Modi's special equation with Trump to take up their case with Washington. The US-based Indians were also keen that the Modi government send

a high-level representative from India to lobby for them. It is perhaps no coincidence that Vijay Chaudhwal, BJP's foreign affairs department in charge, was in the US last week where he interacted with the Indian diaspora in California's Bay Area. Hopefully, he succeeded in allaying their fears about their work and stay in America.

When two leaders speak to each other on the phone, it is officially disclosed who initiated the conversation. However, this was not the case when Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke with US President Donald Trump over 10 days ago. The ministry of external affairs put out a brief release but did not say whether it was the PM or Trump who had called. The White House did not release a read-out of the conversation. The general buzz is that it was Mr Modi who established contact with Trump. Their discussion came amidst the ongoing India-US trade talks. The Indian diaspora hopes this conversation also took note of their concerns though there is no official word on it.

Ever since the BJP came to power in 2014, it has been leaning on the Mumbai film industry and publishing houses to make films and publish books which amplify the party's agenda and portray their icons in a positive light. Consequently, there have been a plethora of films like *Kashmiri Files*, *Bengal Files*, *The Kerala Story*, *Uri: The Surgical Strike* and now *Dhurandhar* which all denigrate Muslims and promote Hindu nationalism. Similarly, publishers are being encouraged to come out with titles valorising BJP leaders like Veer Savarkar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi while books on Hindu civilization and the RSS have also flooded the market. At the same time, publishers are reluctant to publish books on the freedom struggle as these are considered 'too Congress-oriented' while some authors were told to avoid any references to Mahatma Gandhi in their manuscripts. A leading publishing house has even set up a separate vertical, headed by a former ABVP member, for the publication of 'nationalistic' titles.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

Opinion

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2025



Range balls vs real balls

Why you're a world-beater on the driving range but a beginner on the golf course



FAHIM GANGJEE

IF GOLF EVER needed proof that it has a wicked sense of humour, look no further than the driving range. That sacred strip of artificial grass where dreams are born, handicaps are murdered, and grown adults convince themselves they're "really close" to figuring it out.

On the range, you are exceptional. A pure striker of the golf ball. You warm up starts cautiously, but by bucket ball number 14, you've found it. That effortless rhythm. That sound. The ball launches high, straight, and proud, disappearing into the distance like it has places to be.

People notice. They always do. Someone pauses mid-swing to watch. Another gives you that respectful nod. Someone eventually asks the most dangerous question in golf: "Good swing... you play much?"

You shrug, pretending not to care. Inside, you're already pencilled yourself in for the club championship.

Fast forward three hours. Same swing. Same clubs. Same human being. You are now six over through five and Googling "sports psychologists near me".

Welcome to the great mystery of amateur golf: why you're a world-beater on the range and a complete beginner on the course. The obvious suspect?

Range balls versus real balls.

Let's talk about range balls first. These things have lived many lives. They've been hit thin, fat, sideways and occasionally backwards. Their dimples are tired. Some are smoother than a politician's answer. Aerodynamically, they are closer to potatoes than golf balls.

And yet, they are incredibly kind. Range balls don't spin much. This is key. Low spin means low punishment. You can deliver the club a little from the outside, a little from the inside, slightly open, slightly shut, and the ball still toddles off in roughly the right direction. Range balls are the ultimate enablers. They let you believe your swing is better than it actually is. They smooth over flaws, hide face-angle sins, and turn what should be violent slices into polite fades. They are also predictable. Every ball reacts more or less the same. Same lie. Same height. Same target. Same routine. You're not really playing golf—you're rehearsing movement. Now enter the real golf ball.

It's glossy. It's expensive. It has opinions. And it spins. A lot. The real ball does not forgive. It documents. Every degree the clubface is open or closed, every path that wanders slightly off-script—it's all recorded in exquisite detail.

That gentle fade you loved on the range? It now starts left, turns right, keeps turning, and ends up introducing itself to a tree that hasn't seen a golf ball since 2007.

The real ball exposes reality. And reality, for most golfers, is uncomfortable. But spin is only half the story. The bigger shock comes from where the ball is sitting. On the range, every ball has been thoughtfully placed for your convenience. Flat lie. Perfect height. Always aligned toward something you're not truly trying to hit anyway. You could set up with your eyes closed and still make reasonable contact.

On the course, the ball develops a personality. It sits on slopes. It nestles into divots. It hides in rough that looks innocent



ACROSS THE AISLE
P Chidambaram

What started with Jawaharlal Nehru has now reached Mahatma Gandhi. The BJP's grave wrongs will not be forgiven by the people of India

MAHATMA GANDHI WAS assassinated on January 30, 1948. The RSS vehemently denied that its ideology and propaganda motivated the assassin. The RSS claimed that the ban imposed on the organisation by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was unjust. Let's, for a moment, take the RSS at its word, and pose the following question to the RSS and its progeny, the BJP: *Why did you erase the name of Mahatma Gandhi from the one — and only — socio-economic programme named after him?*

The programme named after Mahatma Gandhi is the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) supported by an Act of Parliament. The government has passed Bill No. 197 of 2025 in Parliament to *repeal* the Act and the Scheme. Section 3(1) of the Bill reads: *"Save as provided in section 10, on and from such date as the Central Government may by notification appoint in this behalf... the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, with all rules, notifications, Schemes, orders and guidelines made thereunder shall stand repealed."*

The Bill goes further: It obliges, under section 8(1), every state government to make a Scheme for providing a guarantee of 125 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household in the rural areas; the Scheme shall conform to the minimum features specified in Schedule I of the Bill; and under Schedule I, the first minimum feature is:

"The Scheme notified under section 8 of the Act by all States shall be called the 'Viksit Bharat — Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin): VB — G RAM G Scheme'." The name is not only a mouthful, it conveys no meaning to a non-Hindi speaking citizen and is an affront to such citizens.



Trinamool Congress MPs and other opposition leaders protest against the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill at Parliament House in New Delhi

The second killing of Mahatma Gandhi

Lifeline for poor

The 100-days-a-year wage employment guarantee scheme was the lifeline for 12 crore families to ensure that the household did not go to bed hungry and dejected. It was a boon for the poor, especially women and the elderly without regular employment. It put money in the hands of the women in the household giving them a degree of independence that their foremothers had not experienced. It created a safety net for the poor. The Bill snatches these benefits away, cruelly.

In the first Budget of the UPA government (2004-05), I had said: *"In our scheme of things, the poor will have a first charge on... the entire Plan funds... Work has begun on the National Employment Guarantee Act. The object is to guarantee 100 days of employment in a year to one able-bodied person in every poor household..."* The soul of the Act was *"guaranteed livelihood security"* and its key features were:

- The Scheme was universal, demand-driven and available throughout the year.
- The wages were guaranteed by the central government.
- The Scheme was financed by the central government; the State's share was 25% of the material cost alone.
- If refused work, the person was entitled to an unemployment allowance.

■ As the Scheme evolved, it acquired a welcome tilt towards women workers.

Negating spirit of MGNREGS

The Bill and the Scheme destroy every one of the above. The Scheme will be state-specific and the costs will be *shared* by the Centre and the state in the ratio of 60:40. The central government will make a *non-mandatory allocation* of funds to each state; the expenditure in excess of the allocation will be borne by the state and the areas where the Scheme will be implemented will be notified by the *central government*, stealthily making it a *supply-driven* Scheme. The *state shall guarantee* employment for 125 days — a chimera. No work shall be provided during notified *peak agricultural seasons* aggregating 60 days in a year. The unemployment allowance can be as low as 25% of the notified wage and hedged with numerous conditions including the *economic capacity* of the state. The central government will be the arbiter on all aspects, making the Bill *anti-federal*. In effect, the Bill and the proposed Scheme turn the original concept of *guaranteed livelihood security* into head-Sates — BJP ruled, especially — will plead economic incapacity, seek *lower* normative allocation and *smaller* areas of implementation, and gradually kill the Scheme.

Erasing from memory

On February 28, 2015, Mr Narendra Modi said in Parliament *"My political sense tells me never to scrap MGNREGA... it is a living monument to your (UPA's) failures."*

Over the years, MGNREGS suffered neglect. Though promised 100 days of employment, the average has hovered around 50 days per household. Out of 8.61 crore job card holders, only 40.75 lakh households completed 100 days of work in 2024-25 and only 6.74 households in 2025-26. The unemployment allowance, which is the responsibility of the state government, is rarely paid. The allocations are inadequate and the BE has fallen from ₹1,11,170 crore in 2020-21 to ₹86,000 crore in 2025-26. Total number of households that worked has declined from 7.55 crore in 2020-21 to 4.71 crore in 2024-25. Arrears of unpaid wages have mounted to ₹14,300 crore.

Bill's defects apart, the Bill is a deliberate attempt to erase Mahatma Gandhi from the nation's memory — which is reprehensible. In the BJP's reckoning, the history of independent India began on May 26, 2014. The past must be erased. What started with Jawaharlal Nehru has now reached Mahatma Gandhi. The BJP's grave wrongs will not be forgiven by the people of India.

(Next column: January 4, 2026)

Website: pchidambaram.in
X: @Pchidambaram_IN



FIFTH COLUMN
TAVLEEN SINGH

IF YOU ARE Hindu and reading this, you better not be going to any Christmas parties next week. You have been warned. Not by me, but one of the morality policemen of 'new India'. The Vishva Hindu Parishad has ordained that Hindus will be going against their 'culture' if they celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, as they usually do, because Indians love any excuse for a party. At least that is how it was in old India, when we did not know it was against our 'culture' to have a good time.

The ban on Christmas came from a Delhi VHP official. The VHP is one of the uglier offspring of the RSS. Asked if this was not a restriction on the right that our constitution gives us to worship as we wish, he made it clear that this was not about religion but about conversion. It is not just private festivities that the VHP seeks to ban, but in shops and malls as well. It delighted me to see my local mall filled with Christmas decorations and good cheer. There were stars and lights and Santas and Christmas trees and every shop was ready with special Christmas decorations and festive offerings. Nobody obeyed the VHP, so it is possible that by next year the RSS will order its other ugly progeny, the Bajrang Dal, to enforce its Christmas ban by deploying their violent gangs. Their Shiv Sena cousins spread out in Mumbai and hunt for young lovers just before Valentine's Day because love also seems to be not part of our 'culture'.

Some years ago, I rescued a terrified young girl from a police van. She had come from one of our northeastern states to meet her boyfriend, with whom she was arrested on Marine Drive.

What puzzles me about the Hindutva culture that defines 'new India' is why leaders of this movement do not introspect upon the reasons why Hindus, especially those of lower caste, are persuaded to become Christians, Muslims and often Buddhists. Minimal introspection would reveal that the cause is caste. I am an irrelevant Sikh, but one of the tenets of my religion that I am proud of is that one reason Guru Nanak founded Sikhism was because he objected passionately to casteism. But I digress. The point I want to make this week is that 'new India' will not last long unless it returns to the foundational principle of pluralism enshrined in our constitution.

Muslims have been made second-class citizens in the Hindutva Rashtira, but they have little to worry about. India has the second largest Muslim

Cancel Christmas

population in the world and, despite those ugly and stupid 'go to Pakistan' taunts, they are going nowhere. They are perfectly capable of fighting back when the need arises and perfectly capable of protecting vulnerable members of their community. If truth be told, there are times when they have pushed back too far and caused more harm to Islam than to Hindutva. The example that comes instantly to mind is the insane violence unleashed when they thought their Prophet had been insulted by a BJP functionary. The hijab movement was another instance, when they went too far in the wrong direction. If Saudi Arabia, where Islam was born, is encouraging its women to ditch their veils, why should Indian Muslim women be encouraged to do the opposite? But I digress again.

This week, it is the plight of Christians I would like to draw attention to. Christians are the smallest and most vulnerable of India's minority communities, and they have been under relentless attack in recent years. A political friend I met last week from the 'Hindu Rashtira' of Uttar Pradesh said that she was constantly being approached for help by Christians who were wrongly charged with converting Hindus by misleading them through 'force, fraud, allurements or marriage'. The government of Yogi Adityanath

passed the Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act in 2021. Under this law, conversion requires permission from a district magistrate or you can end up in jail. Laws like this one blur the boundaries between voluntary and involuntary conversion and exist in other states. They are designed to halt all religious conversion, even voluntary.

As someone brought up in that old India in which Hindus were confident enough to not care whether someone converted to another religion, I confess that this season of Santa Claus, feasting and festivity makes me nostalgic for that older time. In the spirit in which the VHP has warned Hindus not to celebrate, I would like to warn the leaders of 'new India' that alarm bells have already started to ring, and they should pay attention to them. Pluralism is what makes India what it is. Without it there is a danger that we could descend into the grim situation in which some of our less pluralistic neighbouring countries are today.

Meanwhile, since I am not a Hindu, I shall be going to Christmas parties next week and celebrating merrily with our Christian brethren. If there is a church near where I am on Christmas eve, I shall perhaps attend midnight mass, because it is one of the most beautiful religious ceremonies I have ever witnessed. For my Hindu friends partying away recklessly next week, my advice is to keep a close watch on guests who look suspicious or strange. They could be VHP spies.

EMPIRE OF
THE MIND



Gurucharan Colkerkar
The former civil servant enjoys traversing the myriad spaces of ideas, thinkers, and books

STATE, MARKET, SOCIETY

A people-first progress model

It's been said for a long time that the development of North Karnataka should be a priority for the state. Every government in the last two or three decades has expressed its determination to develop the backward districts. In 2000, the state government set up a Regional Imbalances Redressal Committee, which made several recommendations. Since then, a fair amount of money has been spent on projects and initiatives recommended by this committee.

But notwithstanding the declarations of commitment, the gulf between the prosperous districts and the ones bringing up the rear has persisted. And in March last year, the government set up yet another committee, this time to not only assess development in those districts, but also suggest corrective steps.

Something quite similar is going on at the national level. Some states have significantly lagged others, and for a very long time now, there have been huge transfers of funds from the richer states to the poorer ones. Despite that, the states that bring up the bottom of development rankings have been there for long.

Why? And more importantly, what can we do differently? Perhaps we've been asking the wrong question. Throughout the years, when it has been apparent that a region is lagging, the instinctive response has been to ask - What should the government do? This assumes that the answer to the problem lies within the government, and therefore, we must look for the options available there. But what if we've been looking for our lost keys where there is light rather than where we dropped them?

Early after Independence, we became accustomed to the idea that the government must develop India. In an era of giant new PSUs and limited private investment, perhaps that was predictable. But as the private sector began to grow, the government should have withdrawn from its role in industry and focused on delivering public goods and services; instead, it has taken on new responsibilities without shedding its old roles.

Ashwin number of things they need to do has grown, governments have been responded by making local councils responsible for more functions. But they did not do that. As a result, they've overburdened with responsibilities and have to choose which things they'll pay attention to. In that struggle for attention, weaker regions have invariably lost out.

There has been an even bigger downside to this. Focusing excessively on what they could do to solve various public problems, governments did not ask what the people could do instead, and how the state could enable them. At a time when they should have been promoting the capabilities and freedoms of citizens, they did the opposite, insisting that only governments could be trusted and empowered to solve public problems.

The result is widespread scarcity across sectors. If we're serious about developing backward districts, we must first let them control more of their own destinies locally.

State and national control of development will almost always favour the places that are already top-of-mind to political leaders, leaving other places neglected. And second, we have to accept that development is not something the government alone creates; it needs society and the market too. There is evidence for this way of thinking. The states that have more decentralisation of governance also have multiple economic hubs and social infrastructure that nudges people to think they have a future in those places.

Amartya Sen famously pointed out that development is the expansion of people's freedoms, allowing them to seek and achieve the lives they wish to lead, including pursuing their economic goals. In this way of thinking, people are not mere beneficiaries of strategies to create investments or jobs. They are the reason we seek development, and it is in their imagination that we should pursue it.

I recently asked a senior executive of a leading IT firm about the company's experience in trying to shift some of its workforce to smaller towns. He was candid, pointing out that companies want to be where the talent is, and managers in particular don't want to go to places without social infrastructure.

We do need investments in the poorer districts. But more than that, we need better child care, education and health, more skills training, better public transport and credit access, and other inputs that enable people to develop their talents and have a good quality of life. And we need to trust that places with these features will be naturally attractive to the investments we wish to bring there.



Shaifali Sandhya
is an international psychologist, former professor, and writer on culture, cosmopolitanism, and global affairs

"My heart burns with grief," King Pandu lamented, at war with his thirst. Cursed, he was condemned to death if he so much as laid a finger on his wives. "What life remains for a man who cannot embrace the woman he loves?"

