

About E20: Why choice, pricing matter



OFF THE RECORD
BY P VAIDYANATHAN IYER

THE ETHANOL-petrol debate refuses to abate on the streets, and just like the Cockroach Janta Party’s Jantar Mantar NEET protest, it is getting traction on Instagram, and other social media platforms. The government is finding it challenging to quell public disenchantment and turn opinion in favour of E20 (petrol blended with 20 per cent ethanol). There are reasons beyond politics why reasoned communication by the government is being disregarded by people, and there are possible solutions, which are being resisted by the government due to big implementation hurdles.

But some in the government have their ears to the ground, are filtering the noise, and picking the right signals. They are looking behind to see what could have been done to incentivise those who feel short-changed on mileage due to E20 rollout. And now, thinking ahead, if something is still possible to win them back. In India,

they understand mileage and price are two key aspects that influence decision-making in lower and middle-income families.

All along, the NDA government has defended the blending programme and rightfully so, while simultaneously emphasising that it did not begin under the present government. Indeed, the pilot was launched during AB Vajpayee’s government in 2001, and the E5 roll out across several states was attempted in 2006 under the UPA. But it gathered momentum after the present government assumed charge in 2014. Ethanol blending reached 10 per cent in 2021-22, and gradually rose to 19.2 per cent in 2024-25, and is now set at 20 per cent.

There is no doubt, ethanol blending has many advantages. It cuts fossil fuel use, produces lower carbon emissions, reduces dependence on imports, saves precious foreign exchange, and insulates the country from the vagaries of geopolitics that affect supplies. While this may be appreciated by those affected, they are not convinced how all this translates into benefits for them.

They don’t get it, because as a government officer explains, the consumer is not seeing a tangible price benefit despite bearing the cost of a lower mileage. And this is because the consumer does not have a choice. For example, when petrol pumps started dispensing E5, could they have offered it alongside petrol? Con-

Consumers are not seeing a tangible price benefit despite bearing the cost of a lower mileage. This is because they do not have a choice today.

sumers then have a choice. They could be incentivised to transition to E5 by being charged lower than petrol for this blended fuel. Similarly, for E10, and now E20. Differential pricing becomes an incentive; consumers would make peace with a 3-5 per cent lower mileage because of a lower-priced E20 compared with E10.

This can be best explained by what the government did following changes in the income tax regime, points out another officer. A new tax regime with lower taxes but no major exemptions was introduced in April 2020. It was voluntary. As the new tax regime evolved over the years, the Finance Ministry continued to offer tax payers the option to file returns under the old tax regime. The old regime offers exemptions, but tax rates are high. It has been six years, and the two systems continue alongside. But almost 90 per cent of all individuals have shifted to the new tax regime.

To be fair, the government has tried to explain the advantages of E20 by comparing India’s retail fuel prices with that of other countries in South Asia and Europe. The petrol price hike in India between June 2022 and June 2026 was in the lower single digits, at less than 6 per cent, whereas it was more than 15 per cent in European countries, and more than 20 per cent in South Asian countries.

Be that so, it is tough to make the Indian consumers believe the counterfactual. What did not happen, but could have

happened, is a concept that does not stick easily. The fact that E20 was a reason why the government could keep petrol prices low despite the Indian crude oil basket averaging over \$100 a barrel is still lost on most consumers.

The transition from E10 to E20 happened in four years. Given the West Asia crisis, it is possible the government was worried about its impact on oil prices in the long term. It is possible prices could remain higher for longer. It has not played out that way, but uncertainty prevails in the region, and the motivation for transitioning to E20 could be many. When global crude oil is at \$70 a barrel or less, E20 is costlier to produce than pure petrol, according to government estimates. Ethanol becomes much cheaper at relatively high global crude oil prices of \$120-130 a barrel.

Clearly, for many reasons, moving away from fossil fuels is a long-term strategic imperative. Ethanol blended fuel is definitely an alternative, but requires behavioural changes among consumers. It is here that public policy gets interesting, and challenging. Offering consumers a choice of fuel and making them see a price advantage will make a difference. What can’t be done about mileage, can choice and differential pricing cover for that?

The writer is Managing Editor, The Indian Express. Off the Record is a fortnightly column

Am I a Naxal?



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

AM I a ‘*dimagi* Naxal’? Ever since the Prime Minister identified this new genre of traitor in his Red Fort speech, I have brooded over this question. In simple English, this new kind of traitor is an intellectual with leftist tendencies who takes inspiration from the teachings of Chairman Mao. So, as someone who is possibly the most economically right-wing, politically conservative columnist in our vast and wondrous land, why should I of all people worry? Well, because the definition of ‘*dimagi* Naxal’ is treacherously ambiguous and could encompass even those who despise Mao and totally oppose violent uprisings against the Indian State.

On this, my credentials are impeccable. I openly opposed the late Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale at a time when you could be killed for doing so. And, never at any stage of my long career in journalism have I had the smallest sympathy for the Naxalites. Not even in the seventies when many young people of my acquaintance were not just in sympathy with this movement but had given up college to march with the comrades in the jungles. In those days it was fashionable to be extremely leftist and unfashionable to be mildly rightist, either politically or economically.

Memories come back as I write these words of conversations in dingy, smoke-filled ‘*barsatis*’ where over cheap rum and cheaper cigarettes we talked of how only a revolution could save India. I joined in these conversations and drank the rum but was never persuaded. When I became older and wiser and learned to analyse economic and political ideas, I became convinced that it was decades of ‘socialism’ that kept millions of Indians mired in poverty. It is simply not possible to distribute wealth without first creating it. In this column I have said more than once that I believe India would have been among the richest countries in the world if we had adopted the principles of free markets and liberal democracy.

Instead, we chose to emulate the Soviet Union, and this has meant that millions of Indians continue to live on government handouts and the dream of a government job. Those aged lefties who still believe Mao and Stalin are heroes pretend that they have not noticed that it was only after the leaders of Russia and China started following free market economic policies that their people began to enjoy a measure of prosperity.

With ideas that are so far from being leftist, why do I fear that I might end up in the ‘*dimagi* Naxal’ category? Well, because I oppose many of the policies that the Modi government has chosen to follow. I agree with the Cockroach Janta Party’s campaign to improve village schools. And I agree with Abhishek Dipke when he says that it is only when political leaders and high officials are forced to send their children to government schools that these schools will improve dramatically. When I see the ‘cockroaches’ fan out across villages to make reels of the horrific conditions in government schools, I see them as nationalists and patriots and not subversives. Could this put me in the ‘*dimagi* Naxal’ category?

Since the Prime Minister’s Independence Day speech, there has been an explosion of public support for him from his devotees and spokespersons on television. In oneshow, I heard these acolytes explain that Modi was talking about intellectuals who were really Naxal collaborators. But these worthies have not noticed the reels that the BJP’s propagandists are posting on social media in which they illustrate the definition of the new traitors with photos of Modi’s political opponents.

If you believe in liberal democracy, as I do, you necessarily believe that dissent is the oxygen that allows democracy to breathe and remain healthy. Sadly, this is not an idea that has been much cherished since Modi became prime minister. The opposite is true. Every effort has been made to silence dissenting voices and crush dissidents. The methods used are to unleash the most powerful investigative agencies on those who speak against the government. Journalists whose job it is to speak out against the things they see wrong are often treated as anti-nationals who should lose their rights as citizens. When the Jantar Mantar protests were at their peak, did you notice that many of Modi’s more passionate devotees demanded that the cockroaches should have their passports confiscated?

Every time I see dissidents attacked and dissidence crushed, it makes me realise that India is no longer the liberal democracy that it once was. Of course, leaders of yore did their own damage to liberal democratic values, as Indira Gandhi did when she declared the Emergency. But she did that so openly that defiance was much easier. In the past twelve years, the elimination of dissent and dissidents has been more insidious and more dangerous. The first time I saw that invisible pall of fear lift was when the Cockroach Janta Party began to mock Modi in their reels and in their speeches.

As I was writing this piece, I noticed on Instagram that some Modi devotees had set up a makeshift temple, in which stood a cardboard cutout of Modi dressed as Lord Rama. His devotees were reciting what they called the ‘*Modi chalisa*’ and, with lighted *diyas*, were praying to the cardboard deity. This sickened and shamed me. Does that make me a ‘*dimagi* Naxal’?

Historian, constant rebel whose work reshapes the future



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY DEEPAK TENGURIYA

IT WAS the late 1970s in Sussex, England. Two historians sat well past midnight, talking. They spoke of Indian peasants, their anger, their quiet rebellions.

One of them later wrote that he sat “practically spellbound”. Ranajit Guha, the founding figure of the ‘Subaltern Studies Collective’, did most of the talking that night. The man who was listening was Sumit Sarkar.

Sarkar, who helped shape an entire era of Indian history writing, died on August 13, 2026, aged 87.

In the cold evenings of England in the late 1970s, a new way of writing Indian history was beginning to take shape in Oxford and elsewhere — one that would come to be known as ‘Subaltern Studies’ in 1982, when the first volume of the series, *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha, was published. It was an approach to “history from below”. Most history books had been focused on the big leaders and political parties. But Guha argued that ordinary people, peasants, workers, and tribal communities had their own “autonomous domain” of politics, one that did not simply follow the lead of the nationalist elites. ‘Subaltern Studies’ tried to recover their voices and actions.

Sarkar became one of the key contributors to this collective, alongside historians Shahid Amin, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gautam Bhadra, and David Hardiman. His first book, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, published in 1973, had already moved the story of Bengal’s anti-colonial revolt away from famous leaders towards workers, peasants, and small artisans — an approach that fed directly into the group’s founding spirit.

It is one of history’s small ironies that the same man would years later become



{ SUMIT SARKAR }
1939-2026

one of the school’s sharpest and most respected critics. By the late 1980s, the project had increasingly turned away from class-based histories towards critiques of Western thought, secularism and Enlightenment values, drawing on Western thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Distancing himself from the group, Sarkar, in his essay, *The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies*, warned that some of these critiques came dangerously close to the arguments made by the Hindu Right.

Sumit Sarkar was born in 1939 into a Brahmo family in Calcutta, in a home where mornings began with Tagore and evenings ended in arguments about Marx. His father, Sushobhan Sarkar, was a celebrated Marxist historian at Presidency College. His uncle was PC Mahalanobis, the statistician after whom India’s premier statistical institute is named.

For Sarkar, becoming a historian was almost inherited — not chosen. Yet even within that inheritance, he rebelled, writing sharply about the Bengal Renaissance, sharp enough that a senior Communist Party of India (CPI) worker once

accused him of betraying his father’s legacy. Interestingly, without telling him, his father responded with a sharp rejoinder, defending him.

Decades later, generations of students learned modern Indian history from Sumit Sarkar’s book *Modern India, 1885-1947*, first published in 1983. The kind of book that ends up on a shelf with a torn spine and pencil marks on every page. Later he focused on the economy, environment and culture, and *Modern Times: India 1880s-1950s* was published in 2014.

Sarkar’s moral courage comes out in the later part of his life, as well. In 2004, West Bengal’s Left government granted him the Rabindra Puraskar literary award. But in 2007, after police fired on farmers in Nandigram, Sarkar returned his award and donated the prize money to a relief fund. He argued that while Jalianwala Bagh had happened under colonial rule, Nandigram was in some ways more shocking because the violence had occurred under a Left government in independent India.

In his later years, Sarkar grew fascinated with “microhistory”. He unearthed a forgotten newspaper account from Doyhata, a village in East Bengal, where a ‘lower-caste’ man had murdered another ‘lower-caste’ man before his ‘upper-caste’ guru, later going on to assault ‘upper-caste’ women that same night, in a brutal, isolated tragedy. Sarkar called the contradictions in the news story a kind of “unexpected reversal” that grand history often misses. When questioned by *Economic and Political Weekly* on this, he replied simply: “All historians are entitled to try and understand their Others.”

Sumit Sarkar leaves behind his wife Tanika Sarkar, and a legacy that lives not only in bookshelves, but also in the minds of students who first understood modern India through his pages. A historian’s death is a different kind of leaving. He does not leave behind just a body of work, but also a work unfinished, one that the next generation must walk into archive rooms to complete. Like evening light streaming through the window of an old house, his impact will linger on the walls long after the room has gone dark.

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Imitation isn’t the sincerest form of flattery

TENS OF thousands of people attended a vigil in London to pay tribute to 41-year-old Jason Arday, the former Cambridge professor who died right after being publicly accused of plagiarism and making grandiose claims about his supposed achievements. Delicately poetic looking with dreadlocks and kohl rimmed eyes, young Arday cut a dashing figure, indeed. His good looks combined with a prestigious post in academia ensured admiration and celebrity. Ultimately, it all came to naught; he was brutally roasted for wildly inconsistent lies, each one gleefully torn apart by the British mainstream media.

The crowd at the vigil seemed greatly moved by the “unfair” level of scrutiny Arday endured, the sub-text being his white peers wouldn’t have had to face the same. Emotional speeches about the vicious media “hounding” that led to his death touched on “institutional racism”, but there

hasn’t been much said about the far more likely cause, the devastating embarrassment that stems from being trapped and exposed in a situation of one’s own making. For someone extra sensitive, being outed as a fraud is shattering enough to not want to wake up the next morning. In other words, it’s all too possible that Arday couldn’t hack his own stupidity. This outpouring of sympathy for his tragic end brings to mind Jim Morrison’s profound observation in the poem *A Feast of Friends*: Death makes angels of us all, and gives us wings where we had shoulders smooth as raven claws.

After any shocking incident, an instinct kicks in, reminding us we are all flawed beings, trying our best to get by. We’re forced to reflect on our own mortality. It’s more comforting to ascribe blame or find reasons to explain ordinary human fragility than hold people responsible for their choices. On the scale of terrible things people do to one another, garnering the



ON THE LOOSE
BY LEHER KALA

spotlight by boasting seems pretty minor. Ideally, nobody should have to die for it. However, the reactions and conversations around Arday’s death raise important questions and shed an (alarming) light on changing value systems. Does pursuing the right to social justice trump pursuing the truth? Or can we agree that both racial injustice and intellectual dishonesty are to be lamented equally?

It is worth noting that the ChatGPT era has redefined how we think about originality. Plagiarism used to mean passing off someone else’s work as one’s own, but students now are open about using AI to write academically perfect essays. A far cry from when we grew up in the 80s when anyone who cheated during an exam was treated with withering scorn (copycat!). Interestingly, one no longer hears of schools rusticating students for unethical exam practices. In this scenario, the thinking goes: everyone’s handing in AI-assisted assign-

ments, so is it so bad that Arday was masquerading as a pseudo highbrow?

I’m going to stick my neck out and say it is actually that bad. Post-generative AI is so clever that plagiarism can no longer be reliably detected, as long as the user asks ChatGPT to paraphrase the content. If the Ardays’ of this world are allowed to flourish unheeded, the future means endless, tired regurgitations of stuff that already exists. Nothing new will emerge; society will remain stagnant. And surely that poor, nameless PhD student who toiled away in obscurity to come up with a new perspective — only to have the far more famous and networked Arday grab it for himself — deserves some sympathy, too. We’re told not to badmouth the dead, but there’s the thought that people who’ve made their fortune via a public reputation have a greater duty to maintain the highest integrity.

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Balakrishnan is the author of India’s economy from Nehru to Modi: A brief history

Coomi Kapoor’s Inside Track column will be back in a fortnight



What does ChatGPT for Teens entail?

Why did OpenAI launch this? What are its features? What restrictions does it have? Can it be used for learning?

Abhinava K.

The story so far:
On August 18, OpenAI launched a version of ChatGPT for teenagers. The company said ChatGPT for Teens will have stronger protections, including restrictions on content related to self-harm, suicide, and sexual content. The launch comes amid claims that AI chatbots have contributed to deaths by suicide among the youth and caused other mental health problems.

What are the key features of ChatGPT for Teens?
ChatGPT for Teens, designed for 13- to 17-year-olds, has features such as parental controls, quiet hours, a study mode, and notifications for situations that require real-world interventions. Most of these safeguards were already present in accounts for minors. Apart from those who identify themselves as minors, OpenAI has said that it will also automatically place users who its system determines to be below the age of 17 under ChatGPT for Teens. The company says it is guided by a commitment to treat teens as teens, and to encourage real-world support. Apart from restrictions on content related to self-harm, violence, eating disorders, dangerous activities, and explicit sexual or graphic material, it also places emphasis on helping teens study, rather than providing answers.

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Can ChatGPT for Teens be used for learning?
As the first generation of children and teens grows up with AI, an increasing number of them uses the tool for learning. ChatGPT for Teens promises to support students working on their lessons. For example, a teen attempting to solve a mathematical equation will not be directly given the answer; instead, the chatbot will go over the equation step-by-step, ask questions, and give hints for solutions. The study mode, built with inputs from teachers, scientists, and other experts, will use this detailed approach to arrive at answers. Parents and teens can even set specific timings for it to be enabled by default.

What other guardrails are present?
The company says ChatGPT for Teens will “reduce exposure to harmful content while preserving the ability to learn, create, and explore”. The accounts of parents and teens can be linked, and parents can receive notifications in certain high-risk situations. This will alert them if something may be seriously wrong. The alerts will be monitored by human moderators. OpenAI will also provide options such as quiet hours that regulate when ChatGPT can’t be used, turning off memory so it doesn’t save and use chats while responding, and removing options for image generation. For teens, the chatbot will offer periodic reminders to take breaks from using ChatGPT and caution them against uploading sensitive images. It will also provide the option of switching off voice mode to minimise the ability of the chatbot to appear like a person. “ChatGPT should not use romantic language, encourage emotional dependence, or imply that it has feelings or consciousness,” OpenAI said. However, the effectiveness of these safeguards remains to be seen. Experts have reservations on whether these actions will be enough to address the dependence of users on chatbots.

Why is this needed?
Concerns over the unchecked use of AI chatbots have been mounting for a while now. There have been several news reports of teens and adults using chatbots for advice on self-harm and/or inflicting violence on others. Several families, including the parents of 16-year-old Adam Raine, who died by suicide last year, have sued OpenAI saying it has contributed to deaths. There have also been growing concerns about learning losses due to the use of these chatbots. Various studies have highlighted the harm that chatbots cause to critical-thinking skills. Among teens, this can cause lasting damage. The ability of chatbots to mimic human characteristics and emotions has also led to several users forming relationships with them. OpenAI CEO Sam Altman has spoken about how several people, particularly the youth, have an “emotional over-reliance” on ChatGPT. Governments are also facing pressure to regulate the use of AI chatbots. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission is examining the negative impacts of AI chatbots acting as companions, particularly on children and teens. The U.K. is considering restricting the use of AI chatbots for users under 18. India does not have stand-alone legislation regulating how children use AI chatbots.

What are the U.S.’s latest allegations against India?

Why has the U.S. accused India of violating what it considers fair trade practices? How many countries have been named in The Great Transhipment Scam? What do these allegations mean for India? Can they impact India’s growth story?

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:
Last week, the U.S. accused India of violating what it considers fair trade practices. The White House published a report titled “The Great Transhipment Scam” in which it accused about 40 countries, including India, of helping China evade U.S. tariffs.

What is the Great Transhipment Scam?
Over the last nearly three decades, the U.S. and Chinese economies have become deeply intertwined, with the U.S. increasingly relying on China to be its manufacturing hub, and China relying on the U.S. as its market and for investments. This is a somewhat simplistic assessment of their engagement, but it is also the most relevant for the current context. This relationship has resulted in the U.S. running huge trade deficits with China. That is, importing much more from the country than it exports to it. U.S. President Donald Trump has for long spoken about his concerns with vast trade deficits; it is primarily why he insisted on levying tariffs on U.S. trade partners during his second term. However, China began facing such actions during Mr. Trump’s first term itself. In 2018, the U.S. imposed tariffs ranging from 7.5% to 100% on goods from China such as electric vehicles, semiconductors, and medical products under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, for unfair trade and tech practices. As per the White

The U.S. has alleged that more than 40 countries ore regions are importing Chinese goods, modifying them, and exporting them to the U.S. at tariffs below what they would have faced had they directly been exported from China

House report, this resulted in a shrinking of the U.S.’s trade deficit with China in 2019 and 2020. On July 24, 2026, the U.S. added a further 12.5% tariff for gaps in forced-labour compliance and the lack of comprehensive legal import prohibitions. According to the report, since 2018, Chinese exporters have increasingly been routing goods through third countries to evade tariffs. “Products that previously moved directly from China to the United States were shipped through jurisdictions where limited assembly, finishing, repackaging, relabeling, or documentation changes could create the appearance of a different national origin,” the report stated.

What is India’s involvement?
The White House has identified more than 40 countries associated with “elevated illegal transshipment risk”, with India among the top “enablers” of China’s evasion of tariffs. The other countries/regions named as the top enablers are Mexico, Canada, the European Union, Japan, and South Korea. The U.S. has alleged that these countries are importing Chinese goods, modifying them marginally, and exporting them to the U.S. at tariffs below what these goods would have faced had they directly been exported from China. This, the report said, has led to significant revenue loss for the U.S. government. “The Office of Trade and Economic Analysis estimates that approximately \$67 billion in U.S.-bound goods were transshipped from China through the top hubs – Mexico, India, and Vietnam – in 2025, producing an estimated \$28 billion in lost tariff revenue,” the report said. As an example, the report mentioned the Pune-Gujarat-Chennai production belt, saying that the region “absorbs” pumps and compressors from China, thereby affecting industrial supply chains in Cincinnati, Dayton, and Columbus in the U.S.

What does this mean for the U.S.?
Broadly, the report’s findings suggest that the U.S.’s tariff policy has failed to reduce U.S. imports and increase domestic production. While U.S. imports from China fell from \$525.8 billion in 2017 to \$327.5 billion in 2025, total U.S. imports from all countries rose sharply from \$2.41 trillion to \$3.50 trillion. In short, the U.S. replaced many Chinese finished goods with imports from other countries rather than with domestically produced goods. As Ajay Srivastava, founder of the think tank



U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping during a state dinner at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. AP

What did Trump say about India’s voting system?

Why is the President pushing for stricter voter ID rules in the U.S.? How are elections conducted in the U.S. and how are they different from those in India? What is the SAVE America Act? What do Americans think about the requirement of a photo ID?

Srinivasan Raman

The story so far:
U.S. President Donald Trump posted on his social media platform, Truth Social, that India’s Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar had asked his administration how elections are held in the U.S. without a valid photo identity card. He also pointed out that just 1% of India’s 64.64 crore electors who voted in the last general elections voted by mail (unlike the large number who do so in the U.S.) Mr. Trump reiterated his demand that Congress pass the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility (SAVE America) Act, which would require documentary proof of citizenship to register to vote in federal elections and a photo ID to cast a ballot, among other restrictions.

How are elections conducted in the U.S. and how do they differ from elections in India?
Article I, Section 4 of the U.S. Constitution (the Elections Clause) empowers the State legislatures to determine the “times, places, and manner” of federal elections even as it allows Congress to alter or make such regulations. There is no national election authority like the Election Commission of India. There is the Federal Election Commission, but it is only empowered to regulate campaign finance as registration, balloting, and counting are done by

The Bipartisan Policy Center in the U.S. estimates that over 20 million eligible American citizens do not have ready access to a passport or a birth certificate. Newly registering young adults have also faced problems producing these documents

the States’ county and municipal jurisdictions. This is due to the strongly federal nature of the U.S., unlike India’s quasi-federal system. The U.S. Congress also passed the National Voter Registration Act, 1993, which required States to offer voter registration at motor vehicle and public assistance offices, and the Help America Vote Act, 2002, which provided funding for States to buy new voting machines and called for State-wide elector databases. Voter eligibility in the U.S. is therefore a State concern, and registration is elector-initiated. While documentary proof of citizenship is not demanded, a potential elector has to affirm citizenship under penalty of perjury on the registration form. Thirty-six States ask for some form of identification at the polling place and 23 ask for a photo ID. This is unlike India, where electoral rolls are compiled in each State via house-to-house enumeration conducted by the ECI, which has superintendence over the whole process of registration. Eligible electors are then issued the Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC), though other documents, including Aadhaar, can be used as identification at the booth as well.

Is non-citizen voting a real problem in the U.S. as Mr. Trump has made it out to be?
Independent studies have found that almost all non-citizen registrations in the U.S. are accidental and only a small proportion of them votes. The Trump administration’s claims have not survived scrutiny. *The New York Times* reported that after announcing in July that it had identified 2,78,000 non-citizens on the rolls of four States, including 15,903 in Nevada, the Department of Homeland Security told Nevada’s election administrators this month that it had identified just 185 potential non-citizens so far. It described the earlier figure as a “ceiling” and shared a list without names. Surveys show that a large majority of the electorate supports the requirement of photo identification at the polls. Yet, even this is short of the more onerous requirement of proving citizenship at the point of registration, which is what the SAVE America Act requires.

What is the SAVE America Act, and why is it opposed by Democrats and others?
The SAVE America Act was passed by the U.S.

Global Trade Research Initiative, said, “Mr. Trump’s tariffs changed the source of imports but failed to reduce America’s overall dependence on imported goods”.

What are the implications for India?
This is yet another way that the U.S. is finding fault with India’s trade policies. During his first term, Mr. Trump found fault with India’s tariffs on luxury motorcycles, after which India reduced them. Last year, he blamed India for financing Russia’s war with Ukraine by importing Russian oil; his government hiked tariffs on imports from India to 50% as a penalty. More recently, the U.S. Senate passed a Bill with Mr. Trump’s backing that would result in tariffs of up to 100% being levied on India for its Russian oil imports. The Bill is waiting to be introduced and passed in the House of Representatives. Apart from this, the U.S. has also imposed a 10% tariff on imports from India as a penalty for not doing enough to curb the import of goods made using forced labour. Another investigation on excess capacity is ongoing, which could potentially see tariffs being hiked even further. The latest allegations that India is helping China evade tariffs are not accompanied by penal actions yet, but that possibility remains. Mr. Trump could decide to impose further tariffs on countries he deems are helping China in this regard.

How could India’s economy be impacted?
For India, any penal action would be a blow to its growth story. Over the last few years, rather than predominantly importing Chinese finished goods, India has been importing raw materials and intermediate goods, using them to manufacture finished goods within the country, and then exporting them. For example, electronic components made up 3.3% of India’s imports from China in the first quarter of 2015-16. This has grown to nearly 13% as of the first quarter of 2026-27. Several other goods used in manufacturing in India, such as electric machinery, chemicals, plastics, have seen their shares rise over the same period. On the other hand, the share of finished goods such as telecom instruments have fallen from about 18% to 11% over the same period of time. Similarly, the share of manufactured fertilizers have fallen from about 7.5% in 2015 to less than 1% in 2026. The share of consumer electronics in imports from China have halved over the same period. The ‘Make in India, For the World’ story still relies heavily on inputs from China. If India is forced to curb those imports, its manufacturing costs will rise, making Indian products less competitive globally.

House of Representatives in February along party lines, with Republicans outnumbering Democrats. It requires every new registering elector or an existing elector who wants to update his/her record to produce a passport, or a birth certificate, or naturalisation papers along with a government photo ID. Mail-in voters – a widely used option in the U.S. – have to enclose a copy of their photo ID. States will then run names on electoral rolls through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the latter could flag non-citizens for removal. Election officials who register people who lack the documents can face up to five years in prison. The Bipartisan Policy Center in the U.S. estimates that over 20 million eligible American citizens do not have ready access to a passport or a birth certificate. Newly registering young adults have also faced problems producing these documents. These concerns have led the Democratic Party to oppose the SAVE America Act, which has stalled in the Senate.

Is India’s Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process delivering the “pure” rolls that the ECI promises?
The SIR, launched by the ECI to “purify” the electoral rolls, uses a peculiar methodology in which electors must self-enumerate on forms distributed door-to-door by the ECI before being included in the draft roll. After scrutiny by election officials, who will compare the forms with the previous SIR conducted more than two decades ago in the States, the draft rolls will be updated (the corrections and clarifications phase) before new SIR rolls are released. The three phases of the SIR conducted by the ECI have been beset by anomalies in each State. By phase 2 of the SIR, for instance, more than 7 crore names were deleted during the process. The issues with the SIR are reflected in the drastic fall in gender ratio in the new rolls across most States. In West Bengal, in particular, an analysis published in *The Hindu* showed that there has been a religious skew in the deletions as well, which mattered in the way the election results panned out in the State. Despite these infirmities and anomalies, the Supreme Court held that the exercise was well within the ECI’s statutory mandate. The SIR in India has shifted the onus of verifying voter eligibility onto electors, unlike the earlier process in which election officials prepared the rolls by identifying and enrolling eligible citizens through house-to-house surveys. Opponents of the SAVE America Act have raised a similar concern about the Trump administration-backed legislation.

PROFILES

The man who steadied the ship

Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir

The former BNP general secretary who steered the party through the difficult years of the Hasina government, when Khaleda Zia was in jail and Tarique Rahman was in exile in the U.K., has been elected President of Bangladesh

Kallol Bhattacharjee

In 1961, General Ayub Khan’s military government of Pakistan wanted to further entrench its control over East Pakistan and made the celebration of Rabindranath Tagore’s birth centenary illegal. The crackdown had an opposite outcome as colleges and universities in East Pakistan erupted. The protests shaped a generation of leaders who would take important positions subsequently as Bangladesh became a free country a decade later. Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, the new President of Bangladesh, graduated from Dhaka University during those early years when agitational politics energised the demand for a new country.

There are many legends about Mr. Alamgir, one of which is that he is a master of marathon meetings, sustained simply by cups of tea. The late Khaleda Zia was also known for her energy and her tireless engagement with the cadre of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). But the only other person who used to spend longer hours at the BNP Chairperson’s office in Dhaka’s Gulshan was Mr. Alamgir. In 2015, one night, Begum Zia, on hearing that Mr. Alamgir was leaving the office at 2 a.m., chided him for working so late, as the Sheikh Hasina government had tightened political space and BNP leaders were under pressure. “They can detain you for plotting protests in the city if they find you without adequate party workers around,” Begum Zia told him.

Among his friends and colleagues, President Alamgir is known for his personal bravery and integrity. G.M. Quader, younger brother of late President Gen. Ershad, who has known Mr. Alamgir for more than 50 years, says: “Sacrificing self-interest is rare in politics but Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir has sacrificed a lot for the BNP at a time when the party was under tremendous pressure. It was he who kept the party alive on the ground as Tarique Rahman lived in the U.K.”

The period following the end of the last BNP government in 2006 was not

easy for the party or its cadre and officials. After the interim government, Ms. Hasina took charge in 2009, beginning an era in which the BNP remained under sustained pressure. During this period, it was Mr. Alamgir, the party’s general secretary, who handled much of its political work. His emergence as President of Bangladesh marks the high point of a political career that has seen many of the highs and lows of Bangladesh’s political history.

Starting as a student activist in East Pakistan, Mr. Alamgir was initially associated with the leftist student movement that opposed Gen. Ayub Khan’s dictatorship. He was sent to study economics in Dhaka University where he joined the East Pakistan Students Union, the student wing of the Communist Party of Bangladesh.

His father, Mirza Ruhul Amin, had tried his luck with mainstream Pakistani politics and was elected to the provincial assembly.

By the end of the 1960s, with the political breakdown inside Pakistan, Mirza Ruhul Amin’s career came to a standstill and he joined a peace committee in Thakurgaon to preserve local peace and amity as the Pakistan military attacked commoners. Eventually he too had to take refuge in India like many others because of the atrocities by the Pakistani forces.

During the 1971 war, Mr. Alamgir left Dhaka and went to Thakurgaon, and organised local resistance against Pakistani police and military forces. Decades later, in 2018, in a video message against the Hasina-led government, Mr. Alamgir said he too had fought against the Pakistani forces like millions of other youngsters of Bangladesh.

Beginning of political career

Mr. Alamgir’s active political career formally began when Gen. Ziaur Rahman took charge after the November 7, 1975 military uprising in Dhaka. Later, several leftist and socialist leaders joined Ziaur Rahman’s political party, the BNP, and Mr. Alamgir was one of them. His first experience of working for a BNP



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

government came in 1979, when he served as secretary to Deputy Prime Minister S.A. Bari. He returned to teaching after the overthrow of the BNP government following the assassination of Ziaur Rahman in 1981.

During the next eight years, he taught economics in Dhaka and nurturing his links with the BNP that was being revived by Khaleda Zia. His father had reinvented his political career at this time and served as a Minister in the government of Hossein Mohammed Ershad. Mr. Alamgir left the government job towards the end of the 1980s when he won the chairmanship of the municipality of

Thakurgaon in 1988 as an Independent. He revived his links with the BNP once again in 1992 when Khaleda Zia was serving as PM.

He became a state Minister for agriculture in 2001 when Khaleda Zia became PM once again. He subsequently handled civil aviation and tourism as well. Mr. Alamgir came into national limelight during the difficult years of the BNP when Khaleda Zia was out of power and later in prison, and Tarique Rahman was forced into exile in the U.K. It was during this period, when Sheikh Hasina steered Bangladesh from 2009 onwards, that Mr. Alamgir took on

much of the party’s responsibility.

In an interview with *The Hindu* in February this year, Mr. Alamgir, who was then in charge of the Ministry of Local Governance, Rural Development and Cooperatives, described the period under Ms. Hasina as “very difficult”. “It was difficult for us personally but it was more difficult for our families as many of our party workers and leaders were jailed on multiple occasions during the Hasina years.” On October 28, 2023, the BNP had given a call for a major rally in Dhaka that rattled the Hasina government. To scuttle the rally, the Awami League government detained him. The BNP boycotted the January 2024 election claiming that the government had rigged the polls and contesting in such circumstances was pointless. Following the overthrow of Ms. Hasina on August 5, 2024, Mr. Alamgir provided the BNP with the leadership it needed and took part in dialogues with the interim government aimed at stabilising the country.

The Hasina factor

Mr. Alamgir believes New Delhi should hand over Ms. Hasina to Dhaka. “We believe Hasina has really committed serious human rights violations. There is a popular demand to punish her and we believe that India should hand her over to us. But not handing over Sheikh Hasina to Bangladesh will not be a deterrent to build trade and commercial ties. We want to build even better ties,” said Mr. Alamgir in February 2026.

G.M. Quader described Mr. Alamgir as a pragmatist who wants to build relations with important stakeholders such as India, and said the biggest test before him as the President of Bangladesh will be whether he can bring his pragmatic approach into politics and administration. “Bangladesh’s politics needs to be more inclusive as we need to discuss all challenges before the country in a transparent manner. Hopefully, as President of the country, Mirza Fakhrul will be able to convince the government of Bangladesh to be just that,” Mr. Quader told *The Hindu*.

THE GIST

Alamgir’s active political career formally began when Gen. Ziaur Rahman took charge after the November 7, 1975 military uprising in Dhaka

His first experience of working for a BNP government came in 1979, when he served as the secretary to Deputy Prime Minister S.A. Bari

He became a state Minister for agriculture in 2001 when Khaleda Zia became PM, and subsequently handled civil aviation and tourism as well

The Islamic apparatchik

Mohsen Rezaee

A former IRGC commander and a close confidant of the Supreme Leader, the General has been appointed Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council

Stanly Johny

Some in Iran call him the “eternal candidate”. Maj. Gen. Mohsen Rezaee, now 71, ran for President of Iran three times – 2009, 2013 and 2021. The former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has always remained an institutional insider and an ideologically committed apparatchik of the Islamic Republic, but, despite repeated attempts, he never managed to secure a position at the heart of Iran’s strategic decision making apparatus. The war the U.S. and Israel launched against Iran on February 28, 2026 changed that. Mr. Rezaee is now one of the most important decision makers in war-hit Iran and a close confidant of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei.

In March, when Mojtaba was appointed the Supreme Leader after the assassination of his father and predecessor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Mr. Rezaee was picked as the military adviser of the new leader. The country was under attack. A host of senior leaders were killed in the initial phase of the war – from Ali Khamenei to Ali Larijani, who was the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. Initially Mojtaba opted for replacements for the assassinated leaders and allowed the



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

system to function without any major shake-up. But earlier this month, he made a host of changes in the government by appointing his loyal supporters to key posts.

Ali Abdollahi was named the chief of staff of the armed forces; Ahmad Vahidi, the IRGC commander, was promoted to the rank of Major General; Ali Azmaei became commander of the IRGC Navy and Hossein Taeb was appointed commander of the paramilitary Basij. But the most significant elevation was that of Mr. Rezaee. He replaced Mohammed Bagher Zolqadr as secretary of the Security Council. Mojtaba’s office has also issued a special decree naming him as the representative of the Supreme Leader on the Council, which is today the most important wartime decision-making body on strategic matters.

Born in 1954, Mohsen Rezaee grew up in the Shah’s Iran. In the early 1970s, he became active in anti-monarchy protests, and the Shah’s infamous

secret police, SAVAK, arrested him in 1973. He later joined the Islamist guerrilla group Mansouroun (The Victors), whose members filled the ranks of the IRGC after the Shah’s regime fell in 1979. Mr. Rezaee, then 25 years old, sat on the 12-member committee that drafted the IRGC’s founding charter. In 1981, a year after Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, Mr. Rezaee was appointed the commander-in-chief of the IRGC, a post he held for 16 years.

Principalist faction

A PhD in economics (his thesis was on the theory of money, credit and general balance), Mr. Rezaee co-founded the Imam Hossein University in Tehran. He had also served as the secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council, a constitutional body tasked with resolving differences between the Guardian Council and the legislature.

Mr. Rezaee has long belonged to the “principalist” faction of Iran’s political class – the group broadly

called conservatives. In 2002, when reformist Mohammad Khatami was the President, Mr. Rezaee launched a news site *Baztab* as a conservative platform to counter the reformist agenda.

The 2026 war elevated his position among the top echelons of the Islamic Republic as Mojtaba turned to his hardline loyalists to run the security apparatus. Mr. Rezaee’s views about the war, Iran’s nuclear programme or its control of the Strait of Hormuz are hardly a secret.

In July, he said the control of the Strait, a critical waterway connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman, was “more important than dozens of atomic bombs”. In an interview with *CNN* in June, he said the “ball is in Trump’s court”, referring to Iran’s demand to release roughly \$24 billion of frozen assets. According to him, U.S. President Donald Trump cannot be trusted in negotiations. He said Iran was prepared for any U.S. ground invasion, which would be “great for us”. Uranium enrichment, he once stated, is “an inviolable right” of the Islamic Republic.

The hardline insider is today a central figure in Iran’s wartime leadership. By elevating Mr. Rezaee to secretary of the Security Council, Mojtaba Khamenei is sending a message that is lost on no one.

Eyes on the seas

UKMTO

What was established to help combat piracy has now emerged as a primary source of information for vessels on the dangers lurking at sea

Debayan Tewari

On August 18, 2026, an unknown projectile hit the Liberia-flagged bulk carrier *Minoan Dignity* while it was exiting the Strait of Hormuz, killing the ship’s chief engineer.

Before the news broke, a 72-word alert had informed seafarers and maritime observers about the attack. It read, “UKMTO has received a report of an incident in the Strait of Hormuz. The Company Security Officer has reported that the vessel was struck by an unknown projectile while conducting an outbound transit of the Strait of Hormuz. The impact caused damage to the engine room and resulted in a crew casualty. The remaining crew are currently being assisted by the Omani Coast Guard. At present, no environmental impact has been reported.”

For 25 years now, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) has been providing seafarers, shipping companies and authorities “essential, verified and corroborated security information”. According to its website, it is a “trusted authority in the maritime security sector, helping protect crucial trade routes”. Always working in the background, the West Asia war and Iran’s stranglehold over the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian



UKMTO

Gulf, and the threat posed by the Houthis at the Bab el-Mandeb in southern Red Sea, have put this under-the-radar organisation in the spotlight.

Maritime security

The UKMTO is a British Royal Navy-sponsored organisation that was formed in 2001 with an office in Dubai to handle distress calls during piracy threats, particularly near Somalia. In 2014, it was moved to Portsmouth in the U.K. The ‘UK National Strategy for Maritime Security’, presented in the British Parliament in 2014, outlines the U.K.’s broad-based thinking on maritime strategy of which the UKMTO is a part. The document said how “every aspect of our national life” is connected to the wider world and “most of these connections are provided by the sea”. Hence, it was seen as an imperative to “organise and use our current national capabilities to identify, assess and address maritime security issues at home and overseas”.

For its scale of operations, the UKMTO is a lean organisation with a team of 15 civilian ‘watch-keepers’ and three managers. The team, which works in shifts, takes calls from ship masters irrespective of their nationalities and coordinates rescue responses and issues warnings and advisories.

The UKMTO works in West Asia and the Indian Ocean Region through an information framework agreement and operates a “Voluntary Reporting Scheme within the Voluntary Reporting Area (VRA)” outlined in a maritime security chart, according to its website. This zone stretches to almost 2.5 million sq. miles of the ocean and includes the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, a majority of the northwestern Indian Ocean, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, and Persian Gulf.

The UKMTO has three 24/7 phone lines and an e-mail to report emergencies or incidents. Ship masters are requested to file multiple reports – an initial report when entering the

VRA, a daily report while transiting the area, and a final report after exiting the VRA or reaching a port. Following an incident, the UKMTO says that a “detailed After Action Report” is submitted.

