

Opinion

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Beware of the golfer returning from a lesson

FAIRWAY FILES

Rahil Gangjee



THERE'S A PARTICULAR type of golfer I've learnt to be cautious around over the years. Not the one who buys a new driver every season because he believes modern technology will finally solve a problem his swing created twenty years ago. Not even the golfer who announces, before teeing off, that he's "not playing well these days" and then proceeds to shoot three under.

I'm talking about the golfer returning from a lesson. You'll recognise him immediately. There's a quiet confidence. A different energy. Last week, he was struggling with a slice and blaming tight shoulders. This week, he has terminology.

"Coach says I need to shallow the club." "My sequencing is off." "Need to use the ground more." The vocabulary changes much faster than the golf. I say this with affection because professional golfers may actually be worse. Over the years, I've had enough coaches and enough swing changes to fill a small instruction manual. There have been phases where I was convinced I had discovered something profound — a feeling in transition, a position at the top of the backswing, a move through impact that suddenly made everything easier. For about ten days, life improves dramatically. Practice sessions become enjoyable. Golfers know this feeling well — that dangerous period where optimism arrives before evidence.

I remember one season after spending weeks working on my swing and genuinely believing things had clicked. My coach and I was pleased. We had videos comparing old positions and new positions. Everything looked efficient and repeatable. The first event arrived. I stood on the opening tee carrying the confidence of someone who thought he had solved golf. The first drive disappeared so far left that even spectators seemed surprised. By the turn, I had abandoned several new thoughts and was mentally apologising to my old swing for criticising it so harshly. That's the thing about golf instruction. Improvement doesn't arrive dramatically. More often, confusion arrives first.

Club golfers go through exactly the same emotional cycle, except with slightly more enthusiasm and much lower stakes.

The most entertaining phase is immediately after the lesson. Improvement becomes contagious. The golfer who has spent one hour with a coach suddenly sees swing faults everywhere. Playing partners become projects. I've often sat quietly during these conversations because golf advice is dangerous territory. Give someone a swing thought and you may become responsible for three months of poor golf. What fascinates me, though, is how willingly golfers place themselves in situations where they might fail. Think about it. Most adults become increasingly protective of competence. We stop doing things we aren't good at. We prefer familiarity. Golf asks the opposite. Golf repeatedly convinces intelligent, successful people to wake early, spend money, practise awkward movements and publicly struggle — often in front of friends who remember every poor shot.

And still they return. Not only return, but seek lessons. I've seen golfers in their sixties taking instruction with the enthusiasm of juniors. Working on posture. They simply want to hit the ball a little better next month than they did this month.

That desire to improve never really leaves golfers. Perhaps that's why lessons create so much excitement. They bring

possibility. Possibility is powerful in golf. One well-struck seven iron can erase memories of terrible previous rounds. One lesson can make next weekend feel different.

Of course, golf eventually intervenes. The new swing thought becomes complicated. Scores remain stubborn. Frustration returns. Somewhere around the third poor round, the golfer who was discussing pressure shifts and sequencing quietly returns to older habits. Tour life gives the impression that elite golfers have certainty. The truth is far less glamorous. Players search constantly. New feels, old feels, technical adjustments, putting changes. Confidence in golf is fragile regardless of level. The difference between a touring professional and a club golfer is often smaller than people think.

I've also noticed that golfers returning from lessons become unusually optimistic about timelines. This fascinates me. The coach might have said, "We'll need a few months." The golfer hears: "Should be sorted by next Saturday." Improvement in golf is perhaps the only thing slower than golfers expect and faster than they fear. Because golfers, by nature, are impatient people pretending to play a patient sport. We want immediate returns. Hit ten good balls on the range and we assume the problem is fixed. Miss three fairways the following round and we question everything again. I've gone through this cycle myself. There were periods on tour where one encouraging practice round completely changed my mood. Suddenly the hotel room seemed nicer, food tasted better and the week looked promising. Golf has an extraordinary ability to influence emotional weather. The opposite happens too.

Good coaches remind golfers that improvement is untidy, progress is uneven and frustration is part of learning

Which is why good coaches matter. The best ones aren't always teaching technique. Often they're managing expectations. They're reminding golfers that improvement is untidy, progress is uneven and frustration is part of learning.

That message, unfortunately, is less exciting than believing your new swing has arrived fully formed after a Tuesday afternoon lesson. Both hate missing short putts.

Both overanalyse poor rounds. Both believe the next tweak could change everything. And both occasionally convince themselves they've figured the game out.

That belief never lasts long. Golf has a remarkable ability to humble certainty.

Yet perhaps that's why people stay with it for decades. I've begun thinking that lessons are less about technique and more about hope. The coach may alter your backswing, but what he's really offering is optimism. The possibility that golf can become enjoyable again. As golfers get older, progress becomes rarer in most areas of life. We accept routines. We become comfortable. Golf refuses comfort. It keeps asking questions. Can you improve? Can you adapt? Can you stay patient? Maybe that's why I've grown softer toward the golfer returning after a lesson.

Years ago, I found the enthusiasm amusing. Now I find it reassuring. Because beneath all the technical language and exaggerated confidence sits something simple — belief. Belief that effort still matters. There are worse ways to grow older.

So the next time your regular playing partner arrives discussing hip rotation and transition patterns after a lesson, let him enjoy it. Listen patiently. Encourage the optimism. Because for a brief period, before golf reintroduces reality, he'll believe everything is about to improve. And honestly, that hopeful version of a golfer is usually quite nice to be around.

Until he starts giving swing advice on the fourth tee. Then all bets are off!

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

The world assumes the vital oil chokepoint will reopen soon. History suggests blockades can last far longer than markets expect

JAVIER BLAS

WHEN THE SUEZ Canal closed in 1967 after war broke out between Egypt and Israel, 15 ships got trapped inside the waterway. They dropped anchor to wait for the hostilities to stop. The conflict ended quickly. Aptly, it was called the Six-Day War, but the canal remained closed for eight years. When the ships were finally allowed to leave, in 1975, only two remained seaworthy. The rest were so rusted they became known as the Yellow Fleet.

History doesn't repeat, but it rhymes. So what if something similar were to happen in the Strait of Hormuz? It's a nightmare few contemplate, and it's certainly not my own base case. But nearly 90 days since the US-Israeli war on Iran all but closed the oil-and-gas sea route, it's worth considering what seems unthinkable but has happened elsewhere. Call it historical science fiction.

Perhaps it won't come to this. Washington and Tehran are talking, via Pakistani mediators, about ending the conflict and reopening the chokepoint. But what if a deal was limited initially to a one-page long memorandum of understanding? Would that clear the strait fully?

Tellingly, the United Arab Emirates has accelerated plans for a second pipeline bypassing the strait, which it hopes to put into service in 2027. This is prudent worst-case scenario planning — and a strong signal that Abu Dhabi thinks the waterway could remain imperiled far longer than many others believe.