Desire, as depicted in the 2000-year-old story from the *Adi Parva*, influences our sense of self-worth. The ability to desire and feel loved shapes how men understand their place in the world. Men grow up believing they are only as good as their performance. When it falters - at work or in love - men feel less. In India, men's depression leads to erectile dysfunction, a persistent inability to achieve satisfactory sexual performance. ED is not a transient failure of desire, like the harangued husband during in vitro fertilisation. In thirty years, ED has spread from affecting 152 million in 1995 to over 320 million. Surveys suggest more than 35 Indian men face ED, while data indicate higher prevalence in Japan (one in three) and the United States (about one

a withdrawal from many traditional theatres - from the Middle East to peace-keeping to global governance - the document purports to release the US from burdens forged in earlier eras.

But this retreat is less an honest reappraisal of engagement than an act of magical decimation: it imagines that problems abroad - like wars, humanitarian crises, and instability - can simply be wished away or outsourced. The world, in effect, disappears unless it fits squarely inside the US strategic self-interest. That is not realism: it is a rhetorical spell, a wishful negation of complexity. For India, which has stepped into many of the vacuums left by US disengagement in recent years - in regional security, development, and institution-building - this 'Atlas shrug' is not comforting. It risks leaving behind a world receding not in response to realism, but in response to US indifference.

Perhaps the most striking re-orientation in the 2025 NSS is the prioritisation of the Western Hemisphere. The US now claims the Americas - not Eurasia, not Indo-Pacific - as the locus of its primary security interests. In doing so, Washington revives a 19th-century doctrine - a new Monroe Doctrine with a Trump Corollary - as the backbone of its global posture. This is not just a reallocation of resources; it is a mental re-mapping of global stakes. By turning to its 'backyard,' the US implicitly downgrades every other region, including South Asia and the Indian Ocean, to secondary or tertiary importance unless they serve narrow transactional purposes.

From New Delhi's vantage point, this shift feels like a re-definition of geography: a subtle but powerful message that India, and the broader Indo-Pacific, will count only so long as they help Washington manage its economic competition or keep China in check, but not as part of any vision for global public goods, climate, development, or multilateral cooperation.

The consequent realignment suggests transactional rather than substantive partnerships in the Indo-Pacific and with India. To give context

to this shift, the NSS document encourages 'improved commercial (and other) relations with India' and invites New Delhi to 'contribute to Indo-Pacific security,' presumably alongside the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). There is no denying that for India, this explicit mention carries some value. Washington continues to view India as a strategic pivot in deterrence against a rising China, and the NSS reaffirms that partnership. Yet, and here is where the magical thinking shows, the NSS frames such cooperation almost entirely in transactional, utility-based terms: commerce, technology, burden-sharing. The document is silent on values, long-term institution-building, or deeper structural cooperation. Democracy, climate, development - all the dimensions that matter to a rising power with global aspirations - are relegated to the shadows.

For India, this suggests that the US sees New Delhi not as an equal partner shaping a new world order, but as a tool to be deployed when it

is convenient. That is a dangerous illusion to accept, because it binds India to a worldview that may shift with Washington's internal politics, but may not deliver stability or global leadership. When major powers build their strategy around wishful visions - nostalgia rather than evidence, assertion rather than engagement - they risk creating instability masked as control. The 2025 NSS, for all its ambition and rhetoric, is in many respects a document of magical thinking. It conjures up a world simplified for American convenience: geography redrawn, allies redefined, global burdens shrugged off, and the future compressed into convenience. Strategy is not magic. America's new security doctrine reads like a spell cast in the hope that disorder will politely disappear. For India, a nation buffeted by climate, commerce, and conflict, there is no refuge in magical thinking. The world will not be wished into order. It will only be steadied by those prepared to face it as it is - unromantic, unruly, and very much awake.

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JUDGMENT DAY

International law, domestic procedure

People often believe that international law is not real law and is just a figment of a law professor's imagination. Whatever might be the merits of this view, it's certainly not true for situations in which international law impacts domestic legislation. Why should domestic law and international law interact at all, you might ask. Let's for the same reason why domestic commerce and international commerce interact in the globalised world.

But globalisation comes at a cost, which is that the same item of income might be taxed by two or more countries. Suppose an Indian company within a multinational group sends dividends to its American parent company. The American parent company will be taxed in India because the dividend is coming from an Indian source. The American parent company, since it is resident in the United States, will also be taxed on the same payment in the US. This is a fairly typical problem of double taxation and cannot be solved only through domestic legislation. Enter international law in the form of tax treaties.

India has agreed in most of its tax treaties to reduce or eliminate its tax on dividends paid up by Indian companies to their foreign parent companies, so as to reduce the incidence of double taxation on foreign companies. Here, international law does count for something, as it has tangible effects on taxpayers affected by Indian tax law.

But here, we arrive at a complication. The law that impacts taxpayers are instruments promulgated by Parliament. This stands to reason; parliaments are elected bodies tasked with enacting laws for citizens. How is it possible, then, for the executive - a set of senior officials in the government - to enter into an agreement with foreign countries that modifies the tax obligations as set by Parliament?

In some countries, it's possible for international treaties to have a direct impact on the country, without the intervention of domestic law, but not in India. In India, the executive can enter into international treaties, but the treaty will have no effect domestically unless it is transformed into domestic law by Parliament. Section 90 of the Income Tax Act 1961 states that when India enters into a tax treaty with another country, it shall have the effect of modifying the tax obligation of persons to whom the treaty applies. However, this section also envisages cases where the official notification issued by the central government implementing the treaty. While the official notification appears to be a formality, it is in fact an indication of parliamentary intervention in the application of international law to domestic affairs.

The scope and impact of section 90 was considered recently by the Supreme Court in *Assessing Officer (International Taxation) v. Nestle*. In some of its treaties, India has agreed to an MFN (Most Favoured Nation) clause in its tax treaties. This is like a generation of good tidings clauses. It states that if India enters into more favourable provisions in the future in tax treaties with other countries, it will be obliged to apply the identical favourable provisions to MFN partner countries as well. That's the whole point of being an MFN partner. Similar MFN clauses are present in India's WTO agreements as well.

But there's a twist to the case. The government argued, and the Supreme Court agreed, that the MFN clauses will operate to bring more favourable tax treatment to taxpayers only if the government issues a separate notification under section 90 implementing the MFN treatment. Why so? Because only then will the legislative pre-approval loop in section 90 be completed. For non-lawyers, this appears to be an unnecessary bureaucratic complication, but for the Supreme Court, this was of capital importance.

This is one of those instances where the formality of the law becomes of great importance, and is one of those puzzling features of the law that annoys the public. Formalities in the law abound. Most property transfers require registration. Wills need a certain number of witnesses. Court cases require specific documentation. Why can't the law be simpler? Unfortunately, the answer is complicated. Formalities serve various functions. Sometimes, they make evidentiary arguments about past events easier. Sometimes, as in the *Nestle* case, they are in the service of making sure international law applies in domestic law only after due deliberation. Often, formalities are meant to constrain arbitrary behaviour by government officials. Many tax collection proceedings have failed because the wrong official sent a show-cause notice. Formalities matter. To what extent is a discussion for another day.

instead may struggle with their desire brought on by ED through: extramarital affairs or one-night stands to prove their virility (novelty boosts dopamine, temporarily masking ED, escalating use of porn; avoidance of sex for fears of 'failing' partners); avoidance of getting married and dating; overinvestment in work or fitness, or they may blame their partners for being unattractive. Recognising the anxiety-depression connection can empower partners to engage in conversations about intimacy, health, and ultimately, strengthen their bond.

Responding meaningfully to ED demands more than medication; it requires cultural permission for men to voice their struggles with desire, fear, and love. Without that permission, anxiety hardens into illness, intimacy collapses into silence, and love becomes fraught with shame. Before dysfunction takes hold of the body, it takes hold of meaning - and before men lose their capacity for erection, they often lose their confidence of being loved. Silence, not erectile dysfunction, is the real affliction.

QUITE
UNGRATEFUL-
FORGETTING
THE MAN!



GADFLY

Reading on the move

Public transport marked my life as a student. Growing up in a corner of north Mumbai in the 1990s and 2000s, I felt the value of the city's overcrowded buses and local trains, whenever I left it to visit other towns, which only had buses and auto-rickshaws for public transport. In those toddler Internet days, people read printed materials in trains, buses, stations, depots, and hospitals. They read standing, sitting, crouched between aisles, amid rows of people toting and froing from workplaces. They read newspapers, magazines, poetry, history, religious texts, smut, in English, Urdu, Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Punjabi, French, and Spanish. They read and swayed as the Mumbai local's handles on the top of the train coach clinked the bar that held them. They read fat 19th-century novels and solved cryptic crosswords, playing with crypts on margins of the paper using a pen or pencil tucked behind one ear. As a college student, books became my BFFs. In them, I saw my own and others' feelings refracted; lives laid bare.

Over one summer as a student in the late 1990s, I freelanced for a tiny website and a daily paper in the southern end of the city. In this period, finding time only on the bus and train journeys, I completed reading the three novels of Franz Kafka. Local trains at that time had some of Mumbai's best writers travelling in them, and sometimes, one struck up a conversation with them and later saw them at the once-a-month poetry

reading at the British Council or American Centre.

When the new term began, again on the early morning train to college and the early evening one from it (almost like a typical Mumbai office-goer), R K Narayan, Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, A K Ramanujan and the Brontes became friends. I began loving reading poetry. I'd lift my eyes to reflect on the mess of Mumbai outside as the moisture-wrought windows of the train peeled paint and left its residue on the pages of the book in my hands. I found one sight, the mangrove gutter that one crossed between the stops of Mahim Junction and Bandra, unbearable, and

office-rum cab. JM Coetzee, Cormac McCarthy, Lawrence Durrell, and Maya Angelou saw me through its heat, cold, dust, and smog. A dried hibiscus leaf from Lodhi Gardens has bookmarked my old Neruda collection for nearly 18 years.

I'm a quarter century older now. This year, more than ever, in all my years as a hungry reader and lover of the Word, I've felt only great literature levels to the quiescence of life's ambiguities and ambivalences. I'm a teacher now, and ride the expensive Mamma Metro. In the slings and arrows that life has thrown, the 40-minute ride that takes me underneath and above central and southern Bengaluru, across rivers-turned-gutters, corporate office precincts, university greens, and army lands to my workplace, when much of the world has its nose to the cell phone, I've read 10 books in 2025. They've all been emotionally wrenching, and in these demanding literateurs' words, I see the lives of people I've known and loved and whom either I have left or who have left me behind.

"History isn't the lies of the victors, as I once glibly assured Old Joe Hunt; I know that now..." writes Julian Barnes in *The Sense of an Ending* that I devoured twice this year. "It's more the memories of the survivors, most of whom are neither victorious or defeated." Stunned, I lift my head, gazing at the passing homes close to the metro pillar. Reading remains the most stirring stationary movement ever.

Later, I studied in Delhi and became a hack there. Like many others, I read in buses, autos, and

often the train would stop over it for a minute or two. I'd tie a kerchief around my nose like a biker and dive into what I was reading to avoid looking out till the train gathered pace. I'd lift my eyes off a moment, an image, a sentence of the greats I was reading offered, and knew it spoke immediately to the feelings of the person an inch from my nose, who was staring at my book's cover.

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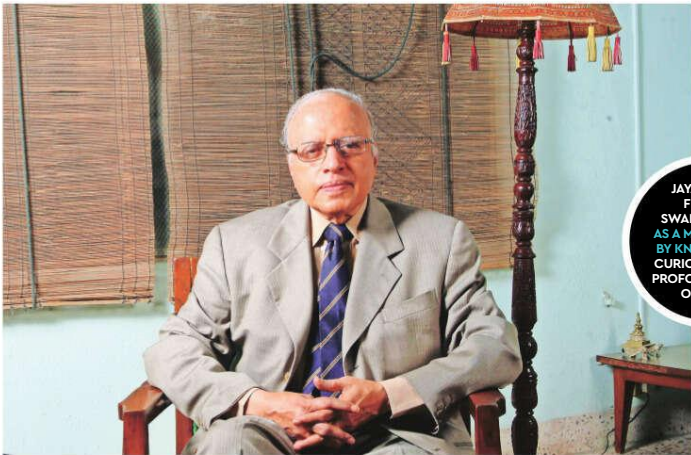
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Words Worth

Sunday, December 21, 2025

Alchemy on the field

A biography of agricultural scientist MS Swaminathan is also India's story of self-sufficiency in food



MS Swaminathan: The Man Who Fed India
Priyambada Jayakumar
HarperCollins
Pp 324, ₹799

REENA SINGH

SOME LIVES ARE so deeply intertwined with the history of a nation that to tell their story is to tell the story of the country itself. *The Man Who Fed India* by Priyambada Jayakumar captures one such life, that of MS Swaminathan. The revolutionary scientist believed that science is a form of service and a way to heal the wounds of hunger that he witnessed during the Bengal Famine of 1943—an experience that planted the seeds of his lifelong mission to ensure that no one in his country would ever go hungry again. As a child, watching his

uncles fret over the shifting prices of crops and unpredictable monsoon, he learned that agriculture was not merely about planting and harvesting but about integrated aspects within agriculture. These early observations would later blossom into his advocacy for more sustainable and inclusive farming practices, as well as his commitment to recognising the labour of women in agriculture. One of the most compelling parts of the book is Jayakumar's account of Swaminathan's groundbreaking research on wheat and his partnership with American biologist Norman Borlaug. Swaminathan had thrown himself completely into the study of wheat varieties, trying

to replicate gene transfer methods that had worked with rice. His relentless experiments, from genetic trials and radiation based techniques, taught him that science alone could not solve hunger. It needed collaboration and a shared purpose, so he invited Borlaug to India. The two scientists embarked on a journey across rural landscapes, speaking directly to farmers and observing their challenges firsthand. When the time finally came to introduce the new seeds, Swaminathan and his team took to the villages themselves. They demonstrated the wheat's potential to farmers who were hesitant to trust yet another promise of prosperity. After

patient persuasion, some farmers agreed to experiment with the seeds. The results were astonishing. Yields multiplied, and families who had long survived on subsistence farming began to glimpse the possibility of surplus and stability. Swaminathan's openness to local feedback led to the creation of a variety that was both resilient and culturally rooted, which became emblematic of his 'land-to-lab' analogy. Jayakumar also gives attention to Swaminathan's ethical clarity. In a time when science can easily be driven by ambition or politics, he stood for something quieter but more enduring, which is the belief that knowledge should serve

people, not profit. The book acknowledges his critics too. It explores the unintended effects of the Green Revolution: soil exhaustion, the ecological costs of chemical fertilisers, and the widening gap between rich and poor farmers. Yet what keeps the narrative honest is how Swaminathan himself grappled with these issues. Jayakumar portrays him not as someone defensive about his legacy but as a man always willing to rethink and learn.

The structure of the book feels organic, more like a conversation than a timeline. Each chapter offers a balance of information and emotion, moving easily between personal anecdotes and national developments. Jayakumar frames Swaminathan as a man guided by knowledge, curiosity and a profound sense of duty. The Green Revolution, so often reduced to statistics and policy, feels personal and alive here. We follow a young scientist through muddy fields, listening to farmers and carrying the burden of every failed crop. It is in these moments that the science feels human, and the story, unforgettable.

Through Swaminathan's story, Jayakumar also reflects on the evolution of India itself. The reader witnesses a country emerging from colonial shadows, struggling with scarcity, and learning to believe in self-sufficiency. The Green Revolution transformed India's relationship with food, with science, and with its own sense of possibility. Revolutions are sometimes not born in noise but in patient dedication. The book stands as both an ode to one man and an invitation to understand that every grain carries within it a story of vision, struggle and grace. In Priyambada Jayakumar's hands, MS Swaminathan's life becomes more than a biography. It tells us how one person's conviction can nourish a nation, and on how compassion, when cultivated with courage, can change the course of history.

Dr Reena Singh is senior fellow, JCRIR (Views expressed are personal)

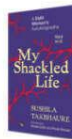
JAYAKUMAR FRAMES SWAMINATHAN AS A MAN GUIDED BY KNOWLEDGE, CURIOSITY AND A PROFOUND SENSE OF DUTY

ON THE SHELF



FORGOTTEN FOOTPRINTS
Prateek Dasgupta
Hachette
Pp 448, ₹699

What is Agatha Christie's connection to the world's earliest known city? Did the first cotton farmers practice dentistry? Did the Balkans know writing before Mesopotamia? Embark on a journey through time, from the Ice Age to the Middle Ages, exploring lesser-known civilisations shrouded in mystery. Discover stories that shed light on the underappreciated peoples of the ancient world. Written in an engaging style, this book takes you around the globe while providing insights into life in the distant past.