In June, while reporting on a U.S. attack on a ship in which three Indians were killed off Oman, *The Hindu* had called one of the numbers and sent an email. While the response was prompt, the staff refused to divulge any information about the attack.

Though initially set up to fight piracy and serve British interests, the UKMTO assumed greater significance in November 2023 when Houthis started attacking commercial ships it claimed were linked to Israel or its allies in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Between October and December 2023, after the Hamas attack on Israel and the beginning of the Israeli offensive, the UKMTO “put out 71 warnings and advisories, took part in 40 exercises and drills, handled 27 emergency events,” according to the BBC.

Today, the UKMTO has positioned itself as the primary point of contact for commercial vessels with military forces in the region. The reporting system aims to, in the UKMTO’s words, “increase security and provide anti-piracy support to maintain the freedom of navigation to all vessels”.

The Hasina case

India's handling of the request for Sheikh Hasina's extradition is becoming a test not merely of its relations with Bangladesh, but of whether New Delhi can keep law and diplomacy from becoming indistinguishable. Bangladesh has a legitimate interest in seeking the return of a former prime minister convicted of grave offences. India, equally, cannot treat an extradition request as a routine diplomatic transaction.

Hasina was convicted and sentenced to death in absentia by Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal. That fact makes the case considerably more complicated than a straightforward request to surrender a fugitive. The 2013 India-Bangladesh extradition treaty creates obligations between the two countries, but it does not eliminate the discretion and safeguards available to the requested state. The central question is therefore not whether India is friendly towards Hasina or whether Bangladesh is entitled to seek her return. It is whether the circumstances of the prosecution satisfy the standards India should require before surrendering a person to face punishment.

The political-offence exception deserves particular scrutiny. Crimes such as murder and genocide cannot be insulated from extradition by attaching a political label to them. At the same time, the characterisation of an offence by the requesting government cannot by itself settle the matter. India must examine the substance of the allegations and the judicial process through which the conviction was obtained.

The in-absentia death sentence makes that examination unavoidable. A government cannot credibly argue that a conviction obtained without the accused being present is automatically sufficient justification for surrender. If Hasina is eventually sent back, Bangladesh would need to demonstrate that she can meaningfully challenge the case against her, have legal representation and receive a trial consistent with basic standards of justice.

The death penalty presents an additional difficulty. India retains capital punishment, but its extradition practice has also recognised the importance of assurances where a person faces execution abroad. New Delhi would therefore have to consider carefully what guarantees Bangladesh is prepared to provide about the sentence and the judicial process. There is also a larger diplomatic consideration. India cannot afford to appear to be shielding a former Bangladeshi leader indefinitely. Nor can it afford to become an instrument in what could be perceived as political retribution by a successor government.

Either course could damage its long-term interests in Bangladesh. The sensible approach is consequently neither immediate extradition nor indefinite sanctuary. India should insist on a transparent legal examination of the request and seek explicit assurances on due process, retrial rights and the death sentence. If those safeguards cannot be secured, refusal would have a stronger legal and moral foundation.

The Hasina case will inevitably carry diplomatic consequences. But precisely because it does, India should make the law - not the temperature of bilateral politics - the centre of its decision. That would protect not only Hasina's rights, but India's own credibility as a country governed by rules rather than expediency.

Unreliable ally

An alliance is a promise about the future. Its strength depends not only on weapons, troops and treaties, but on whether a partner can reasonably predict what the other will do when circumstances turn difficult. That predictability is now becoming a casualty of President Donald Trump's transactional approach to American alliances. The latest warning comes from the decision to substantially scale back Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS), the annual US-South Korean military exercise. The reduction itself need not be catastrophic. Exercises can be adjusted without destroying military preparedness, and South Korea is more than capable of defending itself. The deeper concern is the reason for the change and the message it sends.

Washington has linked the decision, among other considerations, to Seoul's reluctance to support America's war against Iran. That effectively makes an obligation arising from one strategic theatre contingent upon compliance in another. It transforms an alliance from a durable security arrangement into something closer to a running account between partners, in which military commitments can become bargaining chips.

That is dangerous precisely because deterrence depends upon expectations. North Korea's calculations are shaped not merely by the number of American troops stationed south of the 38th parallel, but by its assessment of whether America would stand with Seoul in a crisis. Every visibly discretionary adjustment to the alliance introduces another uncertainty into that calculation. The timing is unfortunate. North Korea has acquired battlefield experience through its military cooperation with Russia, including experience of drone warfare and other technologies being tested in Ukraine.

The purpose of UFS is not simply ceremonial. It allows American and South Korean forces to practise operating together under wartime conditions and to incorporate lessons from changing forms of conflict. Reducing such training when the adversary is acquiring new capabilities may therefore carry a military cost, even if that is difficult to quantify. This is the paradox of transactional diplomacy. In seeking greater leverage over allies, Washington can encourage them to become less dependent on it. An ally that feels uncertain about American protection has an incentive to build alternatives rather than deepen dependence.

None of this means that the US-South Korean alliance is collapsing. Nor does every adjustment to a military exercise constitute an abandonment of an ally. Alliances must evolve, and America is entitled to demand greater contributions from partners. But there is a difference between asking allies to do more and making the credibility of collective defence appear conditional on unrelated political choices.

America's greatest strategic asset has long been the network of alliances it built after 1945. Those alliances gave Washington influence far beyond what its own military power could purchase. If that network begins to lose its reliability, the damage will not be measured by the number of training days lost in UFS. It will be measured by how many allies begin quietly preparing for a world in which American promises are no longer certain.

India's GCC Revolution

Now is the time for a comprehensive national policy for the GCCs. The current budget proposed one to guide states in promoting GCCs, particularly in Tier-II cities, with emphasis on talent, infrastructure, building regulation, and collaboration with industry. Of course, six cities cannot carry India's GCCs forever, and hence this focus on Tier-II cities is welcome, but for that the necessary infrastructure must be created to make them GCC-ready

Indians have never lacked talent. When India offered no opportunities, they went abroad to work with MNCs. Now that opportunities exist within the country, American and European MNCs are employing our English-speaking engineers, scientists, IT professionals, accountants, and auditors at a fraction of the cost they would have to pay in their own countries. Even then, they are among our best-paid employees. This is transforming our employment and economic landscape, a point often missed by our policymakers who dismiss it as a "domestic brain-drain."

It has led to runaway growth in a few cities like Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chennai, Pune, etc., where MNCs now own huge offices with thousands of employees who could work across time zones and deliver software and business processes to their headquarters thousands of miles away. These are their Global Capacity Centres (GCCs). These GCCs, once back offices for MNCs, have evolved and matured over the years. They now design products, develop intellectual property, run global technology platforms, conduct research, manage cybersecurity, develop and deploy agentic AI models, and take decisions for their parent companies. They can transform India from an exporter of services to a global innovation hub if we can get our policies correct. As per the Nasscom-Zinnov GCC Landscape 2026, India had 2,117 GCCs operating through 3,728 centres as of March 2026, employing 2.36 million people and generating \$98 billion in revenue. The number of GCCs has risen 32 per cent since FY2021. An estimate by the consultancy firm Wozniak puts the FY2026 revenue higher at \$164 bn, or 4.4 per cent of GDP, and employment at 4.2 million.

More than 500 companies from the Forbes Global 2000 list now operate GCCs in India. They combine technology, operations, and product engineering; about 39 per cent them are operating as "Portfolio Hubs", with end-to-end ownership of products, platforms, and intellectual properties, while another 5 per cent are functioning as "Transformation



Hubs" for MNCs that handle all their AI-led operations and perform strategically important functions that directly concern their global business.

GCCs are embedding India into the global value chains, turning it into a major player in the global digital transformation market, estimated between \$1 tn and \$2 tn, growing annually at around 15 per cent. What China did in manufacturing for the world, India is now doing in services, courtesy the GCCs.

The top GCCs operating in India belong to Accenture, Capgemini, IBM, J.P. Morgan, Amazon, HSBC, Microsoft, Deloitte, EY, Google, etc. New companies are joining every month - in early 2025, when the oil giant Chevron opened its GCC in Bengaluru, it was the 147-year-old company's biggest investment in technology outside North America. The Economic Survey 2025-26 reports that services accounted for 53.6 per cent of GDP in the first half of FY2025-26, while services GVA grew by around 9.3 per cent. Services exports reached an all-time high of \$387.6 billion in FY2024-25. Services exports have reached around 10 per cent of GDP in the first half of FY2025-26. A significant part of this growth is owing to the GCCs.

Interestingly, all this has happened without much government intervention or encouragement. Policy makers must now frame a comprehensive policy to attract more GCCs and to use them to transform the core sectors of the economy. Their parent companies are the world's biggest spenders on R&D, an area where India is a laggard. GCCs can channel global R&D investment, technology, and expertise into the country towards high-end engineering and frontier research while creating spillovers for Indian universities and start-ups.

Geographically, the GCCs remain highly concentrated, with 90 per cent of them located only in six cities: Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chennai, Pune, Mumbai and Delhi-NCR. With more than 900 centres, Bengaluru accounts for almost 40 per cent of GCC activities, followed by roughly 20 per cent each for Hyderabad and Pune.

The government must now encourage them to spread to Kolkata and Tier-II cities like Indore, Bhubaneswar, Guwahati, etc., which can offer overall operating-cost advantages of 25-50 per cent compared with traditional Tier-I hubs, reduce congestion in Bengaluru and other large cities, spread high-productivity employment to new regions, and incubate local innovation ecosystems. But it would require public investments in urban infrastructure, airports, high-speed

digital connectivity, and high-quality educational infrastructure in these cities.

Structurally also, GCCs are transforming from cost arbitrage to innovation arbitrage. Early GCCs were primarily designed as back offices of MNCs to exploit the advantage of India's cheap, low-skilled labour. Now they are using the highly specialised talent widely available here that is difficult to reproduce elsewhere at comparable scale and cost.

The Engineering R&D GCCs have grown 1.3 times faster than the overall GCC sector, indicating a structural shift towards high-value activities. NASSCOM reports that nearly 90 per cent of GCCs now operate as multifunctional centres, while more than half have evolved into portfolio or transformation hubs. India has developed a pool of more than 120,000 AI/ML professionals associated with GCCs and over 185 dedicated AI/ML centres of excellence. With about 28 per cent of the global STEM workforce and 23 per cent of global software engineering talent, India is a major player in the GCC ecosystem, poised for a large expansion.

GCCs are also building our AI ecosystem, a useful step toward bridging the massive gap that today exists between India and the US/China. The 2025 GCC Pulse Survey by Earnst Young (EY) found that 83 per cent of Indian GCCs were investing in generative AI, while 58 per cent were already investing in agentic AI, and another 29 per cent planned to do so within a year. GenAI pilots increased from 37 to 43 per cent during the year, while 81 per cent of GCCs were upskilling their internal teams in GenAI. Other than AI, the focus is also on healthcare, pharmaceuticals, automotive, aerospace, and semiconductors.

EY reports that 23 of the world's top 50 life-sciences companies have established GCCs in India. This diversification creates a virtuous circle: GCCs bring global technological capabilities into India, which imparts specialised knowledge to Indian engineers and scientists, which then subsequently diffuses into India's broader start-up and industrial ecosystem, raising productivity and attracting more global corporations into India.

Nasscom-Zinnov reported that India's engineering R&D GCCs were growing 1.3 times faster than the overall GCC ecosystem, indicating movement towards higher-value and more complex activities. By climbing



GOVIND BHATTACHARJEE
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The Daily Star

We must adopt an area-based population strategy

In the early 1970s, Bangladesh was considered overpopulated due to the country's limited land area and resources; and the government declared rapid population growth as a national problem in the country in 1976. To address this, a preliminary population policy outline was prepared in 1976. The policy was formulated and approved in 2004, and was later updated in 2012.

A National Population Council (NPC) was constituted in 1975 as the highest-level body, with the President of Bangladesh as chairperson and concerned ministers as members, to guide and give advice related to population planning and execution of policies.

However, as per a report published in The Daily Star recently, the NPC has not met for the last 16 years. This shows that population planning and policy

implementation has not received due attention during the last decade and a half. As we will explore below, the impact of this gap is visible in population data from the last few years.

In the First Five-Year Plan (1973-1978), the country's population growth rate was estimated at about 3 percent. Accordingly, the policy focus was to control population growth through family planning to reduce family size and ensure sound maternal and child health. Both explicit measures (such as making contraceptives widely available) and implicit measures (such as promoting women's education) were included in the policy.

An area-based approach was adopted in the Bangladesh Population Policy 2012

to develop localised plans and undertake targeted interventions to achieve better outcomes.

Over a decade later, the 2025 population policy aimed at the utilisation of the demographic dividend together with achievement of lower fertility rate.

The demographic dividend is an opportunity as a higher share of working-age population (15-64 years) exists. Ideally, younger people should be educated and their skills developed so they can be employed in sectors which need them. The 2025 policy also recommended regional planning, service delivery, capacity building, development, and job creation.

The adoption of a decentralised approach and other crucial policy decisions require the highest level of attention and constant monitoring of performance in the population

sector. In this case, the role of the NPC, established in 1975, was also deemed crucial in the 2012 and 2025 population policies. Bangladesh's population growth rate decreased from around 3 percent in 1976 to 1.22 percent in 2022.

The use of contraceptive methods increased substantially from only 8 percent in the mid-1970s to a peak of 64 percent in 2024. But, as per the latest Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data, this dropped significantly to 58.2 percent in 2025.

The success of the family planning efforts, however, seems to have stalled. According to MICS data over the years, although the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) remained at 2.3 between 2012 and 2019 (down from 6.3 births per woman in 1975), it increased to 2.4 in the latest MICS.

Whenever the prime minister finds himself in an awkward position, he uses such terms just to warn us of another villain. The opponents' joyous embrace of the term, with senior leaders wearing it as a badge of honour, was equally unhelpful. They converted a debatable choice of phrase into a distraction from the substantive questions our country needs answered.

The need for the government to isolate those having inimical designs on the nation is unquestionable. But is the "dimaagi Naxal" the only category that the government wants to address?

The mood among sections of the population suggests otherwise. They want immediate solutions to the burning problems the country faces.

Yours, etc., Narayan Chandra Ghosh, Madanpur, 19 August.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Isolate them

Sir, The article 'Who's a Dimagi Naxal?' by Gaurav Vallabh (19 Aug) is an excellent piece of writing. 'Dimagi' refers to an intellectual - one who thinks deeply and understands ideas by using reason over emotion. As violence is often an emotional response to perceived injustice, it needs to be dealt with strongly and not with kid gloves. However, intellectual dissent needs to be encouraged in a democracy.

Dimagi Naxals come in many shapes and forms in India. Some politicians insult the Indian army and the police for taking action against anti-nationals like terrorists. Others bad mouth India whenever they visit abroad.

Still others prevent industries from being set up in their states, or force the existing

ones to close down, impacting economic growth and job opportunities for the youth.

There are student agitations, when slogans like 'Death to India' and 'We will break it into a thousand pieces' are raised for hanging a Parliament attack convict, after following due process of law. Then there are those who hold demonstrations, indulge in violence and bring normal life to a standstill.

Some marginalised political parties hold 'Bharat Bandhs' to show the world that they are still 'alive and kicking' and then proudly announce how many thousands of crores of turnover loss was caused to the exchequer, akin to a dimwit gloating over the loss caused to his own family property.

We have also witnessed movements openly or tacitly supported by self-styled intellectuals, like Naxalism, NE Insurgency, Khalistani movement and J&K militancy,

which believe in the violent overthrow of elected governments to achieve their objectives.

As the author succinctly puts it, anyone adopting violent means to hurt India's sovereign interests is a 'Dimagi naxal', who needs to be isolated and marginalised.

Yours, etc., V. Jayaraman, Chennai, 19 August.

Distraction

Sir, This refers to the Perspective page article, 'Who's a dimaagi Naxal?' by Gourav Vallabh (19 August). Our Prime Minister is habituated to using pejorative socio-political labels to characterize ideological opponents, critics, activists and even protesting students. The term "dimaagi Naxal" is his latest addition to India's political lexicon.

Who will foot candyfloss economy bill?

ANDREW SHENG

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) said that life is understood backwards and lived forward. We look at history to guide us, but with much uncertainty in the future, we must live or act to reveal what the future will bring. If perception of reality is subjective, then what happens is often based on beliefs or judgements that can be detached from reality.

As financial markets become increasingly bubbly, Financial Times columnist Gillian Tett described financial bubbles as a “Candyfloss economy”.

Candyfloss finance or economy describes a market or system which looks big, sweet and attractive from the outside, but entirely hollow on the inside. She quotes an Islamic scholar as the originator of the term: “Real assets - like houses - were being used to secure debt that was then rehypothecated multiple times, partly with derivatives, just as sugar is spun and re-spun into candy floss.”

McKinsey Global Institute's estimates of the global balance sheet show that from 1980 to 2025, total financial assets grew from roughly 2.5 × GDP to more than 6 × GDP - or more than double relative to the size of the real economy. Most of this happened after 2000, when asset valuations and credit expansion detached from GDP growth. In other words, finance is like candyfloss - pumped up by credit and the belief that valuations can keep rising.

In the Candyfloss economy, financial engineering is prioritized over real engineering or production. Financial derivatives are created essentially through leverage, based

on contractual promises secured on some underlying assets such as real estate. Derivatives can be created as long as there are buyers who believe in the product or the issuer.

The real danger in financial candyfloss is that buyers have a false sense of stability in values. Valuations gain momentum: they rise simply because more people believe they will continue to rise. But what goes up must eventually go down.

Mathematically speaking, financial candyfloss is circular reasoning that arises from self-referential logic and positive feedback systems. Evidence from financial markets, physics, and biology shows that self-referential systems can briefly generate massive, unsustainable values before collapsing.

Circular reasoning occurs when an assumption - possibly false - is treated as its own proof. Financial candyfloss has expanded since 2000 because government debt has grown, being monetized by central banks, and the resulting liquidity has lifted both consumption and asset valuations. It all hinges on the promise that governments will repay in the future.

Today, US government debt has grown to the point where interest payments are increasingly being financed by new borrowing. We witness circular valuation in the current AI bubble, where chipmakers hold equity stakes in AI model developers, who then purchase chips from those same investors and both borrow heavily to fund their expanding capital expenditure.

In physical or biological systems, growth continues only as long as new energy flows in; without fresh input, the system contracts. Real systems face clear resource constraints.



In social psychology, the “illusory truth effect” demonstrates that repeated exposure to a claim increases belief in its truth, regardless of whether evidence supports it. It is commonly believed that if you tell a lie long and big enough, it may be accepted as the truth. Even as AI hallucinates, so do human beings, from mild self-deception to the madness of crowds.

The full faith and credit underpinning the dollar is now being severely tested by harsh, arithmetic reality. As the US increasingly weaponizes the dollar for geopolitical advantage, global surplus economies are reducing their holdings of dollar assets. This reduction pushes US interest rates higher, which are fiscally intolerable

given the scale of US government debt.

In short, no candyfloss economy can remain self-referential forever. Every system ultimately rests on trust. As global trust in American leadership erodes, and ordinary people feel that the benefits of the candyfloss economy flow disproportionately to a small elite at the expense of everyone else, a fundamental reset is coming. In the meantime, the smart money wants to push asset bubbles up so that they can get out earlier than the dumb money, greedy for more profit.

In highly complex systems buffeted by overlapping shocks, no one can predict precisely what will trigger the turning point, or exactly when

it will arrive. But warning signs multiply daily. As a former central banker, the signal to watch is when the Fed begins to buy Treasury bonds at scale to keep down interest rates. That's when investors realize that the borrower is trying to delay the inevitable, by buying back its own bonds through monetary creation. The bill is passed to Treasury bond holders through eventual inflation, with negative real interest rates.

When candyfloss eventually dissolves, someone always foots the bill. Let's pray that it won't be us.

(The writer is Adjunct Professor at Tsinghua University, Beijing and University of Malaya, and former Chairman of the Securities and Futures Commission, Hong Kong) Special to ANN.

Could a woman break the final glass ceiling?

ATANU BISWAS

Some political questions begin as speculation and, almost imperceptibly, become serious. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's name is now at that point. Could the young congresswoman from the Bronx become President of the United States in 2028?

The answer is yes, she can. Whether America will choose her is another story. There is no constitutional obstacle. A president must be a natural-born citizen, at least 35 years old, and a US resident for at least 14 years. Ocasio-Cortez will be 39 in 2028 and comfortably meets those conditions.

But America has another barrier, one that cannot be found in the Constitution. No woman has ever been elected president. Hillary Clinton came close in 2016, winning the popular vote but losing the Electoral College. Kamala Harris became the first woman vice-president, but her 2024 presidential campaign didn't break the final barrier. If AOC reaches the White House, she would make history twice: America's first woman president and its first Latina president. That makes a possible AOC candidacy about more than one politician. It raises an old question: Is America ready for a woman who is also unapologetically progressive?

For now, she has kept open both a presidential bid and a possible Senate race, while saying that her immediate focus is the 2026 midterms and building a political movement. Still, the speculation has acquired substance. A July University of New Hampshire poll placed her at 22 per cent among likely Democratic primary voters, narrowly ahead of Pete Buttigieg. It is far too early to call this a prediction, but it shows that AOC is no longer simply a voice on the Democratic left. She is a potential national contender.

Her real gift may not show up neatly in a poll. She knows how to make politics feel human. She can talk about wages, housing, healthcare, or climate change without sounding like she is reading from a policy paper. Her admirers call that authenticity; her critics call it theatre. Either way, people listen.

But listening is not the same as voting. AOC's biggest challenge would be turning a loyal following into a national coalition. Her natural base is progressive and includes many self-described socialists. A Democratic primary rewards such enthusiasm. A presidential election demands more. She would have to win over moderates, independents, older voters, and working-class Americans who may agree with her economically but hesitate at

“democratic socialism”. She would also need to prove that her appeal travels beyond progressive urban districts to Black voters, Latinos, and the battleground states that decide elections.

This is where the gender question becomes particularly revealing. America has had women in almost every important political position. Yet the Oval Office remains the one room they haven't entered as president. Clinton brought decades of experience and establishment credibility. Harris had been a senator, attorney general, and vice-president. AOC would offer something different: youth, movement politics, digital fluency, and an unabashedly progressive agenda. She would therefore be asking voters to cross two boundaries at once: Can a woman be president? And can a progressive woman win without becoming less recognisably progressive?

Her Latina identity would add another historic layer. But identity cannot win an election by itself. Neither can celebrity or ideology. Ultimately, AOC would have to persuade millions of Americans that their lives - not merely the history books - would be better with her in the White House. Recent reporting suggests that she is becoming more pragmatic while



remaining firmly on the progressive left. If she can broaden her appeal without losing the authenticity that made her famous, she could become formidable. So, can she break the jinx?

Yes. The Constitution allows it, and the early political signals make it conceivable. But “can” is not “will”. She must first choose to run, win a difficult Democratic primary and build a coalition capable of winning the Electoral College. At 36, AOC is

still young by presidential standards. She has time on her side. But political moments have a habit of disappearing.

For now, she stands at the doorway. If she walks through it, she would not merely be asking America to elect another president. She would be asking it to open the Oval Office to a woman, a Latina, and a progressive - all at once.

(The writer is Professor of Statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata.)

Crossword | No. 293560

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About E20: Why choice, pricing matter

*The writer is Managing Editor,
The Indian Express. Off the Record is
a fortnightly column*

As I was writing this piece, I noticed on Instagram that some Modi devotees had set up a makeshift temple, in which stood a cardboard cutout of Modi dressed as lord Rama. His devotees were reciting what they called the 'Modi chalisa' and, with lighted diyas, were praying to the cardboard deity. This sickened and shamed me. Does that make me a '*dimagi* naxal'?



Films thrive in that fertile ground between fact and feeling, evidence and imagination

ARTS PAGE 3

The Sunday Tribune

SPECTRUM



Stephen Alter's book brings together sight, sound, smell of the monsoon

BOOKS PAGE 4

CHANDIGARH | 23 AUGUST 2026

Rahi Masoom Reza's works moved effortlessly between Hindi and Urdu. While his literary writing earned him critical acclaim, his dialogues for BR Chopra's 'Mahabharat' captured the hearts of millions. Remembering the maestro as his birth centenary celebrations begin

RAHI'S SAMAY

MRINAL PANDE

RAHI MASOOM REZA was born in a prosperous family of Shia landlords of Gangauli village in Ghazipur, eastern Uttar Pradesh. He was frequently unwell and that robbed him of precious academic years, but after graduating from Aligarh (and unconfirmed reports say from Allahabad), he joined Aligarh Muslim University and began to teach while also writing Urdu short stories and poetry that drew applause.

Most good-looking writers (and he was that) with a wound, either spiritual or physical, quickly attract a large fandom, especially among female readers. According to literary circle gossip, Rahi Saheb's undoubtedly refined airs, his impeccable *zuban*, his *sher-wani* and Aligarhi pyjamas, along with a slight limp (result of a childhood brush with polio), made him a star. His language and demeanour had a generalised twinkliness around it — like a man who could barely contain some vast and rare hilarity while still retaining his dignity as a scholar.

Lauded, harassed, micro-inspected on various scales of caste, language and nationality by Indo-Pak audiences, he remained stoical till the end about the 'attention' his Urdu and Hindi novels, and later the mega screen script of Ved Vyas' Sanskrit epic 'Mahabharat', attracted.

In 1966, he married Nayyar Jahan, a high-born divorced lady connected to the Rampur nobility. That and his views on using Devanagari script for Urdu caused severe problems that ended with the sensitive writer having what can be best described as a lover's quarrel with the Urdu camp at the university, and also the Urdu publishing world.

Mumbai was where he lived thereafter. As a master of multi-tasking, he wrote for both the Hindi print magazines as also the film world. Few know that as an Urdu writer, he had once also tried his hand at writing crime fiction under a pseudonym (Shahid Akhtar) that rivalled the popularity of the Don among Urdu crime writers, Ibn-e-Safi of Allahabad.

His Hindi writings soon catapulted him to fame with novels like 'Aadha Gaon' and 'Topi Shukla', his scripts and lyrics for many films and last but not the least, his script for the mega epic of the great fratricidal war, 'Mahabharat'.

One of his characters in 'Aadha Gaon' says: "People told me, brother go anywhere, speak English or Urdu or Hindi, but at home do not pollute the *zuban* our ancestors have been speaking..."

Rahi Saheb remained true to his heritage all through his literary career. He once said he was a son of three mothers: his biological one Nafisa Begum, Aligarh Muslim University and the Ganges. He was a prolific multi-tasker, working on two, three or even four scripts at the same time, poems, novels, and miscellaneous articles. His choice of Hindi for his fiction and screenplays continued to draw the ire of his fellow Muslim writers and grudging admiration from his Hindi fellow writers.

He held firmly to his belief that the only way to save Urdu in post-1947 India lay in substituting the Arabic script for the Hindi Devanagari. I recall the furore it caused when *Dharmyug* published his views. But Rahi Saheb did not complain about the abrasions from exposing his honest views.

The non-Hindi writers of Urdu viewed his promotion of Devanagari script as a betrayal of Urdu. But they might as well have accused Shakespeare of having in his tragedies a weakness for nobility. Such a deep conviction is not a flaw in writers of Rahi Saheb's stature, it is sensing an evolu-



Be it poetry, prose, detective novels, screenplays, dialogues or lyrics, Rahi Masoom Reza left his indelible mark. PHOTOS COURTESY: PROF NADEEM HASNAIN

tionary need of a new world that was shaping all around us by the late 1960s.

This was happening when I was a student and my mother was writing her bestsellers sitting in remote Allahabad. I wished someday a BR Chopra or Raj Khosla might come to our modest home in their limousines to offer her to write a film script based on any of her popular novels serialised by *Dharmyug*. It never happened. But she met Rahi Saheb while visiting Dharmvir Bharati in Mumbai.

He had shifted to Mumbai and told mother that compared to Aligarh, the atmosphere struck him as ugly, resentful, and poisonous. So, like her, he chose to be out of harm's way by continuing to write his screenplays, novels and articles from home, unlike most successful writers, who demanded and were housed in five-star hotels by their publishers or film financiers to facilitate their work.

Under the enlightened patronage and unbroken relationship with two prominent Hindi writer-editors (Dr Dharmvir Bharati, the editor of Hindi weekly *Dharmyug*, and Kamalleshwar, the editor of the monthly short story magazine, *Sarika*), Rahi Saheb continued to publish brilliant literary works about the great rift of Partition and changing rural India.

'Aadha Gaon', translated by Gillian Wright into English, is about his village Gangauli, torn apart by Hindu-Muslim riots. His lively student character Topi Shukla is a camera capturing North India's emergent political leaders and university campus rivalries.

Several interviews with Rahi Saheb have been unearthed from archives and are doing the rounds in his centenary year. But a literary interview subsumes the writing and the writer's own life into a thumbnail sketch. It will not tell you what the writer was really like. A personality is more palatable and 'interesting' than a body of work in print. What makes him an outstanding writer today is the way his books have aged like good wine.

His prose is grandiloquent in 'Mahabharat's' resonant "Main Samay hoon" (I am Time). But in his crime fiction immersed in the physical world of thugs, criminals, millionaires and secret surveillance, his voice turns sour, withering, crafty, and painfully comic.

He worked tirelessly till the end, taking no breaks:

*Iss safar mein neend aisi kho gayi
Hum na soye raat thak kar so gayi*

(I lost my sleep during this long journey. Ultimately the night fell asleep, not me).

— *The writer is a veteran journalist*



RAHI MASOOM REZA
SEPT 1, 1927-MARCH 1, 1992

A man of conviction

SHABIHUL HASNAIN

Ai saba tu to udhar se hi guzarti hogi

Us gali mein mere qadmon ke nishan kaise hain

This *masoom* (innocent) *sher* belongs to Dr Rahi Masoom Reza, asking the wind what is the state of his footprints in that lane? It is a beautiful and classic example of the type of poetry Rahi Saheb composed. Tender and subtle, romantic yet having social and political overtones.

Ye chiroagh jaise lamhe,

kahin raigan na jayen

Koi khwab dekh dalo, koi inquilab lao

(Lest these lamp-like moments go completely waste,

Go weave a dream, or bring about a revolution)

I am a great fan of Rahi, his poetry, prose, dialogues, film scripts and satire — all make him a larger-than-life writer. His benevolence, simplicity, humour, wit, generosity and friendship made him a loveable man. But beneath this soft exterior, he was a very hard nut to crack — a man of strong conviction.

Cumulatively, he was quite a rare Indian writer and in my opinion next only to Munshi Premchand in his craft and oeuvre. Now 'saba' (wind) can be told to convey that Rahi Saheb has, indeed, left very strong footprints on the sands of time, not only in Urdu literature but in Hindi writings as well with equal dexterity. Time will remember his timeless opening dialogue of the epic TV series 'Mahabharat': "Main Samay hoon, aur aaj Mahabharat ki amar katha sunaney ja raha hoon."

The indelible imprint had been in the making even before the series started in 1988, but it came to its zenith with the voice of Harish Bhimani booming every Sunday morning on Indian television for the next two years. Rahi Saheb had become immortal.

Rahi Masoom Reza belonged to Gangauli or Gangoli, a village on the banks of the river of the same name in Ghazipur district in Uttar Pradesh. His ancestors owned almost half of this village. His father, Bashir Hussain Abdi, was a distinguished lawyer at the Ghazipur district courts. Rahi's famous novel, *Aadha Gaon*, is named after these ancestral facts. Despite a little disability in one of his legs (he limped a little), Rahi was perceived as a handsome man, quite articulate and always impeccably and traditionally dressed.

He initially started composing poetry in Urdu. Named Masoom Reza, he adopted 'Rahi' as his pen name. Rahi was a versatile person and after a successful journey in poetry, he decided to try his hand at prose, too. And what a miraculous decision it turned out to be.

His works, primarily set in the Gangetic plains of Uttar Pradesh, explore themes of identity, Partition, social realities and human relationships. His notable novels include *Aadha Gaon*, 'Topi Shukla', 'Neem Ka Ped', 'Oos ki Boond' and 'Scene: 75'. 'Shishe Ke Makaan Wale' is his most famous poetry collection. 'Mauj-e-Gul Maj-e-Saba', 'Raqs-e-Mai', 'Ghareeb Shahr', 'Aynabi Shahr Aynabi Raste' and 'Main Ek Pheriwal' are some of his other well-known poetry collections.

His wife Nayyar Jahan reveals in an interview that Rahi even wrote detective novels. He used to write for Nikhat Publications of Allahabad. There were two novel series in Urdu and Hindi,

'Jasoosi Duniya' and 'Rumani Duniya'. Writer Ibn-e-Safi would write and publish these two detective series every month. After Safi fell ill and was hospitalised, Rahi took over. He wrote under the pseudonyms Shahid Akhtar and Afaq Haider, and continued writing and publishing 'Jasoosi Duniya' for quite some time.

Rahi was a sensitive and simple person. He used to have a number of friends, who would drop in without prior information. His wife used to call him Masoom as he was quite kind and simple. She recalls that Masoom was quite bad in asking for money from producers and directors, sometimes even writing a story for only 'do beeda paan'.

He hardly bargained for money. In an interview, his son Nadeem once said that he tried to coax his father about asking for more money for his film projects. But Rahi replied that they had a comfortable home, their doors were always open, anybody who dropped in was offered a meal, sometimes 15 persons would eat, and they had never been short of food. All this was God's blessings. "Why should I charge more money?" he had asked Nadeem.

Nayyar recounts another interesting story about their relationship. Rahi had taken a strong stand to marry her (as she was a divorcee) and had to leave Aligarh because of their marriage, yet he went ahead with it.

Nayyar was a good horse rider. Before she got married to Reza, she would participate in equestrian sports. After the marriage, Masoom asked Nayyar to stop horse riding. She replied that she would stop if Masoom stopped going to the *mushairas*. Rahi Saheb was a judicious man. He promised her he would never attend a *mushaira* again. And he never did despite a huge demand. Nayyar, too, kept her promise.

Rahi's nephew Prof Nadeem Hasnain, who retired from University of Lucknow as head of the anthropology department, reminisces, "Mamu always had a point of view on any subject, and if he took a stand, it was very difficult to change his mind."

Rahi was a perpetual dissenter. "During the Emergency days, some writers decided to write a letter of praise for Mrs Indira Gandhi. Rahi did not agree and walked out of the meeting. This was the kind of courage he had," adds Hasnain.

Admirers of his writings have often wondered whether he was a better poet or a prose writer. It is difficult to decide, but I will quote a few lines from his prose and leave the decision to the readers. In 'Topi Shukla', he writes, "Bhasha ki ladai darasal nafe nuqsan ki ladai hai. Sawal bhasha ka nahin hai. Sawal hai naukri ka (The battle of language is actually a battle of profit and loss. The question is not about language. The question is about employment)."

At another place in the same book, he remarks, "Prashn hamara peechha nahin chhodtey. Mamushya maut ko jeet sakta hai, parantu prashn ko nahin jeet sakta (Questions never stop chasing us. Man can conquer death, but he can never conquer questions)."

I leave you with this absolute core of Dr Rahi Masoom Reza's existential philosophy with lovely advice from the man himself:

*Umr bhar tune, zamane ka kaha mana hai
Dil ki awaz bhi sun, dekh to kya kahta hai*
(All your life, you have listened to what the world told you to do

Listen to the voice of your heart too, look what it has to say)

This is your eternal footprint Rahi Saheb which no wind can erase.

— *The writer is a former judge of the Allahabad High Court and an Urdu poet*

IMMENSE CONTRIBUTION TO HINDI FILM INDUSTRY

NO description of Rahi Masoom Reza can be complete without reference to his mammoth contribution to the Hindi film industry. He wrote screenplays, dialogues and lyrics of some of the most popular films, including 'Milli', 'Alaap', 'Main Tulsi Tere Aangan Ki', 'Gol Maal', 'Karz', 'Judaai', 'Hum Paanch', 'Disco Dancer', 'Tawaif', 'Anokha Rishita', 'Lamhe' and 'Aaina'. Rahi also won the Filmfare Award for Best Dialogue for 'Main Tulsi.', 'Tawaif' and 'Lamhe' (posthumously).

His songs in 'Alaap' deserve special mention, especially 'Mata Saraswati Sharda', the classical song sung by Lata Mangeshkar. The lyrics of this

vandana are in Sanskritised Hindi:

He Mata Saraswati Sharda

*Keeje sudrishti, keeje sudrishti sewak jaan apna
Itna vardaandeeje taan, taal, aur alaap*

Buddhi alankaar, Sharda

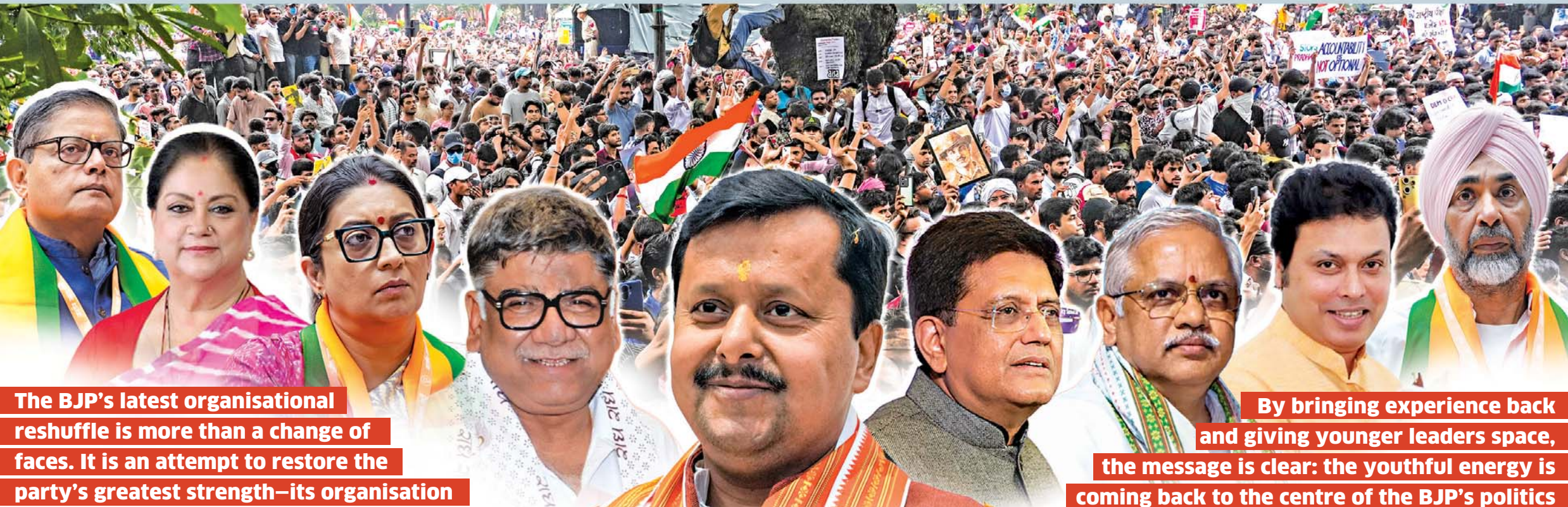
This shows Reza's range of knowledge.

Actor Bharat Bhushan and his brother were the ones to invite Rahi to Bombay. BR Chopra, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Raj Khosla, and Gufi Paintal were among his close friends.

Ever humble, Rahi never forgot his benefactors. He would often talk about his childhood servant Kallu Kaka, who would tell him stories which became an inspiration for many of his scripts.

The Pioneer AGENDA

I don't write off any political party. I believe in strengthening the BJP and winning elections and not depend on writing off parties.
— Amit Shah



The BJP's latest organisational reshuffle is more than a change of faces. It is an attempt to restore the party's greatest strength—its organisation

By bringing experience back and giving younger leaders space, the message is clear: the youthful energy is coming back to the centre of the BJP's politics

Re-organisation of a party built on organisational strength



RATAN SHARDA
Author and TV panelist

Re-organisation of the BJP central team has become a major topic of discussion nationally, and rightly so. No other political party has such a structured organisation where workers begin work from booth level to get a chance to move from local to national politics by sheer dint of their hard work on the field. Lately, there have been many horizontal entries because of the new corporate culture in Indian politics, so there are many newcomers who get a chance to enter at middle or even higher level, but most of them too have to prove their mettle and their malleability in the organizational ethos they have adopted, or they fall slowly by the sidelines.

Organisation is the major strength of BJP. It is the life breath of BJP that saw its rise from two MPs to being the most dominant force. Due to cycles of elections every few months, the urgency of coming to power in most states saw the much vaunted organisation to stay in the back stage and it seemed like being pre-dominantly run by ministers and powerful political leaders. The recent reshuffle is a long due process undertaken now. By all means, it is a major overhaul. Many established actors have gone backstage, replaced by new faces and erstwhile proven and time tested stars who seemed to have been on the way out.

Many analysts are stuck with average age of the new team. However, NDTV has put up some interesting graphics to show that while above 60 years leadership moved out, some experienced stars of 50-60 age group have come back, while the younger leaders have been given responsibilities. So, the average doesn't reflect the true nature of this change. The party starts with the advantage of the youngest party President ever in BJP history. The recalibration also shows that he has been given some freehand in putting his team together. He has not shied away from the fact that absence of experienced mature leaders saw the organisation become weak in some area where personalities had become power centres by themselves, and slowly losing connect with the field karyakartas. This is a positive development.