The industry consensus on the reopening is less apocalyptic. Asking my contacts in the commodity and financial world, most seem to think Hormuz will reopen next month, at worst in July. Why? Mostly because the consequences of the opposite happening — much higher energy prices and serious economic damage — are too painful to consider. In the 1980s, American economist Herbert Stein made a famous observation: "If something cannot go on forever, it will stop." Today, Wall Street is leaning on a slightly tweaked version of Stein's Law: "The Strait of Hormuz cannot be closed forever because it



Until now, the energy industry has managed to cope with the disappearance of about 20 million barrels that passed through Hormuz. Fortunately, the market was oversupplied going into the war

What if the Strait of Hormuz didn't reopen?

will cause too much economic damage. Therefore, it will reopen."

The problem is the closure is yet to do enough economic harm to either side to force a compromise. For US President Donald Trump, the war has been relatively cheap so far, at least in terms of what he cares about most: financial markets. The S&P500 index is hovering close to an all-time high, up nearly 10% since the war began. Gasoline prices have risen but they're below their 2022 record peak. And the American economy is galloping, with the estimate for second-quarter growth currently above 4%.

Equally, Iran hasn't yet suffered the economic meltdown that would force its hardline leaders to drop their negotiating red lines. Unemployment is rising, food inflation is rampant and the currency is in free fall. Unable to export because of the US Navy blockade, the regime has started curtailing oil output. But the Islamic Republic has demonstrated many times before its huge capacity to absorb pain, more so when the threat is existential.

With both sides dug in, the best hope is for any kind of deal to emerge, however imperfect. If not, we're back to waiting until the economic toll becomes unbearable. On Friday, a senior UAE diplomat put the odds of an immediate deal at "50-50." US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said there was "slight progress" in the talks. "I don't want to exaggerate it, but there's been a little bit of movement, and that's good." Pakistani mediators have been shuttling between Islamabad and Tehran.

The UAE has accelerated plans for a second pipeline bypassing the strait, which it hopes to put into service in 2027

If the US negotiators want a little extra motivation for getting on with things, they could do worse than look at that Suez Canal example from 1967 to 1975. Of course, Hormuz isn't Suez. The canal can be bypassed with ease. But it's a working example of just how long a blockade can drag on. From the early days of this war, I have argued that the Hormuz closure wasn't yet an energy crisis because it had been short-lived. The market had enormous buffers to cushion a disruption, large as it is, for a while. With every passing day, however, the world's tank gets emptier.

Until now, the energy industry has managed to cope with the disappearance of about 20 million barrels that passed through Hormuz. Fortunately, the market was oversupplied going into the war. Riyadh and the UAE have been able to

their bypass pipelines to keep some Persian Gulf oil flowing. Rich nations have tapped strategic petroleum reserves and the US has exported some of its SPR overseas. China, meanwhile, has somehow managed to massively reduce its oil imports. And finally, demand has contracted as prices have moved beyond the reach of poorer nations. If the strait is closed much longer, we'll need a lot more demand destruction — where politicians use emergency tools to curb energy use or sky-high prices force consumers to stop buying (a serious economic blow). Other buffers, including strategic stockpiles and commercial inventories, will run out, although rich nations hold enough crude for at least another major release.

Without a reopening, prices would clearly have to go much higher. Trader predictions early in the war of \$200 oil were proved wrong. But what if Hormuz stayed shut until late 2026, or into 2027? Or if the strait only opens partially, with Iran still exercising significant control over its use? I don't see how oil prices would remain at current levels in that case. Still, the market has remained more sanguine than even my sanguine early views. Alternatively, either side can resume the war to break the stalemate. But neither appears to have the appetite. Iran probably reckons it can outlast a Washington that's under pressure from allies to avoid more fighting. But Trump isn't feeling enough economic discomfort to admit defeat. This stalemate is why the closure could continue.

Could the world live forever without the 10%-15% or so of its oil supply that Hormuz represents? Yes, but at vast cost. To cut consumption permanently by so much would most likely mean a global recession, as in the 1973 and 1979 oil crises. New bypass pipelines will be built and production beyond the Middle East would increase. But that takes years. By 2027 the UAE will probably double its export capacity avoiding the strait. The Saudis would likely need longer to do the same. Kuwait and Iraq would require more time still. Qatar doesn't have a realistic way to export liquefied natural gas other than the strait.

Hormuz's long-term closure is so economically ruinous to contemplate that hardly anyone dares consider it. Ultimately, a fudged short-term deal that everyone can live with, is likelier. Still, considering the regional precedents, it's fair to ponder traumatic "what if" scenarios. They are not pretty. —BLOOMBERG



FIFTH COLUMN
TAVLEEN SINGH

FIRST, FULL DISCLOSURE. No creature on this planet terrifies me as much as a cockroach. The terror this insect invokes in me is so great that I find it hard to say its name in conversation and usually spell it out letter by letter. My wicked younger sister exploited my dread to her advantage when we were small children.

Her superpower was to somehow seek out cockroaches everywhere so she could wave them in my face and watch me flee for my life. A scar on my left knee is from one of these episodes when I ran so fast that I fell down a flight of stairs.

Last week for the first time ever, I began to take a fresh look at this creature with new eyes and with politics in mind. I have spent the past two weeks in a Swiss village and so it was only when I got back to Mumbai that I discovered that a nascent political outfit that calls itself the cockroach Janata Party (CJP) has caused such incredible political panic that the mighty Home Minister of India asked 'X' to kill its account. This order was duly obeyed and within hours it had reinvented itself under a new handle.

In the shortest time the CJP has managed to garner so much social

Hope in a cockroach

media attention that it is has more followers than the Bharatiya Janata Party and Congress put together. When I consulted my new best friend Claude about this, it confirmed that, "As of May 21, 2026, the Cockroach Janata Party's Instagram account had over 16 million followers — a staggering 1,400% increase in a single day — along with 200,000 followers on X."

It is no wonder then that when I posted on X about the CJP, my timeline filled up instantly with abuse from the BJP's two-rupee trolls. I was warned that I seemed to be supporting a Pakistani plot. That it was funded by the CIA, that Abhijit Dipke who started the CJP was one of Arvind Kejriwal's proteges. That he believed in violent revolution and reservations for Dalits and opposed the abrogation of article 370. These charges were accompanied by personal attacks on me that questioned my patriotism. I am used to being trolled so I mention this only to make the point that it is time that our ruling party stopped being so thinskinny.

Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, this party has gone from strength to strength, and he personally is regularly described as the most popular political leader in the world. So, what is there to fear from an entity that has barely been born and that

seems more like a satirical attempt to mock our mainstream political parties than anything else? Could it be that under the veil of invincibility that shields the Modi government, there are today a bunch of scared, ageing political leaders who are terrified that a younger political party could end up taking them on one day?