MY SHACKLED LIFE
Sushila Takbhaure
Speaking Tiger Books
Pp 308, ₹599

My Shackled Life is the searing autobiography of Sushila Takbhaure, a Dalit woman whose story reveals not only the brutal machinery of caste but also the intricate cruelty of patriarchy. Born into the Valmiki community of Banapura in Madhya Pradesh, Takbhaure chronicles her struggle to rise from poverty and social stigma to become a teacher, scholar and voice of resistance for her people.



THE WOMAN WHO WORE A HAT
Kamal Desai
Speaking Tiger Books
Pp 128, ₹399

First published in Marathi in 1975, *The Woman Who Wore a Hat* is a landmark of Indian feminist fiction. In its quiet yet piercing way, it dismantles the boundaries between the masculine and feminine, sanity and rebellion, belonging and exile, memory and selfhood. With wit, lyricism, and sharp psychological insight, Kamal Desai traces a woman's insistence on choosing her own meaning in a world that seeks to name and contain her.



PORTRAITS FROM MEMORY
Mahadevi Varma
HarperCollins
Pp 272, ₹399

Mahadevi Varma was perhaps the greatest Hindi woman poet of the 20th century and a magnificent writer of prose. This book brings together two collections of pen-portraits, *Aatek ke Chalachitra* (Moving Pictures of the Past, 1941) and *Smriti ke Rekhaen* (Lines of Memory, 1943), written by her. The author tells the unforgettable life-stories of many people she knew. One gets glimpses, too, of Mahadevi's own unusual life.



ABSOLUTE JAFAR
Jafar Samath Banerjee
HarperCollins
Pp 272, ₹799

An Indo-Pak romance withstands years of toxic nationalism between two hostile countries, only to unravel in a third, in Europe. Jafar, born of that romance, inherits a history he has no control over. Set in a world where bureaucracies and borders shape human relationships, Samath Banerjee's *Absolute Jafar*—perhaps the author's most personal work yet—is a poignant meditation on belonging and becoming.

Pot of plots

Tales from the Andhra coast deck out a fun-filled rainbow banner

FAIZAL KHAN

TELUGU WRITER MOHAMMED Khadeer Babu swears his literary allegiance to a small town in Andhra Pradesh. It is Babu's home town, called Kaval. Nearly a decade ago, he published a bouquet of stories about Kaval in Telugu. Babu's tales about his fascinating town are now available in an English translation, titled *That's a Fire Ant Right Right There*.

Divided into two parts, to equally share the author's sentiments for his family and friends, the collection of a whopping 50 short stories from his childhood narates life in a coastal town in the '90s when the country was slowly beginning to make forceful new changes in the economic, political and social milieu. Babu tells tales of his home and around in a straightforward manner. The home is that of an ordinary Muslim family. The father is an electrician, the mother, a homemaker. They have four children. The father's mother completes the family. The ordinariness of an Indian family is always complicated like that of the country. Babu's stories confirm that it doesn't matter whether the family is Muslim or Hindu, Sikh or Christian. It is still complicated.

The ordinary and the complex feed into each other like the mouthwatering rice dish every time the family prepares to feast, for transporting it to Pendum Ravi, Palavenkareddy and Subbareddy, his friends in Kaval. "Thanks to my father, not a single Ramzan did we have the good fortune of being the first to eat the *palav*," writes Babu. In *My Dadima, His Nanamma and a*

Bamma in Between, the often unacknowledged stewardship of struggling families by their women in the face of suffocating patriarchy comes to the fore. Dadima is Babu's grandmother, Nanamma is his friend Ketireddy Sridharreddy's grandmother who raised her teenage son after her husband's untimely death, and Bamma, his neighbour Murali's grandmother who never forgot to give Babu "a *puppuchekola* (a popular fried snack) or two" to eat even when she was busy.

My Mother the Simmer reveals the secret behind the author's mother suddenly falling ill as the time for fasting approaches in the month of Ramzan. "Do you see, ma,....her cunning plays? The month of Ramzan is starting in two days and she's already begun with her acting. All this is only to skip the Roza fasting, no?" Babu's father tells his mother. The complaint soon begins an examination of each

other's ability to observe or skip fasting. Babu's brother is keen to observe Roza because he sees the benefit of breaking the fast by eating pomegranates, watermelons, grapes, *pappasam* and *amboli* porridge at the mosque for *ifhar*. "I will make mincemeat of you, *haram*—my son, even if you think of it," warns his mother. "You want to fast in these burning summer days and do what? Kill yourself? It becomes apparent who holds the family together in good times and bad times and in between...its women." *That's a Fire Ant Right Right There* pays tribute to the unserving spirit of its dominant characters whose reward for cleverness is camaraderie rather than camouflaged gains. "Kavali, Kavali, Kavali, three times. Those were his last words," reads a note from the author at the beginning of the book, which refers to his father's death nearly three decades ago.

"My father didn't care about gathering assets while he was alive. He gathered debts," continues the note. Bengaluru-based writer and translator DV Subashini, who translated the tales into English, brings Kavali and its culture alive by retaining the original Urdu and English words. Through Kavali, Babu builds another Malgudi for his readers, only it is real.

Faizal Khan is a freelancer



That's a Fire Ant Right Right There
Mohammed Khadeer Babu
Speaking Tiger Books
Pp 288, ₹499



Digital traps

An account of the anatomy of cybercrime serves as a warning

RISHI RAJ

THESE ARE TIMES when headlines are filled with stories of digital-arrest scams, *lamtara*-style phishing rackets and shadowy call centres preying on vulnerable people across borders. Technology has opened doors which were once unimaginable, but it has also thrown open new corridors for high-tech crime. Every smartphone notification carries both opportunity and risk, and the rise of cyber syndicates presents a reminder that even dreams of a better life can become traps. Shaileendra Jha's *Press 9 for a Crime* is set against this contemporary backdrop, and, therefore, feels familiar as it mirrors the reality one hears or reads about almost every day.

The book revolves around the Anand family, living in a cramped lower-income Delhi neighbourhood where aspirations are high and options limited. Their hopes rest on Atul, the eldest son, who's responsible, hardworking and the one supposed to elevate the family to a more secure future. When he lands a promising job in Bangkok, it appears to be the long-awaited turning point. But in the world Jha portrays, good fortune is often the first step into a deep and dangerous maze. Atul's disappearance after arriving in Bangkok is the opening of a dark tunnel into a cyber scam syndicate head-

quartered in Cambodia. His family's confusion and helplessness echo the emotions of countless real-life families who struggle to navigate systems stacked against them.

As seen, the younger brother, becomes the emotional engine of the story. Known for his impulsive decisions, he is the least likely hero, and the most compelling. His determination to track down Atul is born not out of strategy but out of pure brotherly instinct. Without resources, without connections and without a coherent plan, he ventures into the dangerous world of cross-border crime networks. The journey is messy, terrifying and full of missteps, but it captures something powerful about the ordinary individual pushed to extraordinary lengths by desperation and love.

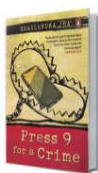
Jha uses the Anand family as a lens to

examine the anatomy of cybercrime—how these massive, scam operations function and how they feed on economic vulnerability. Every step of Asem's journey exposes another layer of exploitation, which includes fraudulent job agents selling illusions of foreign success, criminal syndicates operating with military precision, and the horrifying transformation of victims into unwilling workers trapped inside scam hubs. The book forces the reader to confront the uncomfortable truth that cybercrime is not just about technology, but about people, those who scam and those who are scammed, and those who are forced into doing both.

What gives the novel its momentum is its pace. The language is direct, accessible and uncensored, slipping seamlessly between Indian-English and Hindi in a way that most urban readers will instantly recognise.

Jha brings the same urgency and realism that shaped the OTT series *Ghahan*, created by him in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots at Bokaro in Jharkhand. His characters bleed, panic, hope and persist. The plot is tight and never loses sight of the emotional aspects of a family refusing to give up on each other. While the book brings out the brutality of digital exploitation, it does not slip into cynicism. The lesson it offers is that resilience does pay eventually.

Press 9 for a Crime is not just a thriller. It holds up a mirror to the digital age while reminding that while every scam has a story of shattered trust behind it, salvation sometimes emerges from the most unexpected place—a stubborn younger brother who refuses to stop fighting in this case. In a world where technology has made crime borderless, Jha's novel brings to the fore that when it comes to protecting people one loves and cares for, there are indeed no borders.



Press 9 for a Crime
Shaileendra Jha
Penguin Random House
Pp 180, ₹299



A SRI ADHIKARI BROTHERS ENTERPRISE

GOVERNANCE **now**

LET'S MAKE IT WORK

WEEKEND | SUNDAY | DECEMBER 21, 2025

Dr Vani Archana

Two weeks ago, 28-year-old Senthil Kumar (name changed) from Tiruppur died of a heart attack in a labour camp near Dammam, Saudi Arabia. His body came home to Chennai because his employer agreed to pay for the airfare. His family received 10 lakh under the Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana (PBMY). The district collector handed over the cheque, cameras flashed, and the story ended there. Senthil's case is the only side of PBMY the Indian state likes to showcase: the neat success story where the system appears to work. The rest is silence. Senthil was, in a brutal sense, fortunate. The policy would have paid the paperwork was in order, the claim went through. For every family like his, there are hundreds of thousands of Tamil workers in the Gulf and Malaysia who live and work as if insured, but are effectively unprotected.

Tamil Nadu's own data show that about 2.2 million emigrants were abroad in 2015, sending home roughly 61,843-62,000 crore that year – around 14-15% of the state's income and more than the state's own tax revenue. Those remittances build houses, pay school fees and plug holes in state finances. Yet, when these same workers fall ill, collapse from heat or are injured on site, the system that counts their money looks the other way. On paper, PBMY is the shield. Since 2003, and in a revised form from 2017, it has been mandatory for ECR passport workers going to the Gulf and other destinations. For a one time premium of 275 – 375 for two or three years, it promises 10 lakh for accidental death or permanent disability, 1 lakh in medical cover (capped at 50,000 per hospitalisation), 50,000 for family hospitalisation in India, a 35,000 maternity benefit, repatriation airfare and up to 45,000 in legal expenses. The brochure looks generous. The lived reality is less so.

Everyday health needs, outpatient visits, diagnostics, medicines for back pain and hypertension or depression are almost entirely outside the frame, even though these are exactly what drive most out of pocket health spending for migrant and low income households in India. Then there is the question of access. To activate the "safety net" beyond death benefits, a worker or family must be able to document illness or injury in ways that satisfy insurers and missions: proper hospital bills, employer certificates, sometimes a police report. Under the kafaala system, where sponsors control mobility, documentation for a passport, obtaining that paperwork without anger-



When insurance fails our migrant workers

Rethinking Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana for Tamil Emigrants

ing an employer is difficult. Miss a stamp, a date, a signature, and the claim can be rejected. National data illustrate how rarely the safety net is actually used: between 2006-07 and June 2025, over 89 lakh PBMY policies were issued, but only 3,302 claims were received and 2,210 settled – a crude claims ratio of around 0.04%. This vanishingly small number sits uneasily beside evidence from the Asia-Pacific that over 80% of migrant workers report work related injuries or illnesses, many in high risk sectors such as construction and manufacturing.

Awareness is the other weak link. The Tamil Nadu Migration Survey shows that in one in ten households has an emigrant, but that that emigration is highly stratified: better educated, repeat migrants are more likely to understand contracts and schemes, while first time, low educated workers and women in domestic work depend almost entirely on brokers. Policies are almost never explained in Tamil; claim procedures, online portals and embassy contact points remain abstract ideas for someone who will soon be living in a fenced camp outside Riyadh or Doha. For many workers, "insurance" is some-

thing that agents and employers talk about, not a right they know how to use. Women bear the sharpest edge of this neglect. TNMS suggests that about 20% of female emigrants are illiterate, and a large share of women from Tamil Nadu in the Gulf are employed as domestic and care workers, isolated in private homes where working hours, mobility and bodily autonomy are tightly controlled. Sexual harassment, overwork, miscarriages and mental health crises rarely fit neatly into the claim categories of an accident death hospitalisation product. The maternity benefit looks progressive on paper; in practice, pregnancy can trigger termination and forced return. PBMY may finance the ticket home but does little to address the structural violence that made that ticket necessary. This is not just an implementation gap; it reflects a deeper choice.

The Indian state has tacitly accepted a model in which the role of a poor Tamil worker is to migrate, endure, remit, and if he or she dies, to leave behind a cheque that proves the system is "working". A low premium, catastrophic insurance scheme becomes a convenient fig leaf: it allows Delhi to claim it

has protected its migrants without seriously confronting the Gulf's labour regimes, the recruitment industry's debt traps, or the lack of meaningful consular enforcement. Tamil Nadu, for its part, has world class data on migration through TNMS, which quantifies not just remittances but also costs, debt, and reasons for return.

Yet unlike Kerala, which actively leverages migration data to shape policy and institutions, Tamil Nadu has been slow to build a robust state level welfare architecture for its emigrants. There is no dedicated migrant welfare board with teeth, no Tamil language 24x7 helpline in major destination countries, and no public reporting on how many PBMY claims filed by Tamil workers are accepted, delayed or rejected. Fixing this does not require reinventing the wheel; it requires political will and a shift in perspective. First, PBMY literacy must be treated as a right, not an afterthought. Pre departure orientation should be compulsory, in Tamil, with clear visual material and take home information, backed by simple SMS or app based tools that let migrants and families verify policy status and submit basic claim information without going through employers.

Second, the product itself needs rethinking: moving from a narrow hospitalisation-only model towards a benefit package that meaningfully supports outpatient care and mental health, especially for workers in high risk and isolated settings.

Third, transparency is non negotiable: annual, state wise, gender-disaggregated data on PBMY policies, claims, rejections and processing times should be published and debated. Ultimately, the debate around PBMY is a test of what kind of relationship India wants with its emigrant citizens. Are they merely remittance-sending bodies whose deaths can be wrapped in a cheque and a condolence speech, or workers and rights holders whose health and dignity the state is willing to defend beyond its borders? Tamil Nadu's 2.2 million emigrants already underwrite a significant share of the state's prosperity.

They deserve more than a photograph with a collector and a closed file. They deserve a protection regime that works while they are alive, not just compensation after they are gone.

(Dr Vani Archana is Senior Fellow, Pehle India Foundation, New Delhi.)

Lessons from the Emergency

A new collection of essays revisits the event from a variety of angles, draws lessons for democracy

GN Bureau

Emergency transformed Indian polity, and shaped law enforcement and penal practices, the media, student movements, judicial responses, subaltern politics and literary expression. Here is an excerpt from the introduction by the editors – Peter Ronald deSouza, Senior Research Associate, African Centre for Epistemology and Philosophy of Science (ACEPS), University of Johannesburg, and Trustee of the Institute of Social Studies Trust, and Harsh Sethi, formerly Consulting Editor of Seminar.

Lessons for democracy

The overwhelming lesson that we learn from studying the Emergency, in all five frameworks, is the failure of institutions. We had wanted to use a less dramatic term than 'failure', to describe the situation, such as 'infirmity', 'deficiency', or 'weakness', but the need to be true to the evidence compelled us to stay with 'failure'. The institutions that were chosen by the Constituent Assembly to safeguard our democracy from tyranny unfortunately failed us during the Emergency.

This is true of the 'deliberative' institutions (the cabinet, parliament and state assemblies) as well as the 'oversight' institutions (the courts, CAG, CVC and media), as also the 'penalty imposing' institutions (the courts, police and jails). The Shah Commission report details this failure. The most disappointing of these institutions was the Supreme Court. The 'ADM Jabalpur' judgement is a reminder of the highest court's potential for failure. It was only the dissenting Judge H. R. Khanna who demonstrated that it was possible to work for an institution, defending its independence in the face of an authoritarian Executive. Justice Khanna showed that the principles of 'separation of power' and 'checks and balances' need not be vacuous. He had the spine to uphold them.