The reshuffle shows that BJP leadership keeps a keen tab on the performance of its karyakartas. No karyakarta is forgotten or discarded as many speculate when changes take place. Smriti Irani has, of course, proven to be queen of comebacks with sterling performance in West Bengal and her unique gift of communicating precisely in multiple languages. Communication has been one of the weak points in BJP for some years, with Modi ji and Amit Shah doing the heavy lifting.

Vinod Tawde, once pushed out of Maharashtra was brought to Delhi where he worked silently but solidly to

rise again in prominence as a very important organiser. Ram Madhav with his proven skills at negotiating with tough opposition, turning many foes into friends, his knowledge of foreign affairs has seen him back. Biplob Deb a rising star from north east, after some days on the bench, so to say, finds himself at the top.

Bringing in Piyush Goyal, a veteran and key minister in Modi cabinet back as treasurer shows the seriousness of the exercise. Not many have commented on BL Santhosh's continuation at the top of the organisational pyramid. He is the most experienced organiser in BJP now with minutest knowledge of the organisation and people in every corner of Bharat. He will be very important for Nitin Nabin to run the organisation smoothly.

Rajasthan is in serious trouble due to inexperience of the CM, while Vijayaraje Scindia sulked on the sidelines. She has been rehabilitated, strengthening Rajasthan at organisational level. If the CM were to seek her guidance, he can improve on his governance score card. An important feature of this re-organisation is space given to 'outsiders' meaning those who came to BJP from other political parties. Anil Antony stands out as a person who worked silently at the organisational level for some time before being brought into centre. I wish more of such articulate and good talents were accommodated too. Sandeep Pathak finds a place with his excellent achievements in fields outside politics. Bringing very late entrant Rohan Gupta is a surprise promotion, but BJP surely knows his importance.

Rising number of women is a great signal that BJP walks to talk. 33% is not just a political rhetoric but a commitment. That ratio is not yet 33% shows the difficulty in getting enough talent, yet, among women. A challenge well accepted. The social balancing of different communities has been well maintained, reiterating the talent and commitment of social engineering of BJP in every aspect of governance and organisation. Absence of organizational secretaries in many states, induction of outsiders in important positions shows the changing organizational priorities of BJP.

One area of concern could be lack of enough representation to the southern states. There is enough talent. BJP is serious about making strong headway into South, but it is not reflected in the composition of the team. Karnataka is the only strong state, the beach head of BJP in southern part of Bharat, but the

The new-look BJP

organisation there is nothing to write home about. Various fronts do have many faces from southern region, who will find it difficult to communicate with the strong northern party workers.

The biggest change that attracted lot of attention was removal of much loved and hated Amit Malviya from the critical post of IT Cell head. But I am sure he is not going anywhere far. His services will be used in strategic areas. He set up a formidable machinery in social media. However, over last few years, Congress seemed to have stolen a march over BJP in social media space. A political analyst S Nagarajan notes that there is a sense of digital fatigue and public friction has set in among netizens due to hyper-aggressive, polarizing online rhetoric. I think, IT Cell behaved in a flat footed manner during critical political challenges. Debacle of communication and anticipating the mood of youth during CJP protests was a signal that IT cell had lost its mojo. Media cell too has seen serious changes. Despite a big panel of spokespersons, very few spokespersons get to appear on national media. Among the panelists there is preponderance of new comers from other parties. To me, the major failure of media and IT Cell was blocking of communication and feedback mechanism. Ministers can be excused for being very busy. But a department set up specifically for communicating with people cannot operate within closed networks. It is hoped that the new team will relearn the quality of BJP of keeping all channels open to again become the dominant force as it was from 2014 to 2019-20.

Nitin Nabin has shown that he can create a navin (new) organizational mood. One can say that he mishandled only the opening over (by-elections in his own stronghold), but he definitely recovered well and is battling with focus and patience for a long haul.

Ratan Sharda is a well known TV panelist and has authored several books. He has been a member of the RSS since his childhood days. He is a founding member of Vishwa Adhyayan Kendra, Mumbai



Prof. SATISH KUMAR
Political Science, IGNOU, New Delhi

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) recently executed a significant organisational overhaul immediately following youth-led demonstrations at Jantar Mantar. The reshuffle raises a fundamental political question: Is this restructuring a proactive, natural evolution, or a defensive reaction to mounting public pressure? There are many questions are on surface which need to be explained. First, is it a new team which will drive the party or veterans sitting on the top continue to play shot? Second, how far BJP has travelled on the way as it had been sketched by the Congress earlier? The famous political scientist named it 'Congress System'. Third, has the gap occurred between RSS and BJP? Fourth, how will the Gen G react on the forthcoming elections? These are common political questions which need a better understanding.

First BJP is a party with difference. It is closely attached with its ideological foundation i.e. RSS. Other political parties in India either national or regional are imbedded within the family bond. Leadership cannot emerge beyond blood relations. Exceptions could be Communist Parties of India. At major turning points BJP has overhauled its structure and sent a strong message that decisions are always taken democratically. During Ram Rath Yatra, veteran leader of BJP Lal Krishna Advani created a new team in which the current prime minister was one of the pillars. The organisational overhaul following L.K. Advani's 1990 Ram Rath Yatra was a foundational turning point in the BJP's history. Parmod Mahajan



THE BHARTIYA JANATA PARTY GETS A MAKEOVER: THE KEY FACES

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) announced its new national leadership team under the newly appointed Party President Nitin Nabin. The major organisational reshuffle balances veteran leaders with fresh faces for upcoming political cycles.

TOP LEADERSHIP & TREASURERS
— National President: Nitin Nabin
— National Treasurer: Piyush Goyal (Union Minister)
— National Joint Treasurer: Rajesh Mangal

NATIONAL GENERAL SECRETARIES
— B. L. Santhosh (Organisational National General Secretary)
— Smriti Irani
— Biplob Kumar Deb
— Vinod Tawde
— Sunil Bansal

NATIONAL VICE PRESIDENTS
— Vasundhara Raje Scindia
— Ram Madhav
— Baijayant Jay Panda
— Tirath Singh Rawat
— Sardar Manpreet Singh Badal
— D. Purandeshwari

— Rekha Verma
— Bharti Pawar
— M. Nagaraja
— Lal Singh Arya
— Usha Ben Doshi

NATIONAL JOINT GENERAL SECRETARIES
— Shiv Prakash
— Saudan Singh

SECRETARIES & MORCHA PRESIDENTS
— Anil Antony (National Secretary)
— Rohan Gupta (National Secretary)
— Hemang Joshi (Yuva Morcha President)
— Roop Kumari Choudhary (Mahila Morcha President)

WEEKLY MOON SIGN FORECAST | 23 - 29 AUGUST

Wide Horizons, Steady Work and a Clearer Outlook

Dr Shanker Adawal
Astrologer, Author & Researcher

This forecast is based on your Moon Sign (Janma Rashi), which often reflects day-to-day emotional and instinctive patterns more closely than general Sun-sign readings.

Moon Watch

The Moons quiet message for the week ahead. A Full Moon and lunar eclipse arrive towards the close of the week, bringing some matters to a natural point of review. Notice what has been building quietly; not every strong feeling needs an immediate decision.

Weekly Overview

The week opens with the Moon in Sagittarius, encouraging broader thinking, learning and movement. Capricorn then brings attention to discipline, responsibilities and practical decisions. By Friday, Shravana Purnima and the lunar eclipse add a more reflective note as the Moon moves through Aquarius. The weekend favours perspective and calmer conversations.

Aries (Mesh): Travel, learning or future planning may open the week on an encouraging note. A conversation with someone experienced could help you see an old situation differently. Capricorn then turns attention towards career and responsibilities, where steady follow-up matters more than speed. By the weekend, friends and professional networks become useful again. Keep plans flexible; one new connection may lead somewhere worthwhile.

Taurus (Vrishabh): Shared finances, trust or an unresolved commitment may need careful handling during the opening days. Avoid making assumptions simply because a discussion feels uncomfortable. The middle of the week broadens perspective through learning, travel or useful advice. By Friday, professional matters become more visible. Stay composed if expectations rise; quiet preparation will carry more weight than trying to prove a point.

Gemini (Mithun): Relationships and one-to-one discussions take centre stage early in the week. Some differences can be settled if both sides are willing to listen rather than defend a position. Later, shared responsibilities or financial matters need practical attention. The closing phase opens a wider view and may revive interest in travel, learning or future plans. Give yourself time before turning an idea into a commitment.

Cancer (Karka): Work, health and routine responsibilities may keep the first part of the week fairly structured. Small corrections can make daily life easier without requiring a complete change. Relationships become more important as the week progresses, particularly where duties are shared. Fridays Full Moon phase may bring a financial or emotional matter into sharper focus. Handle it calmly and avoid making a final decision in the heat of the moment.

Leo (Simha): Creative interests, children or personal plans may bring lighter moments at the start of the week. Capricorn then asks for more discipline in work, health or unfinished responsibilities. Relationships move into stronger focus towards Friday, and someone close may have more to say than expected. Listen before reacting. The weekend can bring useful clarity once both sides have had enough space to speak honestly.

Virgo (Kanya): Home, family or personal arrangements may need attention early on, especially if something has been left half-finished. The middle of the week feels more expressive and may revive a creative interest or personal plan. By Friday, work routines and health priorities come back into focus. Keep things simple. A few practical improvements may do more for your peace of mind than another ambitious target.

Libra (Tula): Communication, paperwork or short journeys can make the opening days busy, but useful information may emerge through ordinary conversations. Capricorn later shifts attention towards home and family, where practical arrangements need patience. The Full Moon phase brings creativity and personal emotions closer to the surface. Enjoy what feels good, but avoid reading too much into one moment or one persons reaction.

Scorpio (Vrishchik): Money, family responsibilities or personal values may need sensible handling as the week begins. Discussions become easier once you move away from fixed expectations. Midweek supports communication, meetings and short travel. By Friday, home or family matters may feel more emotionally charged than usual. Give people some room. What appears urgent in the moment may look quite different after the atmosphere settles.

Sagittarius (Dhanu): With the Moon beginning the week in Sagittarius, confidence and personal momentum improve naturally. This is a useful time to reconnect with plans that had lost direction. Capricorn then brings finances and practical priorities into focus, asking for a more measured approach. Towards the weekend, communication becomes active again. Speak clearly, but avoid promising more than your time or energy can realistically support.

Capricorn (Makar): The opening days may feel quieter, giving you useful space to think before stepping forward. Once the Moon moves into Capricorn, priorities become clearer and practical decisions feel easier to make. Use this phase to organise rather than overextend yourself. By Friday, finances and personal security need a balanced look.

Aquarius (Kumbh): Friends, professional networks or longer-term plans may remain active early in the week, though you need not respond to every suggestion immediately. Capricorn then encourages a quieter phase of preparation and rest. As the Moon enters Aquarius around the Full Moon and eclipse, personal feelings may become stronger or clearer. Observe first.

Pisces (Meen): Career matters or public responsibilities may demand attention at the beginning of the week. Useful support can come through colleagues or wider networks as the week develops. The closing phase becomes more inward-looking, particularly around the Full Moon and eclipse.



SURJIT SINGH FLORA

A defence treaty agreed in Mecca on August 7 binds Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan to a single mutual-defence promise: an armed attack on one nation will be viewed as an attack on all three.

The agreement is already being called "Islamic NATO," although that isnt its official name. The comparison rests on its central pledge, which resembles NATOs Article 5. Yet the pacts real importance will depend less on its language than on whether the three governments build the structures needed to act together in a crisis.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif signed the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement in Mecca. Its stated goals include deterrence, military cooperation, regional peace, security, and stability.

The three countries have different strengths. Pakistan has a nuclear arsenal, a large army and combat experience. Türkiye has the second largest military in NATO, a booming defence industry, armed drones, missiles and naval forces. Saudi Arabia has substantial financial resources, energy leverage and a pivotal position in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

That combination explains the NATO comparison. However, there is no public evidence that the agreement creates an automatic troop deployment rule, a standing joint force, or a unified command. Mutual-defence language carries political weight, but it doesnt create an integrated military by itself.

The timing reflects rising security fears in the Gulf. Missile attacks, threats to energy facilities, and dangers to shipping near the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz have pushed regional defense planning higher on the political agenda.

The pact builds on the Saudi-Pakistan Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement signed in September 2025. Holding the ceremony in Mecca gave the agreement additional religious and political significance. It didnt, however, create military obligations beyond the terms of the document.

Saudi and Turkish officials have described the pact as defensive rather than an anti-Iran alliance or a sectarian bloc. Iranian lawmaker Ebrahim Rezaei called it a "paper

merely as markers of ancestry but as structures that helped preserve social and cultural memory. A community is not preserved merely because its members continue to carry the same surname. It survives because it carries forward a memory. It remembers where it came from, what traditions shaped it, who its teachers were, which institutions sustained it, and what it believes is worth passing on. There is also the story of the Chaturvedis beyond Mathura. Over different periods, Chaturvedi families came to be settled in areas beyond Mathura, including parts of the Bhadaur region and present-day Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The book engages with the popular explanation that the communities dispersal was simply the result of people fleeing Mathura because of invasions and persecution. The Chaturvedi story, as presented in the book, is therefore not simply a story of migration. It is a story of how identity travels. What emerges is a simple but powerful idea: Education was one of the ways a small community like the Chaturvedis decided to empower themselves and break the poverty cycle - through intellect and knowledge. Perhaps that is one of the most valuable lessons my fathers generation can leave ours.

Another part of the book is its discussion of the traditional akhara and community institutions. The akhara was not merely a place for wrestling. It could become a space of social cohesion, where people with completely different political beliefs could nevertheless come together as members of the same community. The book gives the striking example of Congressmen,

"IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, IN FOREIGN POLICY, A GREAT DEAL HAS TO DO WITH HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES, A GREAT DEAL HAS TO DO WITH THE SENSE AND PERCEPTION OF PEOPLE."

— SALMAN KHURSHID

The future of Islamic NATO



agreement," though that was his personal comment and not a formal response from Tehran.

Pakistans hand is clear. Its military has trained and fought alongside Saudi forces for decades, and its nuclear arsenal provides an additional layer of deterrence. Türkiye has traditional military strength, defence technology and a growing domestic arms industry with increasing export potential. Saudi Arabia can finance weapons, infrastructure and joint programs. It can use its geographic location and diplomatic clout.

Those resources could support a durable partnership. They dont answer the hardest questions about collective defense. If one member is attacked, who responds first? What assistance is required? Who commands the operation? Would the response involve intelligence and weapons, air defense, logistics, troops, or direct combat?

A shared threat can bring governments together quickly. It cant produce a common war plan overnight.

Pakistans Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar said on August 9 that the agreement is open to countries willing to accept its principles. He also said it doesnt replace existing bilateral or multilateral security arrangements.

That language leaves room for expansion. Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Jordan could all see value in closer military cooperation, particularly in missile defense, maritime security, and intelligence sharing. None, however, has been confirmed as an applicant. No official list of potential members exists, and no accession process has been announced.

Further members could improve practical cooperation. Exchanges of intelligence could improve warnings about missiles, drones, militant networks and cross-border attacks. Smaller militaries could obtain Pakistani and Turkish training thru joint

exercises. Ports, energy facilities and shipping lanes could be protected by coordinated air-defence and maritime patrols. The richer Gulf countries could also help pay for equipment, maintenance and military infrastructure. A broader grouping would carry diplomatic value as well. Muslim-majority states could gain a stronger voice in regional security discussions that are often shaped by the United States, China, Russia, and other outside powers.

Membership would also bring risk. A country that joins a mutual-defense pact could be expected to support a crisis it didnt start and cant control. Each government would have to balance the new commitment against relationships with Washington, Beijing, Tehran, Israel, and neighboring states.

Their policies already differ on Syria, Yemen, Gaza, Iran, and relations with Western powers. Türkiyes membership in NATO adds another layer of complexity. Saudi Arabia maintains wide Gulf and international ties, while Pakistan faces domestic political pressure and depends on external economic support. Those constraints could limit each governments freedom of action when a real conflict begins.

The signing ceremony was the easiest part. The agreements credibility will depend on what follows. Reports indicate that the pact may establish a Saudi-based secretariat, regular meetings of foreign and defense ministers, and consultations among military chiefs. The published Arabic text also refers to cooperation in training, logistics, and intelligence sharing.

Important details remain unclear. Public reporting hasnt explained how the three countries would make decisions during a crisis, what forces each would provide, or how Pakistans nuclear status fits into the arrangement. The agreement also doesnt

define the military response that an attacked member could expect.

That ambiguity matters because "defense" can mean many things. It can involve diplomatic support, intelligence, weapons, logistics, air defense, or combat troops. Without agreed procedures, governments may interpret the same promise in very different ways.

The first signs of seriousness would be concrete. The three members would need a permanent council with authority during a crisis, secure intelligence systems, joint command arrangements, regular exercises, and agreed funding. They would also need published rules covering the type and speed of assistance available to an attacked member.

The earlier Saudi-Pakistani accord is a word to the wise. Subsequent regional attacks didnt lead to direct military intervention, despite strong mutual-defense language. War is expensive and political promises tend to get stretched to the limit.

Any decision to fight could complicate NATO duties and diplomatic ties for Turkey. Pakistan would have its own internal and external constraints. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, would need to weigh the impact of military action on its economy, energy exports and relations with major powers.

The most likely near-term result is therefore less dramatic than the Islamic NATO label suggests. Training exchanges, intelligence cooperation, defense technology projects, border security, and coordinated diplomacy are more plausible than a fully integrated force modeled on NATO.

That result would still count. Improved intelligence, joint training and better air and maritime defences could increase the cost of attacking any member. It could also improve the readiness of three militaries that already have significant capabilities thru joint planning. Shared interests and a formal ceremony were not enough to create an enduring alliance. This would require trust, clear commitments, joint planning and rules that hold when governments change.

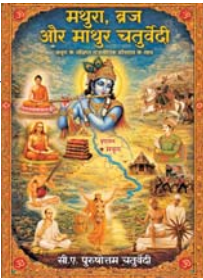
The Makkah agreement has the political weight and military capacity to attract new partners. But expansion is not guaranteed and more members would not automatically mean more security. The pact is now a three-country mutual-defence agreement with a lofty political message.

Its future will be measured through exercises, intelligence sharing, procurement, command arrangements, and crisis decisions. Calling the agreement an Islamic NATO is easy. Building the institutions that could make the name credible will take far longer.

Surjit Singh Flora is a veteran journalist and freelance writer based in Brampton, Canada

What we inherit: A father, a book and the memory of Mathura

BY PRIYANKA CHATURVEDI



Publisher: Mathura, Brij aur Mathur Chaturvedi
Author: C. A. Purushottam Chaturvedi

There are some books you read as a reader. And then there are books you hold as an inheritance. For me, Mathura, Braj aur Mathur Chaturvedi is the latter not just because it is the fruit of labour of my father, C. A. Purushottam Chaturvedi, who has spent much of his life besides being a Chartered Accountant, as an avid reader, chronicler, researcher collecting as well as documenting the history of the region. What began as a lifelong intellectual curiosity has now become a substantial volume bringing together history, religion, culture, genealogy, local traditions and the political history of Mathura.

Mathura has always occupied an important place in Indias imagination. It is one of Indias seven sacred cities. The town carries the memory of Krishnas birth, the history of the Shurasena kingdom, the traditions of Braj, and layers of Buddhist, Jain, Vaishnav, Shaiv and Shakta traditions. It is not just a geographical location, a historical city, a pilgrimage centre, Mathura is an amalgamation of all these lived and ideas. Despite its rich cultural and civilisational history there is one uncomfortable question that the book asks, why has Mathura not received the attention and development that it deserves?

Cities survive because ordinary people continue living in them. Traditions survive because families continue practising them. Memories survive because somebody tells the next generation what happened. This is why the book is an important contribution towards Indias civilisational ethos and the power of continuity as it brings the historical narrative through the people who lived these centuries of change - it is the communities of Mathura and, particularly, the Mathur Chaturvedis who continued to remain connected to the city and its religious traditions. The book documents the Mathur Chaturvedi community through its *gotras*, *pravars*, all, *kuldevis*, customs, social institutions, and geographical spread. These may sound like details of genealogy, but they are actually records of continuity.

The book describes how these identities became important not

Jana Sangh supporters, and communists sharing the same social space.

That feels remarkably relevant today.

We speak endlessly about polarisation and the loss of social cohesion. Perhaps we should also ask ourselves what happened to the institutions that once allowed people to disagree politically without ceasing to belong to the same social world.

The other lesson from the book is that the communities history through music. How music continues to build communities and keep it alive. Music became a vehicle for devotion and cultural expression in Mathura. The book records traditions of Ramlleela, Kansa Mela, Holi that continue even today. Most importantly the book eventually brings us back to something far more eternal.

Love.

One of the reflections in the book beautifully connects Braj, Krishna, and the Bhagavata tradition through the idea of prem - the affection of Yashoda, the friendship of the cowherds, the devotion of the gopis, and Radhas mahabhava.

Personally for me & selfishly so, this book is an act of preservation. Every generation assumes the next one will remember. It doesnt unless someone makes the effort to write it down. In the foreword I wrote for the book, I described it as preserving the unbroken connection of the Chaturvedis with Krishna and his janmabhoomi. But perhaps I was also describing something much more personal; the connection between one generation and the next - that is of me with that of my parents and the one I take forward with my children. Finally, when I think about what a parent can best do for their children, it is not merely to leave an inheritance that is of monetary value - property, money, or possessions. But sometimes it is to leave behind something as invaluable as curiosity. Sometimes something as precious as a library. Sometimes something as beautiful as a story of our roots and where we belong. And then, sometimes it is a book that says: this mattered to me, and I wanted you to know why.

The reviewer is a former member of Rajya Sabha

Greek bards and Indian battles



BY ALOK PRIYADARSHI

Christopher Nolans "The Odyssey" has crossed \$1.3 billion worldwide and over 7200 crore in India, making it the biggest hit of Nolans career, ahead of even "The Dark Knight Rises." The real author of that success, though, is a poet who never saw a rupee of it: Homer, whose Iliad and Odyssey were composed nearly 2,700 years ago and still anchor the costliest film epics money can buy. The Iliad tells of the ten-year Trojan War sparked by Helens abduction; the Odyssey follows its hero's twenty-year, monster-strewn voyage home to reclaim his wife and throne from her suitors.

Whats eerie is how much of this weve heard before, in Sanskrit. Odysseus strings his old bow to prove his identity, as Rama strings Shivas bow to win Sita. Achilles, invincible but for his heel, dies to an arrow, exactly as Krishna does, shot in the foot by the hunter Jara. The wooden horse that breaches Troy has its twin in Yudhishtiras murmured lie about "Ashwatthama," the elephant, which breaks Dronas will to fight. Both wars ignite over a humiliated woman: Helens abduction, Draupadis disrobing.

Achilles and Karna are both invincible but for one weak spot, both reluctant warriors - one fighting to avenge a friends death, the other to repay a debt of loyalty rather than conviction. Patroclus and Abhimanyu both die young, entering battles meant for greater men in their absence. Even the dogs rhyme: Argos waits twenty years to die at Odysseuss returning feet; Yudhishtiras companion walks with him all the way to heavens gate.

No credible contact existed between Greece and India before Alexanders invasion of 326 BC, centuries after both epics took shape. So this is either coincidence, or evidence that every culture reaches for the same stories to make sense of duty, loyalty and grief. What survives intact in both is an unfashionable moral: glory isnt the point. Rama, the Pandavas and Odysseus all end their stories by turning away from the spoils of victory, choosing home over conquest. Thats the real inheritance: not the wars these epics describe so unforgettably, but the walking away from them.

The writer is Additional Commissioner of Police (Crime) Varanasi



Actor Shabana Azmi pens a tribute to eminent poet Jan Nisar Akhtar, her father-in-law, on his 50th death anniversary

WE belonged to the family of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA), and as a result, I met Jan Nisar Akhtar Saheb on several occasions as a child — at his house, our house, at the homes of common friends, at *mushairas* and many *mehfils*.

The PWA was peopled by like-minded individuals who were bound together in the quest for a better world where social justice, gender equality, the celebration of pluralism and diversity were a given. It was like a close-knit family where joys and sorrows were shared. There was a propensity amongst the poets, whether Faiz, Akhtar Saheb or Kaifi, to dote on their daughters — Salima and Moneeza, Uneza and Albina, and me — and we were happy to bask in their love.

Around the time I had just entered films, a *mushaira* was announced in Maunath Bhanjan in honour of my father, Kaifi Azmi. Unfortunately, he was too unwell to travel, and so I was sent to represent him. I travelled on my own, secure in the knowledge that I was in the custody of my father's friends and did not need an escort. But in the melee that followed the *mushaira*, I was left behind in the crowds, and the entourage of cars carrying the poets moved on till suddenly Akhtar Saheb realised I was missing. He threw a fit and thundered, 'Yeh kya Shabana koi atthani hai jo kho gayi? Gaadiyaan roko aur sab waapas chalo!'

Eight cars made their way back to the stadium where the *mushaira* was held. They found me amidst a crowd of people who were so busy shouting instructions to each other that they didn't even notice that I was in tears. Akhtar Saheb jumped out of the car, escorted me back into it, and spent the entire journey fussing over me. 'Kaifi toh mujhe zibaah kar dete agar tumhara baal bhi baan-ka ho jaata, bas baal baal bach gaya,' he exclaimed, rather pleased with his own pun.

I warmed up to him, and was relieved that I was travelling back with him rather than with some strangers. A decade later, I married his son Javed Akhtar. It continues to make me wistful that he was gone by that time and I never had the fortune of meeting him as a father-in-law. I instinctively feel that we would have shared a terrific relationship.

He was a ladies' man and as Javed often says, 'a daughter's father'. I would have worked hard to give stiff competition to his daughters Uneza and Albina!

Alas, that was not to be; but I continue to be fascinated by the world he inhabited. He was one of the leading lights of the PWA, committed to social justice and gender equality like his colleagues Majaz, Ali Sardar Jafri, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Sahir Ludhianvi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Kaifi Azmi, and his poetry reflected that. However, there was a marked difference.

It was a mandate of the PWA that their writers inspire, encourage and provide leadership to the masses. There is considerable evidence of that in Akhtar Saheb's work. *Jo shaane par baghawat ka alam le kar nikalte haiN*

A daughter's father



(From left) Jan Nisar Akhtar (Feb 18, 1914 — Aug 19, 1976) had passed away by the time Shabana Azmi and his son Javed Akhtar got married. PTI



Kisi zalim hukumat ke dhadkte dil pe chalte haiN
MaiN unke geet gaata hooN
Jo rukhh dete haiN seena garm topoN ke dahaanoN par
Nazar se jinki bijli kaundhti hai aasmano par
MaiN unke geet gaata hooN

But sometimes, he was also willing to expose his hurts and his vulnerabilities. He chose to speak about his disillusionment, his heartbreaks and his weaknesses without cloaking them in an armour of strength. *Sabr sehat aql sab kuch kho chuka hooN*
Chhod ab jo ho chuka so ho chuka
Jis qadar rona tha mujhko ro chuka
Dost sab kuch bhool jaane de mujhe

Akhtar Saheb chose to write in simple language although he had an enviable vocabulary. 'The point is not to show off your vocabulary; the point is to communicate,' he would say. He seems to have inherited this from his father Muzter Khairabadi. And his sons Javed and Salman have, in turn, inherited this from Akhtar Saheb.

Akhtar Saheb's language is more rooted in the soil of Avadh. In contrast, the Delhi poets used a more Persianised language. It is often said that Urdu has to depend heavily on Persian or Arabic, but this is a false claim. Urdu is a purely indigenous language, and to prove this, the celebrated poet Arzoo Lucknowi wrote a book named 'Surili Bansuri', which did not contain a single word even rooted in Persian or Arabic.

Akhtar Saheb's similes bear testimony to the originality of Urdu in verses such as: *Chaukhat pe koi naar sajaati thi rangoli*
Poochha koi tyohaar hai
It-hlaa ke ye boli

Jis din bhi piya aan biraajeiN mere dware
Uss din hi maney meri Diwali meri Holi
Akhtar Saheb was known for his versatility. He had such control over his craft that he could write in the diction of Ghalib or even Nazeer Akbarabadi. He has been celebrated for creating a completely new metre: *Inquilabon ki ghadi hai*
Har nahiN haaN se badi hai

He was as committed to the cause of women's empowerment as the other Progressive Writers. In his famous *nazm* 'Aakhri Lamha' addressed to his daughter Uneza, he says: *Mumkin hai ki yeh duniya ki ravish pal bhar bhi tumhara saath naa de*
KaaNtoN hi ka tohfa nazr kare phooloN ki koi saugat naa de
Mumkin hai tumhare raste meiN har zulm-o-sitam deewar bane
Seene meiN dehakte sholay hoN har saaNs koi aazar bane
Aise meiN naa ghut ke reh jama ashkoN se naa aanchal bhar lena
Gham aap badi ek taqat hai yeh taqat bas meiN kar lena

The PWA poets were prone to exhorting their women to rise and march shoulder to shoulder with their men. But Akhtar Saheb had another facet which was uniquely his own. His relationship with his women had a different fragrance. He spent reams of paper describing the 'niswaniyat' — femininity — of the women he loved, and his romantic eye didn't miss a single beat: the lowering of the eyelids, the tantalising glimpse of a face half seen, a *dupatta's* border playfully pressed between lightly clenched teeth... His imagery is striking. *Abr meiN chhup gaya hai aadha chand*

Chandni chhan rahi hai shakhoN se
Jaise khidki ka ek patt kholey
JhaaNkta ho koi salaakhoN se ...
Yaad-e-maazi meiN yuN khayal tera
Daal deta hai dil meiN ik hulechul
Daud-te meiN kisi hasina ka
Jaise aa jaaye paaoN meiN aanchal

It was rare for a poet to write in the romantic vein after marriage. There was an abundance of odes to the beloved, but rarely, if ever, did an Urdu poet capture so lovingly every detail of his wife's actions as in 'Ghar Aangan'.

Akhtar Saheb is perhaps the only Urdu poet who has captured the playful banter (*nakhras*) of marital life from the point of view of the wife.

Woh zidd pe utar aate haiN aksar aaugat
Har cheez pe woh behs kareNge mere saath
Hargiz woh na maneNge jo maiN chahooNgi
Lekin jo maiN chahooNgi kareNge wahi baat

His wife Safia Akhtar once wrote a delightful article, 'Ghar Ka Bhedi', in which she confessed to the tricks she had to play to coax him into doing something she wanted. 'If I ever wanted to go to a party, I would make a big show of how reluctant I was to go. He would immediately rise to the bait and say, "But of course we must go, woh bahut burra maaneNge agar hum nahiN gaye! Chalo taiyyar ho jao, der ho rahi hai!"'

Safia would leave the room with heavy steps only to dance with joy in the safety of the bedroom, knowing that her ruse had worked. Had she let on that she was keen to go, he would invariably say, 'Uffo, we will be bored to death. Let's stay at home.'

I cannot speak about Akhtar Saheb's poetry with any degree of authority. I can only speak as an admirer who marvels at his range. He writes 'Sharm aati hai ke us shehr

mein rehte hain jahaaN/Na miley bheekh toh laakhon ka guzaara hi na ho' on one hand; and on the other, the delicate 'Jab raat gaye koi kiran mere baraabar/chupchap se so jaye toh lagta hai ke tum ho'.

I refer to his *nazm* 'Aakhri Lamha' again because it is an outstanding work. He talks about the virtues of tradition as well as the value of rebellion in it. He describes in detail the injustices his daughter may have to encounter, but also urges her to find beauty in life's small moments and its big struggles because despite all adversity, he believes life is beautiful.

Jeene ki har tarah se tamanna haseen hai
Har shar'ke baavajood yeh duniya haseen hai
Dariya ki tund baadh bhayaanak sahi magar
ToofaN se khelta hua tinka haseen hai
Sehra ka har sukut daraata rahe toh kya
Jungal ko kaat-ta hua rasta haseen hai
Dehshat dila rahi haiN chattaanein toh kya hua

Patthar meiN jo sanam hai woh kitna haseen hai
RaatoN ki teergi hai jo purhaul gham nahiN
SubhoN ka jhaaNkta hua chehra haseen hai
Akhtar Saheb's iconic poem 'Khaak-e-Dil', written in Lucknow at the grave of Safia, is heartbreakingly honest and describes what Safia meant to him. *MaiN aur in aankhoN se dekhooN tujhe*
paiwand-e-zameeN
Is qadr zulm nahiN haaye nahiN
haaye nahiN

Koi ai kaash bujha de miri ankhon ke deeye
Chheen le mujhse koi kaash nigahein meri
Ai miri sham-e-wafa ai miri manzil ke charaagh
Aaj tareek hui jaati haiN raahen meri...

He bares his soul, and in that one poem, you can sense his utter despair at her passing and the intensity of his love for his partner.

He got to spend more time with Khadija, whom he married after Safia passed away. Khadija was reticent in a charming way, and equally in love with her husband.

His creative energy in the last five years of his life propelled him to write as much during that phase as the body of work he had produced before that.

Legend has it that he could write the most romantic poetry in a room full of people arguing heatedly over politically contentious issues. Javed has the same gift. He can slip away in the midst of a party and write an entire song before the guests can even notice his absence.

Uneza and I were the first people to whom Akhtar Saheb and Kaifi Saheb would recite their new poems. Novices that we were, we had no hesitation in objecting to a word here and a word there; and quite often, our fathers would indulge us and change it to our great pride.

It is often said that Javed and I come from such similar backgrounds that ours should have ideally been an arranged marriage! When you read 'Rainbow' ('Dhanak') and 'The Circle' ('Da'ayra') together, you will hopefully arrive at a deeper understanding of what drew the children of these two great poets to each other.

CAPTION CONTEST 1575

MANAS RANJAN BHUI



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

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1574



SPECTRUM AUGUST 9 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

- The speaker in silent mode — Rajinder Parsad Bansal via epaper, Pundri (Kaithal)
- Sounds like a protest — Khushpreet Singh via epaper, Ferozepur city
- Audio gathering — Amarjit Singh via epaper, Rampura Phul (Bathinda)
- Stacked against all odds — Prasoon Gupta via epaper, Jagadhari
- Shifting grounds, silenced sounds — Sandeep Daniel, Shimla

Flavours from across the border



FOOD TALK
PUSHPESH PANT

A forgotten Punjabi delicacy returns, rich with history and earthy tradition

IN the glorious days of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Sikh empire, the borders of his realm extended to Afghanistan. The capital was Lahore, on the banks of the Ravi river, and valiant Sikh Generals had extended the northern frontier to Ladakh, touching Tibet. Major rivers that irrigate the subcontinent passed through the land he ruled — Indus, Sutlej, Chenab and Jhelum. Their waters were augmented by sister rivers — Ravi and Beas. Saraswati, now invisible, continues to be listed among the most sacred rivers of India. Punjab has imbibed diverse culinary influences over the millennia, and the food that reaches from the *sarhad* to *surfa* (low table), *chowki*, *thali* or plate has dominated our palate.

We were thrilled when Le Meridien on Janpath in the Capital invited us to trials for a beautifully curated tasting menu for the festival of gems from the Punjabi repertoire. Meena Bhatia, general manager of the hotel, and Davinder Kumar, chef-cum-vice president, have pulled off a coup. They have put on the menu almost-forgotten delicacies that don't try to imitate Awadh or Hyderabad, but are proud to shine with a rustic, robust glow.

The dish that stole our heart was *Kunna Gosht*, which is extremely slow-cooked in

KUNNA GOSHT

INGREDIENTS	
Mutton (shanks)	500 gm
Onions (sliced)	100 gm
Garlic paste	1 tsp
Ginger paste	1 tbsp
Coriander seeds (ground coarsely)	1-1/2 tsp
Turmeric powder (optional)	A pinch/1/4 tsp
Degi mirch	1 tsp
Salt	To taste
Oil/ghee	200 ml

METHOD

- Trim, wash and pat dry the mutton.
- Pour oil or ghee with equal measure of water into the clay pot (you may be tempted to use a thick-bottomed pressure cooker but the dish tastes much better when cooked in a clay pot. It is worth investing in one. It doesn't cost a fortune anyway!) and add the powdered spices. Light the stove and stir before covering.
- Bring to boil to let the spices bloom. Uncover and add the mutton.
- Add ginger and garlic pastes. Now add the onions. Stir to mix well with a very light hand. Once the onions are brown, cover tightly with the lid.
- Let it cook on high flame for 10 minutes. Then uncover. Add three cups of water. Bring to boil again. Cover and reduce the flame to very low and simmer the *gosht* for at least two hours.
- Prepare a slurry by mixing 1 tsp of *atta* in a quarter cup of water. Blend well and pour slowly, mixing with a light touch all the while, to thicken the *yakhni* to a sauce-like consistency. Add salt and check seasoning. Enjoy with *phulka*, *khamiri roti* or fluffy steamed rice.
- You can, of course, press to service the trusted pressure cooker. But the cheat sheet insists that you serve this beauty in a *kunna*! In this case, reheat the cooked meat for 7-8 minutes in the clay pot on sim before serving to let it imbibe the flavour of Mother Earth!

the classic *dum pukht* style that came to India from Persia via Afghanistan. Mutton shanks are cooked in a clay pot (*kunna*), sealed with dough. Spicing is minimal. Don't get us wrong — the dish eschews unnecessary embellishments like aromatics and garnishes while concentrating on taste.

The meat falls off the bone and is unimaginably succulent. The marrow enriches the sauce-like gravy.

Some may confuse it with *nihari*

because of the dark complexion but the two are poles apart. *Kunna Gosht* doesn't aspire to be anything else — neither *laskhara khana* nor a *shahi qorma* or the colourful *rogan josh*.

We hope that this unveiling leads to a revival of this iconic recipe that was once cooked regularly at home. We share the recipe that our dear readers can try without any hesitation and make up for the meatless days in Sawan!

— The writer is a food historian

Films thrive in that fertile, messy ground between fact and feeling, hard evidence and the wild leaps of imagination

NEELAM MANSINGH CHOWDHRY

RECENTLY, I was asked to deliver a lecture on the subject: 'Is art subjective, or is it objective?' Posing this as an either/or question immediately creates a false dichotomy. I don't believe a film, or any artistic expression, is objective. In fact, if I am being honest, I don't believe history is objective either.

That might sound like a curious, perhaps even provocative, way to begin a conversation about cinema. But anyone who engages with the past knows that history never arrives in our hands untouched. Someone, at some point, decided which information from the past is relevant, which events are significant, which facts need to be tucked away, what needs to be saved, who are the heroes and who is exiled into the footnotes. History is not a lie, but it is always a curated space.

If history gives us the dry anatomy of an event, cinema gives us its living, breathing memory

Every medium we have ever invented to record our lives comes with its own flawed lens. Literature wraps the truth in metaphor; photography pretends to be neutral while choosing exactly what to crop out of the frame; everything we create is filtered through human eyes, human hands and human politics. Objectivity, whether we seek it in the archive, the newspaper, or on the screen, is perhaps the most persuasive myth we have ever invented to comfort ourselves.

For me, cinema — much like theatre — operates in the same twilight zone. A filmmaker decides where the camera rests, whose face needs to be lit, where a scene begins, and where the curtain falls. Every frame is an act of deliberate selection.

This leaves us with a paradox: if films are inherently biased and non-objective, why is it that they so often feel more truthful, more devastatingly real, than official histories? History gives us the dry anatomy of an event; cinema gives us its living, breathing memory.

I felt this while watching Honey Trehan's *'Satluj'*, which retraces the life of human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khrala. The controversy surrounding its release has almost woven itself into the fabric of the film. And that doesn't surprise me. It is a battle over memory, about asking who owns the right to remember? Who decides which wounds are allowed to bleed in public and which must be quietly bandaged and hidden away?

When I think of *'Satluj'*, the first thing that clings to me is not the progression of its plot, but the heavy, visceral weight of pain, and brutality. *'Satluj'* isn't just recounting a political

How to engage with cinema



yards, the sudden stillness of a home, the shuttered businesses, and the slow, paralysing shock of realising that your own country now looks at you as an alien.

By the time the 1970s arrived, the air had shifted. The docks, the smuggling lanes, the labour strikes, and that unforgettable, simmering wrath of Amitabh Bachchan in *'Deewaar'* were not just tropes of a crime thriller. They were the emotional biography of an angry, betrayed generation.

Take Chaitanya Tamhane's *'Court'*. If you want to understand the truth of modern Indian bureaucracy, watch this film. It is a masterclass in the theatre of the absurd, finding brilliant, dry humour in the absolute lethargy of our legal system. The film shows us that institutional violence isn't always carried out by sinister masterminds; sometimes it is just carried out by bored people waiting for the lunch bell to ring.

Or consider Neeraj Ghaywan's *'Masaan'*, a film that archives a changing, small-town India with exquisite tenderness. *'Masaan'* handles the heavy, age-old weights of caste and mortality, but it balances them with a light-footed portrayal of romance in the digital age. Think of Deepak and Shaalu. Their love story isn't one of grand cinematic gestures. There is a lovely, humorous truth in how they navigate their realities — Deepak, a boy from the Dom community whose family works in the cremation grounds, trying to impress an upper-caste girl by reciting poetry he memorised just for her. When they ride together on a motorcycle, the camera captures a modern, aspirational India trying to break free from the gravity of its past.