The CJP's instant social media success appears to be mostly because young Indians are unhappy with our established political leaders and desperate for new leaders who would give them more hope? As someone who travels into small towns and villages, I can report that the biggest problem is the absence of jobs for young, educated Indians who aspire to a higher standard of living. Everywhere I go, I meet young people who are 'graduates' but who have failed to find employment after they leave college. These are young people who are too poor to ever hope to migrate to other countries in search of jobs and a better life but not rich enough to start living the middle-class dream.

Less than five percent of Indians ever manage to travel abroad so it is here in our own beloved homeland that they hope to see their lives improve.

These are the same young Indians

who once placed all their hopes and dreams in Narendra Modi when he first became Prime Minister. And things have improved for India. We have better roads, airports, train stations and ports. There has been a huge jump in prosperity at the very top and millions of very poor Indians have been lifted out of poverty because of welfare schemes and generous hand-outs at election time. But, for the people in the middle there has been little change and now that dark clouds hover over the world economy, a deep desperation is beginning to grow and spread.

The opposition parties have failed totally to use this desperation for their own political ends and are perhaps as startled by the upsurge of support that the CJP has garnered at least on social media. Clearly there is room for a new political party to emerge even if it comes dressed up as a cockroach. It is entirely possible that by next week we will hear no more about cockroaches in politics but if there are alarm bells going off in the highest echelons of political Delhi, it is a good thing.

Those ensconced in their cocoons of political power need to be reminded from time to time that they are there because of ordinary people who rest their hopes and dreams in their votes. They do not ask for much. They want to be able to live in decent homes, send their children to halfway decent schools and live their lives with dignity.

I KNOW WHAT YOU'LL BE TALKING ABOUT WHILE YOU DRINK THIS SUMMER

The cocktail party or bar soiree is, bar none, the most cosmopolitan space where conversations fizz and sips can spill over into scripted slips of the tongue – but remember, some universal club soda rules apply



KANIKA GAHLA

SOFT LAUNCH
With summer having arrived in this part of the world at full throttle – and by throttle, I mean in both its noun and verb avatars – I realise that my favourite seasonal change party is a cocktail party. I love a bar soiree because a bar is such a cosmopolitan place. You arrive and perch yourself on a stool as if you can get up and leave anytime. Which feels far freer than being trapped at a table with a placard bearing your name on it. You order drinks – nothing could ever really be wrong with that. And then you then let the conversation flow.

Yes, that's the only tricky part about a bar-top evening. It really puts your conversational skills to the test.

Are you a slow-sipping whisky tête-à-tête? Or a tequila shot garrulous sort who leaves people reeling in the wake of your gab? But here's the thing: what we consider 'private' and 'social' in polite society can be cultural. One man's mann ki baat can be another woman's bakwaas.

For instance, Americans are not shy about wearing their vote as a badge. Unlike Indians, who find 'Who did you vote for?' an intimate question on a par with someone asking them the colour of their underwear. You see eyebrows go up with the look, 'Are we really that close?' before composure returns.

Money, too, is culturally slippery on the Indian side. Americans can discuss salaries with startling openness, often in the language of self-worth and ambition. Meanwhile, Indians are masters of financial camouflage, despite living in a society deeply structured by class. We don't even casually ask each other the price of our houses, let alone discuss debt, inher-



NOW YOU'LL TALK ABOUT MONEY, WON'T YOU?

itance or income. Old money whispers, new money posts receipts on Instagram, and everyone at the bar pretends to practise Indian detachment from materialism while discussing Gauravi Kumari's cut-up Gayatri Devi sarri-gawn at the Met.

What we consider 'private' and 'social' can be cultural. One man's mann ki baat can be another woman's bakwaas

and other near-strangers that we have become numb to it. Westerners, quite understandably, are perfectly scandalised.

None of these topics is technically forbidden. Yet, one culture treats voting and money like state secrets, while another reacts to relationship questions as if it has been served a legal notice with the olives. Sure, a vote is a protected right, and money is quite risqué. But bars are for dirty martinis and dirtier declarations. And in an age of situationships, chosen identities and endlessly revised relationship labels, it seems odd that simple questions about personal status can still shock people.

So, small talk can be culturally contested, because it can be a conversation-starter or a social faux pas, depending on which side of the world you are on. It's just how cultures are tuned.

Things can also change. The twee idea, still prevalent among PG Wodehouse ad-

mirers who mentally wear tweed even in this near 50 degree summer, that weather is the ultimate universal conversation starter has become ironic, with climate change becoming such a heated and divisive subject. Comparing AQI levels, though, can be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Food has become dangerous territory with vegans entering the scene. Some Michelin chefs have learned this the hard way after making anti-vegan jokes to unforgiving audiences, only to be force-fed humble tofu pie.

In all societies, and no matter the politics of the moment, a strict no-no at the bar is religion. This makes perfect sense because the two blessed spirits – the holy and the alcoholic – remain as separate as chalk and cheese or, if you like, mandir and bar. And inside this airconditioned shade on a Sunday, I'll bloody order a round of Bloody Mary to that.



INDRAJIT HAZRA

Ministry of Questionable Questions

How a spokesperson should speak when speaking (sic) on unspeakables

One of the strange things about being at an Indian press conference – whether of GoI, a state government, Amitabh Bachchan, or BCCI – in a foreign country is that you start to think that rules of media interaction of the foreign country apply. You become bolder, sit up straighter, start thinking that you're Dustin Hoffman in All the President's Men.

Unless you're in China or facing White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt, you suddenly find yourself in a culture where the usual fawning, vetting of questions, and civil service exam-type homilies don't apply. That's Mistake No. 1. You can take the Indian media interaction out of India, but you can't take India out of the Indian media interaction.

Mistake No. 2 is forgetting that whatever you may ask sitting in Oslo or Sarajevo, if it's pertaining to India, the same press con 'etiquette' applies as it does back home – don't be pesky, smart-ass, rude, all these traits liable to be descriptions of anything not considered positive, jubilant, wide-eyed, celebratory.

So, here's what can happen in Vegas, if there's an Indian press conference attended by an Indian journo in Vegas, and that certainly won't stay in Vegas (because no one in Vegas is really interested).

Journo: Thank you for taking my question. Sir, whenever a non-Indian head of state or government visits a foreign country, the cheering crowds are never from their home country. No Americans were lined up in Beijing to cheer Donald Trump. No Chinese Americans are likely to perform a martial arts performance when Xi Jinping visits Washington in September. We've never seen a British monarch or head of government be greeted by British expats, or even Anglo-Indians, in Delhi. Do you think NRIs are the only diasporic community that gets super-turned on by a visiting PM?

Spokesperson: India is the world's oldest civilisation, a cradle of tolerance and truth. Our people, wherever they may be in the world, have always welcomed guests from their 'mother country' with open arms and a sudden urge to put up a dance recital. India does not need non-Indian local cheerleaders. We are self-sufficient in applause. As the Upanishads remind us, the slap is a one-handed clap.