What makes for an independent judiciary? This is an urgent issue since it is at the centre of many of the challenges confronting democracies today in 2025 – in many democracies across the world such as Poland, Israel, India and the USA. When the Emergency was imposed, however, all institutions, for some reason, succumbed to the Executive, contributing to its transition from one that was constrained by these institutions to one that was unconstrained. A supreme authority emerged in the political realm – an Executive largely unbound. The parliament, for example, without much demerit passed the 39th and 42nd Constitutional Amendments that Mrs Gandhi had wanted, giving herself extraordinary powers. (See the chapter by Ujjwal Kumar Singh and Anupama Roy, and also the one by R. Sudarshan.) The failure of institutions is a fact. What is required, not just for India but also for other democracies, is an explanation for why this happened. Why did they crumble, even though they were not expected to, when faced with a demanding and fierce authority? Three possible explanations can be

forwarded. The first is fear. Officials who hold important offices of the state, offices that can halt the movement towards tyranny, imagine that if they express their opposition to decisions of the Executive, they will face retribution. They have chosen the prudent route. Aspiring tyrants therefore cause officials to look over their shoulders rather than at constitutional principles, and rules and regulations from which they draw their authority, while making decisions.

The second explanation is collusion. Officials collude in the arbitrary decisions of the authoritarian leader because they believe they can gain benefits, such as career advancement and plum postings, from such collusion. When this happens in the case of members of the judiciary, we must accept that we have lost an important, perhaps the key, bulwark against authoritarianism. The sad justification by Justice P. N. Bhagwati for his collusion in the 'ADM Jabalpur' case shows this weakness to seduction by power. One does not need to look very hard to find such collusion. The challenge is how to fix it, if it is fixable at all. Justice P. N. Bhagwati who was a member of the notorious 'ADM Jabalpur' bench of the Supreme Court wrote an obsequious letter to Mrs Gandhi when she returned to power in 1980 where he described her as the 'symbol of the hopes and aspirations of the poor' and praised her for her 'iron will and firm determination, uncanny insight and dynamic vision, great administrative capacity and vast experience'. For a sitting judge of the Supreme Court to write to a prime minister such a fawning letter is embarrassing.

Thirty year later he regretted his being part of the majority vote on ADM Jabalpur. I was wrong. The majority judgement was not the correct judgement... I would agree with what Justice Khanna did. I am sorry" (for the judgement) he told The Indian Express in 2011. Bhagwati added: 'Initially, I did not favour the majority view. But ultimately, I do not know why I was persuaded to agree with them. I was a novice at that time, a young judge... I was handling this type of litigation for the first time. But it was an act of weakness on my part.' (The Indian Express 2011) This is a pathetic admission coming from a former Chief Justice of India. The third level of institutional failure is the delegation of authority – to implement the orders of the Emergency – to levels where it should not have been delegated, that is, to the jailors, constables and the petty officials, who are the face of the state for most common citizens. On the contrary, threats and the display of coercion are an essential aspect of their sense of office. An example would be the arrest of Prabir Purkayastha by DSP P. S. Bhinder, and keeping him in jail even though Bhinder knew that it was a case of mistaken identity; or Navin Chawla preparing lists of political opponents who were to be arrested. It is the jailor and the constable, however, who shaped the coercive dimension of the Emergency through torture and encounter killings. (See the detailing of these atrocities in the book by John Dayal and Ajay Bose [2018].)

We flag it here because it is here where safeguards have to be considered, to eliminate both collusion and the tendency towards tyranny by the officials of the state. How does one protect democracy from the dangers of 'anticipatory obedience'? To an ordinary citizen, it is the 'thane' who is feared even in normal times. Beyond fear, self-interest and collusion, there were also individuals in the administration who, while disagreeing with many of the decisions taken, chose not to resign or openly dissent. Possibly, they felt that as insiders they might be in a position to help contain and dilute at least some of the excesses of the period. This is the classic challenge of 'now is not the time' that individuals in positions of authority face when their institutions are descending into tyranny. Universities across the Western world are plagued with this dilemma. The counter to this incursion is the other question, which must also be faced: if not now, when? During the Emergency, there were individuals who, in addition to recording the excesses, helped individuals evade arrest, provided information to regime opponents, and attempted to block/slow down proposals that they perceived as harmful.

Excerpt from the book (50 Years of the Indian Emergency: Lessons for Democracy, Edited by Peter Ronald deSouza and Harsh Sethi)

These are edited excerpts. Read full articles on governancenow.com

India-Russia ties: Anchored in trust, deep mutual understanding

Putin visit reaffirms strengths of relationship, plans to strengthen it

Shankar Kumar

Unlike the US and the West, Russia does not have a relationship with India merely based on transactional exchange of goods or commodities. Instead, it is based on deep mutual understanding and trust, which have helped the two countries in navigating ups and downs of international geopolitics for decades.

When the US, under the Donald Trump administration, imposed discriminatory steep 50% tariffs on India for purchasing oil from Russia, New Delhi instead of buckling under pressure, sided more strongly with Moscow. It can be seen in India's continued purchase of oil from Russia. Yet, cause of heartburns among western leaders would not be India's willingness to maintain autonomy in its foreign policy approach; rather New Delhi's decision to go against welcome to Russian president Vladimir Putin during his visit for the 23rd annual India-Russia summit. For the first time an Indian Prime Minister went to the airport to welcome the Russian president. What was most significant in terms of optics was both PM Narendra Modi and president Putin travelled together – from the airport to the PM's official residence in New Delhi. The symbolism was unmistakably present in the move; it signalled clearly that both New Delhi and Moscow were keen to work together, free from the pulls and pressure of the US and Europe.

Economic engagement

Invariably, depth of friendship, warmth of camaraderie and firmness of strategic intent were on full



display when the two leaders, amid rapid shift in global alignments, decided to give thrust to their bilateral engagement. In this context, both leaders announced the elevation of their ongoing economic cooperation to new heights with both sides committing to achieve a \$100 billion target in bilateral trade well before 2030. However, since the objective is to broaden the basket of trade, both sides announced an Economic Cooperation Program until 2030. "This will make our trade and investment more diversified, balanced, and sustainable; and will also add new dimensions to our areas of cooperation," Modi said in his statement during a joint press conference on Friday. This reflected India's intent to give a meaningful push to the partnership wherein bilateral trade has been usually around few commodities including oil and gas. Since the aim is to strengthen economic cooperation between the two countries, India, first of all, called for an urgent requirement for immediate removal of non-tariff barriers and regulatory impediments.

"Enhancing Indian exports to Russia in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, agriculture, marine products, and textiles is important to correct the trade imbalance. Each one of these sectors, in considerable detail, was discussed between the two leaders today, with both of them pointing to the opportunities that existed in these areas," foreign secretary Vikram Misra said in a special briefing on the Russian president's visit. However, amid this, what would turn out to be a major initiative towards strengthening economic ties was their decision to continue bilateral trade through Rupee-Ruble mechanism. The Leaders appreciated the ongoing intensification of the joint work on a Free Trade Agreement on goods between India and the Eurasian Economic Union covering sectors of mutual interest," the India-Russia joint statement issued following the 23rd annual summit said.

Defence cooperation

Even though no significant agreement or announcement was made in the field of defence because of possible noise it would create in the

western world and China, both India and Russia decided to enhance their military ties through the Inter-Governmental Commission on Military & Military Technical Cooperation (IRIG-M&MTC) route. Established in 2000, it oversees the entire spectrum of military-technical collaboration between the two countries. On December 24, ahead of the annual summit between Modi and Putin, India's defence minister Rajnath Singh co-chaired the 22nd session of IRIG-M&MTC at Manekshaw Centre in New Delhi. Broadly speaking, joint research and development, co-development and co-production of advanced defence technology and systems have been the thrust of India-Russia cooperation in defence.

Energy cooperation

Since energy forms an important pillar of the India-Russia special and privileged strategic partnership, the two countries discussed ongoing cooperation between their companies in the field of oil and oil products, oil refining and petrochemical technologies, oilfield ser-

vices, and upstream technologies. Emphasis was placed on development of LNG and LPG related infrastructure and cooperation in various existing projects lying in their respective countries, including underground coal gasification (UCG) technology and nuclear projects. Both sides also agreed to resolve challenges faced by their investors in the oil and gas field.

Nuclear and space cooperation

The two countries agreed to broaden the area of cooperation in nuclear energy, including fuel cycle, life cycle support for operating Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNPP) and non-power applications, as well as to elaborate new agenda of interaction in the field of peaceful use of atomic energy and related high technologies. India aims to increase its nuclear energy capacity to 100 GW by 2047. The sides welcomed the progress achieved in implementation of KKNPP including the construction of the remaining NPP (nuclear power plant) units and agreed on adhering to the timeline for supplies of equipment and fuel," the joint statement stated.

Conclusion

In the course of two-day visit of the Russian president, the two countries signed as many as 16 agreements, including maritime cooperation which particularly envisages training of Indian seafarers in polar waters through programmes designed and facilitated by Russian agencies. Apart from these agreements, five announcements were also made, which included granting of a 30-day e-tourist visa on gratis basis to Russian nationals on reciprocal basis. They also underlined the primacy of respect for international law and emphasized their commitment to the purposes and the principles of the UN Charter.

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Jamevar-Kashmir

With Tancholai as the weaving technique (silk threads, dense patterns without cut at the back), each handcrafted saree in opulent silk is a labour-intensive outcome of exquisite Indian craftsmanship merging Persian influences.

Leheriya & Bandhani-Rajasthan & Gujarat

Leheriya means 'wave'. A tie and dye method, with wavy patterns is sparked by the waves of the desert sands of Rajasthan. Originating in Jodhpur and Jaipur, the chevron-like designs can be found on cotton and silk sarees. It is generally teamed with abhala work (mirror) cholis and chunky silver ornaments. Bandhani or Bandhej engages the ancient painstaking process of tie-and-dye technique to create resist-dyed forms. Red and yellow hues dominate to represent auspiciousness in weddings.

Patola & Bhujodi-Gujarat

Time-honoured methods, labour-oriented double ikat woven silk from Patan, Patola spotlight themes like human/bird, betel leaf, gem stones, elephants, geometric patterns, and the designs are reversible. With a huge cultural significance, it forms a part of the bridal trousseau to ward off evil eye. The synergy of various elements creates a grand and dramatic saree. Bhujodi saree owes its name to its place of origin in Kutch. Kala cotton—a rare organic, rain-fed cotton native to this region, is generally on which the extra weft technique is used. Unevenness in weave with loose threads on the wrong side of the saree are some of the marks of handwoven sarees.

Paithani-Maharashtra

Zari-bordered peacocks, parrots, lotus in visually arresting colours are the highlights of this handwoven mulberry silk. The intense colours and incandescent finish for that feel of luxury, are passed down as heirloom collectibles.

Map of sarees

On National Saree Day, let's take a look at the different types of sarees and its roots

Gita Hari

Saree, the traditional attire of our country sports a border and pallu with delicate weaves and designs. On National Saree Day (Dec 21), know more about the variety and vibrancy of the refined drape. Most of these have Geographical Index (GI) tags ensuring their regions' identity and authenticity.

Talking about the weaves, Arunima Hoskote, an expert who deals in exclusive sarees says, "The weaving of some sarees takes up to 60 days and sometimes even 200 days. Investing in timeless pieces is almost like buying an expensive painting. These sarees get passed down to future generations."

Here are some of the popular Indian sarees and the state they represent:

Chikankari & Banarasi-Uttar Pradesh

Believed to have been introduced by Noor Jehan, the wife of Mughal Emperor Jehangir, Chikankari is known for its white-on-white intricate trellis-like lace embroidery on muslin cloth. The embroidery incorporates shadow work, dots or knots, jaali, and keel kangan—a stitch engaged in floral or paisley motifs for a stylish silhouette. Handwoven, Mughal-inspired designs in high quality silk, Banarasi are mostly worn for weddings and momentous occasions. The ultimate in luxury and tradition with intricate brocade work. Heavy to wear and expensive, each saree in gold and silver zari is a legacy to cherish.

Gamcha-Bihar

The lesser-known variety in sarees, Gamcha typically displays checkered pattern in lightweight cotton, akin to gamcha towels. It is inexpensive, ideal for daily use, especially a summer wardrobe for its breezy texture. The checks pattern makes it easy to recognise a Gamcha.

Baluchari, Kantha & Tant-West Bengal

The border and pallu draw inspiration from folklore, mythological stories in its elaborate weaves. Paisley and butti motifs are predominant. Meenakari Balucharis have threads in two or more colours to lend a luxurious vibrant feel and a distinctive cascade. Kantha work is hand-embroidered—uneven running stitch narrating tales of everyday life, folklore and nature. It adapts to casual and formal get-ups. Tant sarees, mostly worn by Bengali women, are woven from cotton threads. This everyday saree is breathable and feels light for home-wear.

Chanderi-Madhya Pradesh

Feathery and diaphanous, Chanderi saree a blend of cotton and silk, makes it a breathable and comfortable drape. The lustre in deep and earthy hues, with hand-woven zari work in gold, silver or copper exude a festive look.

Bomkai-Odisha

They can be usually identified through their plain body, contrast-coloured border and rich pallu. Ikat, embroidery and intricate thread work come together to create flowers, animals and geometric shapes for an aesthetic flow in silk or cotton.

Pochampally, Gadwal & Narayanpet-Telangana

Pochampally has complex patterns and geometrical ikat designs woven on silk and cotton. Gadwal with lightweight cotton body with silk pallu and borders, notable for its 'kuttu' or interlocked-weft method. Narayanpet is affordable, lightweight, and contrast colours.

Kalamkari, Dharmavaram, Uppada-Andhra Pradesh

Fall in love with imperfection as stains, smudged dyes and kinked lines represent kalamkari prints. The dominant styles are hand-painted and block prints: Dharmavaram sarees are grand zari sarees for weddings and special occasions. Uppada pattu are lightweight, glossy, and elegant party wear.

Kanjeevaram-Tamil Nadu

The refined sheen of heavy mulberry silk with signature temple borders in bright contrasting colours and pallu use peacock, parrot, swan, floral motifs, woven in timeless heirloom style. The seamless integration of 'korvai' technique and real silver/gold zari make it a prized possession, with a resale value. Worn for poojas, classical dance performances, weddings, it also comes in nine yards.

Kasavu-Kerala

The simple grace of off-white with gold zari border in cotton or cotton-silk blend is usually offset with a contrasting bright coloured blouse, and typical Kerala jewelry for that festive look.

Mysore Silk & Ilkal-Karnataka

Mysore silk sarees come in pleasant colours with a subtle sheen, are soft to the feel, with slim zari borders. Ilkal adopts the Topi Teni technique wherein the artistically woven silk pallu and cotton body are entwined seamlessly without knots.

In a Gen Z world where does saree stand? According to Bhramini Subramaniam Ayyar, acclaimed educationist-design thinker and textile expert, "The saree is here to stay. It has survived the onslaught of fashion down the years. The different traditional sarees of India and its drapes almost form a subtext of our culture. Being an unstitched piece of cloth, it becomes volatile and dynamic in its 'anywhicway' you can wear it." Cover up your bulges or flaunt your curves...it is sensuous all the way!

Future of saree

Aiming for another glory

Chess champ Praggnanandhaa on representing India in one of the toughest tournaments

Rushikesh Bammie

India, who has been known as Cricket dominant country has become a powerhouse in Chess over the last few years. From Double Gold in Chess Olympiad, FIDE Men's World Championship in 2024 to Women's Chess World Cup in 2025 India has got their rising stars such as Dommaraju Gukesh, Divya Deshmukh. However, Rameshbabu Praggnanandhaa is also in its own league since and is aiming to achieve another glory.

Praggnanandhaa, a 20 years old prodigy from Chennai, recently qualified for the Candidates chess tournament. The 2026 Candidates Tournament is an eight-player chess tournament that will determine the challenger for the World Chess Championship 2026. The winner of the tournament will earn the right to play the World Chess Championship 2026 against the current World Champion Gukesh.

When asked about his feeling after qualifying for Candidates, he shared that the tournament is still far away. "Yes, it was a nice feeling. I'm excited to represent India at Candidates against some world class players. Aim is to obviously qualify for the World Championship. Thanks to coaches, family and everyone who's supported me. Will keep working hard and giving my best," he said.

"But Candidates is still four months away. So I'm not thinking much about it. The focus is on upcoming tournaments," he added. Praggnanandhaa is currently playing in Global Chess League (GCL) at Mumbai.

Praggnanandhaa was runner up in the 2023 World Cup. Thus he participated in 2024 Candidates as well.

However, he failed at that time to qualify for the World Championship and stayed at fifth position. He is aiming now to turn it around and play in a World Championship match against Indian rival Gukesh, who is also his good friend. Praggnanandhaa, who deservedly earned one of the eight slots in the 2026 Candidates has been the best FIDE Circuit player throughout the year, winning the Tata Steel Masters, Superbet Chess Classic Romania, UzChess Cup Masters, and London Chess Classic Open. Also finishing second in the Stepan Avagyan Memorial and 12th Sinquefeld Cup. Though he failed in the FIDE Men's World Cup in 2025, as no one from India even reached the Semifinal.