The romance in *'Masaan'* feels entirely true because it isn't sanitised; it is fragile, awkward, sweet and, ultimately, heartbreaking. Through this intimate lens of love and longing, the film tells us more about the stubborn borders of caste in contemporary India than any sociological survey ever could.

None of these films is objective. Every single one of them operates from a distinct vantage point, choosing its heroes and choosing its silences. But their profound value lies precisely within that heavy, honest subjectivity.

So, how do we engage with this medium? We must resist two very easy temptations. The first is to treat a film as absolute, literal gospel. The second is to dismiss it as mere make-believe, a distraction. Cinema is neither. It thrives in that fertile, messy ground between fact and feeling, between hard evidence and the wild leaps of imagination.

— *The writer is a theatre director*

nightmare. It forces us to sit with the moral unease of a time when truth itself was fractured and contested. Whether you agree with every aesthetic choice the filmmaker makes is beside the point. The film stands as a stark reminder that history is never merely about what happened; it is about what a society chooses to bring to light, and what it prefers to leave buried in the dark. It is not only about what you remember, but how you remember.

But we must make a vital distinction here, because not all subjectivity is born equal. There is a vast, irreconcilable gulf between a film that explores subjective truth and a film that manufactures propaganda.

Lately, we've seen a disturbing rise in films that could be called 'manufactured truths' — propaganda films designed not to unearth human truth, but to serve the people in power. Propaganda demands certainty. It paints

the world in monochromatic blocks of absolute heroes and absolute villains. It weaponises the camera to close down debate, to flatten the contradictions of human nature, and to validate a state-sanctioned narrative. Propaganda pretends to be the ultimate, objective truth, and in doing so, it functions as an act of violent erasure.

Cinema does the exact opposite. It has the courage to be vulnerable. It doesn't look for enemies; it looks for the human condition. It understands that two conflicting realities can exist in the same room, trapped in the same tragedy. Propaganda seeks to manipulate our anger; art seeks to awaken our empathy. Think of Govind Nihalani's masterpiece *'Tamas'*. When he adapted Bhisham Sahni's novel for the screen, he was not trying to give us a sterile lesson on the politics of 1947. *'Tamas'* gives us some-

thing else entirely. It shows us what fear actually feels like in a deserted, twilight alleyway just before madness descends. It captures the terrifying, psychological unravelling of a community — showing us how quickly ordinary neighbours, who had shared festivals for generations, can be mutated by suspicion and transform into complete monsters.

Nihalani's camera doesn't point fingers from a safe distance; it forces us to look at the vulnerability of each character and the collective madness that swallows them all. *'Tamas'* is a monument to subjective truth because it refuses the easy comfort of a singular villain. It recognises that the real tragedy of history is how easily an ordinary human being can transform into a beast.

It takes MS Sathyu's *'Garam Hawa'* to show us the agonising grief of those who chose to stay behind — the empty court-

COURTESY: NFDC - NATIONAL FILM ARCHIVE OF INDIA

SAURABH CHADHA

LONG before live music became another box for cafes and restaurants to tick, one man held a radical belief that a city could be transformed simply by listening. When Arjun Sagar Gupta opened the first Piano Man Cafe in 2012, and later The Piano Man Jazz Club in Safdarjung Enclave in 2015, Delhi wasn't exactly holding its breath for a dedicated jazz venue.

The city's nightlife ran on commercial playlists, dependable cover bands and the familiar comfort of chartbusters. Jazz was niche, independent musicians had talent but nowhere to play, and the audiences, while they existed, were scattered across the city.

A decade on, the experiment has grown into something far more than a successful hospitality brand. With three venues across Delhi-NCR, thousands of performances, hundreds of international artistes and an almost stubborn commitment to original music, The Piano Man has become one of India's most influential cultural arenas. More importantly, it has rewritten the relationship between artistes and audiences. This isn't just the story of a venue. It's the story of building an ecosystem from the ground up.

MORE THAN A CLUB

Walk into any Piano Man venue, and you understand immediately that music isn't background entertainment here. It's the reason the room exists. Every design decision flows from that philosophy. The acoustics. The lighting. The architecture. Even the placement of tables seems to acknowledge that every seat deserves to experience the performance properly.

An engineer by education, a trained jazz pianist by passion and a hospitality entrepreneur by instinct, Arjun has always approached venue-building almost like composing music itself, where every element has to work in harmony. From the intimate charm of Safdarjung Enclave to the grandeur of Gurugram's award-winning venue and the expansive new cultural destination in Malviya Nagar, each space reflects the same guiding principle: respect the artiste, the music, and the audience will follow.

SILENCE AS APPLAUSE

Perhaps nothing illustrates this philosophy better than The Piano Man's now iconic

The Piano Man at 10



Over the last decade, the dedicated jazz venue has emerged as a defining cultural brand

Arjun Sagar Gupta

Silent Song. During a performance, service stops. Conversations pause. Cutlery falls silent. For a few minutes, hundreds of people do something increasingly rare in modern life: they simply listen. It's a remarkably idea that has become one of the venue's defining cultural signatures. When asked whether this was an attempt to educate audiences rather than entertain them, Arjun smiles. "Live music deserves com-

plete attention. Those few minutes remind us that listening is an act of respect, not just for the musician, but for ourselves."

ARTISTES BEFORE BUSINESS

Over the past decade, The Piano Man has hosted thousands of performances featuring global icons alongside emerging Indian musicians. Grammy-winning artistes have shared the stage in the same ecosys-

tem that has introduced audiences to young performers taking their first professional steps.

When asked what he looks for in young and underground musicians, Arjun says, "Technique matters, but honesty matters more. The audiences connect with musicians who have something genuine to say. Our responsibility is to give them the stage before the industry gives them validation."

VALUE OF ART

The most radical aspect of The Piano Man is its ethics. Conversations around musicians in India have centred around exposure, but Arjun chose compensation. Where others negotiated visibility, he argued for dignity. These ideas seem obvious today. A decade ago, they were anything but.

Asked what responsibility a venue has towards musicians beyond giving them a stage, he doesn't hesitate. "Giving a stage is only the beginning. A venue has the responsibility to create an environment built on respect, professionalism and an understanding of the value of art. Many of the principles that shaped The Piano Man came from my own experiences as a performing musician. As more ethical venues emerge, artistes naturally choose to perform where they're respected and treated professionally."

THE NEXT MOVEMENT

Ten years have transformed The Piano Man from an ambitious idea into one of India's defining cultural brands. But Arjun's ambition isn't simply to open more venues. It is to nurture more artistes. To build larger audiences. To make independent music part of cultural life. We ask Arjun what excites him more: bringing the world's greatest musicians to India or watching artistes who began on a Piano Man stage become global headliners? He pauses, then answers: "One of the greatest joys is seeing artistes who performed at The Piano Man in their early years go on to build remarkable careers. At the same time, it's an incredible privilege to welcome some of the world's greatest musicians to our stage. Over the years, we've had the honour of hosting artistes such as Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Tigran Hamasyan, Jacob Collier and Cory Wong."

He adds, "When international artistes witness the depth of talent we have here, it changes how they see India as a musical destination. If I had to choose one moment that defines success for us, it would be the day an artiste who started here headlines an international festival and says they found their first real audience at The Piano Man."

It is perhaps the perfect ending to a story that was never really about buildings, restaurants or even jazz. It was always about the belief that one room, built with enough conviction, can eventually change the sound of an entire city.

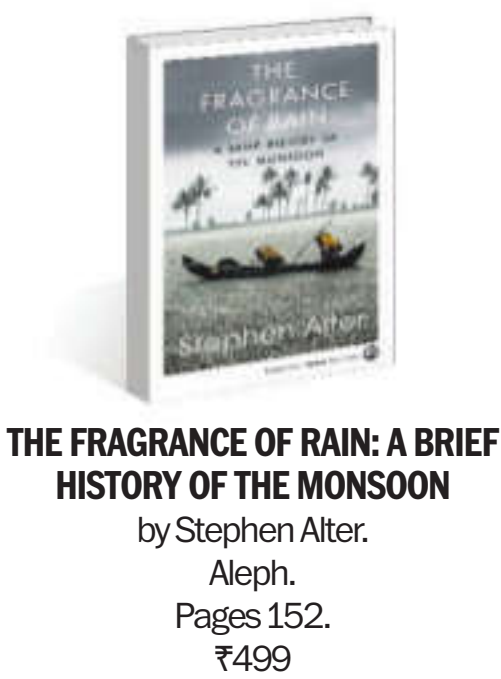
— *The writer is a music critic*

BOOKS

Sight, sound, smell of the monsoon

RAZA KAZMI

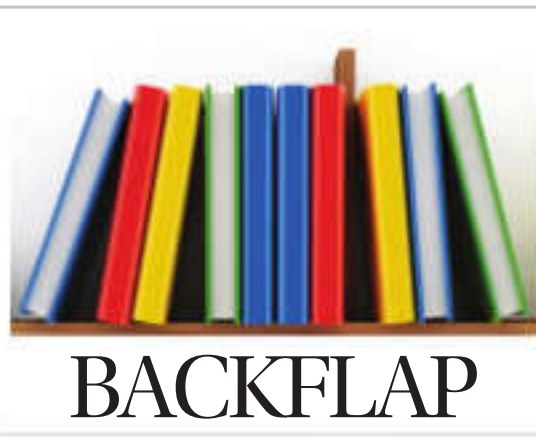
PUT the book down and gaze out of my cottage window. The forest beyond is fresh and green, the ground is soaked to the bone, and there is a distinct, gentle pitter-patter on my room’s old tiled roof. A streak of gold flashes past in the canopy, and then the air bursts into the song of the golden oriole. White mushrooms grow at the feet of wet trees. A man is walking through the woods towards my cottage, deftly balancing an umbrella while gingerly placing every step to avoid getting his feet wet. In doing so, he looks like a human mimic of the hopping waddle of the orange-headed thrush that I often see moving about like a comical detective, upturning the forest leaf litter. “The road out of the village is blocked; the river has flooded over the bridge,” he informs me with concern. Then he suddenly looks at the book and queries, “What are you reading?” “It’s a book on rains,” I reply. He looks at me, puzzled. “People write books on rain?” he asks. “Yes. This is a book called ‘Fragrance of Rain: A Brief History of the Monsoon’, by Stephen Alter,” I reply. So why does someone write a book on the rains? Perhaps because it gives birth to new life across nature, perhaps because it rejuvenates our watercourses, perhaps because it is the season for sowing rice and other monsoon crops, perhaps because



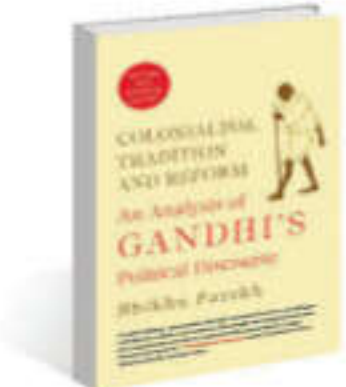
something about the sight, smell and sound of rain evokes a distinct sense of romance, perhaps because it kindles a strange, primeval inspiration to express oneself, perhaps it is the sum total of all of this and something more. This, in some ways, is the quest that underpins naturalist Stephen Alter’s latest book. The blurb describes Alter’s work as “both intimate and expansive”, and a “vivid portrait of India’s most distinct season — the monsoon”. Luckily for us readers, Alter’s prose lives up to this promise. As I sat in my verandah on a wet afternoon, flipping through the opening chapter, Alter’s words almost magically transported me to the

verandah of his heritage home in the beautiful hills of Mussoorie, where the monsoons were just setting in, with him regaling me with the story of that one fragrance that pretty much defines rains — petrichor. As I breezed through the opening few pages, I wondered how exactly the book would navigate the subject of monsoon given that there are just so many ways in which a writer could look at it. The query was answered by the time I was finished with the second chapter. Alter employs a lovely approach, with a little doff of his hat to Alexander Frater’s ‘Chasing the Monsoon’ (1990), where he experiences the different moods of the monsoon in different landscapes. Just as the pre-monsoon showers roll into Mussoorie, Alter flies down to Kochi and begins ascending, much like the rain-heavy clouds, the Western Ghats. He starts from the home of the Nilgiri Tahr in the misty Eravikulam Hills and settles in Goa to experience the full force of the south-west monsoon lashing through its forests and fields. He goes plodding through pouring rain on a forest adventure in the Bhagwan Mahaveer Wildlife Sanctuary with his intrepid local naturalist friends, observes the quiet monsoonal rhythm of rural Goa where, among other things, he often sits down with old Goa veterans on rainy afternoons to engage in wide-ranging discussions, ranging from local monsoon mango

varieties to the history of the monsoon celebration, São João. Interspersed in between, almost like the brief rain-free spells during the monsoon, are chapters detailing the origin story of the season, and how it has inspired poets, philosophers, travellers and adventurers. Alter is well-known for his evocative writing, coupled with a deep knowledge of natural history. The chapters are well-crafted, the language is elegant and rich. However, it is the chapters that deal with his experiences and observations that shine through. Even though well-written, the slightly more academic chapters on the history and mechanics of monsoon, and its impact on poetry and art as a metaphorical inspiration, are slightly underwhelming compared to the others. One also wishes the work could have had a slightly wider geographical canvas in first person. Having said this, one is also aware that all these minor misses are possibly simply due to the format of the Aleph Essential India series, where each book is supposed to be a slim volume and thus cannot permit a deeper engagement. This might be my only minor complaint in what is otherwise a wonderful book by a masterful writer. And I would not be exaggerating when I tell you that long after you have finished the book, its fragrance lingers on, almost like petrichor. — *The reviewer is a conservationist*

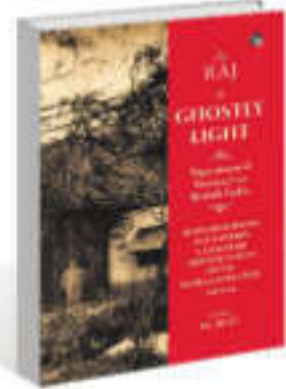


BACKFLAP



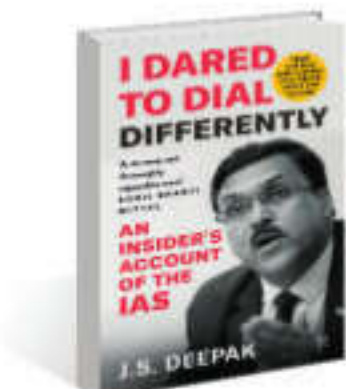
COLONIALISM, TRADITION AND REFORM
by Bhikhu Parekh.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 416. ₹899

How can a society reform itself without repudiating its past? How can it learn from other civilisations without accepting their judgment of its inferiority? Such questions lie at the heart of Bhikhu Parekh’s landmark study of Gandhi’s political discourse. First published in 1969, the updated edition examines Gandhi’s reworking of *ahimsa*; his dialogue with the revolutionaries; his campaign against untouchability; his experiments in celibacy; his Indian remaking of autobiography; and the tensions within his economic and political worldview.



THE RAJ IN GHOSTLY LIGHT
Edited by BC Dutt.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 335. ₹499

Tales of hauntings, madness, fever, guilt and dread, and of the anxieties beneath imperial confidence — this collection opens a door into the shadowed rooms of the Raj, where every verandah has a whisper and the past is never quite past. It gathers classic supernatural stories from the 19th and early 20th centuries by writers, including Rudyard Kipling, Alice Perrin, Flora Annie Steel, Arthur Conan Doyle, S Mukerji and others.



I DARED TO DIAL DIFFERENTLY
by JS Deepak.
Hachette.
Pages 318. ₹799

From conducting India’s first-ever 3G spectrum auctions to blocking a huge scandal at BSNL, from implementing the midday meal programme in 1,00,000 schools in UP to overseeing the establishment of the Commonwealth Games Village in 2010, JS Deepak’s career has spanned telecom, trade, technology and diplomacy at the highest levels. Written with wit and wisdom, this book traces his four-decade-long journey through the IAS.

The aroma of memories

SURBHI GOEL

WHAT is a memoir? A memory recall, remembrance, life experiences shared with interested readers or a tapestry of a rich, vital life, lived on one’s own terms, a mosaic of turning points, interactions within and beyond the family, or a companionship shared with the universe? All this, and more, is what is mapped in Inderjit Singh Jaijee’s ‘Over Tea: Stories from an Earlier India’, narrated to Dona Suri, who has also meticulously edited the book to bring out the very aroma of these memories.



OVER TEA: STORIES FROM AN EARLIER INDIA
by Inderjit Singh Jaijee.
As told to Dona Suri.
Pages 144.

The book contains a set of 23 stories woven around that ritual of evening tea, introduced by the British in India. These stories follow a design of cartography, and the readers can read/see a map unfolding in words, travelling through various places: the Northeast, the Himalayas, Punjab, Delhi, Calcutta; calling on numerous spaces: a house, a mystical well, a canvas tent, through the forest near Chail, various villages in Punjab; rendezvous with an array of people: relatives, an itinerant wise-man-of-a-singer, Master Tara Singh, random strangers who became part of the forever memory, the great Gama wrestler, the Muslim schoolmates who left during Partition. Amid all these details, it is marvellous how the author navigates various timelines, criss-crossing historical events. The reader can almost feel the contours of places, people and conversations. Although the author states how his “teatime visitors emerge from the dim corners”, they dazzle with a freshness and vitality rarely found in a memoir, especially when each one of them is so finely

etched and outlined so animatedly. In the story entitled ‘A Soldier’s Daughter’, Inderjit Singh introduces his wife and her character builds up across several other vignettes as a resilient, supportive wife. Although the author does not imprint particular kinds of attributes upon her, a full portrait emerges through the variegated details. The same is true of the various life experiences and the people illustrated throughout. Dainty sketches of people, places and key events in the stories add to the timbre of the narratives. One can almost hear the author’s susurrations and soft murmurs, as if sharing deep secrets of his heart with us. Reminiscing is never on an even keel, and it is obvious that some of the stories are a bit faded while some others are fresh and sparkling. But the highlight of the book is how the author perambulates through an entire history of India, specifically Punjab. Personal experiences and lives of people offer a much more savvy historical perspective than any heavily researched academic tome can ever do. It reveals the particularities and dimensions that would otherwise be missed completely.

In the story entitled ‘The Boys who Left’, there is a wistful recall of how a “wave of grief and disbelief” gripped the students of Bishop Cotton School in August 1947 when several Muslim boys left for the newly created Pakistan, and “the doors through which they had passed were nailed shut” so that no one would walk through them ever again. The final story, ‘My Trip to the Moon’, is a scintillating fictional fantasy, as if the author, having lived and recounted for us his sprightly adventurous life, seeks even more wonders, even in an afterlife, which we are taking delight in.

— *The reviewer teaches at Punjab University*

Batanagar, the urban utopia

GEETU VAID

CAN a place built for commerce — an artificially implanted company town — ever grow a soul? Can it have roots, rituals, and a heartbeat? In ‘Batanagar’, author Paramita Sen answers this tough question by weaving the two threads of history and nostalgia into a vibrant tapestry. Sen, who spent her formative years in Batanagar in the 1970s and ‘80s, gives readers not only a glimpse of life there, but also of its historical context. We ride the school bus to Calcutta with her, wear the “chronic latecomer” badge with her, learn crafts in school, argue with friends and explore the township’s lanes. But it’s not only about a child’s enthusiasm and memories. With the patience of a seasoned archaeologist, she brushes dust off each fragment — the teachers, the *mashis*, the playmates, the Batanagar Club, the sports grounds, the Ratha Jatra fair, the company contests, even the foreign toys her father brought home from tours abroad — and arranges them into a living portrait of a world that lies forgotten and fragmented now.

The simplicity of her prose is its power as Sen refuses to romanticise blindly and intersperses her accounts with historical facts about the Bata company, its business model and worldwide footprint. The addition of pictures from the archives as well as her personal collection enhances the nostalgia quotient for readers. We see Batanagar being imagined in the 1930s as an urban utopia, modelled on Bata’s Garden City of Zlin in Czechoslovakia. We meet Bretislav Martinec, the architect who executed Frantisek Gahura’s vision in India. We feel the sheer audacity of laying a foundation in 1934 on difficult soil, by a river, amid snakes — and building not just a factory, but a community. We walk past Bata’s landmark shoes — the Janata 556 and Susta Juta of the 1930s and



BATANAGAR
by Paramita Sen.
Pan Macmillan.
Pages 223.
₹399

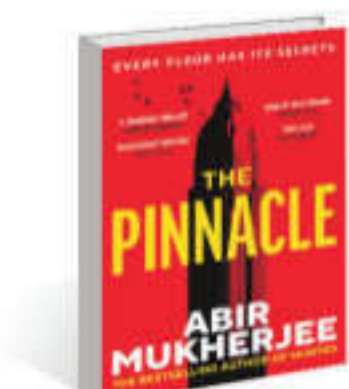
’40s — that turned the brand into a household name in India, making the country Bata’s largest market in the world. Sen does not flinch from the fault lines either: the hierarchy and social segregation, the labour unrest of 1939 that forced a complete overhaul of the management and, paradoxically, forged a deeper sense of community and equality among people of different ethnicities and nations. Batanagar became synonymous with Bata in India precisely because it learned to hold contradiction. And then history walks in. The Bengal Famine of 1943. Independence. The Naxal tremors of 1960s. The 1984 riots. Effects of globalisation. The slow erosion of the Bata empire worldwide. Through it all, Sen tracks the core ethos of Batanagar — humanity, compassion, brotherhood — that made a company town feel like home. The ending, however, lands like a quiet ache as the once vibrant town is pictured as a “wasteland”. A dilapidated clubhouse, the unrecognisable lanes, all portray the passing of an era. Batanagar is more than a documentation of historical facts. It is an act of remembrance that insists that sometimes the truest archive of a city is not in municipal records, but in the memory of a child who once called it home.

Swapping crime in colonial Calcutta for Bollywood thrills

MANDIRA NAYAR

ABIR MUKHERJEE plots murders for a living, even if he is squeamish about blood. One of the most successful writers of crime fiction, he has spent the last decade on bestseller lists with a historical crime series, Wyndham and Banerjee, set in Calcutta. His new book, ‘The Pinnacle’, turns the whodunit — a closed-door mystery — into an adrenaline fest, almost Bollywood-esque romp. “I don’t want to write too much about violence. I’m a natural coward,” he says. ‘The Pinnacle’ is a roller coaster — absurd, sometimes laugh out loud, a potato chip bag kind of book. Sweetly Sahota, Bollywood’s biggest movie star, is found stabbed in Mumbai’s most secure apartment complex. In the next room is her husband George — a washed-up American movie actor who is trying to rekindle his career in India, a country he detests — drunk and unable to remember what he did the night before. His shirt soaked in her blood lies next to her. There are others: Amit, George’s sleazy gopher,

and suspect no. 1; superstar Chunky Malhotra, Sweety’s ex. Abir packs in everything in the book — blackmail, organised crime, a politician from a party with a polarising agenda and the grittiness of Mumbai. He spins what is essentially a classic crime story into a spectacle. A Slumdog Millionaire meets a Hollywood summer blockbuster, but with a global cast of characters — American, British, set in India and with Bollywood sensibilities. The author burst on to the scene with ‘A Rising Man’ in 2016. An instant bestseller, it won the Crime Writers Association’s Dagger Award 2017. A banker, Abir had always kept to the safe path, tucking away any ambitions of writing, unlike his father who wrote fiction in Bengali while having a different day job. But that was until he was let go in 2012, at 38, with “a kid with special needs, a stupidly large mortgage” and no idea what to do next. The book was about Sam Wyndham, a detective with emotional baggage, an essential for all detectives. Wyndham is a policeman in India during the 1920s, a time of political awakening. His partner is Surendranath “Surrender-not” Banerjee, the black sheep of the family who chose to be a policeman



THE PINNACLE
by Abir Mukherjee.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 423. ₹899

instead of fighting for freedom. “When I was growing up, we did not see people like myself represented in crime fiction,” he says. “We never saw our stories. We never saw our voices. Now and again, somebody would write a book from a South Asian perspective, but it was generally literary fiction. At times, a Hanif Kureishi or Salman Rushdie, who were writing a very different sort of fiction, would break through.” Abir is among a host of writers who grew up as immigrants in the UK and have now crashed the last bastion of Britishness stand-

ing by occupying the main shelf space. A close associate is Vaseem Khan, who arrived in 2016 with ‘The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra’, featuring a retired cop with his Baby Ganesh Detective Agency and an elephant he inherited. Together they host a podcast, The Red Hot Chilli Writers. Immigrants from different sides of the Raddcliffe Line, they have traded corporate careers to be writers. Vaseem has been the first non-white Chair of the Crime Writers Association since 2023. He has also been commissioned by the James Bond Estate to write spin-off mysteries with ‘Q’ as the star. South Asian writers of crime now dominate the shelves — AA Dhand, Imran Mahmood, Kia Abdullah, Sajida Kay, Ajay Choudhury, Saima Mir, the list goes on. Their stories offer a different lens, perspective, and version of history of being British. Abir brings alive colonial Calcutta through Sam, who upholds British justice in India where unfairness and inequality are an everyday affair. “English crime fiction was focused on the mystery, on the plot, on the whodunit,” he says. “In the 1970s and ‘80s, Scottish authors like William McIlvanney, Val McDermid and Ian Rankin came

along and took a different view of what the purpose of the crime novel was; for them, it was to examine society.” In ‘The Pinnacle’, too, crime is used as a vehicle to throw light on the grimmer side of society. “It’s all very well having a fiendish twist and plot,” he says. “But at the core of the novel, if we’re not talking about society, if we’re not dealing with things on a political level, I’m not going to write it, I’ll be bored.” It is no coincidence that ‘Hunted’, his last book, was set in America and Vaseem’s new book, ‘Girl in Cell A’, is also set in small-town America. The shift is deliberate. Just as George discovered that the biggest market for Scotch whisky is India, the biggest market for writers is the land of stars and stripes. ‘The Pinnacle’ begins with George starring in an advertisement — which pays him a million dollars — for an Indian-made whisky. And American crime isn’t plodding police procedurals, it is adrenaline driven, a formula rarely altered for bestsellers. This may not be the cup of *chai* for true-blue Wyndham and Banerjee readers, but it will bring Abir a bigger new audience. For the others, there is another book on the way. — *The reviewer is a literary critic*

Our patriotic celebrations



TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

SO much has happened since I wrote my last column, almost three weeks ago, that even though I try to keep away from commenting on current affairs, I have to reflect on the new trends emerging in public celebrations. Let me begin with my own memories of the Independence Day celebrations in my childhood. Of course, we loved the holiday that came with it but since I studied in a convent run by German nuns, there was no attempt to involve the students in any meaningful way.

As day scholars (not boarders), we balanced our lives between that very 'phoren' education and the values practised by our family and the rest of the town. My father used to hoist the flag in the lawn of our house and his staff came to participate even though that meant a stiff climb to our Nainital home in the high Ayarpata area. The previous evening, flowers were tucked into the flag to be hoisted in the morning and carefully mounted on the tall flagpole. After it was over, my mother would serve tea and home-made snacks to all those who were there.

We watched the whole ceremony (accompanied by children from the neighbouring houses) and after the elders had gone home, we enacted our own version of it. A smaller copy of the high flagpole (often just a crooked branch from a tree) was erected on the other side of the large lawn and we did our own version of the solemn ceremony my father used to preside over. We saluted the flag, sang the National Anthem lustily and marched round and round the lawn, saying 'left right'.

Our patriotism was probably greater than what was on display in the other ceremony and how we loved to pretend we were grown-ups.



The mood still shines through despite the cynicism, funny memes and muggy weather

The previous evening, we all crowded round our ancient radio to hear the President's message to the nation, delivered by President Dr S Radhakrishnan, surely the most thrilling orator of his time. We weren't allowed even to speak or get up until it was over. Mind you, this wasn't just in our home but in every home around us.

The same reverence was accorded to the Prime Minister's speech from the ramparts of the Red Fort by the one and only Chacha Nehru. No forced shouts of Vande Mataram, just a moving speech heard in rapt attention by the whole nation. There was a difference in that when I compare it to the state-choreographed version of the present times. Is it because we are now older and therefore more cynical, or is there a gradual ebbing away of the spontaneity that marked our celebrations all those years ago? Perhaps that is part of the reason but the muggy, miserable weather when the entire diplomatic corps, the Army bigwigs and the high officials of the government are expected to be present in formal suits, ties or *bandhgallas*, wiping their sweaty faces, takes away the joy that should be the primary mood of such an occasion.

Later, when I was married and we took part in the official Independence Day celebrations, where my husband had to do what was his duty

as a government servant and hoist the flag, the childhood memory refused to go away. The reception at the Governor's At Home in the evening (or the President's At Home in Rashtrapati Bhavan when we moved to Delhi) was a nightmare of another kind. The tea served was often a mishmash of what the historical records from colonial times showed (tea, cakes and sandwiches) alongside *chhola bhaturas*, *samosas*, sticky sweets or juicy *rasgullas* and *gulab jamuns* that sat uneasily together on one's plate. A separate enclosure, with a cordoned-off area, was created for the Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues, the Chief Justice and important Opposition leaders, and people gawped at them from afar. I can well imagine how uncomfortable it must be for those who were gawped at.

I could go on and on but this is not the occasion to dampen the patriotic mood that still shines through despite the cynicism, funny memes and muggy weather. Something stirs one each time one hears the National Anthem, no matter who you are or what your political and ideological position may be. To boycott the ceremony and not attend the reception is just not on.

Moving on, I am relieved that we are finally confronting the trauma suffered during Partition. It has taken almost 75 years for us to acknowledge what a cruel and horrifying effect it had on those who lost loved ones, homes and their land. What is worse, it drove a wedge through the subcontinent that made neighbours into enemies, languages into cultural battles and irretrievably damaged the bonhomie between two faiths. The colonial state and the British have a lot to answer for to all those who they permanently crippled, both culturally and socially.

It is thus ironic that their own lands are now facing the problems that they inflicted on their erstwhile territories. Europe and Britain are wondering how to go back to the time when they were racially 'pure'. Rare is the country in that part of the world that will soon not be overrun by people who will occupy the land they considered 'theirs'. I may not be alive to see that but I think we in the subcontinent know that story well.

— *The writer is a social commentator*

Main Vaapas Nahin Jaunga



RAAJA BHASIN

IT'S been years since I read Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel, the wonderfully complex '*The Brothers Karamazov*'. Of the many currents in that book, like belief in God, morality, free will and patricide, one tiny part of the classic has overtaken all others to remain embedded in my head.

That bit concerns a folktale about a woman who, as a result of her selfish ways, is thrown into a lake of fire in hell. Then an angel remembers that she once gave a beggar an onion from her garden. God tells the angel to hold that onion out to her and pull her out of hell. As she is being pulled away, other sinners grab on to her legs to also try and escape. She kicks them away, shouting: 'I am to be pulled out, not you. It was my onion, not yours.' The onion breaks and she falls back. In that breaking onion, in that angry line, in the word 'my', there is a world of metaphors, parables and endless lessons.

Across history, combinations and challenges have come from variables and from the absence of constants. Patience and resilience, when combined, await opportunity. Then the hammer strikes. A battleground soaked by rain can change the course of events or someone who was blindly trusted can turn out to be a traitor — the past is full of examples like these.

Did the British Empire ever think that a thin, loincloth-clad man whose creed was non-violence would catalyse the collapse of the world's largest, wealthiest and most powerful domain that the planet had known? It happened. Call that 'Factor X'. The Unknown, the event, the person that no one anticipated, far less predicted.

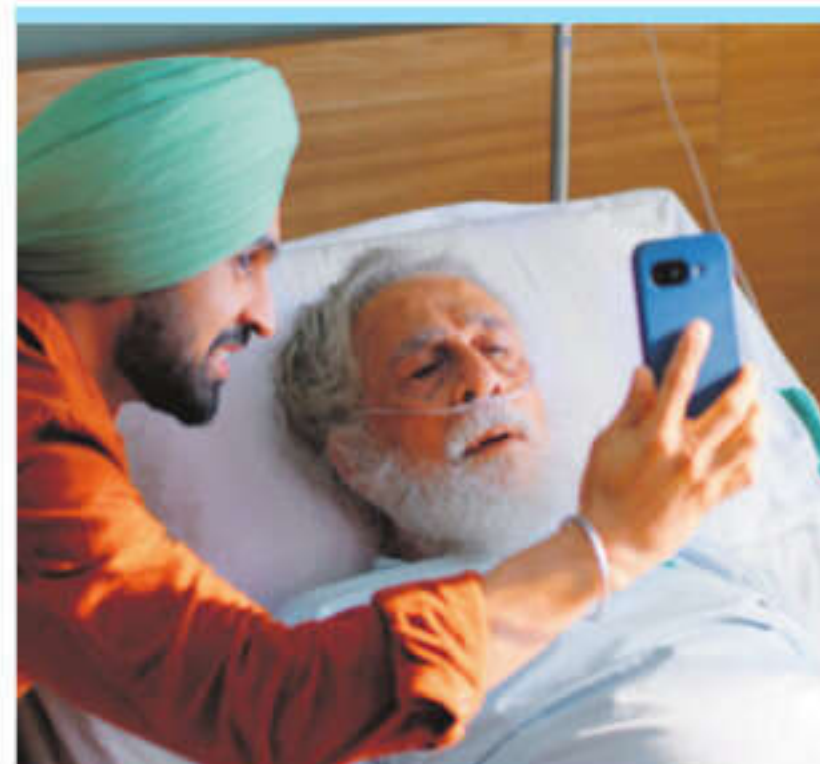
During the Emergency of the 1970s, when civil liberties had been crushed, my father and uncles, or he and a couple of friends, would huddle and talk. The gist of their conversations was: 'Is this what we got Independence for? The only difference seems to be that earlier the colonisers were from another nation, now they are from our own.' This may be a little simplistic, but the kernel of truth is there. This remains to the present day.

During the Emergency, a habeas corpus petition filed by Bharti Nayar challenged the illegal detention of her husband, prominent journalist Kuldip Nayar, under the draconian Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). My father's friend was a part of the Division Bench of the Delhi High Court that ruled in favour of Nayar, ordering his release and stating that the right to personal liberty and legal procedures under the law still applied despite the proclamation of Emergency. Almost needless to add, the powers that be were rather displeased and the judge was sidelined. The spine showed then was acknowledged at the end of that unhappy period of our democracy.

Much earlier, in another part of the country, around the time of Partition, an uncle joined the RSS for a while. With the extended family having been slaughtered almost by the score, my mother and her sisters were trained in self-defence and the use of firearms by members of the '*shakha*'. Years apart, one had done his duty as demanded by his profession; the other had been drawn by emotion and by something that had given hope and support in a trying time. Despite contrary perspectives, was either anti-national or seditious? If anything, both were immensely patriotic.

The difference lay in their interpretation and application of the word 'patriotic'. The meeting ground could only be basic humanity, plain common

I wonder what my parents, who barely survived Partition, would have made of 'Main Vaapas Aaunga'



Despite the horror where it has its roots, there is a gentleness in Imtiaz Ali's film, '*Main Vaapas Aaunga*'.

sense, the rule of law and critically, in what was enshrined in the Constitution. History, like it or not, remembers those with a spine and those without.

Despite the horror where it has its roots, there is gentleness in Imtiaz Ali's film, '*Main Vaapas Aaunga*'. For good reason, the review aggregator, Rotten Tomatoes, has given it an overall positive review. It has much of what makes a film memorable — a good story, good acting, good musical score and much else. This brings me to why I've mentioned it in August, around the anniversary of both Independence and Partition. I wonder what my parents, who barely survived Partition, would have made of this film.

I can almost step into my father's shoes and say that it is unlikely that it would have resonated with him. That has nothing to do with the film, but with views that were shaped by the events of his life — by the years that preceded Partition and by those that followed.

His take always was, '*Main Vaapas Nahin Jaunga*' (I will not go back). For him, that door had closed and events had nailed it shut. At various points, he received opportunities to visit Lahore, where he was born and grew up. His answer was consistent: 'Thank you. I have very happy memories. I would like to leave them at that.'

— *The writer is an author based in Shimla*

Adding the joy span to life



UNIVERSE

RAMA KASHYAP

REMEMBER the dialogue by Rajesh Khanna in '*Anand*': '*Zindagi lambi nahin, badi honi chahiye*' (Life should be big, not long). Exactly! What is the point of living longer if one isn't actually enjoying life? The pursuit of longevity seems meaningless unless it is paired with genuine happiness. Over the years, medical science has extended the average lifespan, but simply adding years is not enough, we need to add 'life' to those years.

For too long, the focus was solely on increasing the lifespan. Recently, that focus has shifted to 'health span', implying disease-free healthy living in later years. But why stop there? Why not aspire for joyful living ('joy span')? Coined by gerontologist Kerry Burnight, 'joy span' refers to the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing required for active and vibrant ageing. The ultimate aim shouldn't just be a long, healthy life, but joyous living, a life filled with purpose, laughter and fulfilment.

Today's retirees certainly get it. They are not interested in total withdrawal as advocated in *vamprash*, nor do they wish to retreat into the quiet solitude of a *sanyas ashram*. They retired from a job, not from life! While they adore their grandchildren, they are not content living solely through them. They want a thriving life of their own.

Why not? Retirement doesn't mean the end of the world; rather, it is the beginning of the second innings. The years beyond 60 can be pure bliss provided one stays '*swasth*, *vyast* and *mast*' (healthy, busy and happy).

Of course, for ageing to be joyful, longevity

must go hand in hand with dignity. That starts with financial independence. Planning for the golden years ought to start at a younger age, ensuring a part of the salary goes into a secure fund so one never feels dependent on anyone later in life.

Equally critical is physical independence. One must invest in health and fitness. Daily walks and regular exercise are non-negotiable. Of course, it's an ageing body. Like a vintage car, it needs a little denting and painting from time to time. Despite medical interventions, some health issues are bound to crop up. They are a part of life;

The ultimate aim should be a life filled with purpose, laughter and fulfilment

How ancient epics are reframed for today's audiences

SUBHASH PARIHAR

FINALLY watched Christopher Nolan's '*The Odyssey*'. Western cinema stands out in how it brings the ancient world to life on screen. In our movies, even when the story is about Emperor Ashoka or Akbar, they end up singing with the heroine.

Both the Greek epics '*The Odyssey*' and '*The Iliad*' are usually credited to the poet Homer. '*The Iliad*' focuses on the anger of the greatest Greek warrior, Achilles, who stops fighting after a dispute with Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae. He only returns to battle after Hector, the Trojan prince, kills his close friend Patroclus, and then Achilles kills Hector. Odysseus also appears in '*The Iliad*' as a leading strategist. He later becomes the main character in '*The Odyssey*'.

After the war, Odysseus spends more than 10 years trying to get home because he has angered Poseidon, the god of the sea. On his way back to his island of Ithaca and his loyal wife Penelope, he faces monsters, curses, and the schemes of the gods. The film does a great job of taking viewers back to a world from 3,200 years ago. Watching Wolfgang

Petersen's '*Troy*' (2004) can help you understand the background of the Trojan War.

In one flashback, Nolan shows Odysseus, who won the war through trickery, deeply shaken by the massacre in the city and overwhelmed with guilt. He cries because he broke the sacred code of hospitality and trust linked to god Zeus.

This made me think of Yudhishtira in '*Mahabharat*'. After winning the terrible war of Kurukshetra and killing his cousins, Yudhishtira doesn't celebrate. Instead, he falls into a deep crisis. He is devastated by the destruction and looks at the battlefield, asking himself: 'What kind of victory is this, when all I have gained is a graveyard?'

In fact, in many epics, the real tragedy isn't losing, but winning. Ashoka also seems to have asked himself a similar question after the Battle of Kalinga.

In Thomas Malory's 1485 romance '*Le Morte D'Arthur*', King Arthur spends his whole life building the utopian kingdom of Camelot but, eventually, it falls apart because of civil war and his son Mordred's betrayal.

In Shakespeare's play '*Macbeth*', Macbeth kills King Duncan in a plot and takes the Scottish throne. Although this is exactly

what he wanted, as soon as he becomes king, he finds no peace. Instead, he feels only guilt, sleepless nights, and mental pain.

In Sophocles' Greek tragedy '*Antigone*', Creon, the King of Thebes, manages to enforce his law against Antigone. But this victory leads to a series of suicides, including by his son Haemon and his wife Eurydice. By the end, Creon mourns over his family and wishes for death.

In the same way, even though Aurangzeb made the Mughal Empire bigger than ever, looking back during his last days, he saw more failure than success.

In Winston Churchill's only novel, '*Savrola: A Tale of the Revolution in Lawrania*', published in 1900, Savrola leads a democratic revolution in the fictional Republic of Lawrania in 1888 and overthrows a dictator. After a night of fierce fighting, he walks up a hill and looks at the destruction. Instead of feeling like a winner, he sighs, 'This is my work.'

Yet Odysseus' remorse after the Trojan War is Nolan's own interpretation. In Homer's story, Odysseus regards the victory at Troy as a triumph of his courage and ingenuity; there is no comparable sense of moral guilt over the destruction of Troy. Nor does

he renounce violence or fundamentally alter his worldview. Nolan has therefore created this moral crisis in his film to explore more deeply the psychological wounds left by war.