Journalist: Right. Moving on. The new West Bengal government has issued Circular No. 139-CS this week, ruling that members of the services are prohibited from criticising any government policy – whether by publication, utterance, or broadcast. Isn't this a gag order dressed up as administrative protocol? What does it say about India's press freedom?

Spokesperson: India is a civilisation imbued with the highest notions of truth. Our culture is one of tolerance, dialogue, and unfettered articulation that need not always be transmitted in words. The circular is not a prohibition but an invitation to silence, the purest form of speech.

[No one interrupts.] Please don't interrupt! It is my time to reply in my own time and manner. So please show some respect and let me continue.

[Still no one interrupts.] **Journalist:** How would you explain the blocking of Cockroach Janta Party's X account?

Spokesperson: We have the Constitution. [Flexes his arm.] And personal hygiene has been an Indic feature down the ages.

Journalist: Ok, never mind. Let me go back to the Bengal notice dated May 20 that says: 'Complete prohibition on members of the services in indulging in any adverse criticism of any policy or decision of the central or the state government, by any publication, interaction, utterance, publication, broadcast, contribution in any media.' So, if you, as a member of the services, now utter anything considered 'adverse criticism of any policy or decision of the central or the state government', what would happen to you?

Spokesperson: India is the land of yoga, Parle Melody Chocolate, Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro, and all 78 episodes of 'Ramayan', which according to none other than Limca Book of Records, holds the world record of 'most viewed mythological serial'. We are a civilisation that invented zero, and we continue to apply it to critical questions.

Journalist: Did you just say that the Indian government responds to critical questions with nothing?

Spokesperson: Please stop interrupting me! [Two people appear out of nowhere and take him away.]

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Two Old Dudes Hydrocarboding

Listening in on a 15-mn-year-old chitchat about why Modern Civilisation® is up for a crude awakening



JUG SURAIYA

This is an imaginary discussion that would have taken place 15 million years ago – if years had been devised then – between Gloop and Gloop, two members of the tribe of Algae-Zooplanktons. Gloop, being a couple of millennia older than Gloop, stands in loco parentis, more loco than parentis, to the younger Algae-Zooplankton.

Gloop: What's the meaning of existence? I mean, does existence have meaning? Or does meaning have existence?

Gloop: That's a meaningful question, Gloop. I'm glad you asked it. As we're just a bunch of carbon molecules, with a dash of hydrogen thrown in to make for a nice biological cocktail, we do exist, but only in a proto-existence way. A sort of dress rehearsal, as it were, for the real show.

Gloop: If we're just a whisps existence, how come we can talk, not to mention discuss the meaning of existence?

Gloop: That's because we're an anachronism. And anachronisms can do anything they want, anytime they want.

Gloop: Knackronism? Does that mean having a knack for doing things that you

shouldn't be able to do?

Gloop: Sort of. Being an anachronism – or a knackronism as you'd have it – I can travel back and forth in time and tell the future.

Gloop: You can? Wow! I mean, I'm going to be very wowsie indeed. In an upcoming avatar, we're going to become the fountainhead of something that'll be called 'Modern Civilisation', except it won't be civilised at all. Nor very modern when you consider that the whole kit and kaboodle will be based on what'll be called fossil fuels which are 15 million years old. How modern is that!

Gloop: We're going to become these

fossil thingummies that Modern Civilisation will be based on?

Gloop: You bet your sweet batootie we will.

Gloop: So, how do we stop being Algae-Zooplankton Knackronisms and become these fossil thingies? Do we say Abracadabra, or Chhoo Mantar! or something?

Gloop: No, no. All we have to do is wait for something called sedimentary compression that'll squeeze and squeeze us and turn us into hydrocarbon compounds called fuels, such as oil and natural gas.

Gloop: Goodness! That sounds like a real gas!

combustion engine, so that instead of racing around being dragged by horses and other animals, it can race around being dragged by the horsepower of something called cars and other motor vehicles.

Gloop: Modern Civilisation doesn't sound like such a big deal to me.

Gloop: It won't be. Because it'll become so dependent on us that it'll go to war with itself to see who gets the most of us and who gets zippo and zilch.

Gloop: Gosh. Going to war with itself doesn't appear to be very modern or very civilised, or even very sensible.

Gloop: Exactly. A far-sighted fellow called Willy Shakespeare will write

'We'll become fossil thingummies Modern Civilisation will be based on'

Gloop: It sure will be. Because something called a tectonic shift in Earth's crust will take us, like riding up in an elevator, from the bottom of the ocean where we are right now, to dry land, where we'll be buried thousands of feet underground, and Modern Civilisation will dig wells to get to us so that it can create itself.

Gloop: How will Modern Civilisation go about creating itself?

Gloop: To create Modern Civilisation, the human race – which is so called because it will always race hither and yon to catch up with its own tail – will invent the internal

about it before Civilisation becomes Modern: 'It is a tale told by an idiot, fuel of sound and fury, signifying nothing.'

Gloop: So, what'll happen to Modern Civilisation in the end?

Gloop: What'll happen in the end is that having used up all of us that Earth has, in the race to be more Modern and Civilised than the next guy in something which will come to be called 'poetic irony', Modern Civilisation will turn itself into a fossil.

Gloop: You mean...?

Gloop: Precisely. From hydrocarbon thou art, and to hydrocarbon thou shalt return...



LOOKING AHEAD

Lovey-Dovey Can Be So-o-o Mush & Gore

Broaden your notion of 'love story,' and you'll have more good films to choose from



JAI ARJUN SINGH

VOX OFFICE
Enjoy romantic films? Over the past month, I watched a few I liked a great deal. There's the recently released Send Help, a gory survival thriller-cum-black comedy in which the lines 'I'm sorry I gouged your eyes out' and 'I'm sorry I stabbed you' are followed by 'God, I love you'.

Then there's the 2022 Sanctuary, about a psychological tug-of-war between a corporate heir and the woman he hires for role-playing sexual games – with the pre-written script getting out of control.

And finally, the Zendaya-Robert Pattinson-starrer The Drama, in which a man learns something

relationship, bringing it to a point of emotional maturity and calm.

Or, to a point where the people involved just throw their hands up and say 'Heck, we're both so messed up, we may as well stay together for eternity.' Those journeys are a lot of fun, for us viewers anyway.

Nor am I saying these films are similar in some overriding sense. Maybe it was because I watched them close to each other that I saw these links. While all of them are dark, unpredictable, even deranged to varying degrees, there are differences based on genre and situation. For instance, Send Help – directed by horror expert Sam Raimi – contains the most explicit violence – physical and psychological – between protagon-

ship. The similarities can be telling, though. Both Sanctuary and Send Help centre on a man and a woman playing power games, taking turns being in control, with the man, in each case, being the heir of a rich family and the woman someone who appears subservient to him... until she is not.

Traditional gender roles are reversed. 'I brought home the bacon,' quips the Rachel McAdams character in Send Help, after killing a boar for dinner. In Sanctuary, Margaret Qualley's Rebecca goes from being a glorified sex worker to demanding a large stake in a company.