"In World Cup, I was not able to perform according to my expectations. I will try to improve on it," he admitted.

"Last five years have been game changing for Chess. Tournaments like GCL have helped our players to give their best and play against top players from the World. Many players have emerged from Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu etc. The system has done exceptionally well. So it's only upwards from here," he added about the improvement of Chess in India. Praggnanandhaa who caught eyeballs at the age of 16, even has beaten decorated Chess champion Magnus Carlsen. He has even out-classed Gukesh in some tournaments. He shared that he loves to carry nutras and bananas in his bag for every tournament. Praggnanandhaa was a part of Indian men's team who won chess olympiad in 2024. He also highlighted that India must organise more international chess tournaments.

"I love playing in Mumbai or anywhere in India. Generally I have to play abroad due to various international tournaments. Over the last 4-5 years, I'm getting good support from crowd too. We must focus on hosting more international tournaments now. It will boost our confidence & people will get connect to this game more closely," Praggnanandhaa shared. He concluded with an aim to win Candidates in his 2nd attempt and then World Championship too. So as the new year awaits us, fans will be delighted if Praggnanandhaa wins Candidates in 2026 & it will be an historic day for country as two Indians will face off in World Championship match.

I'm excited to represent India at Candidates against some world class players. Aim is to obviously qualify for the World Championship. But Candidates is still four months away. So I'm not thinking much about it.

COFFEE CONVERSATIONS & CHRISTMAS CHEER

NISHA'S MUMBAI

Nisha JamWval

**Christmas, Mumbai-Style**

Sherwin Nazareth's Christmas Sunday brunch entitled 'Jingle and Mingle' in the heady heights of Imperial Towers was a relaxed, companionable afternoon—warm conversations, good food, and no one in a hurry. I arrived at 3:30 pm, bracing myself to be apologetic, only to discover I was far from the last. That's Mumbai for you. Time here is elastic. A noon invitation comfortably accommodates a 3:30 arrival. The city doesn't judge; it celebrates just like the warm host of the afternoon and his fiancé Latika!

Over coffee at Wellington Mews, my friend Sanu Seth from New York—confessed, "Mumbai gives me anxiety. The pace is too racy. I don't know if I could ever live here." And yet, here we all are, navigating it with alacrity and affection. Especially now, when the city slips into what we call 'December'—a spirited blur of shows, edits, fairs, awards, panels, theatre, cinema, and, inevitably, Christmas parties. Mumbai doesn't slow down; it simply teaches you to find your own rhythm in the city that never sleeps!

A literary voyage

Reading yet again for my first publisher, Khalid Ansari founder of Mid-Day, was a pleasure—this time for his book Turkey, Greece & Croatia. What made the evening even more special was sharing the space with theatre stalwarts Sabira Merchant and Dolly Thakore. I was told I held my own by many guests some whom I didn't even know—high praise, considering Sabira's Shakespearean pedigree. And while I'll take what he says with a pinch salt it does feel great to be in the company of the greats of Mumbai theatre!

**Light in a troubled world**

In the shadow of recent violence at a Hanukkah gathering in Sydney, the lamp lighting celebration at incoming Consul General Yaniv Revach's home carried a deeper resonance. The mood was reflective, the symbolism potent. Lighting the Hanukkah candles felt like a collective act of hope—an assertion, as the rabbi so movingly said, of light against darkness.

**Young fashion, new energy**

It's always exciting to be among fresh talent, young minds revving to go and talent that is fearless and raw! Watching the Elle awards for the new fashion graduates was delightful and exciting. The catwalk had edgy and experimental ensemble by the awardes at Istituto Marangoni Mumbai presented at a cool catwalk with the backdrop of exciting music by band outstationsubs who performed for us with gusto and verve! There is a magic about raw ideas and fearless execution—young minds have an electricity.

Where the week truly landed

The high point of my week was inaugurating a Balwadi school in Sunder Nagni, Colaba in a tiny lane jammed with parked scooters where we walked through weaving narrow lanes to arrive at a steep stairwell to arrive at a tiny school with fifty even tinier little children. They were thrilled at the goodies being distributed by trustee Bilkis Merchant and social workers Vibha Vig and Neeta Anand who had also brought nimbu pani from their homes for this 'tea party'. Meeting and interacting with children at such a nascent and vulnerable age was a whole new experience for me. I don't have children, so the whole experience was new and endearing. In a small way, I was part of something meaningful—supporting the Shaila Trust, founded by Padam Chaddha and Bilkis Merchant for this, explaining to their mothers who also showed up—the importance of early education.

And more about Christmas and celebratory Santa moments next time—watch this space!

The Sunday Statesman

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The Englishman - founded 1821

The First Ten

Pandemics do not begin with sirens or headlines. They begin with a cough that goes unreported, a fever mistaken for exhaustion, a worker who does not stay home because staying home costs money. The real danger of a future bird flu outbreak lies not in its known lethality, but in how quietly it could establish itself before authorities realise what they are dealing with.

Recent scientific modelling by Indian researchers Philip Cherian and Gautam Menon of Ashoka University offers a sobering lesson: when it comes to zoonotic diseases like bird flu, timing matters more than scale.

The difference between two detected human infections and one is not incremental; it is decisive. Below a certain threshold, outbreaks are containable with focused interventions. Cross that line, and the disease behaves as if no early action was taken at all.

This finding should reshape how India thinks about epidemic preparedness. Our public health reflex has often been to respond forcefully once numbers rise. But by then, according to the modelling, the outbreak has already escaped the tight web of households and close contacts and entered the wider population. Lockdowns, mass advisories, and blanket restrictions become necessary precisely because the moment for surgical containment has passed.

What makes this relevant for India is the geography of risk. Dense poultry belts, informal labour, crowded housing and missed sick leave create ideal conditions for silent spread. A farm worker or market handler is unlikely to seek testing for flu-like symptoms unless surveillance systems are already alert and accessible. By the time hospitals notice a pattern, the virus may already be several steps ahead.

The research also exposes uncomfortable trade-offs. Quarantine, if imposed too early or too crudely, can increase infection within households.

Vaccination helps, but it does not neutralise immediate family-level transmission. Even effective measures can backfire if deployed without precision. This argues for smarter public health, not harsher public health.

Crucially, the study suggests that preparedness is not primarily about futuristic vaccines or worst-case scenarios. It is about detection speed, data flow, and decision-making authority in the first few days. Who has the power to shut a market? Who orders household quarantine? How fast can local health workers escalate an unusual cluster without bureaucratic delay? These are governance questions, not medical ones.

There is a temptation to reassure ourselves that an influenza pandemic would be manageable, that antivirals exist and systems are stronger than before. That may be true. But preparedness is not a static achievement; it is a race against potential spread. Confidence without vigilance is simply another form of delay.

The real warning here is not about bird flu alone. It is about how fragile the margin of control can be in any emerging epidemic. When the first ten cases decide the fate of thousands, the cost of hesitation is not measured in weeks, but in lives.

Unequal Gains

India's wealth story is increasingly told through a confusing set of headlines. On the one hand, the country is adding new dollar-millionaires at a brisk pace. On the other, the average Indian adult is not materially better off than a few years ago. This is not a statistical contradiction. It is a warning that inequality has moved from the margins to the centre of India's economic narrative.

Recent global wealth data places India among the world's most unequal societies, with wealth concentration now comparable to that of far richer economies. The comparison is unsettling not because it flatters India, but because

inequality in several advanced economies has eased in recent years while it has worsened here. That divergence suggests outcomes are shaped less by inevitability and more by policy design.

The most revealing insight lies in the divergence between average and median wealth. Average wealth per adult has declined in real terms, while median wealth has risen modestly. This tells a dual story. A segment of households is experiencing low, incremental improvement. At the same time, wealth accumulation at the very top is accelerating so rapidly that it overwhelms those gains when averages are calculated. The urge to generalise, therefore, is not evidence of broad prosperity; it is evidence of polarisation.

This polarisation is reinforced by the way Indians hold wealth. A disproportionately large share is tied up in property rather than financial assets. Property offers security but is liquid and unevenly valued. Urban land prices surge while rural and semi-urban assets lag, hardening inequality across generations.

Financial assets such as pensions, diversified equity and long-term savings are far better at spreading growth across a population. Their limited reach in India is not merely a financial-sector gap; it is an inequality multiplier.

Currency movements and inflation complicate the picture, but they do not overturn it. Even when measured in local currency and adjusted for prices, average wealth has struggled to keep pace with the cost of living over the past five years. This means household balance sheets, taken as a whole, have not captured the benefits of headline economic expansion.

Growth has occurred, but resilience has not been evenly built. None of this implies that India is becoming poorer in absolute terms, nor does it deny improvements in consumption or access to services. Wealth does not measure human capital or the full depth of the informal economy. But it does reveal who is building buffers against shocks, and who is not. In an era of climate stress, health emergencies, and job volatility, that distinction matters.

The policy lesson is clear. Growth rates alone are no longer an adequate yardstick. India's challenge is to redesign the channels through which growth turns into household wealth: deeper financial inclusion, stronger wage growth at the lower end, asset-building mechanisms that do not rely almost entirely on speculative price surges. Without this shift, India may continue to celebrate its new millionaires even as the distance between aspiration and security widens for the rest.

Perilous Spectacle

India's tragedies illustrate the immediacy of the problem. A 22-year-old engineering student died while filming bike stunts for social media reels, losing control and sustaining critical neck injuries. Another youth in Surat met a similar fate. In Karnataka, a tractor stunt overturned, killing the performer. A man in Rajasthan nearly drowned after being swept downstream during a river stunt



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In Karnataka, a tractor stunt overturned, killing the performer. A man in Rajasthan nearly drowned after being swept downstream during a river stunt.

Even seemingly harmless acts have turned fatal: a 10-year-old boy suffocated himself with a skipping rope while imitating an online stunt. A famous biker attempting to film a speed video at nearly 300 km/h lost his life in a high-speed crash. Each case underscores the unpredictable nature of risk when safety is sacrificed for spectacle.

The consequences extend beyond physical harm. Law enforcement agencies have taken strict action against individuals performing dangerous stunts in public places. Police departments issue heavy fines and traffic violation notices. In Faridabad, an SUV owner was fined over Rs 15,000 for a video showing passengers standing through the sunroof and on window frames while the vehicle was moving.

Arrests and criminal charges for reckless endangerment, negligent driving, and public nuisance are increasingly common. Vehicles used in stunts are often seized. These measures reflect the seriousness with which authorities view the issue, recognizing that such acts endanger not only performers but also unsuspecting members of the public.

The ethical and social dimensions are equally troubling. Youth are exploited by algorithms that capitalize on their vulnerabilities, drawing them into a cycle where the desire for peer approval and the dopamine rush of online validation override judgment and restraint. Vulgar memes, obscene videos, and abusive comments steadily erode cultural and social values.

Even more disturbing is the casual desecration of deities, the trivialization of religious sentiments, and the AI-driven commercial use of sacred symbols for cheap humour or viral traction. In a society that proudly calls itself religious and culturally rooted, such disrespect should trouble our collective conscience. When faith becomes a prop for entertainment and sacred icons are reduced to digital gimmicks, we must ask what kind of personalities and moral frameworks are being shaped. Instead of fostering responsibility, creativity, and constructive engagement, the culture of dangerous displays promotes recklessness.



vulgarity, and short-term gratification, weakening the very values we claim to uphold. The case of "True Online Love" epitomizes this trend. What might appear to some as a romantic escapade is, in reality, a reckless act that trivializes life. A split-second miscalculation could have resulted in tragedy. Creative energy that could have been directed toward art, sport, or innovation is wasted on hazardous acts. The societal mania lies in the normalization of such behaviour. When audiences applaud or share these videos, they inadvertently encourage imitation. The cycle continues, with each new stunt pushing the boundaries of risk further.

Professional stunt performers, even with training and safety measures, face high injury rates. If professionals with controlled environments face such risks, the dangers for amateurs are exponentially greater.

Unlike film sets, amateur stunts are performed in uncontrolled settings - rivers, public roads, railways, tracks - without protective equipment. The absence of safety guidelines transforms these acts into potential disasters.

Historical examples remind us that risk has always accompanied performance. From Yevgeni Urbansky's fatal stunt in 1965 to Evel Knievel's perilous feats, danger was once the realm of trained professionals who understood its cost. Today, that boundary has vanished. Risk has been democratized; anyone with a smart phone can attempt what once required skill, discipline, and preparation. The barriers to entry have collapsed, but the dangers have not. Modern social media fatalities are simply the old daredevil tragedies - now multiplied and accelerated by digital reach.

The broader implications are profound. The pursuit of internet fame has transformed dangerous acts into a public safety crisis. The exploitation of youth, erosion of cultural values, and diversion of energy toward meaningless pursuits represent a collective failure. Parents, educators, and policymakers must recognize the urgency.

Monitoring online activity, engaging in candid discussions about risks, and redirecting youthful energy into constructive pursuits are essential. Social media platforms must enforce stricter policies against content that encourages dangerous or illegal activities. Public awareness campaigns highlighting real-life tragedies can counter glorification. The responsibility is collective, requiring

vigilance from families, accountability from platforms, and enforcement from authorities. The challenge before us is clear. Dangerous displays may capture attention for a moment, but the consequences can last a lifetime. The solutions must be forceful and multi-pronged.

- Parental vigilance: Active monitoring of children's online activity and candid conversations about risks.
- Educational reform: Integrating digital literacy and risk-awareness into school curricula.
- Platform accountability: Enforcing strict bans on content that glorifies unethical and dangerous stunts, with penalties for violators.
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- Community role models: Celebrating young achievers in science, arts, and social service to provide alternative aspirations.
- Media ethics: Encouraging responsible coverage that avoids sensationalizing dangerous acts and instead emphasizes their risks.

Ultimately, the chase for digital stardom is transforming reckless acts into a societal menace. Dangerous displays may thrill for a moment, but they leave scars that last forever. The "True Online Love" video is not a romantic escapade but a stark reminder of how social media distorts youthful aspirations. The tragedy lies not only in potential loss of life but also in the waste of talent, creativity, and energy. The responsibility is ours - to defend youth from exploitation, to preserve the values that bind society, and to transform reckless impulses into constructive achievements.

The time to act is not tomorrow, nor someday - it is now. Let us choose vigilance over indifference and inspiration over neglect, so that the next generation remembers us not for our silence, but for our resolve.

As Nassim Nicholas Taleb reminds us, "Courage is the only virtue that can't be faked." In an age where social media often rewards the illusion of bravery, true courage lies in speaking up, in taking a stand, and in enduring sacrifice for the greater good.

It is this authentic courage - not the counterfeit of viral influence - that must guide our youth and inspire society to act before more lives are lost to the peril of reckless displays.

A number of vehicles appeared. There was a jeep, a microbus splattered with mud, and a military truck, said Shumon. Strangers bearing guns knocked on Selina's door and asked her to go to the secretariat with them, but she refused as she did not have a curfew pass. They said it would not matter, said Shumon.

"Keeping her hand on my head, my mother said, 'Shumon, take your lunch with your uncle. I will come back in a few minutes.' This was my mother's last words to me," testified Shumon in court.

But one need not dig up court records to find these testimonies. They are so abundant that even The Daily Star's archives will yield dozens of such anecdotes with a cursory search. For instance, Nusrat Rabbee wrote in this newspaper on December 16, 2005, how her mother had agonised over her father, Dr Mohammed Fazle Rabbee's abduction.

toward conflict and narrow political thinking. Powerful economic nations want to control resources, markets, and influence. They aim to dominate every sector and shape the world according to their own interests. At the same time, weaker nations remain silent observers. Very few countries have the courage or power to speak honestly against powerful states. Every nation has its own vested interests, leaving little space for moral values or humanity. Ethics and human rights are often pushed aside in the pursuit of power. History shows that such behaviour leads to instability and conflict. If the world continues on this path, we risk repeating old mistakes and moving closer to disorder and chaos instead of peace and progress.

Yours, etc., Dr Jitesh Mon Kutch, 17 December

The digital age has transformed recognition and fame into commodities measured in likes, shares, and fleeting moments of virality. What once demanded years of effort in art, sport, or scholarship can now be replaced by seconds of reckless footage. A recent video titled "True Online Love" doing the rounds on social media, epitomizes this disturbing trend: a couple sits under a stationary goods train, hugging and kissing, only to roll away as the train suddenly whistles and moves. Intended as thrilling entertainment, the act trivializes life and safety, reflecting a growing menace that threatens individuals and society alike.