The 1989 film '*The Mahabharata*' by British director Peter Brook, too, gives a unique take on an ancient epic. Both directors had the same challenge: making a 3,000-year-old story matter to people today.

Brook chose to downplay its supernatural and miraculous parts. He focused on people, their moral choices, and struggles for power. Nolan, on the other hand, kept the mythological world almost unchanged. But he also added modern psychological themes like guilt, trauma, and the mental scars of war. Both directors give new meaning to ancient epics. This may also show two different Western traditions: one links myth to modern psychology, while the other puts people at the centre by moving myth aside.

Many Indians today think that Rama won Sita's hand by breaking the bow, since that's how the story is usually shown in popular versions, Ramllas, and TV shows. But in Valmiki's original, the main test was for Rama to lift and string the bow. In '*The Odyssey*', there's a similar contest, where

Odysseus wins. In both stories, the real challenge is the hero's strength to handle a powerful bow, though in Rama's case the bow breaks, while Odysseus' does not.

At Hukki Chowk in Faridkot, there is a shrine that was built before my own eyes. Earlier, there was only a simple, unnamed grave here. I don't know who decided, or for what reason, to give it the name *Daryah Mauji-Darya*. It used to be looked after by a somewhat eccentric retired peon of the electricity board. The poor man himself could make no sense of the name *Mauji-Darya*. Nor did ordinary people understand it. So, the name was changed to the simpler *Chitte Mojian Wala Pir* — the Pir with the White Socks. The new name had absolutely nothing to do with the old one, but its meaning was immediately intelligible to everyone.

This is how history, myth, and collective memory work — they don't keep events exactly as they happened, but give them new meanings in every era. Nolan sees Homer's Odysseus as a modern person, someone who feels the burden of his actions more than the joy of victory. Maybe that's why this story still feels so relevant.

— *The writer is a historian*

Grassroots push, elite training facilities and a shift in mindset are reshaping Indian badminton

DEEPANKAR SHARDA

BACK in 2018, during a visit to Chandigarh, the current Indian chief badminton coach Pullela Gopichand stressed the need to have a proper coaching setup at the grassroots level if India aimed to become a powerhouse in the sport.

Years later, the vision is bearing fruit, as Indian badminton is making waves especially in the age-group circuit — thanks to enhanced exposure, advanced training facilities and a mindset that prioritises performance over monetary gains.

As the world's top players battle it out in the Badminton World Federation (BWF) World Championships currently underway in New Delhi, Indian badminton is witnessing a thrilling new chapter. A host of small-town young players are emerging as stars of the future.

Inspired by established names like PV Sindhu, Saina Nehwal, Satwiksairaj Rankireddy, Chirag Shetty, Lakshya Sen and HS Prannoy, a formidable lineup of young players has stepped into the spotlight — Ayush Shetty, Unnati Hooda, Tanvi Sharma, Tanvi Patri, Gayatri Gopichand, Tasnim Mir. The list goes on.

From the BWF world ranking events to the Badminton Association of India (BAI)-affiliated championships, the young guns are proving their worth. In recent years, the likes of Anupama Upadhyaya, Annmol Kharb, Abhinav Garg and many others have shown that nothing is impossible if one trains and takes advantage of the facilities and exposure on offer.

"There are various factors behind the success of Indian badminton. The key, perhaps, is the popularity of the sport in recent years. The senior players achieved some rare feats, from winning medals in the Olympics to attaining top world rankings, which propelled the young generation to dream big," says Surinder Mahajan, one of the joint secretaries, BAI.

Also, he adds, "a number of academies opened across India and with the Khelo India schemes and facilities offered by the BAI, coaching has become quite active. From conducting crash courses for coaching to training young shuttlers, Indian badminton has witnessed a massive change, as observed by Gopichand".

The rise of various professional residential academies has also helped the sport gain popularity, be it the Pullela Gopichand Badminton Academy in Hyderabad, Prakash Padukone Badminton Academy in Bengaluru or the Centre of Excellence, Suchitra Badminton Academy in Hyderabad, and the academies at the state level run by associations.

Recently, Tanvi Sharma (17), who defeated Vietnam's sixth-seeded Thuy Linh Nguyen to become the youngest player to win the Taipei Open Super 300 badminton tournament, was in Zirakpur and explained how the ecosystem matters. "Coming from Hoshiarpur, I had never imagined going this far, and now I have a different aim. I won't stop, I'm hungry for more," she told *The Tribune*.

"Over the years, Indian badminton has witnessed a major change — including the level of coaching, and even while training, we are asked to focus on our game, not the opponent's achievements. I have witnessed a massive shift in training methods as I moved out of my hometown, then at the state level, and the international level. Against Thuy, I was just doing what I learned during training. I knew she was more experienced, but I have my own



A little over a year into senior badminton, Ayush Shetty stunned the World No. 1. ANI



Unnati Hooda from Rohtak (left) and Tanvi Sharma from Hoshiarpur are the emerging stars. PTI

confidence level," the young star said.

Ayush Shetty (21) has emerged as another example of Indian badminton's transition phase. In April, he was overpowered by top-ranked Shi Yu Qi of China in just 41 minutes during the Asia Championships. However, within four months, Ayush overpowered the top seed and defending BWF World Championships title holder 21-14 13-21 21-19. Ayush eventually lost in the Round of 16 in the World Championships.

Ayush is the youngest Indian male to win a medal at the Asian Championships and captured his breakthrough BWF World Tour title at the US Open.

Unnati Hooda, the 18-year-old who lost in the second round of the ongoing BWF World

Championships in New Delhi, credits her remarkable journey to her father Upkar Hooda. He quit his job to travel with his daughter and support her. From Rohtak in Haryana, Unnati was just 14 when she became the youngest Indian to win a BWF Super 100 title (Odisha Open).

A NEW APPROACH

"India has a lot of talent, and the budding players need to have patience to achieve new heights," says Meena Sharma, Tanvi's mother. "The BAI is supporting the young players in a planned manner, and most importantly, the young shuttlers are getting a chance to participate in several tournaments and get the much-needed

exposure to excel in future."

Rahul, a junior coach, reflects on the changing coaching methodology: "Along with training the young kids, the coaches themselves are being trained. A sport cannot grow if the overall focus is not planned. From infrastructure to training modules, India is slowly but strongly moving ahead in the international circuit."

As per the BAI, a grassroots level camp to train coaches is attended on an average by nearly 240 to 260 individuals, showcasing a significant development in coaching — with the sole target to train kids to be the stars of the future. In 2022, the BAI decided to appoint 30 coaches on its payroll and start a national champi-

onship for the Under-11 age group, keeping the 2028 Olympics in mind.

Last year, the BAI, in association with REC Limited and the Sports Authority of India (SAI), conducted the first-ever BWF Level 1 Course for coaches, along with BAI Level 1 (Advanced) Course at multiple venues.

On the tournament front, the BAI annually conducts the Senior National, Junior (U-19), and Sub-Junior (U-15, U-17) National Championships; All India Ranking Tournaments (U-13, U-15, U-17, U-19, and Seniors), alongside state meets conducted by their 33 affiliated state associations. This gives an edge to players to get a good amount of tournament exposure.

RETURN TO INDIA

■ Backed by the Badminton World Federation (BWF), India is hosting the World Championships for the second time after the event was first held at Hyderabad in 2009. India has won 15 medals in the tournament's history, including one gold, four silver, and 10 bronze medals.

■ India's first medal in this tournament was won by Prakash Padukone in 1983. The country's only gold medal at the BWF World Championships was won by PV Sindhu in 2019.

STAR PERFORMANCES

■ Tanvi Sharma won the Taipei Open Super 300 title this month to become the youngest ever champion in the tournament's history and the second Indian woman to win it after Saina Nehwal in 2008.

■ Ayush Shetty recorded a major upset at the ongoing Badminton World Championships by beating defending champion and world number one Shi Yu Qi of China in the men's singles first round.

■ Rounak Chouhan and Shriyanshi Valishetti won the men's and women's singles badminton titles, respectively, at the India Junior International Series 2025.

Allowing lawyers to represent policyholders before Insurance Ombudsman undermines the very purpose of the scheme

Ombudsman scheme must not go the consumer court way

PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

TWO separate requests by policyholders for engaging lawyers before the Insurance Ombudsman have now opened the doors of this informal, alternative disputes redressal mechanism in the insurance sector to legal practitioners. The development does not augur well for the Ombudsman scheme, meant to provide a simple, free and expeditious resolution of consumer disputes.

Under the Insurance Ombudsman Rules, the Ombudsman first tries to bring about a settlement through conciliation and mediation and makes a recommendation. If that process fails (or if the recommendation is not acceptable to the consumer), he passes an award based on the evidence brought on record.

The Division Benches of the Telangana and Karnataka High Courts have held that once the Ombudsman travels beyond the mediation stage and enters the realm of adjudication, the character of the proceedings assumes a quasi-judicial complexion. Denying legal assistance during this stage would be contrary to the principles of natural justice. Also, at this stage, an advocate, as a matter of right, is entitled to practice before the Ombudsman, the courts have

held. In other words, while during the mediation stage, lawyers cannot intervene, they can do so during the next stage when the Ombudsman passes an award.

The issue first came up some years ago, when N Vijaya Laxmi went before the Division Bench of the Telangana High Court challenging the Ombudsman's refusal to allow her to take her lawyer. Her contention was that being an illiterate person, she needed an advocate to present her case against the insurance company's repudiation of her husband's insurance policy, following his death.

The Ombudsman, in response, pointed out that he acts as a counsellor and mediator and tries to resolve the dispute amicably, in an informal manner. And there was no role for a lawyer there. Nor did the Ombudsman Rules permit it. Besides, the Ombudsmen are not vested with any judicial powers, nor do they have legal knowledge. Moreover, it was not a tribunal where advocates could appear.

The court, in its order of 2023, however, disagreed. It pointed out that if mediation fails, the Ombudsman becomes an arbitrator, and is mandated to pass an award based on the evidence brought on record. "If this be the position, Section 30 of the Advocates Act, 1961, would come into play... an advocate as a matter of right is



Once the proceedings become lawyer driven, there is a risk of the process acquiring the characteristics of a court, and that does not augur well for the Ombudsman scheme. ISTOCK

entitled to practice before any tribunal or any person legally authorised to take evidence," the court held.

The very next year, in 2024, MV Narasimha Prasad filed a petition before the Karnataka High Court on similar grounds. Directing the Ombudsman to allow legal representation, the High Court, in its order of 2026, said: "A policyholder may not necessarily be a person well-versed in law or procedure; he may be an illiterate

villager, a widow who is a homemaker with no independent exposure to legal or technical matters, or a lay consumer unfamiliar with the nuances of insurance contracts and medical documentation. To expect such a claimant to effectively present his or her case involving interpretation of policy terms, exclusions, medical records and causation, without the aid of professional assistance, would be wholly unrealistic and would, in effect, amount to denial of meaningful opportunity of hearing."

This was challenged by the Ombudsman before the Division Bench of the Karnataka High Court, which dismissed it last month.

Certainly, an illiterate villager or a widow with no exposure to insurance policies will need assistance. The solution lies in creating helplines for such people and not in hiring legal representatives because lawyers cost money and how many policyholders can afford one? Besides, today insurers are sending their officials, not lawyers. When consumers start hiring advocates, they will also follow suit.

Once the proceedings become lawyer driven, there is a real risk of the entire process gradually acquiring the characteristics of a court, undermining the very purpose for which the Ombudsman scheme was created.

In fact, some of the biggest casualties of

lawyers appearing before the consumer courts constituted under the Consumer Protection Act have been speed, simplicity and cost-effectiveness. That's because lawyers invariably bring with them all the trappings of the civil court, such as frequent adjournments and procedural complexity. Several studies on the working of the consumer courts have pointed to this.

The Ombudsman scheme should, therefore, not be allowed to go the consumer court way. Particularly now, when the government has proposed extensive amendments to the Rules to make the scheme far more efficient and effective.

Besides higher compensation to consumers, the draft amendments also provide for penalties on insurers for any undue hardship caused to the complainant on account of their unjust or arbitrary action. The government has also proposed one Ombudsman for each state and UT. There are only 18 Ombudsmen at present.

Hence, it is extremely important for the government to tweak the proposed amendments to prevent lawyers from appearing before the Ombudsman. At the same time, the Council for Insurance Ombudsman should provide assistance to policyholders who may need help in going before the Ombudsman.

— *The writer is a consumer affairs expert*

Where have all the children gone? Sikkim confronts a fertility crisis

With India's lowest fertility rate, emptying schools and an ageing population, the Himalayan state is looking beyond baby bonuses and IVF to treat falling fertility as a quality-of-life issue, not just a medical one

BABY STEPS

- Salary increment for govt employees for each additional child
- Longer parental leave; 365 days for women govt employees and 30 for men
- Vatsalya IVF scheme provides childless couples up to ₹3 lakh for two cycles of treatment
- Mero Rukh Mero Santati plants 108 saplings for every newborn
- Eligible children get ₹10,800 in an interest bearing deposit at 18 under Sikkim Shishu Samridhhi Yojana
- Aama Sashaktikaran Yojana for eligible unemployed, unmarried, widowed, divorced or separated mothers aged 18-59 that provides ₹20,000 annually



THE NEXT PUSH

- ART centre for IVF, IUI and related services slated to open in Gangtok this year
- A national study by ICMR-NIRRH with IIHMR is examining the drivers of Sikkim's fertility decline
- A population-care cell to bring health, education, financial support and other population policies under one dept
- Sikkim Demographic Observatory to track district-wise TFR, age at marriage, infertility, migration and marriage trends
- Planning for an ageing Sikkim through geriatric-care training and collective living spaces



NEW ROOTS: Tshering Choden and her two-yr-old son check on the saplings celebrating his birth

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At 13,200 feet in East Sikkim, Thegu Primary School has eight classrooms, a sprawling playing field and, at the moment, two students. But the only classroom open is pre-primary, where Lhakpa Tshering Sherpa and Gelchen Sherpa are learning their ABCs amid plastic slides and comic-book posters. Beyond the door is the strange luxury of an entire school, built up to Class V, to themselves. There are, in fact, more teachers than students. Three teachers still come for the two boys, including Dima Lamu Bhutia, who travels 15 km from Kupup every day.

It was once a busy village school. Bhutia, who has taught here since 2013, remembers keeping two registers for a single class of about 50. By 2019, Thegu and its surrounding settlements could muster only about 17 students. "People here now want a good life for themselves, so they marry late and say, 'What's the point of having many children?'" says Bhutia.

Thegu PS is among 17 primary schools proposed for closure in Sikkim this year because of low enrolment. Last year, 38 were shut. Education secretary Tashi Chopel links the falling numbers to the state's total fertility rate (TFR), currently the lowest in India. "Our TFR fell from 1.1 in 2019 to 1.0 in 2023. In these four years, enrolment also dropped by about 20,000 children, which is a huge number for Sikkim," he says. Some state- and district-level estimates now put it even lower at 0.8, closer to some of the world's lowest-fertility societies, such as Seoul (0.6). TFR is the average number of children that a woman is expected to have in her lifetime. In the 2000s, India's TFR was around 3.3 births per woman. It has fallen to 1.9.

A few kilometres downhill, there are signs of new life. Tshering Choden has brought her two-year-old son, Kunzang, to Pangthang's forest block, to check on some other two-year-olds: cherry, gurash, chandan and chap saplings. Kunzang is roughly two feet tall now. Some of the trees are too.

They are part of 'Mero Rukh Mero Santati', or 'My Tree, My Child', a govt initiative that gives parents 108 trees to celebrate the birth of a child. Once planted and geo-tagged, eligible newborns from lower-income families get Rs 10,800 in an interest-bearing fixed deposit, locked until 18.

For Choden, 45, an Anganwadi worker who has watched the number of children around her shrink, Kunzang is her third. "Most have one baby or none. Now, some of us are having a second or third," she says. The trees and deposit contribute something to that decision. "We look after those trees just as we look after a child and nurture them."

Kunzang is among 11,663 newborns registered since the scheme began in 2023. The idea fits easily in a state with strong ties to nature, says Gangtok divisional forest officer Kshitij Saxena. "And 108 carries spiritual significance, so the adoption comes naturally." The trees can become a livelihood too. "A father once told me he'd have another baby so he could plant 108 more avocado trees!"

Jigme Lepcha chose sheesham for his younger child. The education department officer's parents grew up with six siblings and he with three, yet he and his wife hadn't planned for more than one child. Then the state offered govt employees an additional increment for a second. "That definitely made us think."

Their second child is now 20 months



ROLL CALL: With two students and three teachers, Thegu PS is among 17 primary schools in Sikkim proposed for closure this year as enrolments fall

old. "The increment, about 3% of basic pay, means Rs 6,000-7,000 more a month. For a govt employee, it is a big amount," says Lepcha. Another increment comes with a third. "I'm actually thinking of having a third too." In Sikkim, where roughly one in seven works for the govt, that possibility enters many households.

But even as the state tries to coax new life, Lepcha's calculations show how much more goes into the decision. "We want our children to go to private school, which is expensive. So is childcare when both parents work. These incentives help ease the choice."

WHEN CLOCKS COLLIDE

Some men and women have other plans for their twenties, and marriage and children now have to fit costs, timing, and the life they're building.

Sonam, 26, from Rinchenpong, has finished her Master's, is preparing for the state competitive exams, and isn't convinced she wants to marry at all. "I want to be independent, work... be in my own company," she says. If she does, she imagines marrying "around 34", after she has had time to "explore a bit". A child would also depend on "the man I marry".

That sentiment keeps surfacing in the state's consultations with young women. Rohini Pradhan, special secretary-cum-programme director of Sikkim INSPIRES (Integrated Service Provision and Innovation for Reviving Economies) under the state's planning and development department, tackling Sikkim's critically low TFR, calls it a "biological and intellectual tension". The years women are most fertile increasingly collide with those spent studying and becoming financially

secure. "Take any field, even civil services, women are doing better than men," she says. "But when you are doing well in life, some roles get compromised."

Fertility specialist Dr Bandana Pradhan, who started Sikkim's first IVF clinic in Gangtok, says delayed marriage is one of the clearest patterns among her patients. "Women are highly empowered, but biology hasn't changed," she says.

Dawa Lhamu Sherpa from Namchi is an example of that awkward time loop. She spent 12 years working in Delhi as her family's sole earner, supporting her mother, brother and his children, and eventually building the family home. "Only after that did I come back and start thinking about myself," she says.

She married at 42. After three years of

trying to conceive naturally, Dawa turned to IVF at 45. The second cycle worked and last Nov, she gave birth to twin girls. Assistance under the state's Vatsalya scheme made the treatment possible. Without it, her husband, Tek Bahadur Chhetri, says, "I would have had to take a loan, borrow, or even let go of the plan to have kids."

OTHER PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

Age, though, is only one part. Dr Pradhan sees women in their twenties with badly damaged fallopian tubes, sometimes from infections following poorly managed abortions. "Infertility doesn't suddenly appear one day," she says. "Young women may take abortion pills themselves and skip the scan or follow-up; retained tissue can cause chronic infection, with the damage surfacing years later as infertility."

Rohini says the state is seeing the problem further upstream. "Young women afraid to approach a doctor sometimes try to manage abortions themselves with MTP kits bought from pharmacies." The govt is now strengthening sexual and reproductive health education in schools. "It's all a chain of interconnected consequences," she says.

Before Dr Pradhan started Sikkim's first IVF clinic, patients routinely travelled to Guwahati or Siliguri partly for anonymity. "Infertility carried the assumption that the woman had failed and faced the possibility of divorce or husband threatening to remarry because of childlessness." She remembers one who, unable to conceive, persuaded her husband to marry again. "The second wife eventually ran away with another man, and she arrived at my clinic. IVF worked." Awareness that infertility is a couple's issue has improved now, she says. "And I've made it compulsory for both to get checked."

WHO WILL RAISE THE CHILD?

And then there is the husband. "A lot of men still have to step up," says Pamin Lepcha, 44, who sees it up close as MLA for the constituency that includes Thegu. Women considering marriage and children "want to know whether they have backup. If they feel they lack support, they refuse to put themselves in that situation."

The same concern has surfaced in the state's consultations. "Women feel their partners have failed to rise to the occasion and share responsibilities," says Rohini. So, policymakers keep returning to her question: "How can we make the choice easier for her?" It is at the heart of what she calls Sikkim's "whole-of-govt approach", which is now looking beyond medicine and baby bonuses to how people live and make choices. "We can't tackle TFR from a purely medical or clinical perspective," she says. "Women's lives have changed, and policy has to change with them."

TOI INTERVIEW

'What Sikkim is seeing today, other Indian states may also have to prepare for'

Falling school enrolments rang the first warning bell for Sikkim CM Prem Singh Tamang. He tells TOI how that led to a 'whole-of-govt' approach to fertility, spanning the happiness index, childcare, migration and the future of its small communities



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Sikkim's fertility rate has been falling for over two decades. When did it become a state priority?

I first noticed enrolment falling, especially in pre-primary and primary schools. When we looked into it, we found our TFR was declining and began asking why people were having fewer children. We started by offering govt employees an additional increment for a second child, and two for a third. Then we looked at what else gets in the way. Parents need time to care for children, so we increased maternity and paternity leave. Some couples need fertility treatment, so IVF assistance went up from Rs 1 lakh to Rs 3 lakh, and there have been many successful cases. Now, we are planning an incentive for people to marry and have babies early because not only in Sikkim but everywhere, people wait till they are 35-40 to settle. We're working out what the conditions for the incentive should be. This is a serious matter for the govt, and we are trying our level best.

And when you think 20 years ahead, if fertility continues to decline like this, what worries you most?

What worries me is the workforce and the next generation. People are ageing and will retire. If fertility keeps declining, where will our manpower come from? An outsider cannot take a govt job; you need to have a Sikkim domicile. You can already see the warning signs in schools, where some have five teachers and one student, or seven teachers and three students. Our fertility rate has to increase. I don't mean enormously, but at least it should come back to an average level.

It's ironic that one of the world's most populous countries now has a state grappling with the opposite challenge, with a TFR estimated at as low as 0.8, comparable to some of the world's lowest. Has this paradox been discussed with the Union govt?

Yes, it's being discussed with the centre, and we are getting support. When Sikkim became the first in the country to introduce incentives to increase fertility, people criticised us, saying, "Oh, Sikkim is a state where you produce a child and then take money." But what Sikkim is seeing today is something other Indian states may also have to prepare for. Other states are beginning to face the same problem. Certain institutions are advocating larger families, and Andhra Pradesh has announced incentives for having more than one baby. It is becoming a national problem.

The govt has introduced several measures to make it easier for people to have children. But there are limits to what policy can achieve because parenthood is ultimately a personal choice. How are you addressing Sikkim's fertility challenge as a quality-of-life issue?

Quality of life comes down to opportunities. If people can work and build their lives here, they will stay. The govt's job is to create that environment through good education, healthcare, infrastructure and opportunities to earn. We can't feed people with our own hands, but we can make those things available. And opportunities need not mean govt jobs. If someone wants to sing or dance, you can't tell them to take up a govt job. When we came to power in 2019, Sikkim had about nine dance and music academies; today we support around 60, besides individual artists and self-help groups. Healthcare has expanded too. Kidney patients who once had to travel outside Sikkim for dialysis can now get it in every district hospital, and we are starting kidney transplants here.

If people have the facilities and opportunities to live well here, they will stay.

Beyond incentives and facilities, how do you make Sikkim a place where young people feel confident about balancing work, aspirations and raising children?

I often talk about the Happiness Index. We're number two in the Northeast and, I think, around fifth nationally because it's not only about earning; people also need the flexibility to pursue what they want in life. We were the first state to introduce sabbatical leave for govt employees, allowing six months to three years off at 50% basic pay to start a business, study, go abroad or pursue a personal goal. It can help people with planning and raising a family, too. After a year of maternity and childcare leave, you can take up to three years' sabbatical without affecting seniority or promotion. So that gives you almost four years. By then, the child has grown up. The idea is to give people that flexibility.

Also, Sikkim is made up of many small indigenous communities. Is there a concern that with falling TFR, these communities, their languages and cultural traditions could disappear?

Sikkim has many small communities, each with its own language and traditions. With



AGAINST THE CLOCK: Dawa Sherpa with her IVF-born twins, conceived at 45 with support from state's Vatsalya scheme

more people marrying across communities and children speaking a different tongue, preserving these becomes important. We are appointing language teachers in schools and publishing books in languages that didn't exist earlier. We have also established an Indigenous Language Development Board. Govt notifications, once only in English, are now issued in these languages too. We are also trying to preserve traditional dress and celebrate each community's festivals. We've made it compulsory to wear traditional dress every Thursday. This year, we started something in the Assembly too. During the budget session, every MLA wore the Lepcha dumpyra on the first day, the Bhutia bakhu the next, and the Nepali daura surawal on the third, irrespective of their own community. Our languages and traditions have to survive.

Apart from increasing births, how is Sikkim preparing for an ageing population?

In Sikkim, our tradition has been to keep our parents at home and look after them, and we want to preserve that. We have enhanced old-age pensions and are expanding healthcare at the gram panchayat level. In 2023, we introduced the Rs 1 lakh Shrivani Kumar Award to encourage families to care for elderly parents, and last year brought senior citizens under the women and child development department so their needs are addressed more closely.

Why gig economy is going grey

A growing workforce in their late 50s and 60s has turned to jobs like cab driving and delivering groceries because they cannot afford to retire

Himanshi.Dhawani@timesofindia.com

In March, as Abdul Afsar drove his cab through Hyderabad, he felt an uneasiness in his chest. Sweating and panicking, he dropped the passenger off, then pulled over and called friends and the app helpline. "I found out later that it was a heart attack. My friends rushed me to hospital, and I got treated in time. But the only question customer care asked me was if the passenger had been dropped off safely," he says. The line went dead when he assured them he had.

Afsar took three months off before returning to driving. At 59, when many enter retired life, he starts his day at 4am and logs 15 hours of work. "I have no choice. My monthly expenses go up to nearly Rs 45,000, and I am the only earning member," he says.

Afsar's plight has become increasingly common, say labour rights activists. Across India's cities, a growing number of workers in their late fifties and sixties with little social security or savings are strapping on delivery bags and logging on ride-hailing apps, not as a side hustle but as their only source of income. Labour experts say policy has largely failed to account for this ageing gig workforce.

Shaikh Salauddeen, national general secretary of the Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT), says: "We are seeing an increasing number of workers in the 55-60 age group and even beyond, in gig and platform work. This is not a sign of a healthy employment system, but economic insecurity and the absence of adequate social protection."

AGED OUT

Fifty-six-year-old Madhavi Bhatia (name changed), an app-based beautician in Mumbai, is separated from her husband and pays for her children's education. "I had borrowed Rs 5 lakh from a private lender for my daughter's marriage. Till I can repay that, I have to stay on the app," she says. She lives with her sister's family to keep costs low. "My sister also helps me with school fees. But how can I expect more from her?"

People as old as 54-55 find themselves jobless, and are forced to compete with young people for incentives and targets

Nirmal Gorana, GIG WORKERS' UNION

Afsar was a warehouse logistics in-charge at a cement company when he was fired at 45. "Everywhere I applied, I was told I was too old," he says.

Nirmal Gorana, national coordinator of the Gig and Platform Service Workers Union, says demonetisation and the Covid pandemic pushed many older workers out of existing jobs. "After the pandemic, many workers had to face attrition from the formal sector: People as old as 54-55 suddenly found themselves jobless. They have now been forced to take up jobs like gig work, competing with young people for incentives and targets," he adds.

Ajay Maity, 53, was sacked from his job as a messenger with a public sector oil company in 2020 after nearly 20 years. "I was 47 years old then. My son was still studying, and I had put all my savings into constructing a home in Midnapore, West Bengal. Everything changed overnight," he says.

From earning Rs 28,000 a month in an office job, he now puts in 15-hour days,



ON THE CLOCK: Afsar and Maity (left), laid off from their formal jobs, now rely on app-based work in their 50s to make ends meet

weaving his bike between delivery points across south Delhi. "I tried to look for office work, even started my own business, but nothing worked out. Now I work as a delivery agent for a 10-minute delivery app."

The narrow lane leading to the warehouse is crowded with e-bikes whizzing in and out. The air smells of detergent and stale vegetables. Amid the scruffiness, Maity takes pains to maintain a

neat appearance in his company-embellished T-shirt.

He stays active on the app till he completes his target of Rs 1,800 a day. "Whether I finish at 10pm or midnight is irrelevant," he adds. He has since shifted his family to Midnapore to cut costs. But when his wife needed surgery a couple of months ago, he had to borrow Rs 2 lakh from a former colleague.

PAST THE SAFETY NET

Last year, the govt introduced social security provisions for gig workers, who

DECCAN Chronicle

23 AUGUST 2026



Ranjona Banerji

Off the beaten track

Hear this! Vinyl is back, and music is cool again!

I signed up for an experience last week, which both surprised me and outdid my expectations in itself, but also in the reactions I got from other people. I fully expected to be laughed at and mocked or chastised. Instead, those I described my experience to, reacted with wonder.

I attended a “listening room” event. An independent coffee roastery in Dehradun, run by a group of young people (this means anyone younger than me), which caters to people interested in music. It was a planned evening, with food done by a local well-known chef and was not cheap.

But it was mind-blowing, even if it was simple.

The band chosen for the event was Pink Floyd, with some explanations from the organisers as we went through the band’s music, played on vinyl on a great sound system. The room was small, enclosed and soundproofed. The equipment was great quality. Basically, you listened to the music in a dark space, bar some visual effects. It was, to use that much cliched word, “immersive”. Each listening session spread over the evening was between 30 and 45 minutes, with short 15-minute breaks in between. No phones, no distractions, just music.

Because it sounds a little poncey or at least fussy and stylised when you first hear of it, I was prepared after the event to be exorciated by my friends. These were the arguments I had worked out: you could have sat at home and listened to music, we used to take records to friends’ homes and listen together (only one person said this), you wasted your money on something very simple and so on.

I had my defences ready, which turned out to be unnecessary. Because 99 per cent of the people I spoke to were fascinated. All of them were my age and older. And they all wanted to be part of such an experience.

It raised a few questions about what interests us and the life we lead, most of all our inability to disconnect from distractions, particularly the need for constant communication and short bursts of entertainment. The experience of a listening room is not the same as watching a film in a theatre, although similar. There is not story, no dialogue, no thrills and no food. It is just listening. It is a solitary experience enjoyed with other people.

Now don’t imagine I’m going to walk down the road to spiritual enlightenment and self-knowledge: I am not that kind of a person. But it is an all-encompassing experience, with subliminal elements. You want to listen, because you have chosen to and have to listen, because of the circumstances. Nuances of music easily lost in the hurly-burly of the outside world are clearer now. There is also the undeniable romance of nostalgia for those old enough. The scratch of the needle on the vinyl and the reality of vinyl recordings — sounds smoothed out by digitisation are now alive. I must make clear this is not an age thing — 40 per cent of my fellow listeners were much younger than the old brigade. There is also the pleasure of meeting people who love music, or your kind of music or any kind of music. And here, nothing matters except that common interest. It has taken me many years to confront my fears of being thrust into a group of strangers. And for the most part, it’s been a liberating experience.

Listening rooms are neither new nor unique. They appeared in 1920s Japan, with a suitably expressing Japanese name: onigaku kissa or kissaten, a music café or coffee house. These came up a century ago, when live music was banned in Japan, to listen to classical music and jazz. Perhaps the only constant that remains is vinyl and in our local listening room, a preference for jazz.

I would do it again in a heartbeat and I still want to understand why. Why for myself, and why for most people I spoke to. Is it the lack of forced social interaction? Is it the reclaiming of pleasurable isolation in a distracted and distracting world? Is it the rediscovery of sound in the midst of cacophony? Is it the thrill of surrender to your senses? This is not after all one of those pseudo spiritual experiences — forest-bathing or playing whale songs or whatever. Nor is it comparable to the simple pleasure — increasingly a privilege — of listening to birdsong early in the morning. There’s an odd forced element to it, which despite the classroom rules, actually enhances the experience.

The choice of music itself did not really matter, enjoyable though it was. Pink Floyd demands a lot from the listener, it is disturbing in music and lyrics and conception. To listen to it together is also an art and a challenge, you have to be like-minded in a sense and prepared for what is ahead of you.

But frankly any music would have a similar effect. It is the method which creates the enjoyment. We have lost the art of the “long form”. For those who remember the days of record players or even cassette players, it was very cumbersome to skip from song to song. Stop, lift the needle, go to the next song or stop, fast forward and so on. All manual, no remotes in those days. You just listened to the whole thing. Each album designed and planned that way as well, by the artistes and possibly in some cases, the studios. So listening was, by default if not design, an “immersive” experience. One you put the record on, you were committed.

Today’s convenience has its benefits. But it has reduced listening to shuffle play and an algorithm’s reading of your patterns. You no longer go on the same journey of discovery.

What is even more welcome is that you go back to the past, using older methods, but in a new interpretation provided by the young. It underlines once more that beauty is there to be appreciated by all of us and perhaps, we underestimate the importance of fresh eyes on something we thought we knew so well.

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

Subhani



Mecca, Pakistan and a quagmire of alliances



Manish Tewari

State of the Union

As officials from Ankara, Riyadh and Islamabad extol the virtues of a new tri-partite axis — the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement — one could perhaps be forgiven for a profound sense of déjà vu. The pact is a fresh chapter in a long, and largely ironic, chronicle of Pakistan’s strategic forays into West Asia.

It is eerily reminiscent of the Cold War’s most flawed constructs. It is born not of an organic confluence of national interests but of a shared, albeit differently perceived, sense of vulnerability.

Saudis seek deterrence against a revisionist Iran and a restless Houthi insurgency. Türkiye, ever pursuing its neo-Ottoman ambitions, seeks to deepen its foothold in the Gulf. Pakistan, perennially cash-strapped and strategically isolated, seeks the lifeblood of Gulf petrodollars and a renewed sense of relevance on the world stage. Yet, this transactional foundation is precisely what doomed its earlier ventures.

Pakistan, for all its fascination with West Asia, remains fundamentally divorced from the region’s core power dynamics. It has traditionally served not as a net security provider, but as a launchpad for Western strategic projects.

In February 1955, the Turco-Iraqi Baghdad Pact created the Middle East Treaty Organisation (Meto). It was preceded by a Turko-Pakistan defence agreement in 1954, signed between Pakistan’s foreign minister Md Zafarullah Khan and Turkish Ambassador Selahattin Refet Arbel. This arrangement, emanating from the overlapping interests of the UK, the US, and Hashemite Iraq, was designed to complete a “Northern Tier” of containment stretching from Turkey to Pakistan. Subsequently the UK in April, Pakistan in September and Iran in November, joined Meto. Iran’s accession completed the “Northern Belt” along the Turkey-Iraq-Iran-Pakistan line.

After the July Revolution in Iraq in 1958, when the government led by Abd al-Karim Qasim withdrew from the pact, Meto was renamed Central Treaty Organisation (Cento).

The same strategic mirage reappeared in Southeast Asia. After the French defeat in Indochina in 1954, Washington was keen to deter and contain communism in the region. In September 1954, representatives of eight governments, including Pakistan, met at Manila and formed South East Asia Treaty Organisation (Seato). Pakistan has no connection with South East Asia except that it was a United States Cold War lackey.

The alliances, for Pakistan, were a means to an end, the end being a stronger hand against New Delhi, thereby negating its very raison d’être for the Western powers who underwrote it. Ayub Khan of Pakistan, himself an early architect of the US-Pakistan relationship, told The Daily Telegraph in London in January 1962 that Pakistan was losing faith in Cento and Seato. These alliances did not serve any collective security arrangement in the wars of 1965 and 1971. The ultimate humiliation was the 1971 dismemberment of Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh. Pakistan withdrew from Seato in 1973, and Cento was disbanded in 1979, collapsing under the weight of its own irrelevance.

The same pattern appears to repeat with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Pakistan has been a key part of its militarisation and has used it multiple times to try and internationalise the Kashmir issue, but the OIC has never been inherently suited for a workable strategic alliance, given its multiple internal divisions amongst Islamic states. The second summit in 1974 was held in Pakistan, at a time when Pakistan still did not recognise Bangladesh. Under pressure from other nations, Pakistan was compelled to invite a delegation from

Pakistan, perennially cash-strapped and strategically isolated, seeks the lifeblood of Gulf petrodollars and a renewed sense of relevance. Yet, this transactional foundation is precisely what doomed its earlier ventures.

Bangladesh, and it was at this very summit that Pakistan came to recognise the nation. The OIC may offer diplomatic theatre, not strategic substance.

Likewise, the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD), set up in July 1964 by the regional members of Cento (Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan) was intended to strengthen socio-economic development. But financial, political, and administrative difficulties made progress slow. Its political significance grew steadily even as Cento’s declined. Recognising that RCD could not provide an effective military substitute, Iran and Turkey still attached value to Cento. After 12 unsatisfactory years, the three regional heads of state held a summit in Izmir in April 1976, making amendments to the 1964 declaration. The Treaty of Izmir was signed in 1977 as the legal framework for RCD. Yet RCD was unsuccessful, and had to give way to the Economic Cooperation Organisation in 1985.

Exhumation of the ghosts of Cento and Seato renders the 2025 Saudi-Pakistan mutual defence pact deeply instructive. Touted as extending a Pakistani nuclear umbrella to Riyadh, the agreement did little to deter Houthi missile attacks on Saudi soil. It was conspicuously impotent when Iranian missiles struck the Prince Sultan airbase and Riyadh airport, and when the Aramco refinery at Ras Tanura was hit in early 2026. It was only in late April 2026 that Islamabad dispatched 13,000 troops and fighter jets to the Kingdom. Ultimately, Riyadh was compelled to take matters into its own hands, forming the Multi-national Maritime Defense Coalition (MMDC) with thirteen other nations, including Pakistan, to defend the Red Sea. The Mecca Agreement, too, is not free from internal discords.

The Arab Spring initially saw them aligned against Bashar al-Assad in Syria, with both nations financing various anti-Assad factions. However, Turkey also demonstrated support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which Saudi Arabia opposed, creating an uneasy sentiment in Riyadh. In 2013, when the Egyptian coup broke out and Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood member and then-President of Egypt, was forcibly removed by pro-Saudi Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Turkey condemned the move.

In 2017, the two nations were at odds over the Qatar diplomatic crisis, with Turkey supporting Qatar against Saudi Arabia. The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul only made matters worse. The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh saw Ankara and Riyadh trading accusations of destabilizing the region.

Beneath this volatile history lies the unspoken reality of Turkish neo-Ottoman ambitions, which directly threaten the traditional leadership role of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Ankara’s efforts to rebuild military and economic beachheads along the eastern flank of the Arabian Peninsula, from Oman to Southern Iraq, are the building blocks of a revived sphere of influence that encircles and constrains Saudi power.

Pakistan, for its part, has stepped into this volatile dynamic, hoping to act as a bridge. But history suggests it will more likely be a wedge. It is a nation in search of patrons that seeks to extract resources from the relationship — financial assistance, investment, and diplomatic support — while contributing little in the way of genuine, deployable security.

The graveyard of Pakistan’s alliances is thus a place of recurring lessons: alliances forged with external powers for purposes alien to Rawalpindi, weakened by internal discord, and undermined by a fundamental mismatch of objectives.

There is also another informal understanding if not convergence in the South Asian-Mid-Eastern theatre between India, UAE and Israel. More on that at some other time.

Manish Tewari is a third-term Lok Sabha MP and former Union minister. @ManishTewari.

LETTERS

POLITICAL VENDETTA

The BJP-led NDA government has again displayed its attitude towards non-BJP governed states in denying permission to Telangana CM A Revanth Reddy to visit the USA. The reasons given are unacceptable and reveal the animosity. The statements of Narendra Modi and BJP leaders that they are most concerned about the youth goes for a toss as Revanth Reddy’s visit was to sign MoUs with top US universities. When economic offenders like Vijay Mallya and Nirav Modi can settle in foreign countries, the CM of an Indian state is denied permission to visit a country for the benefit of Indian students.

M.C. Vijay Shankar Chennai

STRANGE OFFER

The Karnataka CM’s offer to construct the Mekedatu dam across the Cauvery River as a balancing reservoir is incomprehensible. When Karnataka is not prepared to obey theorders of the Tribunal and Supreme Court on various pretexts and denying Tamil Nadu its share of Cauvery waters, it is fatuous to expect them to construct a dam, store water and release when Tamil Nadu needs it. His appeal to “help us help you” is only a play of words, lacking sincerity.

S.V. Venkatakrishnan Coimbatore

NEED COOL HEADS

Apropos article ‘Politics changed, Gen G must step up or go home’ by Ms. Shobhaa De. She should not have said that India is being run by exhausted geriatrics while asking GenZ to take over. She should know that governing a nation like India needs sobriety and not hot heads who will take impulsive decisions and create more problems. She may be reminded of how elderly Congress statesmen Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh had ruled, extricating the nation from an economic morass. While eulogising GenZ, she should advise them to abide by the constitution and rule of law and must contest in polls to get elected democratically rather than indulging in anarchist protests.

A.Seshagiri Rao Chennai

Mail your letters to chennaidesk@deccanmail.com

Bhopinder Singh



Our republic of perpetual manufactured outrage...