Compared to these films, Paradise (2024), starring the talented Darshana Rajendran and Roshan Mathew as a couple who get into trouble while vacationing in Sri Lanka, is straitlaced in its depiction of people under stress. But again, there is a sense of a woman – subdued and quiet early on – coming into her own, and the overturning of conventional roles. Here, this is done through the subverting of mythological templates, with some, perhaps overdone, Ramayan commentary. But now, I should mention that if the above films are not lovey-dovey enough for your taste, consider a couple of other recent releases, sweeter and friendlier in tone. Both involve inter-species love. In The Sheep Detectives, shepherd Hugh Jackman looks after his flock with such devotion – even reading them detective novels – that they set out to solve the mystery of his death.

And in Remarkably Bright Creatures, Sally Field, still wonderful at 80, plays an aquarium cleaner who bonds with a wise, sometimes pedantic old octopus.

All this has been a way of saying: broaden your definition of 'love story' and you'll have many more good films to choose from. You might also have fun locating other connections between them. A hint to get you started: Send Help has an octopus too, but one that's used to create a paralysing toxin. Nothing mushy about that scene.



SO WHAT IF IT'S NOT YOUR REGULAR CANDLELIGHT DINNER?

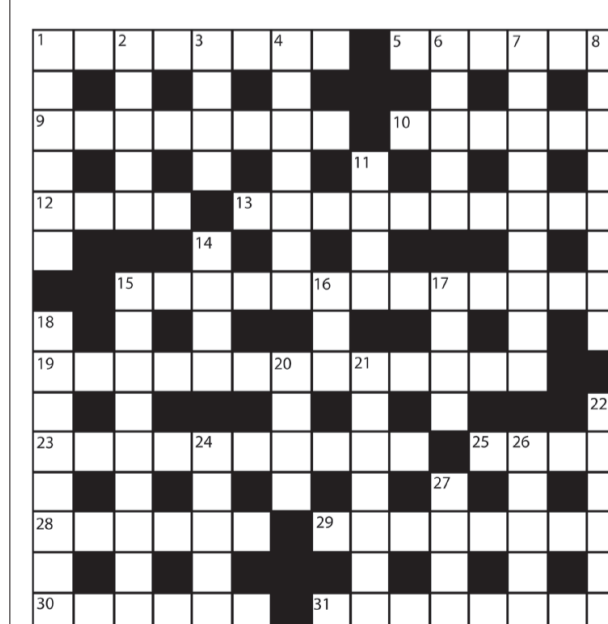
about his bride-to-be that causes panic attacks, near-infidelity, and cringe-inducing wedding toasts.

I'm not joking about these being romantic films. It's possible to view them as intense love stories (or intense love-hate stories). In fact, two of them end on a mushy note where we see that the twisted journey may have been essential to the consolidation of a rela-

'I brought home the bacon,' quips the woman in Send Help (pic) after killing a boar for dinner



ET Sunday Crossword 0169



- A shaft of light opposite centre of boat (5)
- Clothing covering top of legs (4)
- Noise at night in small Native-American church (7)
- Group stand up in concert etc. once (5)
- Wielding a trowel, he makes a refreshing place for animals (9)
- Coach yens to catch bloke who's always meddling (8)
- What people often say in church is not quite correct (4)
- Temperature in freezer occasionally? (4)
- In violent fever everyone's upset by volley of shots (9)
- He's abandoned a chest in part of play (3)
- Mark majority of Z Down (4)
- Learned gold coin's seen in river flowing north (8)
- Not much change in water level in Minneapolis (4)
- Bone in rear beside middle of rump? No (7)
- Stallone claims Gibson's rank (6)
- Shout about Republican fight (5)
- Stainer's notes held by male alto (5)
- Parts of race and what runner needs to cover them (4)
- Henna (2) Legs
- Stem (2) Smelly (2) Brawl (1) Bed (2) Neat (1)
- 15 Fossil (8) 16 Act (7) 17 Bird (1) 18 Eerie (5) 19 Acoustic (8) 20 6 Wrench (7) Waterhole (8) 21 10 M (1) 22 3 K (1) 23 20 (1) 24 21 (1) 25 22 (1) 26 23 (1) 27 24 (1) 28 25 (1) 29 26 (1) 30 27 (1) 31 28 (1)

- ACROSS**
- Salty bishop, dashing round entrance to church (8)
 - Trap firm beginning to back Internet (6)
 - Boss of D-Day operation (8)
 - Standing stone figures English removed (6)
 - To doctor it's grave (4)
 - It occupies sort of chamber, rear end inside (6,4)
 - Family members always seen in butcher's (5,3,5)
 - Party stunt ruined by Danish cash bargains here (8,5)
 - Famous 'Beetle' car designed by Germany (10)
 - Film star Robert rebuffed MIT friend (4)
 - Contents of hot drink airline installed in new gate (3,2)
 - Altered lantern for domestic use (8)
 - Comedian Jack approaches work with passion (6)
 - Ambassador in east lives in army's compound (8)
- DOWN**
- Bum mostly drinks litres, getting pie-eyed (6)



A war based on satyagraha is always of two kinds. One is the war we wage against injustice and the other we fight against our own weaknesses

Sardar Patel

WAR AS PROFITABLE STATECRAFT AND ELUSIVE PEACE

WAR is peace," wrote George Orwell in 1984, imagining a world where words are hollowed out, logic is perverted and conflict concocted to sustain domination. The 1949 opus is defining global affairs in 2026. The era of giant statesmen is consigned to history, replaced by intellectual pygmies who now write the rules of the game. Orwell's dystopia appears eerily real, emerging as the operating system of geopolitics.

The world is lurching through a disorder that profits the powerful and vapourises the vulnerable. At the epicentre of this modern construct is US President Donald J Trump, who famously promised to end the war in Ukraine in a day. That promise is now 487 days overdue. His presidency, betting on grandstanding to deliver, has wagered on misplaced notions of swift victories.

The Trump playbook has alienated allies and friends like India and enriched adversaries like China and Russia. Liberation Day tariffs targeted Canada, Mexico, India and the EU, while China cocked a snook at Trump. The US now has to refund \$166 billion collected as tariffs—and among the first in the queue is FedEx. Meanwhile, the total US debt soared to \$39 trillion. Yet, Trump remains undeterred: a new 10 percent tariff is under litigation, while his team is weaponising provisions to reset the tariff regime.

This global instability is not unfolding in a vacuum. West Asia burns and Ukraine simmers because war-games are shaped by domestic political calculations—in Washington, Tel Aviv, Moscow and Beijing. The decision to wage war or pursue peace is increasingly dictated by internal political calculus. The human and economic costs of these gridlocked conflicts have triggered global anxiety.

Trump loves the word 'obliteration'. After many Trumpian obliterations, Iran is still in the fight. The objective of the peace talks is keeping open the Strait of Hormuz, which was open before the war. What's more, Iran and Oman may partner to charge tolls on ships. For all the talk of regime change, the best Team Trump could do was to replace an older Ayatollah with a younger Ayatollah.