The allure of virality is engineered. Social media platforms reward sensational content, pushing material that provokes awe, laughter, or outrage. For impressionable youth, this creates a powerful incentive to escalate risk-taking. The developing brain, still learning judgment and impulse control, is particularly vulnerable. The promise of instant celebrity overshadows long-term aspirations and constructive development. Short-term gratification becomes the currency of identity, and dangerous stunts the medium of exchange.

Statistics reveal the scale of the crisis. While comprehensive global data is difficult to collect, available studies and reports highlight the tragic consequences of such culture:

- Selfie-related deaths: 259 fatalities in 137 incidents globally between 2011-2017, with drowning, falls, and transport injuries leading.
- Blackout Challenge: 82 U.S. youth deaths between 1995-2007, at least 20 child deaths globally in 18 months around 2022.
- Tide Pod Challenge: Over 12,000 cases of detergent ingestion in 2017, with symptoms including vomiting and respiratory failure.
- Selfie fatalities since 2008: At least 109 deaths worldwide.
- Professional stunt performers: 80 per cent reported head impact injuries in their careers, despite safety protocols.
- Local incidents in India: Fatal bike crashes in Himachal Pradesh and Surat; tractor overturn in Karnataka; near-drowning in Rajasthan.

These numbers, though incomplete, underscore the tragic consequences of equating risk with importance. India's tragedies illustrate the immediacy of the problem. A 22-year-old engineering student died while filming bike stunts for social media reels, losing control and sustaining critical neck injuries. Another youth in Surat met a similar fate. In Karnataka, a tractor stunt overturned, killing the performer. A man in Rajasthan nearly drowned after being swept downstream during a river stunt

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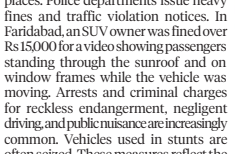
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S. S. SAXENA

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

The Daily Star

Our victory celebrations always come with a tinge of sadness as we mark the Martyred Intellectuals Day on December 14 to remember the brightest sons and daughters of this soil who were taken away from their homes, never to return. But even as we celebrate Victory Day, 54 years after Bangladesh's birth, there are blatant attempts to contrive and concoct historical narratives to absolve certain quarters of their treason.

With their new-found currency in the post-2024 dispensation, some Jamaat-e-Islami leaders are seeking to reverse a well-established narrative and turn it on its head. On December 14, Jamaat Secretary General Mia Golam Porwar claimed it was India who had conspired to kill the intellectuals. He claimed it was "part of a well-planned plot by the Indian army and Indian intelligence agencies."

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Feluda da 60



Sir, Through the esteemed columns of your newspaper, I wish to draw the attention of readers to the completion of 60 glorious years of Feluda, the legendary detective created by Satyajit Ray. Feluda is not merely a fictional character; he is an emotion deeply rooted in the hearts of Bengali readers across generations. Since his first appearance in Feluda Goendagiri in 1965, Pradosh C. Mitter, popularly known as Feluda, along with his cousin Topshe and the ever-reliable Almahom Ganguly (Jatayu), has taken readers on countless thrilling journeys. Iconic stories such as Sonar Kella, Joy Baba Felunath, Kailash Kelenkari, Badshahi Angit, and Joy Baba Felunath continue to captivate readers with their sharp intellect, rich Indian settings, and moral clarity.

Feluda's adventures across Jaipur, Varanasi, Kashmir, and even international locations introduced young readers to history, culture, and logic in an engaging way. His famous mantra, "Magajastara," still inspires logical thinking and curiosity among children and adults alike.

As Feluda turns 60, it is the perfect occasion to celebrate Satyajit Ray's unparalleled contribution to Bengali literature and Indian detective fiction. Feluda remains timeless - intelligent, ethical, and charming - proving

that true classics never grow old. Yours, etc., Susanta Roy Chowdhury, Kolkata, 19 December.

Worrying

Sir, The seizure of the Venezuelan oil tanker 'Skipper' by the United States shows worrying signs of imperial and colonial thinking in world politics. The U.S. military approach toward Venezuela raises serious questions, as it appears to violate international maritime law. We are living in the third decade of the 21st century, a time of great technological and scientific progress. These advances have made life easier and more connected. However, instead of moving towards peace and cooperation, the world seems to be heading in the opposite direction,

that true classics never grow old. Yours, etc., Susanta Roy Chowdhury, Kolkata, 19 December.



NOW AND AGAIN

THE CHALLAN KING

SAIANAND

I saw the obituary for Shri N., former Police Officer, in the township where my cousin lived and a quiet, knowing smirk touched my lips.

The newspaper paper hailed him as the "Challan King," a man whose strictness was unmatched. But I knew his true legend was not about the fines he imposed; it was about the singular moment he chose not to write one, a testament to the unwritten law of the heart.

Decades ago, a public sector strike had turned my cousin's town into a post-apocalyptic ghost city. I was visiting, and her newly-minted kindergarten, my niece, was suddenly without transport.

My mission: ferry my niece and the neighbour's boy to school on my scooter. Both were strapped on like luggage.

I had travelled maybe 500 metres when the legendary Traffic Inspector Shri N., appeared on his gleaming Royal Enfield. He looked more like a law-enforcing god on a chariot; a hawk-like figure with a gaze that could melt lead.

My hands tightened on the throttle so hard my knuckles were white. The only sounds in the deserted street were the gentle tick-tick of his idling bike.

"Triple riding," he intoned, his voice cutting through the quiet like a razor blade.

"But sir," I stammered, pointing a quivering finger at the desolate street, "There's a strike. No buses... it's the end of times!"

He was unmoved. The law was the law. He scowled, his pen hovering over the dreaded challan form.

"Young man," he explained with surgical precision, "you have committed an offence. Your excuses are less compelling than the sight of three humans attempting to occupy seating designated for two humans."

Just as he was about to sign my doom, an old man, in a crisp white kurta, whom I had not noticed sitting on his porch, came out and spoke up with a gentle, mischievous smile.

The Challan King paused.

"Sir," the old man began. "Look at those children. Are they really full-grown passengers? With respect, two children of that size are surely no more than one full passenger between them. They're more like... half-riders."

Shri N slowly removed his spectacles, his gaze softening as he looked straight at the two miniature pillion passengers. The written law demanded a fine, but the unwritten law of "how much space does a four-year-old take up" suddenly felt infinitely more powerful.

A slow smile spread across his face. "That is not a bad argument, I also agree," he conceded. He then tore the challan into pieces and handed me back my licence, mounted his bike, and rode away.

The old man who waited for the Inspector to leave did not speak a word, but slowly tipped his head that conveyed: the law of the heart had won.

Simply put, the Challan King had acknowledged the existence of the Half-Rider Exemption!

Reading the obituary once more, I realised that the Challan King's greatest triumph was in his recognition of the Half-Rider.

May his soul rest in peace.

News Items

FRENCH TANGO

COMING DEMONSTRATION AT THE EMPIRE THEATRE

In view of the interest which is now being shown in the Ball-room Tango, Aliss Aenig Baffin has decided to feature this dance in the Displays which she and her pupils are staging at the Empire Theatre on Monday and Tuesday at 5-30 pm. Monsieur Schweitzer, the well-known French Tango Amateur, has kindly consented to partner Aliss Baffin and they will demonstrate together simple steps of the Ball-room Tango as danced in Paris, explaining each figuration in detail as demonstrated. The steps will be of sufficient simplicity for any dancer to master in half an hour and the average novice in an hour. Miss Baffin is staging this demonstration in the latter half of her programme so that late comers will have the opportunity of seeing it. In order that a correct rhythm should be obtained, the music will be provided by a Columbia Gramophone Record, recording a Tango by one of the finest Parisian Tango Orchestras, and the sound will be magnified by means of an Amplifier.

KARACHI MUNICIPALITY

THREE-LAKH CONTRACT FOR BENGAL COMPANY

(From Our Correspondent.)

Karachi, Dec.
Karachi Municipality have accepted the tender of the Bengal Iron Company amounting to Rs. 3,32,000 for the supply of French pipes.

Political will can solve inequality

UMIT KAPOOR AND MUKULANAND

Widening disparities in income and wealth both within and across countries have become among the most pressing global challenges of our time. As inequalities deepen, the call for coordinated international action has only grown louder, highlighting the need for shared commitment and collective responsibility. Echoing this growing discourse is the G20 Global Inequality report, prepared under the leadership of Nobel Laureate Professor Joseph E. Stiglitz.

A key fact the report mentions is that global wealth, which has more than doubled in the last two decades, reaching US\$480 trillion in 2024, could have financed the eradication of world hunger, universal education for every child, and an accelerated shift away from fossil fuels had it been equitably distributed. However, from 2000 to 2024, the top 1 per cent captured 41 per cent of all new global wealth, while the bottom half received only 1 per cent.

This trend is not the inevitable outcome of globalisation or technology, as it is often claimed. The report cuts this myth to rest with a simple, yet powerful message: inequality is a policy choice, and it is therefore solvable. The need of the hour for governments is to adopt alternative policy approaches that yield more equitable and fair outcomes, which in turn requires political will.

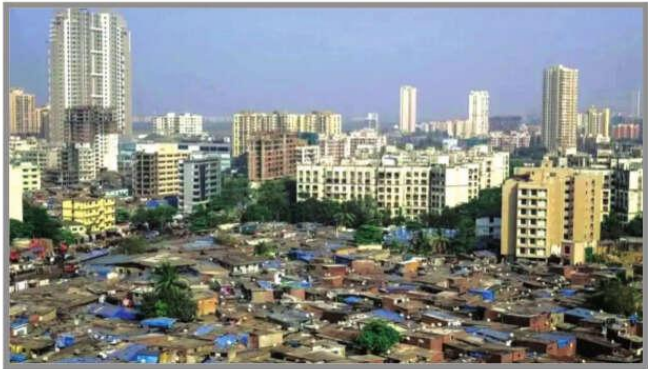
Since the 1980s, many countries have adopted neoliberal policies, assuming that market forces with minimal regulation efficiently allocate resources, but this has only increased inequality. For example, the choice of tax policies, such as the value-added tax (VAT), has been regressive, as effective tax rates on corporations and the wealthiest individuals in most countries have fallen dramatically, disproportionately impacting poorer households. Further, with governments

enacting policies that deregulated the labour market and restricted trade unions, the power of labour vis-à-vis capital has been reduced, leading to wage stagnation and a smaller share of income for workers.

The effects are stark: in constant 2024 dollars, the richest 1 per cent have seen their wealth rise by an average of US\$1.3 m per person, while the bottom 50 per cent have seen their wealth rise by just US\$885 - a 2.655-fold difference. Moreover, growth in advanced economies has been lower under neoliberal regimes than in the post-World War II era. Instead, the world now faces deepening crises: 3.4 billion people live in countries spending more on debt service than on health or education.

Neoliberalism was adopted with the understanding that it would increase inequality, a trade-off justified by the promise of higher overall growth, but that has failed to materialise. Instead, the effect of neoliberal policies, driven by the spread of globalisation, has been to favour capital and market flexibility at the expense of social welfare. Debt payments in the Global South have risen from 28 to 45 per cent of budget revenue between 2019 and 2025, and from 22 to 35 per cent of government spending.

Between 1970 and 2023, Global South governments paid US\$83.3 trillion in interest to creditors in the North, while global IP rules cause US\$1 trillion to flow annually from the South to the North in royalties and licensing, and illicit financial flows drain US\$89 billion from Africa each year. It implies that capital is flowing from the Global North to the Global South. Additionally, unprecedented cuts in aid compound the crisis: the recent US cuts alone may lead to 14 million additional deaths by 2030, with the addition of escalating tariff policies that threaten export-oriented jobs and deepen poverty.



Although income inequality among individuals worldwide has decreased since 2000, mainly due to economic development in China, it remains very high, with a Gini coefficient of 0.61 (the World Bank's definition of "high inequality" is a Gini coefficient above 0.4). Moreover, 83 per cent of the countries that make up 90 per cent of the world's population experience high income inequality. By 2025, 63 per cent of countries, home to 52 per cent of the world's population, will slash public spending by a combined US\$2.55 trillion over five years.

Further, one in four people globally face moderate or severe food insecurity, i.e., regularly skipping meals, totalling 2.3 billion people, a number that has increased by 335 million since 2019. These structural inequalities are no accident; they result from globally imbalanced rules, shaped mainly by the North through institutions such as the IMF and the WTO. The necessary force to reverse the deliberate design of today's inequality is not technical fixes, but political will. This will be the collective commitment by

governments to acknowledge the legacy of past policy decisions, actively choose a different set of policies, and implement them to reverse the trend.

Towards this end, the report argues that policymakers lack sufficient, reliable information on inequality trends and the impacts of present policies. Therefore, there is a need for a technical, non-advocacy body that would support governments and multilateral agencies by providing authoritative assessments and analyses of inequality to inform policymaking. Inspired in part by the success of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and proposed to be called International Panel on Inequality (IPI), the body could consist of a diverse, independent group of experts, supported by a secretariat centred on data and policy-relevant analysis rather than advocacy. The idea is to monitor existing research, assess data and knowledge gaps, and produce periodic, policy-relevant assessments of the drivers, measurement, and impacts of income and wealth inequality, and their relationships

to other dimensions such as health and opportunity.

This work by the "Extraordinary Committee of Independent Experts on Global Inequality," an important legacy of the South African Presidency of the G20, consolidates decades of research and invigorates global coordination to reduce inequality at both national and international levels. It combines rigorous academic and data-based evidence to argue that extreme inequality is a choice: one which not only undermines the economic security of the majority but also weakens our collective capacity to address planetary challenges such as climate change, public health crises, and food insecurity.

The report offers a note of optimism amid harsh realities and the troubling legacy of past decisions. It contends that with informed choices rooted in a deep understanding of the structures, drivers, and consequences of inequality, it is possible to reverse current trends and build a future in which prosperity is more broadly and fairly shared.

(The writers are, respectively, chair and a researcher at the Institute for Competitiveness.)

Why aviation crisis caused a meltdown

SHREY MADAAN

Every few years, India gets a reminder of just how fragile its aviation ecosystem really is. This time, it took a week-long meltdown at IndiGo, a prominent airline service, hundreds of cancellations, airports reduced to holding zones for luggage, and passengers stranded across the country, to expose a truth policymakers prefer to ignore: when a major chunk of the market is controlled by just two airlines, one company's internal crisis becomes national emergency.

IndiGo's shortage of pilots, triggered by the rollout of long-delayed fatigue-management rules, should have disrupted one airline. Instead, it paralysed India's entire aviation network. Fares shot up to tens of thousands of rupees, lagged for days, and alternative carriers simply didn't have the capacity to absorb the shock. In a competitive market, passengers would have options. In India's duopolistic one, they had none.

The fatigue rules themselves were not the villain. Pilot exhaustion is a well-documented safety threat globally, and aligning India's Flight Duty Time Limitations (FDTL) with international norms is long overdue. But the transition was mishandled in every side. Regulators announced the rules almost two years ago,

then delayed and re-delayed their enforcement, only to push through implementation abruptly, leaving airlines scrambling. IndiGo, famous for tight turnaround and a "lean staffing" model, underestimated how many additional pilots it needed. The regulator underestimated how quickly a brittle system can collapse.

This combination, poor planning meets a market with almost no buffers, is why passengers ended up paying the price. What's missing from the conversation is the structural cause: India's aviation sector lacks depth. When just two airlines, IndiGo and Air India, hold over 90 per cent of market share, the entire system depends on their ability to function flawlessly. No modern industry should operate on this kind of razor's edge. The German aviation sector didn't collapse when Lufthansa suffered an IT system outage. The US doesn't grind to a halt when Delta faces a staffing shortfall. In those markets, multiple players create resilience. In India, passengers face a system where when "one airline falters, everyone suffers."

And consumers suffered immensely. People missed job interviews, medical appointments and weddings. Some reached airports at dawn only to discover their flights cancelled with no SMS alert. Refunds trickled in only after government orders.



A country aiming to become the world's third largest aviation market cannot operate with outdated passenger protection norms. India needs a clear and enforceable Air Passenger Bill of Rights, one that guarantees automatic funds, timely alerts and fair compensation for last minute cancellations, without burdening airlines under knee-jerk regulations.