The recent optics of the Leader of the Opposition mocking the Prime Minister, with a few avoidable insinuations and inelegances thrown in for effect, were hardly edifying. What followed was equally revealing: a predictable eruption of ‘manufactured outrage’ from the ruling establishment and its ecosystem, complete with solemn pronouncements on dignity and democratic norms, as though political memory began only with the latest offending remark. The point is not to excuse the Opposition’s lapse; some things are simply better left unsaid. It is to note the extraordinary selectivity with which indignation is deployed. The long record of tasteless and personally disparaging remarks from the ruling side is conveniently forgotten, while the latest indiscretion by the other camp becomes a moral emergency. The outrage is less about standards than about ownership of the moral high ground.

Indian politics was always given to drama, noise and decibels. It was never, however, so comically given to self-righteousness. What has intensified in recent years is the theatrical, condescending and patronising showmanship accompanying political disagreement. Minor remarks, obscure social-media posts, and isolated incidents are routinely inflated into national crises, with politi-

cians, television anchors and partisan influencers competing to establish who is most offended.

Social media has turbocharged this process. A few carefully selected words are lifted from a speech, stripped of context and amplified until they become the story. The same selective memory governs partisan outrage — an equally foolish or offensive remark by one’s own side is rationalised or forgotten while the opponent’s latest utterance is dissected with theatrical indignation. Soon the substance disappears, replaced by the hapless spectacle of people performing personal offence. Context is always demanded for one’s own camp, and always denied to the other.

The media, rather than restoring proportion, has too often become the amplifier of this silly pathos. A press ecosystem that is partisan, timid, or beholden, has little incentive to puncture the performance as it profits from sustaining it. Every grievance becomes ‘Breaking News’, every stray remark a television panel, every manufactured sleight another round of indignation. The distinction between reporting outrage and manufacturing it has become increasingly blurred.

The contrast with an earlier generation is striking. Leaders who had participated in

the freedom struggle and the arduous business of nation-building, from Nehru and C. Rajagopalachari to Piloo Mody and Atal Behari Vajpayee, operated under very different ideologies and were hardly free of flaws. Yet there was a certain largeness of spirit — an ability to accommodate, engage with and sometimes even celebrate the “other”. Fierce disagreement did not automatically become an affront to patriotism or personal dignity. Even parliamentary adversaries such as Vajpayee, Indira Gandhi, Somnath Chatterjee and Sushma Swaraj could combine ideological combat with wit, civility and an appreciation of the opponent’s stature. That quality seems in short supply today.

The citizenry, too, has been conditioned to expect theatricality, particularly on “nationalism”, which increasingly shades into jingoism. Anything short of chest-thumping affirmation risks being treated as suspect. Nuance becomes equivocation, criticism disloyalty and scepticism “anti-national”. Patriotism, which should be capacious enough to accommodate dissent and self-criticism, is reduced to a performance in which volume counts for more than thought.

The result is what might be called soap-opera politics — declarations are exaggerated,

grievances personalised and political language calibrated for applause rather than persuasion. A politician attempting to make a mark through reason, restraint and prudence risks sounding almost out of place. The prevailing mood seems to beseech ‘manufactured offence’, i.e., to find something, anything, that can be turned into an affront requiring collective indignation. And if all else fails, there is always Pakistan. Invoke the enemy and, remarkably often, the machinery of patriotic outrage starts working again.

This has consequences beyond political decorum. The earlier governments of P.V. Narasimha Rao, I.K. Gujral, Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, despite their considerable differences and imperfections, drew more visibly on economists, administrators, technocrats and domain specialists. Rao had Manmohan Singh; Vajpayee had Jaswant Singh, Yashwant Sinha and Arun Shourie; Manmohan Singh’s Cabinets included P. Chidambaram, Pranab Mukherjee and Montek Singh Ahluwalia in influential roles. These were not interchangeable men, nor were they always right, but they brought intellectual heft, administrative experience and, crucially, a degree of independent political personality to government. Expertise never displaced politics, but

competence and independent ministerial talent had a discernible premium. Increasingly, across the partisan divide, that space appears narrower. In its place one often finds obsequiousness, non-threatening competence and tokenism. Expertise is welcome so long as it remains politically harmless, and independence surely becomes a liability.

That may be the deepest cost of ‘manufactured outrage’. When outrage becomes the currency, prudence looks weak, moderation evasive, complexity suspicious and intellectual honesty politically expensive. The Opposition supplies the provocation; the ruling establishment supplies the outrage; the media amplifies both. The ecosystem feeds itself.

Indian politics may always have been noisy, dramatic and fiercely partisan. But it once seemed more conscious that the argument was larger than the ego. The loss of that largeness of spirit is perhaps the most conspicuous feature of today’s political theatre in the Republic of Manufactured Outrage.

The writer is a retired lieutenant-general and a former lieutenant-governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry

EMPIRE OF THE MIND



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

NEET is more than an exam. It is a social contract

The constitution of the high-powered task force on examination reforms, led by Nandan Nilekani, comes at a time when public confidence in India’s examination system has been badly shaken. India has an opportunity to do something much larger than fix an examination. The immediate questions are familiar: paper leaks, examination security, technology, logistics, impersonation, and whether NEET should move from pen-and-paper to a computer-based format. All these questions matter. But they are not the most important. The Nilekani task force must examine something more fundamental: What should a national examination be designed to do?

NEET is not simply an examination. For millions of young Indians, it is a social contract. A student who spends two or three years preparing for NEET is not merely preparing to answer questions. Behind that preparation are parents who have saved, borrowed or sacrificed; teachers who have invested time; children who have postponed other choices; and families that see medicine as a pathway to social mobility. For many first-generation aspirants, NEET represents the

possibility that merit can overcome privilege. That is why a compromised examination does such extraordinary damage. What is lost is not merely a few marks. The connection between effort and reward is broken. Therefore, NEET reform must begin with the restoration of trust.

The first principle of reform should be trust by design. Every stage – from question paper creation to delivery, testing, scoring, and admissions – should be auditable. Every stakeholder should know where accountability lies. Candidates should have predictable rules for disruption, technical failure, grievance redress, and re-testing. The system should be designed so that no single failure can destroy an entire cohort’s future.

However, a second question deserves much greater attention: Does a federal country need one common examination for every institution? India is a Union of states. Education is in the concurrent list. Medical education requires national standards, but the institutions that educate our doctors belong to very different governance structures: central institutions, state institutions, private colleges, and deemed universities.

Yet we have gradually constructed an architecture in which one national examination has become the gateway to almost all undergraduate medical education.

Uniformity has obvious advantages. It creates a common benchmark, reduces the scope for arbitrary institutional selection, facilitates national mobility, and can curb some of the opacity and malpractice that historically accompanied multiple entrance examinations. But uniformity and centralisation are not the same thing. India could consider a different architecture: a National Examination Architecture, rather than a National Examination Monopoly.

The Government of India could conduct a national common entrance examination for central institutions and for institutions whose admissions are appropriately organised at the national level, including participating deemed universities. States, meanwhile, could have the option – subject to clearly defined national guardrails – to conduct their own common entrance examinations for government and private medical colleges within the state.

The principle would be simple: Common

standards and multiple trusted pathways. The Union would prescribe the guardrails: curriculum and competency standards, examination-security protocols, question-setting norms, psychometric standards, statistical equating where necessary, cybersecurity requirements, auditability, grievance redress, and penalties for malpractice. A state examination that meets those standards ought to be recognised as a valid pathway into the state’s medical institutions. This would not weaken national standards. It could strengthen them.

There is also a federal principle at stake. States should not be reduced to mere implementing agencies for a national education policy. They should have the institutional capacity to innovate, experiment, and take responsibility for outcomes within their jurisdiction. A state that believes it can administer a more trusted, equitable or context-sensitive examination should have the opportunity to demonstrate that capability.

The third principle should be to reduce the consequences of a single day. It is astonishing that the future of millions of young people can depend upon their performance during a few

hours on one particular day. The system should explore multiple testing windows, calibrated question banks, and robust statistical equating, allowing more than one opportunity without compromising comparability.

Finally, reform must ask whether we are testing what we actually value. If medicine requires reasoning, scientific understanding, interpretation, judgement, and the ability to apply knowledge to unfamiliar situations, then our assessment system should reward these capabilities rather than disproportionately rewarding memorisation under extreme time pressure. This matters even more in the age of artificial intelligence. AI is making information retrieval progressively cheaper. The value of human capability lies increasingly in reasoning, judgement, empathy, and the application of knowledge. Our examinations should begin preparing for that future.

The challenge is to make India’s examination architecture harder to distrust. The real question is whether young Indians can believe that effort, merit, and integrity still have a place in the republic.

THE DIGITAL ALARMIST

Limits of the colonised mind

In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, which first appeared in 1950, Aimé Césaire examines the psychological, sociological, and pseudo-civilisational underpinnings of the colonialist enterprise, whether in Africa, Latin America, or Asia. He exposes the hypocrisy and contradictions implicit in Western notions of ‘progress’ and ‘civilisation’ upon encountering the ‘savage’, the ‘primitive’, and the ‘uncultured’ – terms solely reserved for describing and denigrating non-Western, non-Christian societies. Western adventurers, with no moral or ethical compass but proudly professing to be Christian, went to great lengths to acquire the territories and resources of non-white populations and evangelise them.

Césaire’s insightful remark, ‘It is [equally] necessary to decolonise our minds, our inner life, at the same time we decolonise society’ is applicable, even more so today than in the previous three centuries, simply because the overlords of technology in Silicon Valley have completely colonised our minds without our being aware of it and, in the process, become fabulously rich and situated themselves in a position to dictate the fate of individuals and nation-states alike. People like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, having colonised our hearts and minds, are looking for fresh territories to conquer, in outer space and the unfathomed depths of the oceans, before China gets there first. In Mao Zedong’s time, political power may have grown out of the barrel of a gun, but today, power comes from a string of bits and bytes.

We have reached a point in society where face-to-face communication has been deliberately made impossible. Ordinary telephone communication between humans has been compromised through the introduction of automated voice agents at one end. In short, every act of human communication is now mediated by one digital artifice or another. If you recently purchased a product and are having problems with it, good luck getting a real, live human being at the company to intercede on your behalf. Automated agents cost little, but humans cost a lot.

Some twenty years ago, there was great concern among the populace that it could no longer discern what was real and what was fake when viewing information on the web. With the advent of agentic AI such as ChatGPT and Gemini, we have reached a moment where anything we read, see or hear can be AI-generated. Attempting to distinguish between fake and deepfake is now an exercise in pitiful semantic quibbling, to be attempted only by the brave.

We have all become so enamoured of AI that, in the process, we have closed our eyes to what is happening to our critical thinking skills. AI summaries have led us to avoid reading original documents in their entirety, even though the AI summary offered comes with a warning that what has been generated could contain errors. Ignoring the warning is akin to ignoring the fine print that accompanies every credit card application, investment opportunity or prescription/over-the-counter drug side effects. The onus is always on the customer, never the company offering the product. Caveat emptor.

Click advertising by Silicon Valley, whether on the web, smartphones or TV, has spread the FOMO (fear of missing out) syndrome, convincing the gullible that the latest AI-supplemented versions of their products are infinitely superior to whatever they currently own. The language of the coloniser has become the language of the colonised.

Google has been successful in stealing millions of books without any credible legal challenges and making them available on the web. The multilingual translation services provided by Silicon Valley, while definitely useful, are in no way foolproof, as we can never know if the translation is correct or if something has been lost in translation. The gratuitous summaries offered by AI of all text may please the many amongst us who are lazy and uncritical, but not all. It is now possible to generate a person’s entire life story based solely on their online interactions with the world at large and post it on the web, an insidious practice known as doxing, to the affected person’s dismay and detriment. Winning the user’s hearts and minds has never been easier since all we need are a few pointers for agentic AI to generate books, movies, theses, dissertations, op-ed pieces, biographies, and operas. To what end?

The leaning Tower of Pisa may still be standing when Silicon Valley’s Tower of Babel comes crashing down in a welter of confusion.



Roger Marshall
is a computer scientist, a newly minted Luddite and a cynic



OUTSIDE

Of life and hope unbound

For a word that seems to be strict about defining the perimeter of individual spaces, it’s surprising that the word ‘bound’ should have a life so predicated on the prefix and suffix. In osmotic linguistic cultures like ours, the first time we encounter the word in some form is perhaps in the phrase ‘boundary wall’. It conditions us to map our own bodies, the skin, and then toes and skull, the equivalents of country and continent. When we go to the origin of the word, there’s a surprise – that it came from seemingly opposite directions, bringing together, tying, as in ‘bound’ and ‘binding’, as well as the circumscribing of space, as, say, we find in the way it’s used to characterise a box-like wall inside which sits a cake-like building.

‘Bound’ and ‘bouquet’ share the first three letters. In both, there is tying, collecting, or gathering, whether it’s flowers from neighbouring habitats or pages in what is about to become a book. These flowers or pages could be identical to each other, but that is not usually the case – different paragraphs, different kinds of flowers, what is being brought together is not a family (tree) but an ad hoc arrangement, a semi-permanent companionship between different species, whether it be flowers or thoughts. That they were often understood to be genetically similar is made evident in a semi-stock phrase such as ‘a bouquet of songs and sonnets’ or ‘a bouquet of poems’. A phrase like that would provide the title for poetry collections and anthologies for many generations. That it should be composed of multiple things not necessarily related to each other

was inherent in the history of ‘bouquet’ itself. Originally meaning a ‘grove of trees’, it soon became lenient, coming to stand for a ‘cluster’ of trees. I say ‘lenient’, but what I probably mean is an elastic accommodationiveness.

How then could such a word, that glued disparate things, also come to mean something that kept things out, as in the ‘boundary’ wall? To understand this is to become aware of one’s jaw tightening at the bristly relationship between the outside and inside. The rules inside the ‘boundary wall’ of one’s house – or

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‘compound’ – are different from those outside it. The boundary creates restrictions, physical but, more importantly, psychological. Of the kind, say, I feel when writing this ‘column’ – a closed space with well-marked boundaries created by editors and the design team. There’s the word ‘limit’, so that what I say does not spill out of the boundary wall of this column. I am *bound* by that contract with the editor even as I write from what I might understand as an unbounded spirit.

Why did Shelley feel so emotionally and creatively driven to free Prometheus from *Prometheus Bound*? Aeschylus had written a trilogy, and *Prometheus Unbound* had been one of them, but only *Prometheus Bound* was extant; the other two were lost to histo-

ry. I’m tempted to see this loss as defining Western civilisation the way the loss of Aristotle’s theory of comedy has – the first censoring audacity of the creative spirit, the second turning the tragic as Western man’s default residency. Prometheus had, as we know, stolen fire for humans, to whom he had also given the arts and sciences – music as much as medicine and metalwork, writing and numbers – for which he’d been punished by Zeus. In Aeschylus’s lost play, there is ‘reconciliation of Jupiter with his victim’, as Shelley put it, and it was this mild reconciliation that the Romantic poet wanted to challenge.

‘I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind. The moral interest of the fable, which is so powerfully sustained by the sufferings and endurance of Prometheus, would be annihilated if we could conceive of him as unsaying his high language and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary,’ he wrote in the introduction to his ‘lyrical drama’, a play that was meant more for the ear and the mind than the stage.

What does being unbound mean? *‘To defy power, which seems omnipotent; To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates/From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;... Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free; This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.’* This is a manifesto that the French Revolution – under whose spell Shelley wrote his Prometheus – made possible. I’ve found myself returning to these lines lately, thinking of an India Unbound.

SALT & PEP

Transition at the Tatas

I spent eight exciting years with the Tata group in India. I was on my second job there. Yes, in those days, sticking to companies longer was considered a good thing, unlike today, when it’s less fashionable. I had spent the previous eight years with a multinational. I joined the Tatas and realised there is life beyond the multinational.

The Tata group is an interesting study. As of today, the organisation employs 1.16 million people globally, has businesses as diverse as consumer goods, aviation, IT services and emerging electronics, and boasts a turnover that exceeds \$185 billion. This is a behemoth of an enterprise for sure.

As I write this, the Tata group is in the middle of a corporate churn. A transition in leadership. N Chandrasekaran, the celebrated Chairman of Tata Sons with almost 10 years at the helm and a total of 40 years in the group, has decided not to renew his availability to be the Chairman for the next tenure of years possible, five or three (whatever that could have been at the behest of the Board and the shareholders).

Chandra, as his friends call him, has called it a day following a set of internal tussles. His current term ends in February 2027. His exit follows a period of substantial growth, profits, and new initiatives that may both contribute and bleed in the short and medium term (Air India, the digital forays, semiconductors, EVs, and more), but promise to insulate the group in the long term. This is a challenge the group will need to brace for.

The Tata group has clocked 158 years of existence. This business enterprise precedes the nation by 79 years. Over these tumultuous decades, the group has seen a total of seven chairmen leading it. Chandrasekaran, who took charge in February 2017, was the group’s first Chairman from outside the Tata family. He rose to his present stature through his brilliant steering of the crown jewel of the group – Tata Consultancy Services – to what it is today.

While theories (both real and conspiratorial) exist to explain this leadership jam, much has already been written about it. Therefore, I will not venture into that contentious space in this column for the sake of space. Suffice it to say that at one end of this entire debate are the owners of the group, and at the other is the operational and strategic leadership. The ownership is represented by the philanthropic trusts (which own two-thirds of Tata Sons and work in charity and societal causes), while the operational and strategic leadership is represented by the Chairman and the Board of Directors. Over nearly 16 decades, the privately held company has refined this hugely successful model, positioning itself as an exceptionally consistent enterprise. Noel Tata, representing the owners, has decided to float a search for the next Chairman. The choice is still a matter of conjecture and will hinge on multiple variables, with the only constant being the timeline – by March 2027, Tata Sons will have a new Chairperson.

All change is good, I guess. Leadership is a response to challenges. Every enterprise needs a change at the helm after seven years. These transitions are vital for the long-term health of the enterprise. Business environments evolve continuously, and each distinct era brings a set of fresh hurdles that demand a tailored approach. Because corporate challenges fundamentally shift over a seven-year cycle, executive leadership must adapt accordingly. No single style of leadership can remain effective indefinitely, nor should any organisation expect it to. I make these comments based on my study of leadership styles across 61 corporate enterprises in India and Sri Lanka. I believe that the group is getting into investment-deep years: investment in terms of routes to market, people, technology, energy, and more.

Having worked with the group for eight years, I have witnessed a unique trait that sets it apart from other corporate entities. There exists a distinct ‘Tata way’ of doing business; a framework that defies conventions of corporate practices. It has evolved and endured along with the brand, and has in many ways defined the ethos of the House. As the organisation awaits another transition in leadership, it will bet on its foundational ideals to prevail, carrying forward its legacy.



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POORVA PAKSHA

The inherited burden in *Dalitality*



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In 1969, John Fogerty of Creedence Clearwater Revival wrote *Fortunate Son* as an indictment of inherited advantage: some are born protected, others are born exposed.

“Some folks are born silver spoon in hand/ Lord, don’t they help themselves”
Suraj Yengde’s *Caste: A Global Story* reasserts the same indictment, but with a different ethnographic ground and a wider comparative reach. Ranked inequality of a caste-like kind appears in many places, even if India’s version carries what Amartya Sen, in his foreword to the book, calls a ‘shameful uniqueness’. Yengde’s narrative follows that ranking system as it moves across oceans, archives, and generations.

“It ain’t me, it ain’t me I ain’t no senator’s son/ It ain’t me, it ain’t me I ain’t no fortunate one”

Readers of Yengde’s earlier *Caste Matters* will recognise the same auto-ethnographic impulse. That earlier book was driven by the lived experience of what he calls ‘Dalitality’ – a term he uses to name the accumulated weight on the being of those born into the lowest rung

of the caste ladder. The new book keeps the personal current but then travels with it. The introduction and Chapter 1, ‘Colonial Dalitality’, examine how the British census and official reports first gave administrative shape to Dalit groups by recording their subjection, occupations, and socio-spiritual separateness. Yengde insists that Dalits were never merely passive subjects in these classifications; they also claimed, refused, or reworked the labels imposed upon them.

Chapters 2 and 4 stage the book’s central claim: that caste is not a fixed Indian inheritance but a system of ranking that crosses borders and takes new forms.

In Chapter 2, ‘Affairs of Letters: Dalit Responses to Black Literature’, Yengde shows that the conversation between Dalits and Black Americans did not begin with the Dalit Panthers or in the 1970s. Ambedkar himself was the first major Dalit thinker to engage African American experience systematically, notably in his reply to Lala Lajpat Rai’s comparison of untouchability

and American slavery. Later, M N Wankhede, principal of Milind College and founder of the journal *Asmita*, became the central mediator, introducing Black literature to a generation of Marathi Dalit writers. Janardhan Waghmare, writing from rural Marathwada, pushed the comparison further, treating slave narratives as directly analogous to Dalit conditions and reading the American Dream against Malcolm X’s American nightmare.

What Yengde captures well is both the depth of this one-directional literary solidarity and its limits: after the 1960s, the Black American side remained largely unaware of Dalit developments, language barriers slowed translation, and the relationship stayed more inspirational than reciprocal. The chapter is innovative precisely because it refuses easy romance; it documents a real intellectual genealogy while remaining honest about its asymmetries.

“It ain’t me, it ain’t me I ain’t no millionaire’s son/ It ain’t me, it ain’t me I ain’t no fortunate one”

Chapter 4, ‘The Dalit Republic of Diaspora: A Case Study of Trinidad’, is the book’s most vivid demonstration that caste does not simply dissolve when it crosses the ocean. Drawing on earlier ethnographers and his own fieldwork, Yengde shows that while many lower-caste indentured labourers arrived in Trinidad, hierarchy reasserted itself in new forms. Colin Clarke’s 1964 survey found that only a small fraction of Hindus still knew their caste by name, yet Brahmanical prestige had actually increased rather than faded. Outcasts were still marked – food served on a leaf instead of a plate, subtle exclusions at religious gatherings. Caste survived as a code of identity, prestige, ritual, and endogamy. It underwent what Yengde calls a kind of creolisation: mixed with other groups, reshaped across generations, and kept alive inside Hindu organisations such as the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, where pandit superiority could still surface in the order of the food line. The chapter makes Yengde’s global claim concrete: caste moves,

mutates, and finds new institutional homes rather than dissolving.

The book concludes by returning to the author’s notes as archivist and activist. The result is a more ambitious book than *Caste Matters*. It demonstrates the same urgency of voice, but now, it’s stretched across a larger map.

“Some folks inherit star-spangled eyes/ Ooh, they send you down to war/ And when you ask them, ‘How much should we give?’/ Ooh, they only answer, ‘More, more, more”

This song still cuts because the structure it named has not disappeared. Yengde’s book demonstrates this on a larger map. In the conclusion, he turns the question back onto the dominant castes themselves: it is we, more than the caste-oppressed, who need to confront the social and religious creeds that cannot tolerate human equality. Some are born protected by the system; others inherit its weight. Yengde, like Fogerty, asks who gets to remain the fortunate one, and at whose expense the protection is maintained.

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Edit Brilliance of Amir Suhail Wani

A brilliant engineer from NIT Srinagar fighting for his rightful job in court instead of building our future. It is time for compassion and administrative wisdom to prevail over rigid rules.



Widening Gap
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The true wealth of Jammu & Kashmir does not merely lie in its majestic mountains, its winding rivers, or its lush valleys. Its most potent, enduring wealth lies in its youth. The brilliant minds that endure countless hardships to emerge as beacons of excellence. When such a mind rises to the top, society should celebrate and utilize it. Yet, in the heart of our administration, a tragedy of bureaucratic rigidity is unfolding, suffocating one of our brightest talents. This is the story of Amir Suhail Wani, a young man whose exceptional intellect is currently being wasted in the corridors of courts rather than being deployed for the progress of our region.

Amir Suhail Wani is an engineer by training. He is not just any graduate; he earned his degree on pure merit from the prestigious National Institute of Technology (NIT) Srinagar. But

Amir is far more than an engineer. He is a multi-talented polymath, a prolific writer, and a deep thinker. His intellect transcends his formal education. To speak to Amir or to visit his home is to witness a mind entirely devoted to knowledge. His personal collection of books is larger and more comprehensive than many fully functional public libraries. He represents the kind of intellectual capital that developing societies desperately crave.

Through sheer hard work and undisputed capability, Amir secured a position as a Junior Engineer (JE). His name proudly appeared on the official select list. He had proven his merit in an open, highly competitive system. But the sweet taste of success was brutally cut short. Amir has a medical condition, a physical disability that has suddenly been transformed by the system into an insurmountable handicap. Because of this medical condition, he has been denied his official appointment letter to join the department. The very government that should be empowering him has instead shut its doors, leaving him stranded on the threshold of a promising career.

Rather than accommodating a differently-abled genius, the system has forced Amir to fight for his basic rights. He is currently contesting his case in the Central Administrative Tribunal

(CAT). The government, tragically, stands as an opposing party in this legal battle against its own bright youth. Recently, a medical review board was ordered to assess his condition. But the fundamental premise of this legal and medical scrutiny misses the larger, more vital point: Amir Suhail Wani has already proven his mental ability and his professional competence.

Let us concede, for a moment, the administrative argument. Amir may or may not be entirely fit for a rigorous field job that requires intense physical exertion, navigating rough terrains, or climbing infrastructure. But does an engineering department run solely on physical labor? Absolutely not. The backbone of any successful engineering endeavour is vision, planning, and intellectual rigor.

It is profoundly unfortunate that the Government of J&K is completely ignoring the vast potential Amir holds for the policy framework. Why is his talent not being utilized in the planning department? The Power Development Department (PDD) in J&K is in desperate need of modernization. It requires the framing of new standards, the integration of smart technologies, and visionary policy development. Currently, our local systems are struggling to keep pace with the rapid advancements

happening across the rest of the country. Let alone the cutting-edge innovations transforming the global power sector in the developed world. Amir is exactly the kind of well-read, innovative thinker, who could draft these modern standards and policies. Yet, his brilliant mind is being left to gather dust while he waits outside courtrooms.

Beyond the loss of technical expertise, there is a glaring human angle, the disability factor that the Government of J&K has inexplicably ignored. We live in an era where inclusivity, accessibility, and the rights of differently-abled persons are championed globally. Our laws and our collective morality dictate that physical limitations should never be a barrier to employment, especially when the individual possesses the requisite intellectual merit. To deny a differently-abled person his hard-earned livelihood is not just an administrative failure; it is a moral abdication.

Why is a boy with a physical handicap left to prove himself in a court of law against the mighty machinery of the State? Where is the sympathy? Where is the compassionate ground? As individuals occupying chairs of authority, there must remain a fundamental fear of the Almighty when dealing with the vulnerable, the disabled, and the deserving. Power is a trust, and it must be exercised

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The bureaucracy has chosen the easy path of rejection rather than the courageous path of accommodation.

with justice and mercy.

As a former military commander with four decades of administrative and leadership experience, I have seen the application of rules in every conceivable scenario. I can confidently say this: rules, manuals, and standard operating procedures are designed to guide normal circumstances. They provide a baseline. But administration is not merely a robotic application of clauses. Special cases, especially those involving exceptional talent and physical disability, require bold, discretionary decisions. Leadership is about finding ways to build people up, not using the rulebook to tear them down.

This bold decision-making is entirely lacking in Amir's case. The bureaucracy has chosen the easy path of rejection rather than the courageous path of accommodation. With a stroke of a pen and a dose of administrative wisdom, Amir could be assigned a desk-based, policy-oriented role within the department for which he has already qualified. He would not

be a liability; he would be an unparalleled asset.

The time has come for logic and wisdom to prevail within the Government of J&K. I urge the administration to view Amir Suhail Wani's situation as a special case on merit. He has earned his place. Let the government of the day re-examine his file, not with the cold, cynical eyes of litigation, but with empathy, on sympathetic and compassionate grounds for a differently-abled citizen.

We cannot claim to be building a better, modern Kashmir if we allow our brightest youth to be broken by a system devoid of a heart. Give this young boy his due. Let him contribute to the society he so deeply loves and understands.

As an alumnus of REC (now NIT) Srinagar, I stand firmly in support of Amir's cause. I make a fervent appeal to all my fellow NIT alumni, across the globe, to rally behind him. We must raise our voices on social media and utilize every platform available to bring this to the highest levels of governance. *I humbly request the Honourable Chief Minister and the Honourable Lieutenant Governor (LG) of J&K to personally intervene in this matter.* Let us ensure that Amir Suhail Wani gets justice, employment, and the dignity he rightfully deserves.

Lt Gen R. S. Reen is a former DGQA

Teacher in a Changing World

The teacher has to become a guide, a questioner, a mentor, and sometimes a reality check.

FREEZE FRAME

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There was a time when a teacher was considered the gateway to knowledge. If a student wanted to know something, the teacher was often the first person to ask. Books were limited. Libraries were not always accessible. Information travelled slowly. But that world is gone.

Today, a student can ask a question to Google, YouTube or an AI tool and get an answer in seconds. A lecture can be watched from anywhere. A difficult concept can be explained in ten different ways. A machine can even write an essay, solve a mathematical problem or translate a paragraph.

So, a difficult question has emerged. If technology can deliver knowledge faster than a teacher, what is the teacher's role? The answer is that the teacher doesn't need to compete with technology. He or she has to become more human. The teacher of tomorrow cannot simply be a walking textbook. The teacher has to become a guide, a questioner, a mentor, and sometimes a reality check.

Technology can tell a student what happened. A teacher can ask, "Why does it matter?" Technology can provide ten answers. A teacher can ask, "Which one should you trust?" Technology can write an impressive paragraph. A teacher can ask, "Do you actually understand what you have written?" This will become the most vital role of the teacher in the age of artificial intelligence.

From information to judgement, we are entering an age of information abundance. The problem is no longer finding information. The problem is knowing what to do with it. Students are surrounded by facts, opinions, videos, influencers, algorithms and AI-generated content. Some of it is brilliant. Some of it is wrong. Some of it is deliberately misleading. A teacher who can teach students how to question information may be more valuable than one who can simply provide information.

This means teachers themselves must keep learning. Not necessarily by becoming programmers. Not every teacher needs to understand how an algorithm is built. But every teacher should understand how technology is changing the way students learn, think and communicate. They should know what AI can do. More importantly, they should know what it cannot do.

There is another danger: teachers should not become machines. In our euphoria about technology, we may try to make education look

like technology. Making everything faster. More automated. More measurable. However, we forget that education has never been only about efficiency. A student may remember a teacher's explanation for an examination. But they may remember a teacher's encouragement for a lifetime. A machine can correct an answer. A teacher can notice that the student has stopped trying. A machine can personalise a lesson. A teacher can notice that a child is unusually quiet that morning. A machine can recommend a career. A teacher can recognise a student's hidden ability. These things are difficult to measure. They are also difficult to replace.

Teachers must become comfortable being with learners because the biggest change required is psychological. Teachers have traditionally entered classrooms as experts. The future classroom requires them to occasionally say: "I don't know. Let's find out together." That is not a sign of weakness. It is a powerful lesson in itself. Students need to see that learning does not stop with a degree or a designation. A teacher who learns openly teaches curiosity without giving a lecture on curiosity. Technology changes every few years. The ability to learn must therefore become a permanent professional skill.

The classroom of the future will therefore not disappear. It will become different. Less about delivering information. More about dialogue. Less about memorising. More about thinking. Less about "What is the answer?" More about "How did you arrive at it?" That is where teachers can remain indispensable. Technology will continue to change and be an excellent aid.

Some jobs will disappear. New ones will emerge. Tools that look revolutionary today may seem primitive tomorrow. But one thing is unlikely to change. Young students will still need someone who believes in them before they believe in themselves. They will still need someone to challenge them when they are capable of more. They will still need someone to tell them, "You are wrong," without making them feel worthless. And they will still need someone to tell them, "Try again."

The future does not belong to teachers who know everything. It belongs to teachers who are willing to adapt to technology while keeping learning, keeping questioning and keeping understanding their students. The best teacher of the future may not be the one who knows the most. It may be the one who knows what technology should do, what it should never do, and where the human being must remain at the centre.

Ukraine-Russia War

A forgotten war in a world distracted by Iran



Sunday Sounds
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On August 20, Russia launched one of its heaviest aerial attacks on Kyiv, killing at least 16 people and injuring more than 40. Residential areas, a school and a children's medical facility were among those hit. Ukraine's air defences intercepted many cruise missiles and drones, but its shortage of Patriot interceptors left it vulnerable to ballistic missiles.

At almost the same time, Ukraine has been escalating its own attacks against Russia. Hundreds of drones have been sent deep into Russian territory, striking military and energy infrastructure. In recent weeks, Russian oil facilities, ports, logistics centres and industrial sites have come under attack. A recent Ukrainian strike involving nearly 800 drones was one of the largest of the war. It is a conflict that has become normalised. And that may be more dangerous. There is something uncomfortable about the way the Russia-Ukraine war has slipped down the world's news agenda. The guns have not fallen silent. The casualties have not stopped. The missiles and drones are flying almost every night. Yet, compared with the first two years of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the war now receives far less attention. The fear is that the conflict may be entering one of its most dangerous phases when the world's attention is elsewhere.

The Iran-US war has presently consumed headlines, diplomatic bandwidth and military resources. Washington is preoccupied with the West Asia, European governments are dealing with their own wider consequences of the conflict, and media are dominated by images of missiles over Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Ukraine, once the defining geopolitical crisis in Europe, has become almost a background story.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the expectation in Moscow was apparently that Kyiv would fall quickly. Instead, Ukrainian resistance halted the Russian advances. The war then settled into the kind of conflict where small territorial gains measured in kilometres, sometimes metres. The war-front now stretches for roughly 1,200 kilometres. Russia continues to grind

forward in parts of the east, while Ukraine tries to make the cost of every Russian advance high-priced. This is not a frozen war. It is an active war of attrition. And attrition has a cruel arithmetic. A few hundred metres gained may mean hundreds of lives lost. A destroyed refinery may cost millions of dollars but does not necessarily change the military balance. A missile attack can kill civilians without producing any meaningful territorial change. That is precisely why the outside world is losing interest.

The West Asia has suddenly become strategically more important to Washington. American air-defence systems, interceptors, aircraft and other military resources are under pressure. The Ukraine conflict, that required a continuing supply of ammunition, air-defence missiles and financial assistance is feeling the pressure. Ukraine is facing a shortage of Patriot interceptors at a time when Russia is increasing its missile and drone attacks. The problem is not simply financial. The United States and its allies have their own stocks to replenish, and West Asia has created additional demands. For Kyiv, this is a frightening development. Russia exploits a divided Western strategic focus. The Kremlin has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to wait, absorb losses and continue fighting while hoping that political fatigue will eventually weaken Western support for Ukraine.

Millions of Ukrainians have been displaced. Thousands of civilians have been killed. Yet casualty figures have become abstractions. The news of thousands killed no longer sends the shock it once did. Hundreds of drones sound almost like a normal, routine game. Perhaps the biggest danger of the new normal in prolonged war is suffering being measured by numbers and no human or emotional values.

The latest Russian attack on Kyiv should have made major international news. Instead, it competed for attention with Iran, US diplomacy, oil prices and the wider West Asia crisis. Hardly, there is any global attention.

Ukraine has increasingly relied on drones and long-range weapons. Unable to match Russia tank-for-tank, missile-for-missile or soldier-for-soldier, it has adopted an asymmetric strategy. Ukrainian forces have targeted Russian oil refineries, energy facilities, ports and military sites deep inside Russia. Such attacks can hurt Russia economically and militarily, but they are inviting stronger retaliation. Moscow has responded with intensified attacks on Ukrainian cities and

infrastructure.

Another major change is taking place within Ukrainian society. After the invasion, hundreds of thousands volunteered, driven by a strong feeling that the country was fighting for its survival. Four years later, that spirit has weakened. Asking people to join a war with no clear end is very different from asking them to defend their country in the first weeks of an invasion. The controversy over forced mobilisation, known as "busification", reflects this growing frustration. There have been allegations of men being forcibly taken to recruitment centres, abuse by recruitment officers and corruption over medical exemptions. Human rights groups have raised concerns about unlawful detention and mistreatment. The stories of soldiers returning from the front and confronting angry civilians are particularly revealing. One Ukrainian veteran quoted in recent reporting asked, in effect, what they had fought for if soldiers could themselves be attacked by citizens.

The political debate is becoming more complicated. Ukraine remains under martial law, which prevents normal elections. That was understandable when Russian forces were approaching Kyiv. But the longer the war continues, the more difficult it becomes to sustain a democratic system indefinitely without a clear political timetable. The emergence of criticism from former officials and political figures is therefore significant. It does reveal war fatigue and demand for political leadership change. And Russia is waiting for precisely this. Moscow does not necessarily need to conquer all of Ukraine. It may only need to outlast Ukraine's political patience and its allies' financial patience.

Western governments have continued to support Ukraine financially. The European Union recently announced that Rs 1.4 billion from interest generated by frozen Russian central bank assets would be directed towards supporting Ukraine. This is important, but it also illustrates the central paradox of the conflict. The West has imposed sanctions on Russia, yet the Russian economy has adapted. Moscow has redirected trade, found alternative markets and continued financing a war economy.

Sanctions have imposed costs. They have not forced submission or defeat. The lesson is not that sanctions are useless. It is that sanctions alone cannot end a war when the adversary is prepared to absorb economic and human costs. Military pressure, diplomacy, economic pressure and

political incentives have to work together.

Perhaps the most depressing part of the present situation is that diplomacy has almost vanished from public discussion. There have been American efforts to mediate. There have been direct contacts and proposals. But there has been no breakthrough. Russia continues to insist that any settlement must reflect what it calls the "realities on the ground", while Ukraine refuses to accept territorial concessions imposed by force. Moscow has also continued to reject proposals that merely freeze the existing front. The Iran war has made the diplomatic vacuum worse.

And so the war continues almost by inertia. That is perhaps the most dangerous phase of any conflict, when nobody believes victory is close, nobody can agree on peace, and everyone becomes accustomed to the killing. The Iran war is undoubtedly a major strategic crisis. But the existence of another war cannot make Russia-Ukraine tragedy less consequential. In fact, the two conflicts are increasingly connected through military resources, energy markets, American strategy and the calculations of Russia and Iran.

For India, there is an additional reason to pay attention. New Delhi has maintained relationships with both Moscow and Kyiv and has consistently called for dialogue and diplomacy. Moscow continues to be India's reliable and tested partner. India's position has always been that lasting peace cannot come through military means alone. The longer the war continues, the stronger the case becomes for a serious diplomatic effort that recognises Ukraine's sovereignty and security concerns while also addressing Moscow's concern as well as the larger European security architecture. The world cannot afford to wait for a battlefield collapse before returning to diplomacy.

Russia-Ukraine conflict may no longer dominate the front pages. But people are still dying there. Cities are still being bombed. Soldiers are still being buried. Families are still living without electricity, security and certainty about tomorrow. A war should not become less tragic because another war has become more dramatic. The greatest danger now is not only that Ukraine may lose territory. It is that the world may slowly lose its sense of urgency and eventually accept a permanent war of attrition as the new normal. And it would be a failure of diplomacy.

*Surinder Singh Oberoi,
National Editor Greater Kashmir*

A ‘Tit-for-Tat’ with Pakistan

It was a sore point for Pakistan when the US Ambassador to India, Sergio Gor, stated that Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India and indicated a review of travel advisories for American tourists visiting the region. Sergio Gor was on a two-day visit to Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh. Previously, the US had maintained that the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35-A in Jammu & Kashmir and the Kashmir issue itself were internal matters between India and Pakistan. Following this statement, the situation has become clear for India while causing frustration for Pakistan.

Pakistan was already agitated by several steps taken by India. Diplomatic relations have been strained—halting bilateral dealings, suspending the Indus Waters Treaty, and stopping trade at the Attari-Wagah border—following the events surrounding ‘Operation Sindoor’. Irritated by the US Ambassador’s statement, Pakistan removed security barricades and parking poles from around the Indian High Commission in its territory. India immediately retaliated by dismantling security perimeters, visa section structures, and illegal constructions in the outer areas of the Pakistan High Commission in Chanakypuri, Delhi. India had already ceased diplomatic dialogue with Pakistan following the Pahalgam attack. Clearly, with the ongoing tension, diplomatic relations between the two nations have been reduced to a nominal level. Meanwhile, Pakistan raised a hue and cry over US Ambassador Sergio Gor’s statement affirming Kashmir as an integral part of India; Islamabad summoned the US Chargé d’Affaires to register a strong protest. It is evident that the spirit of friendship between Pakistan and India has vanished, regardless of the rhetoric employed.

The Attari-Wagah border, which served as a trade route between India and Pakistan, remains completely closed, with no plans to reopen it in the near future. Pakistan’s politics hinges on hateful rhetoric surrounding the Kashmir issue. Leveraging this, the country not only creates a clamor at the United Nations but also persists in harboring terrorist camps within its own borders. Given this context, what else can one expect from Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Army Chief Asif Munir other than displays of hostility? India responded in kind—tit-for-tat—to the disruptive actions Pakistan took outside the Indian High Commission in Islamabad. It is a classic case of “tit for tat.”