It is an accepted hypothesis that the attack on Iran was fertilised during a February 23 phone call between Trump and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu. It is no mystery that US foreign policy is largely influenced by domestic politics, which depends on campaign financing—and pro-Israel outfits such as AIPAC are among the leading donors for presidential and congressional polls.

The February 28 attack on Iran was Trump's nod to the Israeli lobby's quest. The blame-game, the statements of officials, the resignations of Joe Kent and Tulsi Gabbard spell out the saga. For Netanyahu, who is dependent on the Ben Gvir brand of politics for survival, the war is simply an instrument of postponing the day of reckoning—remember, Trump advocated a pardon when he visited Israel. Netanyahu faces his reckoning, rather ironically, in the Fall season.

The West Asia conflict also intersects with the dollar's hegemony. Since the 1974 US-Saudi arrangement, Washington has sought to preserve the dollar's dominance by shaping the architecture of oil trade. Iran, one of the world's largest hydrocarbon producers, has long been central to this strategy. The trajectory of US intervention in Venezuela—from narcotics enforcement to oil politics—is instructive. Recently, it was US Secretary of State Marco Rubio—not Venezuela's leadership—who spoke of an oil deal with India. The indictment of Raul Castro suggests Washington may be contemplating a "Maduro model" approach to Cuba, likely to resonate with Cuban American voters.

It doesn't quite matter to Trump—or thus far, to his MAGA base—that while Trump's marketing pitch is in superlatives, the outcomes are not. Trump has rained harsh words on Russia and China, but the two are beneficiaries of Trump's wars. The Iran conflict has resulted in the US burning through its stockpiles, raising fears in Ukraine and Taiwan. This has eased pressure on Russia and emboldened China to warn the US over arms supplies to Taiwan, which are on pause.

The war has pushed up crude prices, which affect fuel prices in the US. To alleviate the effect, the Trump administration lifted sanctions on Iranian oil and extended exemptions on Russian oil for another 30 days. Russian oil, once steeply discounted, is now priced \$100 a barrel, while Iranian oil is at \$100 and \$103 for light and heavy crude. China, the biggest consumer which pays for Russian and Iranian oil in yuan, is a big beneficiary.

This week, Trump exhibited the tremendous clout he enjoys among Republican voters as he exacted revenge on dissidents at primaries and showed he retains 80 percent support within the party. That said, the level is sliding. The killings of children in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran have affected youth support for DJT, which has slid from 48 percent to the low 30s. Not one, but four recent polls find Trump's ratings sinking—thanks to rising gasoline prices and fewer jobs for the Class of 2026. Angry members of the Republican Party are blocking Trump's Bills as they worry the Fall season could unseat them.

Wars have no winners. Ceasefires mock the dead. There is no guarantee when the wars raging now will end. Even if they do end this week, the costs will be paid for years—just in West Asia, restoration of oil output could take 18 months and gas over four years. The casting of domestic politics as geopolitics and the obsession for political domination through wars have pushed the world to the edge of a political and economic catastrophe.

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QUOTE CORNER



What a time we have had. Don't ask me the reasons I'm leaving. There is no reason, but deep inside I know it's my time. Nothing is eternal. If it was, I would be here. Eternal will be the feeling, the people, the memories, the love I have for my Manchester City.

Pep Guardiola, announcing he is leaving as manager after a decade during which he won 20 trophies with the team

The Bar Council of India is aware that around 35-40 percent of those seen in court complexes wearing black coats and bands are fake.

Manan Kumar Mishra, BCI chairman, after about two-fifths of lawyers did not fill up the council's verification forms

Making yourself feel powerful by sending special forces to arrest a 94-year-old former leader of an island nation impoverished by US sanctions doesn't exactly suggest a strong, self-confident and ascendant superpower.

Ben Rhodes, former Deputy National Security Advisor of the US, on Cuba

THE POLITICS OF AN ECONOMIC IMPASSE



OPINION

SANJAYA BARU

Former newspaper editor and writer whose latest book is *Secession of the Successful: The Flight Out of New India*

UPON his stunning victory 12 years ago, Narendra Modi addressed a gathering of party faithful and appealed to them that they give him "10 years to transform" the country. As we mark the twelfth anniversary of the Modi government, it is now clear that he has succeeded in 'transforming' India politically but has failed to do so economically. It is worth considering whether the political transformation that has been achieved is among the reasons for the failure on the economic front.

The emerging consensus among political and policy analysts across the country is that Modi has not been able to translate his political success into economic performance. Some, like economist Surjit Bhalla, blame the 'deep state' or the embedded bureaucracy for this. Indeed, even many close to and loyal to the Prime Minister often articulate this view, that the real impediment to better performance is the 'rust in the steel frame'.

Some hold the BJP's essentially inward-oriented, 'swadeshi' thinking on trade policy and the confusion created by multiple interpretations of Atmanirbhara and Make in India responsible. Some castigate Modi's own 'instruments', his loyal ministers, for the inadequacies of the leader. During the Congress era, inter-ministerial policy and personality differences would be spoken of openly and reported in the media. Differences between senior ministers like Pranab Mukherjee and P

Chidambaram were open secrets. Such differences and rivalries exist in Modi's council of ministers too, and some in the media are privy to them. But these are almost never reported.

My friend Parakala Prabhakar, a distinguished political economist, has for long held a very different view on the governance challenges faced by the Modi government. Be it the manner of announcement and execution of demonetisation, or the imposition of overnight lockdown due to Covid, or actions on issues like farm and land laws, foreign investment policy and so on. Parakala blames it all on managerial 'incompetence' at the political, not merely bureaucratic, level.

Perhaps Peter's Principle—the celebrated management theory that "employees are continually promoted based on their success in previous roles until they reach a position where they are no longer competent"—also applies to politicians and senior ministers.

Moreover, it is one thing to win elections, quite another to steer the national economy, national security and foreign policy—the primary responsibilities of the Prime Minister—over a long period of time. Even Jawaharlal Nehru, who had a distinguished decade in office as Prime Minister from 1947 to 1957, began erring after that. The question may well be asked if Modi has outlived his welcome and diminishing returns have set in on the administrative and economic fronts, even as he continues to deliver on the political front.

Reflecting on that 2014 request of the PM, that he be given a decade for 'transforming' India, it seems clear now that his focus was mainly on the Indian republic's transformation into a Hindu

majority polity. On that objective he has largely succeeded, with southern India still outside the grip of Hindutva. The mixing of religious faith and prejudice into public life and politics has generated social and political tensions that are depleting the so-called 'animal spirits of enterprise'.

A growing concern among business leaders, at home and overseas, about the direction of Indian politics is making them risk-averse as investors. An important reason for private investment not picking up, for the flight of capital and the tapering down of foreign direct investment may well be the wider political environment.