But consumer rights alone won't fix a market with too little competition. For genuine resilience, India must remove barriers that make it hard for new airlines to scale: high ATF

taxes that erode margins, slot allocation policies that reward incumbents, and regulatory unpredictability that discourages investment. The government says India has room for five major airlines. That won't happen without policy reforms that make market entry easier and ensure a level playing field.

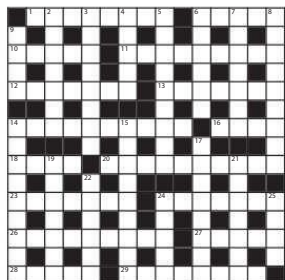
IndiGo's crisis or rostering miscalculations. It was a stress test for the entire sector, and the system failed. India's aviation future depends on embracing what every competitive,

consumer-friendly market eventually learns: choice is stability. The more players in the sky, the fewer passengers will ever be stranded because one airline miscalculated.

If India wants a resilient aviation ecosystem, it must stop firefighting and start enabling competition. The skies need more carriers, more capacity, and more consumer choice. Otherwise, this won't be the last time passengers pay for a crisis they didn't create.

(The writer is Indian Policy Associate, Consumer Choice Center.)

Crossword | No. 293328



Last Sunday's Solution

CARAMEL MITRAGE
NEEDLE POINT
SUNRISE
EXONERATE SCOOP
TUBS
VEAL GARLIGIAN
AT STONE
GIBBERISH
ORDER PROFESSOR
OBSESSIVE MOULT
UNIT SUB EN C
STACKS SCREECH

ACROSS

- 1 Stocky rednecks entertained by festival (6)
- 6 Note 27's come round again (5)
- 10 Does no work - did less after blowing cover (5)
- 11 Unfortunately annual rut is affected (9)
- 12 He might deliver latest in the Dow Jones branch office in the City (7)
- 13 A medium seeing adventurous girl almost restraining sob (7)

DOWN

- 14 Concerned with virus? A way to turn back NICE elaborated (10)
- 16 Final thing to make shoe (4)
- 18 Resistance / current gradient? (4)
- 20 Time before Xmas that's sure to broadcast exciting stories (10)
- 23 Primates etc: intend to reflect when caught in moral lapses? (7)
- 24 Relatively rare argon put in high pressures certainly having leaked (7)
- 26 Pipe charged

ACROSS

- 27 Part of pack to turn alternately into hearts and diamonds (5)
- 28 Copper's timid and not dangerous (5)
- 29 Spy master's years in disguise (8)
- 5 Experimental musical mounted under marquee for example (8)
- 6 True when at sea with navy a volley possibly needed (6)
- 7 Wheel around in short coat in a circle of flowers (7)
- 8 Moves queen up - vulnerable castle takes nothing (9)
- 9 Special gin in cocktail? This might be a plus (4)
- 14 Hammer raised while I finish off bloodsucker like a vampire (9)

DOWN

- 15 Terminus very large to manage - this allows an internal review (9)
- 17 For couples a tango's a pain in Torremolinos on vacation (8)
- 19 Chronicles of Midsummer unusual with no dead (7)
- 21 One delivering frightful curse runs after earl (7)
- 22 Dale and Virginia shout up (6)
- 24 South American greeting snack food (5)
- 25 Free European travel (4)



Konkani Christmas

At a concert in Goa, London's Oscar Castellino debuted a repertoire that blended opera with the poetic genius of Manohar Rai Sardessai



Oscar Castellino first sang in Konkani at the Commonwealth Christmas Concert in London in 2020

Forget the bright lights of Rockefeller Center and Regent Street, because they can't beat Goa for sincere good cheer at Christmas time. Yes, it is true this is peak tourism season for India's smallest state, but even all those hordes of visitors can't spoil the fun at this time of the year, and the annual explosion of community creativity: highly inventive home-made stars and cribs, all kinds of seasonal sweets, and non-stop caroling. Earlier this month, entirely unexpectedly, another memorable highlight occurred at the Concerto do Natal at Museum of Goa, when the Bombay-born London-based opera singer Oscar Castellino debuted several excellent

new Christmas songs based on existing poems. Each one thrilled, but his exultant rendition of the late, great Konkani poet Manohar Rai Sardessai's ode of gratitude Jinnen Mhaka Sogle Dile (Life Has Given Me All) gave pure goosebumps. It is an instant classic for the ages.

Castellino is an ebullient star on the rise, who keeps pushing the traditional boundaries of his craft. At his eye-opening Concerto do Natal, he played several roles: soloist, conductor, musical director, composer, master of ceremonies. None of this is usual in the stratified London opera world, but it was precisely that personal flair and attention to detail that made the difference to this new Christmas

repertoire. Stylish and soulful, seamlessly cosmopolitan, it heralds the beginning of something very special.

"My first experience at singing in Konkani was at the Commonwealth Christmas Concert in London in 2020," said Castellino, when I asked about the roots of his remarkable project, "the organisers suggested I sing something from my culture and I came upon a wonderful carol by Manohar Rai Sardessai and Micael Martins called Mari Matek Ballok Zala (Mother Mary had a Baby Boy). Although I had limited time to prepare, the listeners were very encouraging, and this got me very excited. Carlo Rizzi, a leading Verdi conductor in the operatic

world also thought that the language brought out something refreshing in my voice. I love when my performances resonate with people, bringing out memories and emotions or just entertaining them thoroughly, and I now saw an opportunity to achieve these responses by bringing my training in opera together with my musical heritage and creative skills."

It has been an impressive, brave and beautiful journey, as Castellino reached deep into his own family archives — several new works are based on poems by his maternal grandfather Gabriel Pais — and initiated an exceptionally heartwarming collaboration with the Goa-based sons of Sardessai. That burgeoning friendship yielded one of the highlights of Concerto do Natal, when Umesh Sardessai (whose day job is professor of mechanical engineering) came onstage with Castellino to sing his own composition Ailin Nalamam (Christmas is Here) with conspicuous gusto.

"This project is ambitious and there is always the chance that I would not do justice to the rich Goan musical tradition," says Castellino, "there is the danger that the artist may overlook aspects of tradition, and slap new ideas that do not resonate with the culture. In this case I have been encouraged by the response and the desire for more such music. So far, it has resonated both with those who enjoy the traditional, and those open to furthering the repertoire. I was overjoyed to see people joining in singing and dancing — something crucial to the Goan experience. This is very different to successes on the operatic stage and the encore of large audiences in the opera houses of Europe. Close to home and closer to heart, this endeavour hopes to bring more joy into humble homes and families like the one I grew up in, a lullaby to sing to a baby or a Carol to a grandmother reminiscing about past Christmases."

Most importantly, this is only the beginning. Castellino says, "The hope is to attract more people to the Goan celebrations, concert after concert, song after song. Umesh and I have plans for future collaborations in Goa and London, and I hope to incorporate more audience participation, more singing and dancing. I am also thinking of ways to make it more financially viable for my fellow musicians while making it an unforgettable experience for anyone who comes along."

DEAR PARTHIP,



PARTHIP THYAGARAJAN, RELATIONSHIP REALIST

relationships@timesofindia.com

Lonely in the city of dreams

Success looks great on paper, but what do you do when life in the city feels unbearable?

Q I am a 27-year-old man. I came to Mumbai from Allahabad thinking life would finally start making sense here. Everyone around me back home said, "Go to Mumbai, that's where opportunities are." It's been almost three years now, and honestly, I just feel invisible. I go to office, come back, eat alone, scroll on my phone, sleep. Weekends are the worst. I don't really have anyone to call or meet. Office colleagues are polite but busy with their own circles. I try sometimes, but it always feels like I don't belong here.

Many nights I think of packing up and going back home. But then I wonder what people will say. That I couldn't survive in the big city? That I ran back? I'm

scared it will look like failure, and that it will affect my career and even marriage prospects. In our society, going back feels like moving backwards. At the same time, staying here, I am dying inside. What should I do? This city is so lonely.

Between Home and Here

Dear Between Home and Here,

That's true. While metros are often projected as the ultimate land of opportunity, it's also worth noticing a shift that's happening alongside it. Many professionals today are choosing to go back home — NRIs returning to India, or people leaving big-city jobs to move back to smaller towns and even villages — in search of happiness, balance, and sometimes even greater

success and wealth. Progress no longer moves in only one direction.

At the same time, if you're doing well at work, learning every day, and your instincts tell you that you have room to grow in your organisation or industry, there's no inherent reason to leave just yet. Growth, when it feels real, can be deeply motivating.

If what's weighing you down is loneliness or the emptiness of weekends, it may help to invest intentionally in what genuinely interests or energises you. Today, there are countless online communities, interest groups, and forums that not only offer guidance but can also provide the sense of connection you're missing.

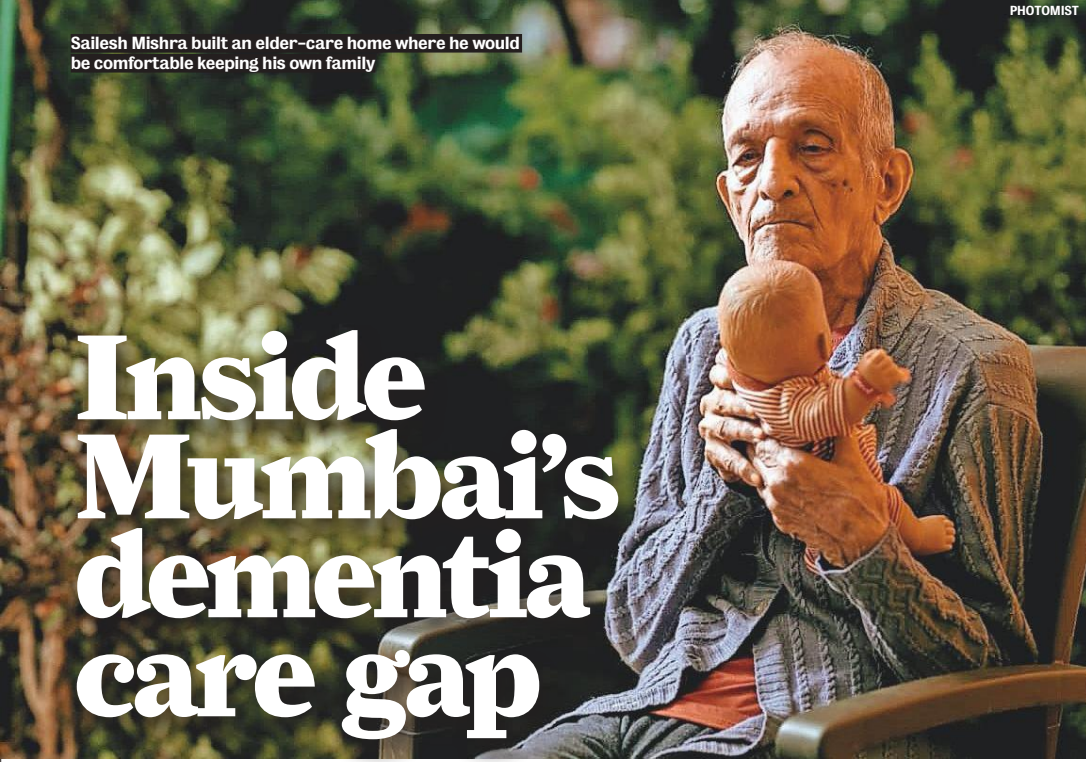
That said, if the job itself feels draining or misaligned with who you are, it's important to listen to that

signal. You may want to explore better opportunities — within the city or elsewhere. People tend to do their best work when their roles tap into their real strengths, and meaningful careers can be built from almost anywhere now.

As for concerns about what people think — your job title, company name, or location — these should never dictate your confidence. Wherever you are and whatever you're doing, self-belief matters far more than external validation.

When it comes to marriage prospects, yes, factors like job, salary, stability, family background, and location often play a role. But being genuinely content and confident in your choices puts you in a far stronger position overall.

When you're happy with what you're doing, you're better equipped to achieve your personal, social, and professional goals — and that always shows in ways no résumé can ever truly capture.



PHOTOMIST

Sailesh Mishra built an elder-care home where he would be comfortable keeping his own family

Inside Mumbai's dementia care gap

India is home to an estimated 8.8 million people with dementia, a number set to nearly double by 2036. As cases rise sharply worldwide, families and caregivers are bearing the strain of a health system that has yet to catch up

| Nisrin Saria
nisrin.saria@timesofindia.com

In a Colaba apartment, Khursheed Mehta, 58, sits beside her 89-year-old mother, checking her overgrown nails and asking the caregiver to trim them later. Her mother, frail in a red-and-black wheelchair, turns plastic spinning tops in her hands and nudges a wheeled dinosaur toy; a soft red octopus rests beside her.

Mehta lifts a glass bowl half-filled with thick mango juice and brings a spoonful to her mother's lips. "She finds it very difficult to swallow, especially liquids. That frightens me the most," Mehta says. "I never want her to reach a stage where she needs a feeding tube." This difficulty, known as dysphagia, is a common and serious symptom as dementia progresses. Neurologist Shirish Hastak explains, "People with dementia lose control over certain areas of the brain that regulate behaviour."

The scale of the challenge was highlighted by a recent *Lancet Psychiatry* study by researchers at the Indian Institute of Science, which called for a national dementia policy. The authors argue that care must move beyond isolated treatment and be integrated into geriatric and mental health services, shaped by India's social and economic realities. Dementia affects an estimated

8.8 million Indians today and is expected to cross 30 million by 2050. And yet, as Hastak notes, "Dementia is often misunderstood, it is more than just a memory problem, and it is not a normal part of ageing." He describes it as a syndrome, a collection of symptoms rather than a single disease.

When words don't come easy
Dementia usually begins later in life, often after 65. Mehta remembers her mother's razor-sharp memory. "I would call her every morning and list out my tasks for the day. If I forgot something later, I would call her back, and she would remind me exactly what I had to do." Gradually, her mother began forgetting things, resisting instructions, and arguing over small matters. Two falls in early 2021 worsened her condition. "After the falls, she stopped walking," Mehta says. "Then she slowly began to speak gibberish."

Prayer once structured her days. "She never missed a single prayer," Mehta says. Now, her mother struggles to repeat even the simplest ones.

About six months ago, her mother grew aggressive. "She would pinch people to express her anguish," Mehta says, adding that she does not blame her and sees it as distress rather than intent. The aggression has since stopped. Now, they often bargain with her like a child. Once health conscious and

opposed to sweets, she will now trade a piece of chocolate for a sip of water. A caregiver wheels her around the compound, coaxing her to drink, which Mehta says is essential. Her mother has lived in the building for over forty years and is recognised by neighbours and security guards during these walks. She may not remember family names, but a sense of familiarity remains. Mehta says she feels some relief that her mother can no longer walk on her own, as people with dementia often wander off.

Risk of wandering
Take the case of Huseni Bhaiwala. "My father would often wander off," recalls his daughter, Tara Karachiwala, 69. As his condition progressed, his behaviour became childlike and unpredictable; at times, he would wet himself unknowingly. Education mattered deeply to him. "He ensured his siblings and children received a proper education," she says. He ran a hardware business and closed it in 1995, when he was about 75.

In his late eighties, Bhaiwala began experiencing hallucinations. "There were times when he would go out and not return for hours," Tara says. He believed someone was trying to kill him and often forgot the way back. The family took precautions. "We made a band with his name and address, kept phone numbers in his pocket, and began locking the house," she says.

Hastak explains, "This paranoia and loss of control stems from damage to the brain... confusion sets in, and this

confusion can lead to hallucinations."

Lost and found
In 2012, Bhaiwala became acutely restless. While Tara and her son Danish rushed to pick him up, a caregiver briefly unlocked the door to fetch her slippers. Bhaiwala noticed the opening and slipped out. By the time they realised, he was gone. The family searched through the night across markets, lanes, stations and hospitals. "A missing complaint was filed, but all the real work was done by us," Tara says. Flyers were printed, newspaper ads placed, and false leads followed. On the third day, they traced his route. "My father had boarded a bus from Colaba Market and travelled to Antop Hill in Wadala." He was eventually found at an ashram in Panvel and brought home.

The episode forced difficult choices. Bhaiwala was briefly placed in an old-age home but returned within two months because his wife missed him deeply. After her death, he was moved to A1 Snehanjali, a dementia care home in Nalasopara, where he lived until his death at 96.

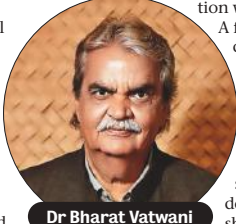
Home away from home
A1 Snehanjali was founded in 2013 after its founder, Sailesh Mishra, 60, found a garden bungalow in Nalasopara West that he felt suited people with dementia. Bhaiwala was the centre's second resident. "This is not an old-age home or a nursing facility," Mishra says. "It is a home where I would feel comfortable keeping my own parents, and the staff does not even wear uniforms so that it does not feel institutional." The centre has five twin-occupancy bedrooms and shared spaces, as isolation worsens dementia.