From a trade perspective, the suggestion has frequently been made that the Attari-Wagah border should be opened for commerce and the Kartarpur Corridor made operational to foster an atmosphere of goodwill. Additionally, the India-Pakistan Friendship Forum’s annual tradition of illuminating the border on August 15th should be revived. We believe there is no animosity between the ordinary citizens of the two nations; rather, it is Pakistan’s policy of shielding terrorist camps—maintained to sustain its own hold on power—that has prevented the normalization of relations. Both nations are classified as developing countries. It is no secret how economically devastated Pakistan has become due to this hostile stance. Across the country—from Balochistan and the Pashtun regions to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir—residents are raising the banner of protest against Pakistan’s narrow-minded policies. We can only hope that Pakistan develops the wisdom to realize that fueling this fire of dissent ultimately causes it self-inflicted harm.

-Abhishek Vij

Prospects of Nuclear Power Plant in Punjab

Punjab is undoubtedly a developing state. It is a significant achievement that NITI Aayog has ranked Punjab number one in the country in the school education sector. Alongside this, it is also important to examine Punjab’s economic and social infrastructure. If Punjab aims to become the leading state in terms of economic progress, it must secure an adequate energy supply to drive agricultural growth and boost investment. Punjab relies primarily on water and coal for electricity generation, with large dams and thermal power plants already established in the state. Solar energy is another source, with both the central and state governments offering various incentives to promote it.

However, there is another potential source that could make the state completely self-reliant in energy: the establishment of a 2,800 MW nuclear power plant. This issue has been under consideration since the year 2000. While the possibility of setting up a 2,800 MW capacity project at Patran in Patiala district was deliberated, the proposal stalled at the administrative level and became lost in red tape.

Now, with the 2026 election year approaching, the proposal to establish a nuclear power plant is once again being seriously considered. It is noted that while Punjab’s own electricity generation capacity stands at only 6,000 MW, peak season demand reaches up to 18,000 MW; the deficit is currently met by sourcing power from other states and the central pool. Conversely, during winter months when demand drops, the surplus power is returned to those states.

Recent reports—including those related to the Atomic Energy Act, the AERB (Atomic Energy Regulatory Board), and CIL—emphasize that if Punjab is to advance on the path of progress, it must establish a nuclear power plant with a capacity of at least 2,800 MW. Only then can we accelerate our development at the speed of electricity. The Centre has clarified that if Punjab consents to setting up a nuclear power plant at Patran or any other location, it is ready to evaluate the proposal. The industrial sector requires affordable, uninterrupted electricity supply. The development of artificial intelligence also hinges on a steady energy supply. Therefore, plans for a nuclear power plant should not be deferred, especially since the Centre is currently willing to approve the project.

WHY REVENGE SEEMS SWEET AND HOW IT HURTS US



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

Antaryatra

On the night of January 21, 1995, twenty-year-old Tariq Khamisa was delivering pizzas in San Diego. He was a university student, engaged to be married, and working part-time to support himself.

At one address, he was confronted by four young gang members who wanted the pizza without paying for it. Tariq refused. A fourteen-year-old boy named Tony Hicks pointed a handgun at him and fired. The bullet entered Tariq’s chest. He died shortly afterwards. When Tariq’s father, Azim Khamisa, received the news, he collapsed on his kitchen floor. Relentlessly, he pursued the legal course, even though he felt many times that he should himself shoot Tony Hicks. Hicks was arrested and prosecuted. Although he was only fourteen, he was tried as an adult, convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to twenty-five years to life in prison.

THE STRANGE HAPPENING Yet something extraordinary began happening within Azim Khamisa. He knew of the innocence of his son, but he also understood that fourteen-year-old who pulled the trigger had also been shaped by abandonment, gang culture, and adult failures that had preceded the murder.

This recognition did not absolve Hicks. Khamisa reached out to Tony Hicks’s grandfather, Ples Felix. Together, they began speaking to children about violence, moral choice and forgiveness. Khamisa founded the Tariq Khamisa Foundation in his son’s memory. After Hicks was released from prison in 2019, he too joined the foundation’s work, speaking to young people about the consequences of violence and the possibility of moral transformation.

Yet for most of us, it is revenge (not justice and forgiveness) that seeks to bring peace.

That distinction lies at the heart of one of humanity’s oldest inner struggles. Why does revenge feel so satisfying? How can forgiveness release us without weakening our commitment to justice?

WHY REVENGE FEELS LIKE A REWARD

When someone betrays, humiliates or injures us (even if we have imagined it), the mind registers more than pain. It perceives an imbalance. Something has been taken: dignity, security, trust, status or love.

Revenge appears to restore the balance.

In a landmark experiment published in Science, Dominique de Quervain and his colleagues studied participants in an economic trust game. When one player violated another’s trust, the injured participant was given an opportunity to punish the offender. Brain imaging showed increased activity in the dorsal striatum. Participants were prepared to incur greater personal costs merely to punish the wrongdoer. The finding was unsettling. Effective punishment activated neural systems associated with anticipated reward. The brain could experience retaliation as gratifying.

This helps explain why news of an adversary’s failure may bring a secret surge of pleasure.

But the reward is short-lived. To sustain the fantasy of revenge, the brain must repeatedly reactivate the original grievance.

The insult must be heard again. The betrayal must be reconstructed.

WHEN THE BODY KEEPS RETALIATING

Anger is not merely an idea in the mind.

It is a whole-body event.

When anger rises, the sympathetic nervous system prepares the body for confrontation. Heart rate and blood pressure increase. Attention narrows around the perceived threat. Muscles tighten. Digestion and other non-urgent functions may temporarily receive lower priority.

This response is useful when immediate action is required. It becomes destructive when a remembered or perceived insult repeatedly activates the same emergency machinery long after the danger has passed.

A 2024 randomised study led by Daichi Shimbo it was found that only eight minutes of induced anger temporarily impaired the ability of blood vessels to dilate normally. The study demonstrated a plausible biological pathway connecting repeated anger with cardiovascular risk.

Rumination prolongs this biological occupation.

Other experimental work has similarly found that individuals who habitually forgive may show more effective physiological recovery after recalling betrayal than those who remain strongly unforgiving.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CAPTIVITY

Anger is not merely an idea in the mind. It is a whole-body event.

Revenge also alters the architecture of attention. The injured person (actual or imagined injury) begins monitoring the offender (who may be totally innocent!). Has he prospered? Has he suffered?

This is the paradox of resentment. We may refuse to speak to someone, yet converse with them continuously in our mind. We may remove them from our home, yet install them at the centre of our consciousness.

Anger appears to initially protect dignity. But research shows that persistent anger impairs concentration and may cause bodily disease. Forgiveness, by contrast, has been associated with lower anger, reduced anxiety and depression, and greater hopefulness and psychological well-being.

The value of forgiveness is therefore not that it changes the past. It changes the frequency with which the past is permitted to invade the present.

FORGIVENESS IS NOT ACQUITTAL

Many people resist forgiveness because they confuse it with absolution.

To forgive is not to say that no wrong occurred. It is not forgetting, excusing, condoning or minimising harm. It does not require an abused person to return to danger.

Most importantly, forgiveness does not extinguish justice.

Forgiveness asks: **How long must the wrongdoer continue to live inside the injured person?**

A woman may forgive an abusive spouse and still seek protection, divorce and prosecution.

Forgiveness does not cancel accountability. It prevents accountability from degenerating into an endless appetite for another person’s suffering.

THE ANCIENT KNOWLEDGE OF UNFORGIVENESS

Long before neuroscience mapped reward pathways or measured vascular function, spiritual traditions understood that hatred reproduces itself within its bearer.

The Dhammapada states:

“Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is an eternal law.”

This teaching is not a command to tolerate evil. It is a statement about causation. Hatred used as a weapon must first be manufactured within the person who intends to wield it.

The *Bhagavad Gita* identifies a neurological truth in spiritual

language. Under intense anger, perspective narrows. Anger begins to possess the mechanism by which we judge. The Sikh tradition identifies *krodh*, uncontrolled anger, as one of the forces that obscure consciousness. This does not require passivity before injustice. Sikh history is filled with resistance to oppression.

The deeper principle is that courage need not be contaminated by hatred.

WHAT FORGIVENESS DOES TO US

In an influential laboratory study, Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet and colleagues asked participants to recall a real interpersonal offence while imagining either unforgiving responses or forgiving ones. When participants rehearsed grudges, they experienced increased heart rate, blood pressure and skin conductance. Forgiving imagery produced comparatively calmer emotional and physiological responses.

Forgiveness did not alter the external event. It altered the body’s present response to the remembered event.

RELEASING THE INNER DEBT-PRACTICE

Every grievance creates an invisible account:

“You owe me the years I lost.”

“You owe me the life I might have lived.”

Sometimes restitution is possible. But some debts cannot be repaid. To make our peace dependent upon payment is to grant the debtor permanent control over our future.

Begin with one grievance. Do not choose your deepest wound first. Bring the incident gently to mind.

Notice where it lives in the body: the tightened jaw, the contracted chest, the shallow breath. Do not suppress the response. Acknowledge it.

Say inwardly:

“What happened was wrong. My pain is real. Justice may still be necessary. But I am willing to imagine a life in which this pain no longer governs me.”

Do not force yourself to forgive. Simply imagine what release might feel like. Notice even the smallest softening.

When the grievance returns, repeat the exercise. Forgiveness is seldom a single moment. It is a discipline of refusing to let yesterday repeatedly commandeer today.

Forgiveness offers something more radical: freedom even while justice takes its course. The prison may have been built by another. But the key, sometimes, has been placed in our own hands.

Parneet Sachdev, IRS is the Chairman of Real Estate Regulatory Authority and a leading author.

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

"Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe." — *Albert Einstein*

Pakistan: 'Hard State' Approach to Suppress Dissent

Pakistan’s recent political trajectory suggests that the “hard state” approach is becoming a permanent feature of governance rather than an episodic response to isolated crisis.

The designation of the Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC) as a terrorist organisation, the use of anti-terrorism laws against political actors and journalists, the suppression of protests in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), communications blackouts and tightening restrictions on civil society all point to the relocation of political dissent from the democratic arena to the security apparatus. In effect, opposition is no longer merely being contested; it is being securitized.

“Officials may defend each measure as a proportionate answer



to a discrete threat. Taken together, however, they point to a more consequential transformation. Security is functioning not simply as a policy objective but as the state’s dominant claim to legitimacy. That claim is especially potent in a country confronting militancy, economic instability, regional rivalry, and chronically weak civilian institutions.

Yet the broader the definition of threat becomes, the easier it is to treat protest, journalism, and political organisation as dangers

rather than essential features of public life.

On June 5, Islamabad designated the JAAC a terrorist organisation and invoked anti-terrorism legislation against the movement, which had become a leading force articulating social and political grievances in PoK. The designation was followed by mass arrests, communications blackouts, restrictions on public gatherings and a heavy deployment of security forces.

Then, on July 27, so-called legislative elections were held in the occupied territory against a backdrop of deep polarisation and violence. Clashes between protesters and security forces resulted in deaths and injuries, prompting international organisations to raise concerns over the excessive use of force,

communications shutdowns, and the use of anti-terrorism laws to silence political dissent in PoK.

These measures fit a familiar pattern in Pakistan, but they also illuminate a broader shift in how states govern. Political, social, and economic disputes are increasingly recast as questions of national survival. Once an issue enters that register, governments can claim a mandate for extraordinary measures, expanded executive power, and narrower space for dissent. The language of emergency does more than describe a threat; it changes what the state is permitted to do in response.

The real danger is not repression alone, but its normalisation, which allows exceptional powers to become entrenched through bureaucracies, budgets, and vested interests.

When a Punishment Becomes a Trophy for Generations

A Police Officer’s Memory of July 1982, Two Warning Letters and the Courage to Stand for Justice



Dr Iqbal Singh Lalpura

Former Chairman, National Commission for Minorities, Government of India | Member, Parliamentary Board, Bharatiya Janata Party | Retired IPS Officer

Some documents are meant to punish. Some are written to create an adverse record against an individual. But time has a remarkable way of changing the meaning of documents.

What was once intended as a warning can become a testimony. What was once regarded as a punishment can become a badge of honour. And what was written to establish an alleged failure can, decades later, become evidence of a person’s courage and conscience.

For the past 44 years, I have preserved two warning letters issued to me in September 1982.

At the time, they were serious documents in my service record. Today, I regard them as a proud possession. I want the generations after me to see them because they record a moment when, as a police officer, I chose what I believed to be justice and uprightness over convenience and unquestioning obedience.

The events of July 1982

On 18 July 1982, a case was registered against some followers of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. In my considered view at the time, the case had been wrongly and falsely registered.

On 19 July, Bhai Amrik Singh, a close associate of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, along with four others, came to Police Station Civil Lines, Amritsar, when the accused were to be produced before the court.

I was physically present there along with a group of police officers led by Giani Bachan Singh, DSP, Giani Bachan Singh and Sardar Surjit Singh Bains, IPS, were responsible for the registration of the case.

My approach was to calm the situation. I tried to pacify Bhai Amrik Singh and suggested that an application for re-enquiry should be submitted. I was prepared to have the matter reviewed so that, if the case was found to be wrong, justice could be done.

Giani Bachan Singh, on the instructions of the SSP, attempted to justify the police case.

The situation became heated. Arguments and an altercation took place inside Police Station Civil Lines, Amritsar.

Bhai Amrik Singh and his associates were subsequently arrested for violation of Section 144 CrPC.

Sant Jarnail Singh subsequently started a dharna outside the residence of the Deputy Commissioner, Amritsar, seeking their release.

These developments became an important part of the chain of events that followed and, in the larger historical context, contributed to the circumstances that ultimately led to the Dharam Yudh Morcha and, much later, the tragic events surrounding Operation Blue Star.

Punjab would subsequently enter one of the darkest and most painful periods of its modern history.

I do not write this article to reopen every controversy of that period. I write because I was there. I was a police officer. I witnessed the circumstances first-hand. And two surviving official documents record what happened to me personally.

The price of objecting

When a police officer questions an action that he genuinely believes to be wrong, there can be consequences.

Following the incident, two warning letters were issued to me.

The first accused me of not helping the police party during the arrest.

The second accused me of failing to maintain secrecy concerning information about extremist activity.

I preserved both letters.

After 44 years, I believe they should be read exactly as they were written.

The first warning letter

The original warning, issued by S. S. Bains, IPS, Senior Superintendent of Police, Amritsar, stated:

WARNING.

It has been brought to my notice that on 19-7-82 Shri Amrik Singh, a close associate of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was arrested on that date, when you were physically present near Police station Civil Lines, Amritsar and you were directed to afford necessary help to the Police Party in effecting his arrest peacefully. You slipped away from there without affording any help sought for. This is an act of cowardice and disloyalty to the department. You are warned to improve yourself in this regard.

S S Bains IPS

Sr. Superintendent of Police, Amritsar. Inspector Iqbal Singh No. 466/J, Circle Beas.

Copy: Steno to SSP for his own record.

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The words are unambiguous: “This is an act of cowardice and disloyalty to the department.”

At the time, such language carried considerable weight for a serving police officer.

But I ask the reader to consider what the document also establishes.

It establishes that I was physically present.

It establishes that I was expected to assist in the arrest.

And it establishes that my conduct was considered sufficiently different from the expectation of my superior officer to warrant a formal warning.

My position was not that the police should not maintain law and order. My concern was whether the case itself was justified and whether the situation could be handled

through re-enquiry and lawful review rather than confrontation.

The second warning letter

The second warning was even more serious in its implications. It stated:

WARNING.

Secret information about the extremist activity in your area was passed on to you from time to time for timely action, but the same was leaked out to the concerned group. Thus you were failing in your duty to maintain that information a close guarded secret. This shows that you are not maintaining that standard of reliability, which is expected from a senior police officer of your rank. You are, therefore, warned to improve yourself in this behalf.

S S Bains IPS

Sr. Superintendent of Police, Amritsar.

Inspector Iqbal Singh No. 466/J, Circle Beas.

Copy to: Steno to SSP for his own record.

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This letter accused me of failing to maintain secrecy regarding information about extremist activity and questioned my reliability as a senior police officer.

I have preserved this document as well.

I do so because historical records should not be selectively remembered. The words should remain available for anyone who wishes to understand the atmosphere, institutional thinking and administrative tensions of that period.

Four decades change the meaning of words

The first warning described my conduct as “cowardice and disloyalty”.

The second questioned my “standard of reliability”.

At the time, these were allegations against a serving police officer.

Today, I see them through the experience of 44 years.

I did not believe that loyalty to the police department meant supporting every action taken by another police officer.

For me, loyalty to the uniform meant loyalty to the law, justice and truth.

If I believed that a case had been wrongly registered, I could not simply accept it because it had been registered by another officer.

If I believed that the matter deserved re-enquiry, I had a duty to say so.

A police officer’s responsibility is not merely to arrest, prosecute and obey. It is also to ensure that justice is not sacrificed in the name of procedure.

What if my objections had been heard?

This is perhaps the most important question that these documents raise.

History cannot be rewritten. But history can be examined through the decisions that were taken—and the decisions that were not taken.

I have often wondered what might have happened if the senior officers of that time had seriously

considered my objections and acted upon them.

What if the case had been re-enquired at that early stage?

What if the grievances of those involved had been addressed through dialogue and lawful investigation?

What if the administration had treated a police officer’s objection as a warning about a developing situation rather than as an act of disloyalty?

Perhaps Punjab’s history would have been different.

Perhaps the atmosphere of confrontation could have been reduced before it hardened into a larger political and social conflict.

Perhaps Punjab could have avoided some of the bitterness, alienation and violence that followed.

Perhaps thousands of young people who subsequently became caught in the turmoil could have lived very different lives.

Perhaps Punjab could have entered the following decades more peaceful, more united and more progressive.

No one can establish a counterfactual with certainty. But that does not mean we should refuse to learn from the warning signs that history provides.

The lesson is particularly important for those in authority: when an officer on the ground raises a genuine objection, it deserves examination rather than automatic condemnation.

From one incident to a larger tragedy

The events of July 1982 must also be viewed in the context of what followed.

The arrest of Bhai Amrik Singh and his associates, the dharna outside the Deputy Commissioner’s residence, the growing confrontation between the administration and sections of the Sikh community, the emergence of the Dharam Yudh Morcha, and the subsequent escalation of militancy were not isolated developments.

They formed part of a progressively deteriorating situation.

The tragedy of Punjab was that opportunities for early correction became increasingly difficult to recover.

The eventual events of June 1984, including Operation Blue Star, represented the culmination of a deeply troubled period in which political, administrative, religious and security issues had become intensely intertwined.

I do not claim that the incident of 19 July 1982 alone caused Operation Blue Star. History is rarely that simple.

But I do believe that the events of those early days deserve serious examination because they form part of the chain of developments that ultimately led Punjab towards an unprecedented crisis.

The two warning letters provide a small but significant window into that period.

They reveal not merely what happened to one police officer, but also how the administration viewed dissent within its own ranks at a critical moment.

Had concerns been heard earlier, had justice been seen to be done, and had dialogue prevailed over confrontation, the course of Punjab’s history might have been different.

That possibility deserves to be examined honestly.

The warning letters became my evidence

At the time, these letters were intended to warn me.

Today, they are evidence of something else.

They establish my presence at an important incident.

They establish that there was disagreement regarding the police action.

They establish that my conduct was considered sufficiently different from the expectations of my superior authorities to warrant written warnings.

Most importantly, they remain a record of the choice I made.

I could have remained silent.

I could have avoided confrontation.

I could have followed the prevailing line and protected myself.

But I chose to stand by what I believed was right.

That choice brought mental harassment, but it did not change my conviction.

Recognition is not the purpose of right action

I have never believed that one should do the right thing merely to receive recognition.

The right action is its own reward.

Recognition may come during one’s lifetime. It may come after one’s lifetime. Or it may never come.

That should not matter.

The real test comes when doing what is right may bring personal inconvenience, professional difficulty or punishment.

That is when conscience matters most.

Historical personalities do not become historical merely because they sought recognition. They become historical because, at a critical moment, they chose duty over convenience and conscience over fear.

A proud possession for generations

After 44 years, these two warning letters are still with me.

I could have discarded them long ago.

Instead, I preserved them.

Today, I look upon them with pride—not because I was warned, but because of why I was warned.

They remind me that I was present at an important moment in Punjab’s history.

They remind me that I had the courage to question what I believed was wrong.

They remind me that I faced mental harassment but did not abandon my conviction.

And I want the generations after me to understand one important truth:

A government document does not automatically define the moral truth of an event.

Sometimes history gives a document an entirely new meaning.

A paper that was once intended as punishment can become a certificate of conscience.

A warning can become a witness. And an adverse entry in a service record can become a trophy for generations.

Let history examine the record

I am preserving these documents not to seek sympathy, nor to claim personal credit for what happened afterwards.

I am preserving them because Punjab deserves to know its history honestly.

The generations that were born after 1984 should know that the tragedy of Punjab did not emerge overnight. It developed through a series of decisions, reactions, confrontations and missed opportunities.

The record of July 1982 is one small but important part of that story.

If these documents encourage historians, administrators, police officers and future generations to examine those events objectively, then their preservation will have served a greater purpose.

Perhaps the greatest lesson is that justice delayed can become injustice multiplied.

A wrong case, if corrected in time, may remain a small administrative matter.

If ignored, defended and allowed to become a symbol of injustice, it can acquire a much larger meaning.

That is why I still believe that if the concerns raised at that early stage had been seriously considered by the senior authorities of the time, Punjab might have taken a very different path—more peaceful, more united and more progressive.

We can never know with certainty what might have been.

But we can ensure that future generations learn from what was.

I have no regret.

I continued to walk the path of justice and uprightness.

Waheguru is the ultimate Saviour.

History teaches us that truth may be tested, justice may be delayed, and those who stand for what they believe to be right may sometimes have to pay a price.

But the lesson remains timeless:

Do the right thing—not for recognition, not for reward, and not even for history—but because it is your duty.

And when history finally looks back, perhaps the very punishment imposed upon you may become the evidence that you stood on the right side of your conscience.

After 44 years, these two warning letters are no longer my punishment.

They are my proud possession.

They are a record of one officer’s conscience, a reminder of a troubled chapter in Punjab’s history, and a document for the generations to come.

Perhaps, ultimately, they will help us understand the real historical facts and the chain of developments that led Punjab from the tensions of 1982 to the tragic events of 1984, including Operation Blue Star.

History deserves nothing less than the truth.

Benefits of 14-Hour Fasting

Eating within a 10-hour window is related to increased energy and improved mood as well as decreased appetite, according to recent findings from the largest UK community research study of its kind.

The trial’s findings were presented today at the European Nutrition Conference by researchers from King’s College London.

Intermittent fasting (IF), or limiting your meal consumption to a specific time frame, is a popular weight loss method. With a ten-hour window, you limit your daily eating schedule to 10 hours and fast for the remaining 14 hours. For example, if you consume your first mouthful at 9 a.m., you must finish by 7 p.m.

Those who were consistent with their eating window had

greater benefits than those who varied their eating window day to day.

Despite the fact that certain intermittent fasting advocates frequently promote restrictive eating windows as short as six hours, data presented in the abstract suggest that eating within a less restrictive window of ten hours has beneficial health effects such as changes in mood, energy, and appetite.

Dr Sarah Berry from King’s College London and chief scientist at ZOE said, “This is the largest study outside of a tightly controlled clinic to show that intermittent fasting can improve your health in a real-world setting. What’s really exciting is that the findings show that you don’t have to be very restrictive to see positive results. A ten-hour eating window, which was manageable for most people, improved mood, energy



levels and hunger. We found for the first time that those who practised time-restricted eating, but were not consistent day to day, did not have the same



positive health effects as those who were dedicated every day.”

37,545 people on the ZOE Health app completed the core intervention period of three

weeks. Participants were asked to eat as normal for the first week and then a ten-hour eating window for two weeks.

More than 36,231 participants

opted for additional weeks and 27,371 users were classified as highly engaged. Highly engaged participants were 78% female, with a mean age of 60 and a BMI of 25.6.

Participants with a longer eating window before the intervention saw an even greater benefit to their health.

Kate Bermingham PhD, from King’s College London and ZOE, said: “This study adds to the growing body of evidence showing the importance of how you eat. The health impact of food is not just what you eat but the time at which you choose to consume your meals, and eating window is an important dietary behaviour that can be beneficial for health. Findings show that we don’t need to be eating all the time. Many people will feel satiated and even lose weight if they restrict their food to a ten-hour window.”

KUMBAKONAM VIA LONDON, WITH STOPOVER IN MADURAI

KUMBAKONAM and this column have to have something between them. The Tamil temple town zoomed into my mindscape via a person, bringing London with it. Lakshmi Narasimha Rangarajan is not a name many would recognise in India today. And even within the Indian Foreign Service, of which he was a shining star from 1956 to his death in 2013, many would not know him by that full name. But ‘LN’, as Rangarajan was to friends and colleagues, was a redoubtable figure in the small world of scholar-diplomats. I have used the hyphenated expression advisedly. LN was a scholar who became a diplomat, and while moving from station to high station abroad, representing India in Greece, Sudan, Tunisia, Norway and Iceland, remained a man of books.

My family knew him well. In 1962, when LN was serving in the national capital between postings abroad, he once strode into our home in Delhi, cigarette glowing between his lips to ‘just drop by for a cup of kaapi’—

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POLITICIANS PAID MORE FOR LESS WORK



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

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Yet that is precisely the uncomfortable reality India is facing. When Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C Joseph Vijay announced that all 234 of the state’s MLAs would be provided government vehicles, ₹75,000 a month for fuel, maintenance and driver expenses, and another ₹25,000 for an assistant, he may have intended to strengthen the capacity of legislators to serve their constituents. It’s going to cost over ₹200 crore for a full five-year

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There is a perfectly legitimate justification for providing lawmakers sufficient means to perform their responsibilities. An MLA is expected to travel through a constituency, attend public meetings, meet officials, inspect schemes and respond to thousands of individual grievances. Many of Tamil Nadu’s legislators are first-time representatives and may not possess the personal resources of established politicians. But somewhere between legitimate assistance and political largesse lies a line that democratic governments cross with increasing frequency. A facility meant to enable public service can easily become a perk which, once granted, has a remarkable tendency to become an entitlement. The citizen is meanwhile expected to accept that public expenditure must be restrained, subsidies must be rationalised and government departments must economise. The contrast is becoming increasingly difficult to defend.

It’s not a Tamil Nadu phenomenon alone. Bihar provides another revealing example. The ruling political establishment in Bihar has been remarkably expansive. Just before the state elections, it sanctioned additional official accommodation and the construction of new residential facilities for legislators. Governments change, parties change and political rhetoric changes, yet once power is acquired, the political class appears to rediscover a common fraternity: better cars, better houses, better salaries and better facilities for those who occupy legislatures. The citizen is perpetually reminded of fiscal prudence and the

legislator, rather more often, of what the public purse can provide.

That is why the question cannot be reduced to whether MLAs or MPs are paid too much. They must be paid adequately. The real issue is whether the compensation attached to public office bears any relationship to the responsibilities discharged by those who receive it. The paradox is that the political class has become more expensive while the legislature itself has become less deliberative. State Assemblies have, on average, been meeting for only a fraction of the year, with several states recording extraordinarily low numbers of sitting days. Parliament has not been immune to the malaise. Sessions are increasingly punctuated by adjournments, protests, walkouts and partisan confrontation, leaving insufficient time for the sustained examination of legislation, expenditure and executive decisions.

No one should imagine that the quality of democracy can be measured in terms of number of sittings alone. But when legislative time diminishes while political privileges expand, the citizen is entitled to ask whether the two trends can indefinitely coexist. According to unofficial estimates, the exchequer spends over ₹2,000 crore annually on 4,200-odd MLAs and 788 members of Parliament. In addition, they are also given an amount varying from ₹1 crore to ₹5 crore to spend on amenities in their own constituencies. There isn’t any credible evidence whether such a massive discretionary expenditure by each of them has made our villages or small towns a better habitat than before.

But there is an additional irony. The Indian voter is perhaps the most unforgiving auditor of political performance. Sitting legislators are routinely defeated, anti-incumbency remains one of the most powerful

forces in Indian electoral politics. Yet the citizen has almost no effective mechanism during the five-year term to demand an account of how much public money is being spent on an elected representative and what measurable public service is being delivered in return.

This does not mean that the answer is austerity for legislators. A poorly-paid politician can become more susceptible to corruption, patronage and private influence. The answer lies in establishing a more credible compact between privilege and performance. If legislators are provided vehicles, their use should be transparent and auditable. If they receive assistants, the expenditure should be accounted for. If constituency funds are placed at their disposal, every project should be traceable. If salaries and allowances are increased, there should at least be a parallel expectation of attendance, committee participation, legislative scrutiny and productive sitting days. They are leveraging their legal legislative power in their favour. Now, they are paid more for doing less work.

The danger is not that India will be bankrupted by luxurious elected leaders. The danger is that political privilege will gradually become normalised across parties and states until nobody remembers to ask where necessity ends and indulgence begins. The language of public service can then become a convenient vocabulary for private comfort, while the taxpayer is left to finance an increasingly elaborate architecture of power. India must spend money on democracy. But democracy cannot be judged by how generously it treats those who govern. It must ultimately be judged by how responsibly those who govern treat the money, institutions and trust placed in their hands. A mature democracy should not merely ask whether it can afford its politicians; it must periodically ask whether its politicians have earned the extortionate price of being afforded. India’s democracy is staring at a rather contrastive question: does India need a paid or a performing democracy?



EXPRESS

GOVTS’ CARRY TRADE A RISING GLOBAL RISK



THE THIRD EYE

SHANKKAR AIYAR

Author of *The Gated Republic*, *Aadhaar: A Biometric History of India’s 12-Digit Revolution*, and *Accidental India* (shankkar.aiyar@gmail.com)

NATIONS borrow against tomorrow’s growth. And it would seem tomorrow has arrived for many of them.

On Wednesday, the gross US federal debt crossed \$40 trillion—more than the combined GDP of China, Germany, Japan, India and the UK. Look at the interest cost. The Congressional Budget Office estimates it at \$1,039 trillion. That is more than what the US spends on defence, which itself is \$900 billion—more than that of the next six countries. In geopolitics and geoeconomics, scale defines attention.

The rise in debt is scarcely a secret. The US Debt Clock updates by the second. Over the past year, the country has added \$5.49 million to its debt per minute. The load is worsened by wars and the messy tariff landscape; Friday saw Canada walking out of its trade talks with the US. The \$40-trillion milestone sent the yield on US 30-year bonds past 5.33 percent, the highest 19 years. The rate signalled trouble across the economy—from the cost of government borrowing to

that of credit card debt. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent stepped in to declare his department would double its buyback from \$2 billion a day to \$4 billion. The long bond market rallied to 5.18 percent, only to pop up like a financial whack-a-mole.

The market mocked the intervention, calling it a band-aid on a bullet hole. Bessent, a former hedge fund operator who worked with George Soros, dismissed the retracement, stating, “Anything that happens within a 24-hour period is noise.” The signal went up in smoke. The market found Bessent and Fed Chair Kevin Warsh’s word salads unpalatable. On Friday, the yield on 30-year gilts touched 5.28 percent and nudged the benchmark 10-year to 4.74 percent.

Zoom out, and the American story is a common one of nations living beyond their means. The 10 largest economies—the G7 plus China, Russia and India—account for nearly two-thirds of global GDP at \$83 trillion. Not one of them covers spending from total revenues, let alone from taxes alone unless they borrow. It is what punters call a carry trade—borrow at one rate, hold or invest in the hope of higher returns, which in this case is GDP growth. India has its own quiet carry trade within the mechanics of fiscal management. The Reserve Bank transferred a record ₹2.87 lakh crore—a windfall from foreign exchange operations—to the government, patching up the fiscal gap.

The model for decades was to borrow at yields below nominal GDP growth rate and let growth service the debt—the scope for borrowing went up as interest rates went down after

the global financial crisis. Olivier Blanchard told a room of economists in 2019 that public debt is not problematic, as the interest rate paid on it stays below the economy’s growth rate. The equation $r < g$ has been upended. The 2026 Annual Economic Report of the BIS states the rate-growth differential has narrowed. Debt and interest rates are up and growth is sliding. As every punter knows, a carry position is viable until it is not.

Following Covid-19, public debt spiralled to near post-Second World War highs in many economies and GDP growth has also slowed from post-pandemic peaks. Sovereign debt of the G7 plus India, China and Russia, as per IMF data, is at \$94 trillion. Data on interest costs as a proportion of GDP illuminates the spectre. Interest cost borne by the top 10 economies is around \$2.23 trillion. India carries the extreme version—interest absorbs 25 percent of every rupee spent, the worst ratio of the 10, on the second-narrowest revenue base. Rising debt and deficit catalyses political rhetoric over how much is spent on whom—elections are effectively a contest of schemes.

The debt toll is rising. The world has migrated from demand deficit to supply scarcity, is navigating the punitive impact of wars and paying the price for onshoring capacity via new industrial policies. The trade does not stop at the sovereign. The sovereign is only the first floor. Below it are corporations. JP Morgan estimates the data centre buildout could touch \$5 trillion by 2030, with \$2 trillion financed in credit markets. JP Morgan CEO Jamie Dimon warned of high levels of mar-

gin debt and leverage. Ray Dalio of Bridgewater warned of a debt crisis and advised folks to buy gold.

It is layer upon layer, with lenders and borrowers assuming the asset beneath will retain value. Hedge funds borrowing against Treasuries. Private-credit funds lending against increasingly leveraged companies. Hyperscalers borrowing to finance AI infrastructure. Households borrowing against houses, shares and gold. That is how leverage becomes a pyramid. What happens in the US bond market does not stay in the bond market. Fears of a weaker dollar rattled investors at home and the prospect of higher rates hung over emerging markets. A synchronised selloff—driven by inflation concerns, rise in fiscal deficit and the rush of capex borrowers—sent long bond rates to decadal highs across advanced economies.

The higher cost of money threatens the economic and political model in democracies. The OECD spends nearly 20 percent on welfare. India must fund the world’s largest food, employment, health programmes. Even as democracies tool and retool income security schemes, the fact is that the world is yet to know the impact of AI on jobs. The murmurs of new taxes—on real estate, on billionaires—are smoke signals.

For years, governments and corporations believed they could outrun the rising cost of money. But as the carry trade turns, a delicious irony is emerging. It was once said that socialism runs out of other people’s money. Now, the modern capitalist economy may be discovering that it, too, can run out of cheap money.

MAILBAG WRITE TO letters@newindianexpress.com

Beyond punishment

Ref: *Rethink death sentence* (Aug 22). While we debate the appropriate punishment after a crime, we must also ask what can be done to prevent the next one. The debate often begins only after the crime has occurred. Preventing crime requires us to look at the circumstances, social conditions and other factors that contribute to serious offences. Punishment may hold a criminal accountable, but it cannot, by itself, guarantee another will not occur tomorrow. The real challenge is therefore not only deciding how severely to punish, but understanding why serious crimes occur. Justice must not end with punishment; it must begin with prevention.
Prasanna P, Tiruchirappalli

Quietly effective

Ref: *Future belongs to Fifth Estate* (Aug 22). It’s a gripping write-up on the activities of the Fifth Estate. There is always a silent group within in-

telligentsia that sincerely dedicates its time and energy—at times, even lives—for the common good. Most achieve their results without much fanfare. Many social reforms are the result of their hard work. The unpolluted youth work with progressive thoughts until politics creeps in. Only time will decide the future of the CJP.
Ramalingeswara Rao, email

Panic mode

Ref: *Revanth cancels US leg of trip* (Aug 22). The recent knee-jerk reactions of the central government are a sign that it is in a panic mode, and will bypass democratic norms to checkmate its political rivals. Democratic federalism in the guise of protecting self-proclaimed national interests is slowly being replaced by an autocratic mode of federalism with no real checks. The argument put forward by the foreign ministry that clearance was not given because the CM’s scheduled programme was not appropriate to the office he holds smacks of arrogance and rides over the powers of an elected state government.
Biju C Mathew, Thiruvananthapuram

FIR struggle

Ref: *After 6-hr Rahul sit-in, FIR filed on use of pellet gun* (Aug 22). That the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha has to struggle to get an FIR lodged at a police station for a protester’s pellet gun injuries is probably the result of instruction from the Union ministry the Delhi police reports to. An FIR is a basic legal document for initiating a due process. Even then, the LoP had to stage a sit-in at the Parliament Street police station. It’s time for the ruling regime to introspect and refrain from demolishing democratic institutions of natural justice.
Buddha Jagdish Rao, Visakhapatnam

Dignified debates

Ref: *House’s digital dilemma* (Aug 22). Of late, the interactions between ruling and opposition members of the Tamil Nadu Assembly have become increasingly unhealthy. They are, regrettably, losing focus on the issues raised. Discussions often stoop to an unacceptably low level, with personal attacks, insinuations and derogatory references that are neither constructive nor

palatable. Both sides have a responsibility to keep the debates issue-based, respectful and befitting the high offices they hold. The arguments can be fierce, but the language should be dignified.

K Venkatasubramanian, Chennai

Palakkad’s loss

Ref: *Mangaluru moved out of Palakkad railway division* (Aug 22). Kerala had been demanding a new railway zone for long. Now its efforts have come to naught with the railways transferring the Mangaluru area to South Western Railways’ Mysuru division. Palakkad, one of the oldest railway divisions, has become one of the smallest in today’s India. As most of the division’s revenue comes from Mangaluru, the move will undermine the very existence of the Palakkad division, as pit-line maintenance facilities will be unavailable, among other things. Introduction of new trains and special trains during festivals will also be in trouble. Kerala needs to make a strong move to press for stopping the shift.
Jishi R, Kollam

KUMBAKONAM VIA LONDON, WITH STOPOVER IN MADURAI

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It’s not a Tamil Nadu phenomenon alone. Bihar provides another revealing example. The ruling political establishment in Bihar has been remarkably expansive. Just before the state elections, it sanctioned additional official accommodation and the construction of new residential facilities for legislators. Governments change, parties change and political rhetoric changes, yet once power is acquired, the political class appears to rediscover a common fraternity: better cars, better houses, better salaries and better facilities for those who occupy legislatures. The citizen is perpetually reminded of fiscal prudence and the

legislator, rather more often, of what the public purse can provide.

That is why the question cannot be reduced to whether MLAs or MPs are paid too much. They must be paid adequately. The real issue is whether the compensation attached to public office bears any relationship to the responsibilities discharged by those who receive it. The paradox is that the political class has become more expensive while the legislature itself has become less deliberative. State Assemblies have, on average, been meeting for only a fraction of the year, with several states recording extraordinarily low numbers of sitting days. Parliament has not been immune to the malaise. Sessions are increasingly punctuated by adjournments, protests, walkouts and partisan confrontation, leaving insufficient time for the sustained examination of legislation, expenditure and executive decisions.

No one should imagine that the quality of democracy can be measured in terms of number of sittings alone. But when legislative time diminishes while political privileges expand, the citizen is entitled to ask whether the two trends can indefinitely coexist. According to unofficial estimates, the exchequer spends over ₹2,000 crore annually on 4,200-odd MLAs and 788 members of Parliament. In addition, they are also given an amount varying from ₹1 crore to ₹5 crore to spend on amenities in their own constituencies. There isn’t any credible evidence whether such a massive discretionary expenditure by each of them has made our villages or small towns a better habitat than before.

But there is an additional irony. The Indian voter is perhaps the most unforgiving auditor of political performance. Sitting legislators are routinely defeated, anti-incumbency remains one of the most powerful

forces in Indian electoral politics. Yet the citizen has almost no effective mechanism during the five-year term to demand an account of how much public money is being spent on an elected representative and what measurable public service is being delivered in return.

This does not mean that the answer is austerity for legislators. A poorly-paid politician can become more susceptible to corruption, patronage and private influence. The answer lies in establishing a more credible compact between privilege and performance. If legislators are provided vehicles, their use should be transparent and auditable. If they receive assistants, the expenditure should be accounted for. If constituency funds are placed at their disposal, every project should be traceable. If salaries and allowances are increased, there should at least be a parallel expectation of attendance, committee participation, legislative scrutiny and productive sitting days. They are leveraging their legal legislative power in their favour. Now, they are paid more for doing less work.

The danger is not that India will be bankrupted by luxurious elected leaders. The danger is that political privilege will gradually become normalised across parties and states until nobody remembers to ask where necessity ends and indulgence begins. The language of public service can then become a convenient vocabulary for private comfort, while the taxpayer is left to finance an increasingly elaborate architecture of power. India must spend money on democracy. But democracy cannot be judged by how generously it treats those who govern. It must ultimately be judged by how responsibly those who govern treat the money, institutions and trust placed in their hands. A mature democracy should not merely ask whether it can afford its politicians; it must periodically ask whether its politicians have earned the extortionate price of being afforded. India’s democracy is staring at a rather contrastive question: does India need a paid or a performing democracy?



EXPRESS

GOVTS’ CARRY TRADE A RISING GLOBAL RISK



THE THIRD EYE

SHANKKAR AIYAR
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NATIONS borrow against tomorrow’s growth. And it would seem tomorrow has arrived for many of them.