Economists often ignore the role of political management in influencing business decisions. Confidence in a government's ability to deal with emergent political and security challenges, at home and overseas, reassures investors. It contributes to positive expectations and encourages risk-taking by investors. Any concern about a political leadership's competence or determination to deal with such challenges contributes to negative expectations and risk aversion.

Consider two examples. It is not often recognised by economists and public policy analysts that a key trigger for the 1990-91 balance of payments crisis episode was the judgement of a variety of economic actors that the government of the day would not be able to handle the challenges at hand. It was the inability of the Vishwanath Pratap Singh and Chandrashekhar governments to act decisively on the fiscal and external front in 1990 that led to a loss of confidence in the economy and the rapid descent into the crisis of 1991. It was then

the decisive actions of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao that restored investor confidence and stabilised the economy.

By contrast, in 2004 the defeat of the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government and the coming into office of a Congress-led coalition supported by communist parties triggered instability in the markets and unease among investors. The reassurance provided very quickly by the newly elected Prime Minister Manmohan Singh set at rest all such worries. In both instances, the quality of political leadership made all the difference to investor sentiment.

We are in a similar situation today. In 1991 and 2004, both business leaders and the media articulated their views openly and played their part in ensuring political action that helped restore investor confidence. Today, a largely timid media and a highly risk-averse and fearful business class are no longer exerting pressure on the political leadership to act in a reassuring manner.

All good news is celebrated in an exaggerated manner and all bad news is buried. Thus, when India was seen as being on the threshold of becoming the world's third largest economy, there was much song and dance about it. Today, when it has slipped to the sixth position, few ask why. In 2017, Prime Minister Modi declared that the country's national income would be \$5 trillion by 2020. Very quickly, the goal was shifted to 2022, and then to 2025, and then forgotten. In 2026, the economy is just over \$4 trillion.

Indian economy's long-term average annual rate of growth from 1990 to 2025 is estimated to be around 6 percent. During 2000-12, the average growth rate was over 7 percent. For India to be regarded as a developed economy by 2047, the goal of Viksit Bharat, the average annual growth over the next two decades will have to be around 8 percent. The question to ask today is what was done over the past decade that the acceleration in growth experienced during 1990-2010 has not been sustained over the past decade.

(Views are personal)

TURNING CAR POOLS INTO CAB TRAINS



REVERSE SWING

MADHAVAN NARAYANAN

Senior journalist
Follow him on X @madversty

WHILE petrol prices shoot up and a heatwave builds up, there's a one-liner on social media that throws a third dimension to commuting in the National Capital Region—half of Delhi works in Gurugram and half of Gurugram works in Delhi, and they are all stuck on NH48.

The highway that connects the capital with its affluent satellite is perpetually jammed. But a casual look will show that most of the cars are driven by middle-aged men flaunting their new affluence with no other passenger in sight. The stories in Mumbai, Chennai or Bengaluru are not much different. Choked roads do not go well with aspirational lifestyles, but there's little people do about it.

It appears all the more ironic given the ongoing oil shock. It is good to see ministers combining photoshoot moments aboard metro carriages with appeals to increase car-pooling so that we can save valuable dollars in oil imports. But this needs a reality check.

A hard look at car-pooling in India shows we have barely scratched the surface. More importantly, faced with is-

sues that make the commonsensical idea of sharing car rides to save on fuel costs and, hopefully, commuting time is not as loaded with common sense as it would seem at first.

We need to reverse-swing our thoughts to humbler modes of transport like auto-rickshaws and the increasingly popular e-rickshaws to get a hang of what we can do about it. But before that, a few thoughts on India's automobile culture may be in order.

It is my firm belief that three things drive India's car boom: cheap loans, the image of a car as a status symbol and its position as a middle-class dream that dates back to the days when incomes were low and roads were barren. A lot has changed since, but a cultural hangover remains.

Before I bought my first car, I once had a neighbour down the street in Bengaluru asking if he could park his fancy Ford in my apartment parking space, but he could not afford to pay a rent for it. Another anecdote involves a Delhi colleague who told me about a shopper at a BMW showroom asking if there was a CNG engine option available so he could save on the fuel.

Cars are more of an object of vanity in urban India, even if that involves the inconvenience of getting stuck in traffic jams and paying more for the fuel.

I once worked for an environmental-conscious editor who talked the company's CEO into taking a metro ride one day—and found the boss squirming through what otherwise was a comfortable journey that saved time and cost. Indian CEOs are not supposed to take the metro, though stinking-rich Wall Street traders in New York are known

to. Quo vadis, dear car-pooler?

There is a flip side to this. Car pool apps like BlaBlaCar and QuickRide are trying to solve the commuter's problem with peer-to-peer sharing. Think of them like an Uber for private riders. But quick research reveals they have had only "segmented success". We may well ask in startup lingo: where's the scale in car-pooling?



Despite years of effort and the recent availability of apps, car-pooling has not taken off in India. Maybe the idea of cab trains—shared shuttle rides between fixed points—is better suited for our congested metros

All of that brought back memories of Kolkata, where I took my first Indian metro ride in 1991, preceded by my first shared autorickshaw ride to the metro station. With one auto leaving every minute in a point-to-point journey, from residential areas to the metro hub, the turnover efficiency was high.

E-rickshaws in Delhi's suburbs like Noida, and even tempo vans in passenger mode, do pretty much the same thing. Commuters are familiar with the usual routes, the points where boarding is likely. These pick-up points are like bus stops, but unlike bulky buses that take time and space to move, e-ricks and shared autos are available at a high frequency, with a predictability of service that bolsters confidence in that system.

Mumbai's Churchgate station already does car-pooling without the fuss. People buzz to and from Nariman Point from the station in black-and-yellow taxis with a not a word exchanged between the cabbie and the passengers. The rates are fixed, the route is known and the efficiency is high.

Now picture a scenario in Delhi, Bengaluru or Gurugram or wherever where such a model can be adopted. The way to do it is to make cars behave like the humble rickshaws that provide valuable last-mile services.

The authorities should come up with a plan to help car pools become 'cab trains' running between set pick-up and drop points. You can number them like buses, colour-code them and run them on predictable routes with clear timetables at fixed rates. Throw in rush-hour premiums or happy-hour discounts. Such options are quite common in inter-city rides. It is time it becomes common within metro regions.

Metro trains and e-ricks are doing it. What we need is to make the surfeit of cars blocking highways and city roads to turn into cab-train services that offer the triple play of predictability, frequency and cost efficiency that collectively spell convenience. Perhaps we need to design government tenders to launch branded point-to-point cab services and incentivise them with higher depreciation rates and tax-free status.

Only a scale-first approach to car-pooling can make sense beyond the lip service it is often given. For CXOs still worried about their status, we might launch shared limousines—with electric engines and uniformed chauffeurs.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG WRITE TO

Fair justice

Ref: *Personal liberty as a constitutional imperative* (May 23). A really interesting, readable write-up on a timely subject. A humanitarian approach is more desirable while granting bails. We have seen deaths following refusal of bail pleas that had been made on health grounds. Prolonged incarceration without trial itself is a punishment denying the constitutional right to speedy trial. The irony is that prolonged bail is granted to politicians while their trials go on at a snail's pace. What is required is immunity from influence rather than harsh laws.