A fixed routine structures the day. Mornings begin around 6.30 am with walks, light exercise and breakfast, followed by outdoor time, spiritual prayer, music and group activities. Lunch is shared; evenings wind down with tea, games and short walks.

"Finding trained dementia care staff in India remains a challenge, so the focus here is on attitude rather than formal education," Mishra says. The ratio is one caregiver for every three residents. "A doctor visits weekly," he adds. "A physiotherapist visits once every 15 days, and a psychiatrist once a month. Doctors are available on call at all times." Visiting hours are fixed to avoid agitation.

Back to school
The Dignity Dementia Day Care Centre in Mahim, run by the Dignity Foundation, has worked with senior citizens since 1995 and recently opened an other centre in Malad East. "These are strictly daycare centres, not residential facilities," says CEO Javed Sheikh. The aim is to support families and slow the progression of dementia and Alzheimer's. Detection remains a major challenge. "There is no single tool for early diagnosis and no clear dementia policy at the city or national level," Sheikh says. Symptoms are often dismissed as normal ageing. "Dementia can escalate very fast," he adds, recalling a man who left Mumbai well

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11



Dr Bharat Vatwani



Dr Naazneen Ladak



Huseni Bhaiwala's daughter Tara Karachiwala with husband Quresh (left) and son Danish

EDITORIAL

India-Oman trade deal — expanding India's footprint in West Asia

It is by the maverick trade policies of the United States President Donald Trump, India has been focusing on strategic hedging, expanding markets and accelerating Free Trade Agreements with a number of countries. The recent FTA with Oman, signed during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Gulf country, is part of this broader strategy. This is the second trade deal with a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country after the UAE, and comes as a major boost to the efforts to expand market access in the West Asian market. With Oman providing India duty-free access to 98 per cent of its tariff lines, Indian manufacturers will get breathing space and a chance to reroute goods through a Gulf hub that can serve Africa and parts of Europe. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Muscat and similar agreements with other partners like the European Union or New Zealand provide the much-needed strategic hedging. India already has 15 FTAs covering 26 countries and preferential trade agreements with another 26. It is negotiating with over 50 more partners. Trade between India and Oman exceeded \$10 billion in 2024-25, providing a strong foundation for greater economic cooperation. The two countries have also agreed to enhance services exports, allowing a more liberal entry and stay conditions for skilled professionals. A deal with Oman could provide the springboard India needs to find other markets in the region and in Africa. Its strategic location serves as a hub from where Indian products can find other markets. The zero-duty access could result in \$2 billion worth of exports to Oman in the near term, benefitting gems and jewellery, textiles, leather, footwear, sports goods, plastics, furniture, agricultural products and engineering products. Oman largely exports crude oil, liquefied natural gas and fertilizers, methyl alcohol, along with petroleum coke. These items are critical for India's energy sector. The CEPA provides for 100 per cent FDI by Indian companies in major services sectors in Oman. Indian exports, largely driven by machinery and parts exports, have doubled in the last five years from \$2 billion to \$6 billion. New Delhi's top exports include machinery, rice, iron and steel articles, and personal care products and ceramic products. With bilateral trade already exceeding \$10 billion, the agreement provides a strong platform for accelerated growth in merchandise trade. The CEPA also delivers ambitious and forward-looking commitments in services, covering 127 sub-sectors including IT and computer-related services, business and professional services, R&D, education, and health, unlocking high-value opportunities for Indian service providers. An undeniable reality of current international politics is that trade policy can no longer be divorced from geopolitical risk.

Viksit Bharat G RAM G- Rozgar guarantee for empowering rural India



Shivraj Singh Chouhan

Public debate around welfare reform is both necessary and healthy. Concerns expressed by some quarters over the Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) stem from a legitimate apprehension: that any change to a historic employment guarantee could dilute hard-won worker rights. That concern deserves respect. But it also calls for a careful reading of what the Viksit Bharat G RAM G Bill actually provides, rather than assumptions. The most prominent feature of the Bill is that it gives legal guarantee of 125 days of wage employment in a year, to each rural household. The Bill also provides for unemployment allowance in case the employment is not provided within 15 days of application, by removing MGNREGA-era disemployment provisions. The weakness of India's rural employment framework lay not in intent, but in structural shortcomings that called for reform. VB-G RAM G must be assessed against this reality. Far from weakening entitlements, the proposed framework addresses MGNREGA deficiencies directly. By removing dis-entitlement provisions that had the effect of

denying workers their due, and by strengthening statutory obligations relating to transparency, social audit and grievance redressal, the Bill seeks to restore credibility to the employment guarantee. Enhanced accountability mechanisms and time-bound grievance resolution are not peripheral features; they are central to making the right meaningful on the ground. In this sense, VB-G RAM G does not retreat from social protection. It seeks to convert a frequently frustrated entitlement into a real, enforceable guarantee.

FROM PAPER ENTITLEMENT TO REAL EMPowerMENT

The most common criticism is that VB-G RAM G undermines the demand-driven nature of rural employment. This claim does not withstand a plain reading of the Bill. Clause 5(1) places a clear statutory obligation on the Government to provide not less than 125 days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to any rural household whose adult members volunteer to undertake unskilled manual work.

Far from weakening this right to demand, the Bill strengthens it by expanding guaranteed employment to 125 days and removing MGNREGA-era disemployment provisions, thereby restoring unemployment allowance as a real statutory safeguard. A right embedded in statutory guarantees and enforceable accountability mechanisms is inherently stronger—and VB-G RAM G does precisely this in real terms.

STRENGTHENING THE LIVELIHOOD GUARANTEE

Another criticism suggests that the reform prioritises asset

creation at the cost of employment. The Bill clearly enshrines a statutory livelihood guarantee, while simultaneously linking employment to the creation of productive and durable public assets.

Clause 4(2) read with Schedule 1 identifies four thematic domains—water security, core rural infrastructure, livelihood-related infrastructure, and works to mitigate extreme weather events. This ensures that wage employment contributes not only to immediate income support, but also to long-term rural resilience and productivity. Employment and assets, therefore, are not competing objectives; they are mutually reinforcing, laying the foundation for a prosperous and resilient rural Bharat.

DECENTRALIZATION THROUGH CONVERGENCE, NOT CENTRALIZATION

Far from centralisation, Clauses 4(1) to 4(3) anchor all works in Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans (VGPPs) prepared at the village level based on local needs and approved by the Gram Sabha. The Bill also addresses a deeper structural flaw of the earlier framework—fragmentation—by requiring all works to be aggregated into the Viksit Bharat National Rural Infrastructure Stack, creating a unified planning and visibility framework.

This is not centralisation by fiat. Clauses 16, 17, 18 and 19 vest planning, implementation and monitoring authority in Panchayats, Programme Officers and District authorities at appropriate tiers. What the Bill facilitates is visibility, coordination and coherence—not centralisation of decision-making authority. Gram Sabhas

continue to drive planning based on local priorities.

BALANCING WORKER SECURITY AND FARM PRODUCTIVITY

Concerns regarding agricultural labour shortages during peak seasons are explicitly addressed. Clause 6 empowers State Governments to notify, in advance, periods aggregating to sixty days in a financial year covering peak sowing and harvesting seasons during which works under the Bill shall not be undertaken.

Crucially, Clause 6(3) allows States to issue differentiated notifications at the level of districts, blocks or Gram Panchayats based on agro-climatic conditions. This built-in flexibility ensures that the enhanced employment guarantee complements, rather than disrupts, agricultural operations—a calibrated balance few welfare legislations have achieved.

EQUITY THROUGH RULE-BASED ALLOCATION

Critics also point to fears of fiscal tightening. Clause 4(5) and Clause 22(4) require State-wise normative allocations to be determined on objective parameters prescribed in the Rules.

At the same time, the framework treats States not as mere implementing agencies but as partners in development. State Governments are empowered to notify and operationalise their own Schemes within the State, consistent with the minimum statutory framework laid down in the Bill. This ensures that while allocations are rule-based and equitable, implementation remains flexibly—cooperative federalism in practice.

TECHNOLOGY AS ENABLEMENT, NOT

EXCLUSION

Apprehensions about technology-driven exclusion overlook the safeguards built into the Bill. Clauses 23 and 24 mandate technology-enabled transparency through biometric authentication, geo-tagged works, real-time dashboards and regular public disclosures—addressing concerns around fake attendance, ghost workers and unverifiable records. Technology is not conceived as a rigid gatekeeper but as an enabling tool, with exception handling as a core design feature. Clause 20 strengthens social audits by the Gram Sabha, reinforcing community oversight. Technology here does not bypass accountability; it underpins it.

REFORM AS RENEWAL

By enhancing the employment guarantee, embedding local planning, balancing worker security with farm productivity, converging schemes, strengthening frontline capacity through enhanced administrative support, and modernising governance, the Bill seeks to restore credibility to a promise that too often fell short in practice.

The choice is not between reform and compassion; it is between a static entitlement that under-delivers and a modern framework that delivers with dignity, predictability and pace. In that light, VB-G RAM G is not a retreat from social protection—it is its renewal.

(The Author is the Union Minister for Rural Development and Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare)

UN Anti-Corruption Conference in Doha concludes with call to maximise potential of AI systems to address corruption, economic crime



The world's largest anti-corruption gathering concluded in Doha today with the adoption of the Doha Declaration 2025: strengthening international cooperation and technical assistance and seizing the opportunities provided by artificial intelligence systems in preventing and combating corruption.

It sends a clear message that shaping tomorrow's integrity requires harnessing technology responsibly and

strengthening international cooperation.

As corruption and financial crimes become increasingly sophisticated, law enforcement and justice systems need to keep pace with these evolving threats.

The Doha Declaration 2025 calls on States to leverage digital technologies, including AI, to strengthen international law enforcement cooperation in cross-border corruption and to improve accuracy, efficiency and

objectivity of national efforts to measure corruption risks.

It encourages the use of technologies developed by expert networks, including through the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Operational Network of Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement Authorities (GOLAE Network), to enable the secure and rapid exchange of information. Timely information sharing is critical in corruption cases, where delays can undermine investigations and jeopardise outcomes.

The Acting Executive Director of UNODC, John Brandolino, said, "The new Doha Declaration, focusing on artificial intelligence, is an important recognition of this technology's impact, and a meaningful step on the way to fully realising its potential in preventing and combating corruption."

The Conference was addressed by the UNODC YouthLED Integrity Advisory Board, calling for meaningful inclusion of young people in anti-corruption frameworks and strong follow-up action to the commitments made at the Conference.

Eleven resolutions have been adopted by the Conference on a wide range of topics, underscoring the complexity of challenges facing the world today. Resolutions focus on enhancing transparency in the funding of political parties, candidates for elected public offices and electoral campaigns, strengthening the integrity of children and young people through education, the role corruption plays in facilitating other crimes, such as smuggling of migrants and crimes that affect the environment, and the future of the United Nations Convention against Corruption peer-review mechanism, among others.

The adoption of a resolution on the next phase of the review mechanism underscores that the effective implementation of the Convention requires review processes that are efficient, effective and fit for purpose, while also building on experience and results generated by the Implementation Review Mechanism to date.

UN marks second World Meditation Day with focus on inner peace, global harmony

The Permanent Mission of India, along with several partner countries, headed the second World Meditation Day at the United Nations Headquarters on Friday with a high-level event focused on inner peace and global harmony as per press statement.

The programme was organised by the Permanent Mission of India in collaboration with the missions of Andorra, Mexico, Nepal and Sri Lanka, which together form the core group behind the World Meditation Day initiative.



The event took place at the Trusteeship Council Chamber at the UN and saw participation from diplomats, experts, spiritual leaders and members of civil society.

Renowned spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar delivered the keynote address at the event and led the audience through a guided meditation session. Several other speakers spoke

about the importance of meditation in daily life and its growing relevance in today's fast-changing world. Yogmata Keiko Aikawa and Sister BK Gayatri from the Brahma Kumaris organisation shared their experiences of practising meditation and promoting it globally. LP Bhanu Sharma, co-founder of Nepal's Jeevan Vigyan Foundation, spoke about efforts to provide practical education in yoga and meditation. Academics and scientists also addressed the gathering. Lasantha Chandana Goonetilleke of Rutgers University and John Hagelin, a physicist and the International President of the Global Union of Scientists for Peace, discussed meditation as an instrument that can enhance our potential to address contemporary challenges.

POEMS

SON/DAUGHTER

In a dream my dad fell from the top of a steep white mountain down to a blue crevasse like the space between two waves where the light shines through just enough to tell you you will miss this life dearly.

The falling took years. I could hear him moving through air and then finally nothing.

In another dream my dad was an angel his see-through body dangling in the air floating above me face shimmery like tinfoil

and I cried and cried when he told me I can't come back to earth now not ever.

When my dad told me You will always be my daughter maybe it was like that. Will I be allowed to come back to earth and be your son?

By Kai Conradi

New ICMR study unravels breast cancer risk factors among Indian women

A new study conducted by scientists at the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has decoded the specific risk factors for breast cancer among women in India.

Breast Cancer is among the top three cancers amongst women in India. The incidence of breast cancers in the country is expected to rise by about 5.6 per cent annually, translating to an estimated increase of 0.05 million new cases per year.

The team from ICMR's National Centre for Disease Informatics and Research (NCDIR), Bengaluru, conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis on 31 studies covering a total of 27,925 participants, with 45 per cent being diagnosed with breast cancer.

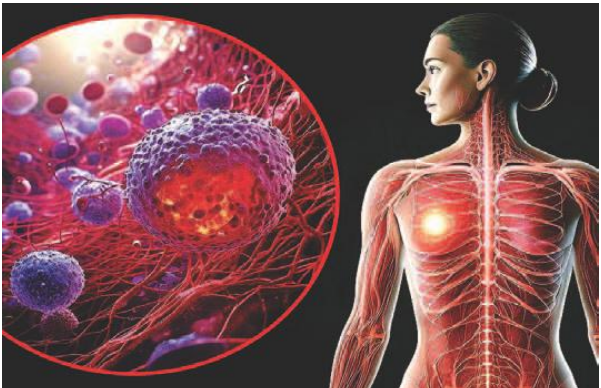
The findings, published in the journal Cancer Epidemiology, showed that

"reproductive timing, hormonal exposure, central obesity, and family history influence breast cancer risk primarily among Indian women".

"Women with late menopause (more than 50 years), first pregnancy after 30 years of age, higher age at marriage, multiple abortions and central obesity (with waist-to-hip ratio more than 85 cm) are at significant risk," the researchers said in the paper.

Among lifestyle factors, poor sleep quality, irregular sleep patterns, sleeping in a lighted room, and elevated stress levels were also positively associated with risk in individual studies. In contrast, higher levels of physical activity showed an inverse association.

The analysis found that women over 50 years had a three-fold higher risk, and



women aged 35-50 years had a 1.63-fold increase in risk, highlighting the importance of early screening for women in their forties.

However, variations in age group classifications across studies may explain the observed heterogeneity. In high-income countries, breast cancer incidence rises significantly after the age of 50, with the majority of cases occurring in postmenopausal women.

In contrast, India exhibits a relatively higher incidence of breast cancer in younger women, typically between their 40s and 50s.

"Genetic susceptibility, earlier reproductive transitions, and distinct lifestyle factors may contribute to this disparity. These findings highlight the importance of early screening programmes for women in this age group to

enable timely detection and intervention," said the researchers led by Saravanan Vijayakumar from the ICMR-NCDIR, in the paper.

The study stressed that it is important to consider low BMI as a potential risk factor for breast cancer prognosis and treatment outcomes, as these findings highlight.

As India has a high prevalence of abdominal obesity, lifestyle interventions aimed at reducing waist circumference may be beneficial for preventing breast cancer.

Notably, the review also highlighted the critical need for large, extensive, population-based prospective cohort studies in India to define breast cancer prevention and early detection strategies with greater precision.

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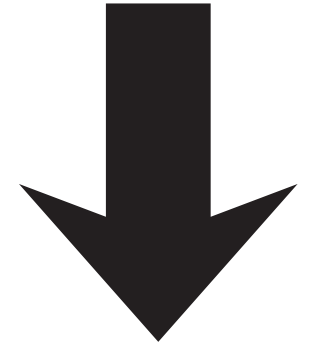
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