On Wednesday, the gross US federal debt crossed \$40 trillion—more than the combined GDP of China, Germany, Japan, India and the UK. Look at the interest cost. The Congressional Budget Office estimates it at \$1.039 trillion. That is more than what the US spends on defence, which itself is \$900 billion—more than that of the next six countries. In geopolitics and geoeconomics, scale defines attention.

The rise in debt is scarcely a secret. The US Debt Clock updates by the second. Over the past year, the country has added \$5.49 million to its debt per minute. The load is worsened by wars and the messy tariff landscape; Friday saw Canada walking out of its trade talks with the US. The \$40-trillion milestone sent the yield on US 30-year bonds past 5.33 percent, the highest 19 years. The rate signalled trouble across the economy—from the cost of government borrowing to

that of credit card debt. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent stepped in to declare his department would double its buyback from \$2 billion a day to \$4 billion. The long bond market rallied to 5.18 percent, only to pop up like a financial whack-a-mole.

The market mocked the intervention, calling it a band-aid on a bullet hole. Bessent, a former hedge fund operator who worked with George Soros, dismissed the retracement, stating, “Anything that happens within a 24-hour period is noise.” The signal went up in smoke. The market found Bessent and Fed Chair Kevin Warsh’s word salads unpalatable. On Friday, the yield on 30-year gilts touched 5.28 percent and nudged the benchmark 10-year to 4.74 percent.

Zoom out, and the American story is a common one of nations living beyond their means. The 10 largest economies—the G7 plus China, Russia and India—account for nearly two-thirds of global GDP at \$83 trillion. Not one of them covers spending from total revenues, let alone from taxes alone unless they borrow. It is what punters call a carry trade—borrow at one rate, hold or invest in the hope of higher returns, which in this case is GDP growth. India has its own quiet carry trade within the mechanics of fiscal management. The Reserve Bank transferred a record ₹2.87 lakh crore—a windfall from foreign exchange operations—to the government, patching up the fiscal gap.

The model for decades was to borrow at yields below nominal GDP growth rate and let growth service the debt—the scope for borrowing went up as interest rates went down after

the global financial crisis. Olivier Blanchard told a room of economists in 2019 that public debt is not problematic, as the interest rate paid on it stays below the economy’s growth rate. The equation $r < g$ has been upended. The 2026 Annual Economic Report of the BIS states the rate-growth differential has narrowed. Debt and interest rates are up and growth is sliding. As every punter knows, a carry position is viable until it is not.

Following Covid-19, public debt spiralled to near post-Second World War highs in many economies and GDP growth has also slowed from post-pandemic peaks. Sovereign debt of the G7 plus India, China and Russia, as per IMF data, is at \$94 trillion. Data on interest costs as a proportion of GDP illuminates the spectre. Interest cost borne by the top 10 economies is around \$2.23 trillion. India carries the extreme version—interest absorbs 25 percent of every rupee spent, the worst ratio of the 10, on the second-narrowest revenue base. Rising debt and deficit catalyse political rhetoric over how much is spent on whom—elections are effectively a contest of schemes.

The debt toll is rising. The world has migrated from demand deficit to supply scarcity, is navigating the punitive impact of wars and paying the price for onshoring capacity via new industrial policies. The trade does not stop at the sovereign. The sovereign is only the first floor. Below it are corporations. JP Morgan estimates the data centre buildout could touch \$5 trillion by 2030, with \$2 trillion financed in credit markets. JP Morgan CEO Jamie Dimon warned of high levels of mar-

gin debt and leverage. Ray Dalio of Bridgewater warned of a debt crisis and advised folks to buy gold.

It is layer upon layer, with lenders and borrowers assuming the asset beneath will retain value. Hedge funds borrowing against Treasuries. Private-credit funds lending against increasingly leveraged companies. Hyperscalers borrowing to finance AI infrastructure. Households borrowing against houses, shares and gold. That is how leverage becomes a pyramid. What happens in the US bond market does not stay in the bond market. Fears of a weaker dollar rattled investors at home and the prospect of higher rates hung over emerging markets. A synchronised selloff—driven by inflation concerns, rise in fiscal deficit and the rush of capex borrowers—sent long bond rates to decadal highs across advanced economies.

The higher cost of money threatens the economic and political model in democracies. The OECD spends nearly 20 percent on welfare. India must fund the world’s largest food, employment, health programmes. Even as democracies tool and retool income security schemes, the fact is that the world is yet to know the impact of AI on jobs. The murmurs of new taxes—on real estate, on billionaires—are smoke signals.

For years, governments and corporations believed they could outrun the rising cost of money. But as the carry trade turns, a delicious irony is emerging. It was once said that socialism runs out of other people’s money. Now, the modern capitalist economy may be discovering that it, too, can run out of cheap money.

MAILBAG WRITE TO letters@newindianexpress.com

Beyond punishment

Ref: *Rethink death sentence* (Aug 22). While we debate the appropriate punishment after a crime, we must also ask what can be done to prevent the next one. The debate often begins only after the crime has occurred. Preventing crime requires us to look at the circumstances, social conditions and other factors that contribute to serious offences. Punishment may hold a criminal accountable, but it cannot, by itself, guarantee another will not occur tomorrow. The real challenge is therefore not only deciding how severely to punish, but understanding why serious crimes occur. Justice must not end with punishment; it must begin with prevention.
Prasanna P, Tiruchirappalli

Quietly effective

Ref: *Future belongs to Fifth Estate* (Aug 22). It’s a gripping write-up on the activities of the Fifth Estate. There is always a silent group within in-

telligentsia that sincerely dedicates its time and energy—at times, even lives—for the common good. Most achieve their results without much fanfare. Many social reforms are the result of their hard work. The unpolluted youth work with progressive thoughts until politics creeps in. Only time will decide the future of the CJP.
Ramalingeswara Rao, email

Panic mode

Ref: *Revanth cancels US leg of trip* (Aug 22). The recent knee-jerk reactions of the central government are a sign that it is in a panic mode, and will bypass democratic norms to checkmate its political rivals. Democratic federalism in the guise of protecting self-proclaimed national interests is slowly being replaced by an autocratic mode of federalism with no real checks. The argument put forward by the foreign ministry that clearance was not given because the CM’s scheduled programme was not appropriate to the office he holds smacks of arrogance and rides over the powers of an elected state government.
Biju C Mathew, Thiruvananthapuram

FIR struggle

Ref: *After 6-hr Rahul sit-in, FIR filed on use of pellet gun* (Aug 22). That the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha has to struggle to get an FIR lodged at a police station for a protester’s pellet gun injuries is probably the result of instruction from the Union ministry the Delhi police reports to. An FIR is a basic legal document for initiating a due process. Even then, the LoP had to stage a sit-in at the Parliament Street police station. It’s time for the ruling regime to introspect and refrain from demolishing democratic institutions of natural justice.
Buddha Jagdish Rao, Visakhapatnam

Dignified debates

Ref: *House’s digital dilemma* (Aug 22). Of late, the interactions between ruling and opposition members of the Tamil Nadu Assembly have become increasingly unhealthy. They are, regrettably, losing focus on the issues raised. Discussions often stoop to an unacceptably low level, with personal attacks, insinuations and derogatory references that are neither constructive nor

palatable. Both sides have a responsibility to keep the debates issue-based, respectful and befitting the high offices they hold. The arguments can be fierce, but the language should be dignified.

K Venkatasubramanian, Chennai

Palakkad’s loss

Ref: *Mangaluru moved out of Palakkad railway division* (Aug 22). Kerala had been demanding a new railway zone for long. Now its efforts have come to naught with the railways transferring the Mangaluru area to South Western Railways’ Mysuru division. Palakkad, one of the oldest railway divisions, has become one of the smallest in today’s India. As most of the division’s revenue comes from Mangaluru, the move will undermine the very existence of the Palakkad division, as pit-line maintenance facilities will be unavailable, among other things. Introduction of new trains and special trains during festivals will also be in trouble. Kerala needs to make a strong move to press for stopping the shift.
Jishi R, Kollam

India's media-business nexus is now a constitutional crisis

CHOLLETI

There are moments when a retired judge, speaking at a commemorative lecture, says something so plainly and so urgently that it cuts through the noise of daily public life and lands with the force of a constitutional alarm. Justice K M Joseph, former judge of the Supreme Court of India, provided exactly such a moment on August 19. Delivering a lecture, organised by the Kerala High Court Bar Association, to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the United States Declaration of Independence, he did not dwell on American history. He spoke about Indian reality.

"I am really concerned," he said, "about the way the majority of the national media houses that I get to listen, how it reveals the close inextricable link between business houses and the media. How they completely destroy an otherwise healthy discourse which should happen."

He went further, describing how anchors "manipulate the discourse in such a way that it not only reveals the bias of the anchor, but it also leaves the listener in a quandary as to what is the truth." His conclusion was devastating in its simplicity: "The ultimate right of every citizen in any democracy is to pursue truth and find truth. This is the fundamental thing of any democracy, any society. This is sadly missing."

These are not the words of a partisan commentator. They are the carefully considered words of a man who served on the highest court of the republic, who has read its Constitution closely, and who has now chosen — in

retirement, without the constraints of judicial office — to say plainly what the institution he once served has been reluctant to articulate.

Consolidation of airwaves by corporate houses:

To understand the gravity of Justice Joseph's concern, one must trace the arc of Indian media ownership over the past decade. It is a story of systematic consolidation — the quiet, methodical transfer of India's most powerful information channels into the hands of its largest corporate conglomerates.

In May 2014 — the very month that a new government came to power at the Centre — Reliance Industries Limited approved funding of up to ₹4,000 crore through its Independent Media Trust to acquire control of Network18, with open offers completed by December 2014. Network18 is the parent company of CNN-News18, News18 India, CN-BC-TV18, Firstpost, Moneycontrol, and more than ten regional news channels. Reliance Industries today holds a 56.89 per cent controlling stake in Network18. One corporate group, one ownership stake, and a news reach that spans virtually every major language market in India.

Eight years later, in late 2022, came an acquisition that sent shockwaves through Indian journalism. Gautam Adani's AMG Media Networks, in what journalists and international observers widely described as a hostile takeover, raised its stake in NDTV — founded in 1988 by Prannoy Roy and Radhika Roy, and built over decades into India's most credible independent broadcast news organisation — to 64.71 per cent. The founders were ef-



Justice K M Joseph, former judge of the Supreme Court of India

fectively displaced from control of the network they had created. Adani's group has reportedly also acquired IANS, one of India's major domestic news wire agencies — an acquisition that, if confirmed, would extend corporate media control to the very raw material that hundreds of smaller outlets use to construct their daily coverage.

The Adani and Ambani acquisitions are only the most visible elements of a broader landscape of concentrated ownership. The Zee Entertainment group, the India Today group, HT Media, and the Times Group are all controlled by powerful business and family interests, whose commercial relationships with the government and the regulatory state are deep and entangling. What was once a diverse, occasionally chaotic but genuinely pluralistic media ecosystem has been steadily narrowed into a small number of powerful corporate channels.

Numbers don't lie: India's press freedom in free fall:

Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Paris-based press freedom organisation, publishes an annual World Press Freedom Index ranking 180 countries. India's trajectory on this index tells its own story. In 2012, India ranked 122nd. By 2022, it had fallen to 150th. In 2023, it plunged further to 161st. In 2024, it stood at 159th. In 2025, there was a marginal improvement to 151st. These rankings — from a credible international organisation with documented methodology — reflect the lived reality of journalists working under conditions of acute commercial pressure, legal harassment, and ownership-driven editorial constraint.

The constitutional dimension and fundamental rights: Justice Joseph's remarks were not merely sociological observations. They were a constitutional argument, carefully constructed. He cited the Supreme Court's Constitution Bench judgment in *Kaushal Kishore v. State of Uttar Pradesh*, which established that Articles 19 and 21 of the Constitution operate not only vertically — between citizen and state — but also horizontally, between private parties. This is a significant legal point with profound implications for media accountability.

"If I am invited to a debate," Justice Joseph explained, "and if I am actually snuffed out, if what I want to say I am not permitted to say, I am tortured out of shape in what I have said — all of this, in my view, constitutes a gross violation of Article 19, the right of the person, who is participating, and the right of the audience, which is wanting to find out what they are saying actually?" He also raised, with uncomfortable specificity, the issue of government advertising as a mechanism of media control — what he described as a potential "carrot and stick" relationship in which media organisations dependent on state advertising revenue develop powerful structural incentives to

The solutions are neither mysterious nor technically complex. They require only political will. A robust anti-monopoly framework for media ownership — limiting any single conglomerate's control across broadcast, print, and digital platforms — is the most fundamental need. Several mature democracies, including the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia, maintain such frameworks. India's cross-media ownership regulations remain underdeveloped and largely unenforced. Full transparency in government advertising — mandatory public disclosure of all advertising expenditure to media organisations by central and state governments — would immediately disrupt the editorial dependency that Justice Joseph described.

soften their coverage of government. The Union Government, through the Central Bureau of Communication (formerly the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity), distributes thousands of crores in annual advertising expenditure across print, digital, and broadcast media. The Supreme Court has in several rulings observed that government advertisement allocation must follow transparent, non-discriminatory criteria — but implementation has remained inconsistent.

What must change:

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any single conglomerate's control across broadcast, print, and digital platforms — is the most fundamental need. Several mature democracies, including the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia, maintain such frameworks. India's cross-media ownership regulations remain underdeveloped and largely unenforced.

Full transparency in government advertising — mandatory public disclosure of all advertising expenditure to media organisations by central and state governments — would immediately disrupt the editorial dependency that Justice Joseph described. A genuinely independent public broadcaster, insulated from government control, would

provide citizens with a baseline of unmanipulated information. Legal protection for journalists — shielding sources and preventing the weaponisation of sedition, defamation, and UAPA provisions against legitimate reporting — would begin to restore the conditions for truthful journalism.

The fourth estate's final exam:

Justice Joseph ended his remarks with an appeal to "authorities to take notice." That a former Supreme Court judge must make such an appeal — publicly, at a commemorative lecture — is itself a measure of how far institutional failure has progressed.

Citizens of a democracy cannot make free and meaningful choices if the information they receive is curated by the same corporate interests that simultaneously seek government contracts, regulatory approvals, and favourable policy outcomes.

When media ownership is concentrated in the hands of conglomerates whose fortunes are intertwined with the decisions of the government of the day, the media ceases to be the fourth pillar of democracy and becomes, instead, its first servant.

Justice Joseph watched his television every day with the hope that things would change. So do millions of Indians. That hope, however, will not survive much longer on hope alone. It requires action — legal, legislative, and regulatory — before the damage to democratic discourse becomes irreversible.

(The writer is with the Cholleti BlackRobe Chambers, Hyderabad, and writes on economy, politics and law.)

Proposed delimitation in Telangana: A different ball game in the offing

P V KONDAL RAO

COME what may, the next Assembly elections may witness a different ball game altogether in Telangana. The increased number of seats, the rotation of reservations and allocation of seats to women could add several new dimensions to electoral politics in the State. Likewise, a probable increase in the number of Lok Sabha constituencies may pave the way for altered reservations in at least four parliamentary seats. Delimitation, therefore, is not merely an exercise in redrawing boundaries. In Telangana, it could become a political reset with consequences for parties, aspirants and established political equations alike.

The possibility of a fresh delimitation has already begun to generate anticipation among political circles. If the number of Assembly constituencies rises substantially, many constituencies that have acquired a familiar political identity over the years could be redrawn or bifurcated. Areas that have traditionally voted together may find themselves separated, while previously peripheral mandals and urban settlements could acquire greater political significance. For sitting legislators, this could mean that a constituency won repeatedly is no longer the same constituency when the next election arrives.

The impact would be even more consequential if the exercise coincides with the constitutional requirement of reserving a proportion of seats for women. The reservation of one-third of seats for women in legislative assemblies, following the constitutional changes that have already been made, has the potential to alter the political landscape significantly. In Telangana, where electoral politics has historically been dominated by men, such a transition could open the doors for a new generation of women leaders. But it could also unsettle established political families and aspirants who have spent years cultivat-

Reservation rotation would add another layer of uncertainty

ing their constituencies. Reservation rotation would add another layer of uncertainty. A constituency that has remained general for several elections could become reserved for Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes, while an existing reserved constituency could return to the general category. Such changes would not merely affect candidates; they could redraw the social and political arithmetic of entire districts. Parties would have to identify candidates afresh, sometimes abandoning leaders who have built considerable influence in a constituency only to find that the seat is no longer available to them.

This is where delimitation could become particularly disruptive for Telangana's political parties. The Congress, BRS and BJP have different organisational strengths and social coalitions. A change in constituency boundaries can either reinforce or dilute these advantages. A party that has performed strongly in a particular cluster of villages may find its support base divided between two constituencies. Conversely, an emerging urban or semi-urban belt could become a new political battleground if it receives a separate constituency.

The urbanisation of Telangana makes the exercise still more complex. Hyderabad and its surrounding areas have undergone dramatic demographic and spatial transformation. Municipal expansion, new residential corridors, industrial clusters and rapidly developing peripheral areas have altered the political geography of the State. Delimitation based on population could therefore give greater weight to rapidly growing urban and peri-urban regions. The old distinction between rural and urban politics may consequently become less meaningful.

The Lok Sabha picture could be equally intriguing. Telan-



The larger question is whether Telangana's political class is prepared for this transformation. Constituencies are not merely lines on a map. Over decades, they acquire identities, loyalties, local leaderships and social equations. Changing those boundaries can disrupt established political ecosystems almost overnight. A leader who is invincible in one constituency may become vulnerable after its composition changes. A relatively unknown candidate may suddenly inherit a favourable demographic equation.

gana currently has 17 parliamentary constituencies. Any increase in their number would necessarily trigger a fresh exercise in boundary formation and reservation. Parliamentary constituencies that have acquired a distinct political identity could be reshaped. More importantly, changes in the SC and ST population distribution and the rotation of reserved constituencies could alter the status of some existing seats. At least four parliamentary constituencies could potentially witness significant changes in reservation, depending on the final delimitation and reservation exercise.

For national parties, this would be a crucial opportunity to reassess their Telangana strategy. A larger parliamentary representation would mean greater political weight for the State in Delhi. For regional parties, it would mean that the organisational map built around the existing constituencies may no longer be sufficient. The BRS, which once

possessed a deeply entrenched constituency-level network, would have to contend with altered electoral geography. The Congress, in power in the State, would face the test of converting administrative influence into electoral advantage. The BJP, meanwhile, would see the new map as an opportunity to expand beyond the pockets where it has traditionally been competitive.

Yet delimitation cannot be reduced to a political opportunity for parties. It is fundamentally a constitutional exercise intended to ensure fair representation. Population must remain the principal consideration, while demographic realities and constitutional safeguards must be respected. The process must also be transparent enough to inspire public confidence. Boundary changes should not be perceived as being designed to benefit or disadvantage a particular political party or social group.

The larger question is wheth-

er Telangana's political class is prepared for this transformation. Constituencies are not merely lines on a map. Over decades, they acquire identities, loyalties, local leaderships and social equations. Changing those boundaries can disrupt established political ecosystems almost overnight. A leader who is invincible in one constituency may become vulnerable after its composition changes. A relatively unknown candidate may suddenly inherit a favourable demographic equation.

That is why the next Assembly election could look substantially different from every election Telangana has witnessed since its formation. New constituencies could produce new leaders; reservation rotation could bring unexpected faces into the contest; women's reservation could transform candidate selection; and an expanded Lok Sabha map could create a new balance between the State's regions and political forces.

The real game, therefore, may begin well before the election notification. Parties will have to study population shifts, constituency-level voting patterns, caste and community composition, urbanisation and local leadership with unprecedented precision. Aspirants will have to decide whether to remain in their traditional political territory or move with the new constituency map. Voters, too, will have to adapt to constituencies that may carry familiar names but represent entirely different social and geographical realities.

Telangana's next electoral contest may consequently be fought on a map that bears little resemblance to the one on which the previous battle was fought. Delimitation could change not only the boundaries of constituencies but also the boundaries of political possibility. The next election, therefore, may not simply be another contest for power. It could be the beginning of a new political geography for Telangana.

Cricket was more gentlemanly in the good old days

VANAM JWALA
NARASIMHA RAO

Today's cricket is technology-driven. Decisions are no longer left entirely to the naked eye of umpires. There is DRS (Decision Review System), ultra-edge, ball-tracking, slow-motion replays, spider-cam, LED stumps, and instant third-umpire irrevocable verdicts, flashing on giant screens. Every no-ball is checked frame by frame. Every appeal is dissected precisely. The game has become faster, louder, commercially vibrant, from five-day Test matches to One-Day Internationals (ODIs) to T20s. The cricket of the 1960s, when I played and watched cricket it was pure, patient, and played in what was proudly called as the 'Sportsman spirit'.

In the absence of television sets, we listened to every word of radio commentators like Vizzy (Maharaj Kumar of Vizianagaram) and Chakrapani. Cricket lovers imagined every stroke and every wicket. For instance, in January 1964, the England team, then officially known as the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), the historic London-based club that governed English cricket for decades, toured India. Under the captaincy of MJK Smith, MCC played five Test matches and two first-class (county) matches.

The match between South Zone and MCC was played at Fateh Maidan (LB Stadium) in Hyderabad from January 7-9, 1964. South Zone was defeated by an innings and 27 runs. Out of our love for the game, some of us who were studying at Khammam College came to Hyderabad for the first time to watch that match. All five Test matches ended in draws. Tiger Pataudi won the toss in all five matches. In the first match at Madras, Farokh Engineer was replaced at the last moment by Buddhi Kunderan due to injury. After Kunderan scored 192 runs, he was retained as the opener-wicketkeeper for the remaining four matches. In the final Test at Kanpur, despite winning the toss, Pataudi surprisingly chose



to put England in to bat first.

England scored a massive 559 runs for the loss of 8 wickets, throwing a big challenge before India, since it was forced to follow on as feared. India were all out for just 266 runs in their first innings. Since Bapu Nadkarni, who had come in at the end as a bowler in the first innings, played well and remained not out, Pataudi asked him to open the batting in the second innings. Nadkarni responded magnificently with a century and remained unbeaten, saving India from defeat. It bore the tactical brilliance of Pataudi and the extraordinary character of Nadkarni.

One unforgettable reminiscence was the legendary bowling of Nadkarni. In one famous spell (Madras Test against MCC), he bowled an astonishing 32 consecutive overs, with 27 maidens, including 21 consecutive or 131 dot balls in a row, conceding just five runs.

Today, with aggressive batting, fielding restrictions, and powerplays, such an achievement of sustained accuracy is unimaginable, and would be nearly impossible.

Each player had distinct stylish mannerisms that won many hearts.

I recall that there was an instance during the series when several MCC players fell ill. At one stage, they did not have eleven fully fit players on the field. Indian players stepped into the field for them. It was all in the true 'sportsman spirit' unlike today.

There was no talk of 'match fixing'. No betting scandals. No media trials. Just pride in per-

formance and respect for the opponent. Cricket today is faster, richer, and scientifically analysed. Cricket then was slower, quieter, and emotionally deeper. Today's players are global celebrities. In those days, players were admired like artists. Today we watch in ultra-HD clarity. Then we listened and imagined. And perhaps that imagination made the memories even more beautiful.

I remember how Jaisimha was initially overlooked for the Australia tour, only to be recalled. He rewarded the selectors with a fine century in the second innings. I also remember Syed Abid Ali excelling as opening bowler, opening batsman, and even wicketkeeper.

At one stage, the Indian Test side was dominated by south zone players, many from Hyderabad, including Pataudi and Jaisimha. I clearly recall Garfield Sobers taking a catch against south zone in Hyderabad and expressing doubt, as he felt his fingers might have touched the ground. Despite the umpire seeking clarification, Sobers honestly admitted his uncertainty, but the next day, a section of the media criticised him for not speaking up before being formally asked, an ironic response to an act of rare integrity.

Then, cricket was guided by conscience and character, when a player's word could decide an outcome, and we trusted the spirit of the game. Now, it is governed by cameras and precision, where technology confirms every verdict. From conscience to cameras, that, perhaps, is 'then and now'.

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

India's space leaps show its self-assured momentum

India's space policy reforms have unlocked private sector potential like never before, but there are a few key challenges that need to be resolved if the momentum is to be maintained

This National Space Day (August 23) feels especially celebratory given India unlocked a key space capacity — private-sector orbital launch. Skyroot Aerospace's success with the lift-off of Vikram-1, an orbital-class launch vehicle, and deployment of multiple payloads in the low Earth orbit (LEO) made India the third country in the world to have private launch capacity, after the US and China.

The mission, called Aagaman (Sanskrit for "arrival") was Skyroot Aerospace's follow-up to its 2022 suborbital Vikram-S flight, which made it India's first private company to reach space. For India, the July launch was the dawn of a new space era, as a Skyroot commentator put it.

It was also, in many ways, a payoff of a decade-long bet made by India on space policy reforms.

Today, there are more than 400 space startups and companies in the country, working on everything from satellites, components, space engineering, traffic management and even rocket engines. The diverse payloads that Skyroot's Aagaman dropped off in orbit included a nanosatellite pathfinder from Grahav Space, a robotic arm built by CosmoServe Space to capture space debris, and Skyroot's own satellite.

Six years ago, all of this would not have

seemed possible, that is, if the department of space hadn't opened up the sector to privatisation. Till 2019, Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), was India's only, State-run space programme. It was the designer, manufacturer, launcher, owner and operator of virtually every Indian space asset. Private companies like Ananth Technologies (founded 1992) or MITAR Technologies (founded 1970) built hardware and core components to ISRO's specifications. For a private company, there was no path to owning a satellite, operating a launch vehicle or selling a space-based service commercially.

This changed in 2020, when the government ended ISRO's monopoly by opening up the sector and launching IN-SPACe (Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre), which became a single-window regulator and facilitator for private companies to set up spacetech shops.

The same year, ISRO created NewSpace India Limited (NSIL), a company whose aim was to transfer IN-SPACe-developed technology into private hands. Through NSIL, ISRO has executed 118 technology transfer agreements with private companies in the last five years.

The other important policy shift was opening the doors to ISRO's testing centres and facilities. Startups didn't have the capex to build testing chambers from scratch. Instead, ISRO provided launch pad, motor-casting and liquid-engine testing facilities at a steep discount so companies could get their technology tested, validated and simulated.

Another action that worked in the space industry's favour was encouraging strong academic research and industry collaborations inside top institutions in the country. IIT Madras, for example, is alone responsible for incubating and supporting 11 space-tech start-

ups including Agnikul Cosmos and GalaxEye.

Another regulatory framework, the Indian Space Policy 2023, offered clear operating guidelines, zoning rules and a degree of regulatory certainty for venture capitalists to make bets on space ventures. In 2024, the government allowed up to 100% foreign direct investment (FDI) in startups working in satellite components, ground equipment, about 74% FDI for satellite manufacturing and operations and 49% FDI to build launch vehicles and spaceports, opening up the sector to further capital bets.

Thanks to these policy and regulatory changes, as well as ISRO's active support, private sector participation has blossomed.

However, this leap has also brought with it the pressures of a maturing market. In 2021, about 21 space startups in India raised \$43 million, according to India SpaceTech Report by Tracxn. By mid-2026, this has become 440 companies and \$871 million in cumulative funding. Just ahead of its own rocket launch, Skyroot raised \$50-60 million through private venture capital, putting its valuation past \$1.1 billion and making it India's first space-tech unicorn.

This consolidation is part of a classic sign of a decreasing risk appetite. Over 60% of all capital invested in space went to safe bets: Skyroot Aerospace (\$150 million), Pixxel (\$96 million), Agnikul Cosmos (\$76 million) and Digantara (\$67 million). Out of 285 startups that Tracxn Data tracked, only 72 have successfully been funded, the rest falling off the wayside. Considering that space hardware requires immense upfront capital expenditure, long R&D cycles, and rigorous regulatory clearances, this, to a degree, understandable from capital's vantage. But it also means that more needs to be done to add width along with depth to the space sector.



Shweta Taneja



India's space ambitions have skyrocketed, not only amongst players, but also amongst the citizens who have come to associate a particular pride on the global stage with the country's space capabilities.

PTI

This could very likely prove challenging, as both the US and China also seem to be struggling here. In the US, SpaceX and OneWeb alone account for more than half of the capital raised by the top ten space companies. China has more startups by headcount and though the underlying private capital is shaky, the country has patient State funding to support its space ambitions.

This global space race also comes with new challenges for India's star-performer ISRO who has been so far the bulwark of the private industry. There are only two operational launch pads in India, both at Sriharikota, both prioritised for ISRO's own missions. This leaves private players scrambling or waiting for a long while for tests or launch slots — sometimes as long as 18-24 months. Most startups can't afford to fund that long a runway before blast-off.

ISRO has been unable to increase their launch frequency. In 2025, ISRO launched only five rockets from Sriharikota against roughly 165 orbital launches by SpaceX. Less launches mean fewer opportunities to catch quality issues, slower institutional learning and a longer wait for indigenous startups to send their payloads into LEO.

India's reusable launch vehicle programme, called Soorya, also lags behind. It received

₹8,240 crore of Cabinet approval in September 2024, but will not take first flight before 2032. This means that for the next five years, India will spend more on expendable rockets while rivals including SpaceX and some Chinese operators are already using reusable rocket fleets.

This pressure to deliver is likely showing up in ISRO's recent performance. In January 2026, ISRO lost its reliable RSLV-C62 along with 15 international payloads, causing India's commercial space-ride-share partners such as Nepal and Brazil to cancel future bookings.

And, most importantly, it is the very opening up of the private space sector that has caused a recent headache for ISRO, a high attrition rate. Over the recent months, around 100-120 senior scientists have resigned or taken early voluntary retirement. There have been 80 resignations from UR Rao Satellite Centre (URSC) in Bengaluru, which handles satellite design and integration, while Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC), ISRO's primary rocket-building facility has seen at least 20 personnel resign. Both Skyroot Aerospace co-founders, Pawan Kumar Chandana and Naga Bahrath Daka are former ISRO scientists from VSSC.

Though a thriving private sector is a healthy sign of a competitive economy, in an industry like space, senior scientists leaving can cause

State projects to be delayed. This has led to the department of space issue an order in July last month, tightening resignation rules for personnel on critical projects.

But it is clear that, despite these challenges, India's space ambitions have skyrocketed, not only amongst players, but also amongst the citizens who have come to associate a particular pride on the global stage with the country's space capabilities. In the coming years, Skyroot plans to launch Vikram-2, ISRO is aiming to send a crewed flight into space, while India's Bharatiya Antariksh Station (BAS-1) will be ready by 2028. There are also plans for a manned lunar mission by 2040.

Amid the Space Race 2.0 which will shoot in relentlessly into the new decade, India will need to ramp up its infrastructure and improve reliability if it wants to remain one of the top contenders. To make it to the moon, India needs to support the ambitions of the private sector, strengthen its infrastructure and boost its institutions with both patient capital and rocket scientists. And do it at supersonic speed.

Shweta Taneja is an author and columnist based in Bengaluru. She tracks the evolving relationship between science, technology and modern society. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Growing poverty of a once-rich language

Is English the richest of all languages? Not being fluent in any other, I have no way of answering that question authoritatively. But, that said and done, I suspect the answer could be yes. So, purely on the basis of a crude hunch, let me explain why. First, the English tradition of separate and unique collective nouns for a variety of wildlife. I admit I'm fascinated by this. Most of us know of shoals of fish, packs of wolves, flocks of geese, herds of elephant or prides of lion. But here are a few that took me completely by surprise. The credit goes to Bambi Rao and Syeda Imam who years ago sent out a round-robin email which I saved for a rainy day. For instance, did you know of a pod of whales, a rafter of turkeys, a muster of peacocks, a cuffle of asses (when roped together), a drove of asses (when driven), a skein of geese (when in flight) and a skulk of foxes?

Not to be out done by his own discov-

eries, Bambi has also suggested a collective noun for bankers. Borrowing from the good Reverend Spooner, he proposes "a bunch of bankers".

But it's not just the collective nouns that seem to differ for each animal in English. So too does the word for the sounds they make. Dogs bark, cats mew, snakes hiss, wolves howl, horses neigh, tigers roar, cows moo, hyenas laugh, elephants trumpet, mice squeal, pigs grunt, donkeys bray and ducks quack! Can any other language beat that?

Even the statement that birds tweet or chirp can be further refined depending on which bird you have in mind. Crows caw, peacocks scream, owls hoot, swallows titter, parrots squawk, doves coo, nightingales warble, magpies chatter, cocks crow, turkeys gobble, whilst larks, believe it or not, sing!

Now, you could ask why the English language has such well-defined specificity for wildlife and, indeed, birds

in particular. The answer, I suspect, may have something to do with 19th century mid-Victorian zoology and ornithology. Or just plain British eccentricity. Either way, it's made the language delightful and wondrous.

However, it's not just the fact that the English language has specific collective nouns for different collections of wildlife or precise terms for the sounds they produce that could make it the richest of all, it also has a variety of different synonyms for the same word. According to The Oxford English Thesaurus, there are 380 for the simple word "good". And, if you believe what you read on the net, a certain Paul Dickson of the US has found more than 3,000 for the word "drunken". They're all included in a book called "Drink: The Definitive Drinker's Dictionary"! And I would add that if you lay your hands on a good thesaurus you can while away several hours in amused wonderment.

The sad part is that this rich heritage has not just fallen into disuse but is in danger of being forgotten except by the fussy or the aged. After all, how often do we use the "right" collective noun or the *mot juste* for a particular sound? Rarely, if ever, is the answer. Worse, those who do are often sniggered at.

Instead of rejoicing in the richness English offers, we've all dumbed down and happily settled for the limited range of sms-speak. Imprecise words like "good", "nice", "bad" and the dreadful "awesome" have colonised our minds

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and begun to dominate our speech. Quite frankly, the loss is ours.

Finally, you can have a great deal of fun with the English language in ways that I suspect you can't with many others. Read the first two stanzas of this *Ode to the Spell Checker* and see if you agree:

*Eye halve a spelling chequer
It came with my pea sea
It plainly marques four my revue
Miss steaks eye kin knot sea.
Eye strike a key and type a word
And weight four it two say
Weather eye am wrong oar write
It shows me strait a weigh.*

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

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



A double burden for women in dengue season

As the monsoon season progresses, it brings with it a host of vector-borne diseases. Dengue and malaria are perhaps the best known. But when such illnesses strike, who gives up workdays to care for the sick, who spends sleepless nights tending to them, who is saddled with extra chores around the house or fields, and who is tasked with keeping the household going and handling hospital visits? It is almost always the woman of the house. With nearly 300,000 dengue cases reported in India last year, and malaria still entrenched in the country's poorest districts, the unpaid caregiving load on women has grown into a hidden public health crisis of its own. Women provide informal care in up to 83% of malaria cases and spend roughly four times more days caregiving than men when a family member falls ill.

Almost 70% of community health workers are women who work at risk of contracting diseases themselves to deliver care. Yet, this labour is rarely acknowledged or paid adequately. They manage the household mosquito control that functions as informal public-health work, while men mostly retain control over health spending and treatment decisions.

Women carry biological risk in an amplified measure. Dengue during pregnancy triples the risk of maternal mortality, while malaria poses additional risks during pregnancy. Women bear a greater burden of water- and vector-borne diseases than men, evident through higher disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) lost. Close to two-thirds of India's female agricultural workforce face heightened mosquito exposure simply by going to work. But not going to work even for a few days can have a disastrous impact on household income.

In this context, the recent regulatory approval for India's first dengue vaccine matters well beyond the clinic. Every case

of dengue prevented is also a caregiving burden prevented, a wage not lost, a school day not missed by a daughter pulled in to help at home. A vaccine adds a durable layer of prevention that vector control alone cannot guarantee, and it does so at the exact point where health policy and gender equity meet. It is a quiet but concrete step toward closing the caregiving gap that dengue and malaria have imposed on Indian women.

"Vector-borne diseases are not gender-neutral. Women face a dual burden as caregivers, frontline health workers and are disproportionately affected at the community level as they are at risk themselves. This fact goes unrecognised and their contribution is rarely acknowledged. Effective prevention and control strategies must acknowledge these realities and place gender equity at the centre of public health action," says Dr Neeraj Dhingra, former director, Nation Centre for Vector Borne Disease Control.

Disease outbreaks deepen existing inequalities. Prevention is, therefore, both a health and gender-equity strategy. Dr NK Ganguly, former director general, Indian Council of Medical Research, says, "Malaria in pregnancy remains a leading cause of illness and death for mothers and their children.

Paediatric dengue can be particularly fatal, and watching a child fight it takes a devastating toll on a mother's mental health. Yet women are often the last to receive treatment and primary health care and remain particularly vulnerable to the stigma these conditions carry. Ensuring that the vaccine reaches these women and their children must be the next priority."

Policy responses should strengthen vector control and other public-health interventions while complementing them with preventive strategies, including vaccines.

The views expressed are personal

Poor policy gives a good biofuel bad rep

India's ambitious biofuels programme is at a crossroads, not least because the country's chief economic adviser, V Anantha Nageswaran, in a recent newspaper article, cautioned against moving to higher ethanol blends without proper assessments and even advocated bringing back the lower E10 blend for older vehicles. His warning is remarkable because it is rare for government economists to air views that don't explicitly agree with current policy. In the public's imagination, the issue still is largely about the "corrosive" effects of E20 petrol on vehicles not equipped to handle the fuel blend. The real issue is much deeper, one tied to food security and sustainability in the world's most populous nation.

Ethanol blending isn't necessarily a bad policy. Done right, it can benefit farmers. In fact, it has benefited sugarcane growers by improving the ability of millers to make timely payments to them. However, it's time the government thoroughly reviewed the blending programme and its longer-term impact on agriculture, food systems and the larger economy for three reasons.

One, the blending programme that began with the National Biofuel Policy 2018 has now entered a high-blend phase. In June, 48 retail outlets of public oil marketing companies started dispensing E85 for so-called flex fuel vehicles. This fol-

lowed a draft notification of the road transport and highways ministry issued on April 27, 2026, allowing flex-fuel vehicles running on E85 and E100. There are no publicly available records of the rationale behind this sudden move up the ethanol value chain.

Two, a move to higher petrol blends is outside the scope of the National Biofuel Policy 2018, as amended in 2022. The government's gazette notification, amending the biofuels policy and published on 15 June 2022, increases the blending percentage to E20 for petrol by 'ethanol supply year 2025-26' and biodiesel to 5% by 2030. It's important to note that the April 27 draft gazette notification, which introduces E85 and E100, pertains to the Central Motor Vehicles Rules 1989, allowing flex-fuel vehicles, which can handle higher ethanol blends. It doesn't amend the biofuel programme itself.

The third reason why a review of the biofuels programme is necessary, is to have an updated cost-benefit analysis at higher blends, drawing especially from data from the past seven years or so. It's not helpful to have a dogmatic 'crops are for food, not fuel' position that biofuel critics hold. Surplus biomass can and should be converted to fuel if it is sustainable. However, the government ought to carefully weigh its current ethanol incentive structure, which is tilted towards two



The government ought to carefully weigh its current ethanol incentive structure, which is tilted towards two water-guzzling crops: sugarcane and rice.

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water-guzzling crops: sugarcane and rice.

Financial incentives, including a discounted Good and Services Tax rate, have pushed up distillers' capacity to produce ethanol, which now stands at an annual 8.38 billion litres. With such massive capacity, distillers would naturally want authorities to ramp up blending. By 2025, the government's target was to divert up to six million tonnes of sugar to ethanol. The sugar industry has requested the government to reserve at least 50% of total ethanol procurement from sugarcane-based feedstock. As for rice, the food ministry has been allocating rice owned by it to ethanol distilleries at a heavily subsidised price of ₹2,320 per quintal, nearly 40% below its acquisition costs. As per Nageswaran's estimates, blends higher than E20 can only come from foodgrain. So, not only is this a perverse incentive, but it could indeed lead

to fuel crowding out food.

Incentivising water-intensive, irrigation-dependent crops, such as rice and cane, for ethanol will deepen India's longstanding problems of unsustainable agriculture. The US and Brazil, major ethanol producers, use corn (maize) and cane as feedstock. However, unlike in India, a majority of the area of these crops in these countries are irrigated by rain, not by groundwater. Corn can be a hardy alternative crop but its productivity is too low — four tonne per hectare compared to the US's 13-14 tonne — to sustain higher ethanol demand. Without a careful consideration of these key issues, higher ethanol blending may fuel an environmental and agricultural disaster in the long-run.

Zia Haq is a policy analyst. The views expressed are personal



Zia Haq



{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

The value of holistic education

This is with reference to "How Doon shapes its young students" by Karan Thapar (Aug 16). Education is not only about academic achievement, but building confidence and character. Teachers who guide students with empathy leave a lasting impression. Doon's lesson is simple and profound: Learn from failure, find your own path.

Sanjay Chopra

Unbiased attitude and behaviour in courts

This is with reference to "Tales of brilliant men and perfect victims" by Namita Bhandare (Aug 16). Courts must treat high-profile accused men in rape cases as criminals, and not make rape victims feel inferior. Lawyers must maintain dignity while questioning rape victims in court.

Abhilasha Gupta

Her ordeal started 13 years ago, and sadly, will only finish when she passes away. Tarun Tejpal may serve his sentence behind bars, but she will suffer endlessly outside. Such is the level of patriarchy in India.

Bal Govind

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com