Ramalingeswara Rao, email

NEET solution

Ref: *Centre aims for 100% error-free retest* (May 23). Along with NEET, all state governments may consider conducting separate entrance tests like Tamil Nadu's TANCET. The latter should be for students from the state. Half the government medical

seats may be filled by NEET and the other half from TANCET-like tests. Like Tamil Nadu, there can be 75 percent or a similar reservation for students from government schools. So students will have the option of two tests. The basic idea is that only the deserving should study such courses, not those who get in by paying huge 'capitation fees'.

S R Dhruvid, Chennai

Youth awareness

Ref: *Police caution public over viral human chain call* (May 22). Once can now say that every cockroach has its day. An imaginary digital-based party named after it recently gained millions of followers. Young people rallied behind its satirical agenda against politicians, the judiciary and social evils. Social cause was highlighted under the wraps of humour. It shows that the country's youth are keeping abreast of contemporary issues and are ready to express their bold views if a proper channel is available. Though such an online moment tends to be short-lived, it can spread awareness about real issues. One cannot wish away the influence of a youth

movement, however temporary it may be.

D V G Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

Expert ethics

Ref: *CBI arrests Pune-based lecturer for allegedly sharing physics paper* (May 22). It is evident that the question paper leak has happened through experts or those associated with the exam process. It shows a lack of self-discipline or ethics for the concerned persons. A thorough check of the activities of all so-called experts at coaching institutes needs to be made to ensure a fool-proof conduct of competitive exams. There should be a mechanism for checking the activities of NEET-UG coaching institutes in all the states and Union territories.

R Sridharan, Pollachi

Chip challenge

Ref: *ISM 2.0 may get higher outlay than initial \$10 billion* (May 20). It is a good sign that India's semiconductor push is on the threshold of a progressive step that creates research talent and an investment system for not just production, but to promote in-

digenous technology and intellectual property too. This is a big boost towards self-reliance in science and technology. It is not an exaggeration that what India's entrepreneurs and workforce choose to do with a chip could well shape the country's destiny. They are the invisible engines of the modern world as a result of recent innovations in circuitry, design and packaging. The industry seems to be one of the best options for the young today.

M Chandrasekhar, Kadapa

Oil spillage

Ref: *IOCL pipeline burst causes petrol spill in Paradip port* (May 23). It's quite disturbing to know about the latest pipeline leakage in Paradip. There could not have been a more unfortunate time for this to happen. Apart from the environmental pollution it causes, the incident is especially disquieting when there's a crude oil crisis due to the West Asia war. The mishap indicates negligence of officials. We must learn from this and prevent any more mishaps of the kind.

Simran Poniya, Koraput

THE ASIAN AGE

24 MAY 2026



Krishna Shastri
Devulapalli

Off the beaten track

If it's Tuesday, it must be strawberry

A couple of days ago, a friend forwarded a link to me with the message "Remind you of anything?"

The link led me to Morioka Shoten, a tiny bookstore in Tokyo. Japan does specialise in tiny things (with the same vigour that the US specialises in the opposite). You think Japan, immediately *bonsai*, *sumi-e*, *bonkei* and *haiku*, of course, come to mind. All examples of how conclusively they've shown the rest of the world that less is more.

So what was unique to the timeliness of this bookstore?

Well, it sells only one book.

Yes, you read that right. You don't go to this shop to browse, ask the bookstore clerk what she recommends or buy a bunch of stationery items. You go to Morioka Shoten to buy that one book they have on the shelves. All their shelves. For that one week. And if you go the following week, there's still only one book. But a different one. It's like Balkumar Softy Centre in the Pondy Bazaar of my childhood (among the earliest soft serve ice cream vendors in Madras), which, for one rupee on a Monday, would give you Vanilla. Followed by Strawberry on Tuesdays, Pista on Wednesdays... with (drum roll) Chocolate reserved for the weekends. Take it or leave it. And, boy, did we take it.

But who dares do this now, the age of infinite choice, gift-wrapped and served instantly at your doorstep with bells on? How does an entire shop make do by selling just one book, or more precisely, multiple copies of the same book, when others in the business have added stationery, coffee, baked goods and bare-knuckle boxing just to survive? (Okay, I exaggerate a bit there.)

Very well, apparently, considering how many book lovers the shop attracts from all over the world.

I guess my friend sent this link to me because the website of our wee indie publishing house says (rather grandiosely, if the expression on the face of a leading writer — as she was listening to our little speech — was anything to go by) "Bringing real writers to real readers. One book at a time."

Worry not. This piece isn't a sly plug for my business. It's about what limitless choice has made us, and between the options of no choice, limited choice, and infinite choice; why I think infinite choice is no better than no choice at all.

Not too long ago, I watched an old interview with the incomparable George Carlin in which he confesses, that for all his so-called misanthropic humour, he actually likes people. Provided he engages with them one person at a time. But the minute they are part of a group, however small, he instantly finds them less likeable.

I couldn't agree more. If you've got to a certain stage in life, you'd think you could control this somewhat, having the luxury to say no to most group situations. And strive for individual interactions, whether personal or professional. Not really.

Most interactions today, however exclusive you may think they are, actually involve you unwittingly becoming part of an orgy. Because, thanks to the infinite options one has in the palm of one's hand, almost everyone you come across is secretly or brazenly straddling a bunch of people — choices, basically — every single minute of the day.

You think you are having an intimate conversation, often with someone who has sought you out, while you are actually competing for attention with all the humans on the various platforms they are juggling at that given moment. Whether you like it or not, you are now the member of a group you had no intention of joining.

I don't know about the rest of you, but buffets make me lose my appetite, and art galleries make me nauseous. I don't care which part of the world I am in, giving the pointlessly, insanely large breakfast spread the go by, I invariably stick with what I have at home: scrambled eggs. And when I go to a gallery, I long to be Steve McQueen (or Pierce Brosnan) from *The Thomas Crown Affair*, where I have the liberty of sitting for as long as I want in front of one painting, ignoring the hundreds of masterpieces waiting to overwhelm my senses, and drink in that work. (While suppressing thoughts of stealing it, of course.)

Like the curators of Morioka Shoten and Balkumar Softy Centre at the production end, I think, we, too, should endeavour to be curators at the consumption end. When the world is telling us, look, there's bigger, there's more coveted, there's sexier, one song, one show, one book, one person, one experience at a time is what we should be aiming for. Without the fear of missing out. Muting capitalism's toxic, ever-present voice in our head, going "Hey, buddy, you're settling for this?"

Maybe we would feel less depleted then. And stop wondering about where our inescapable sense of isolation, deprivation and wanting comes from. So, if it's Tuesday, go for Strawberry. Stick with it, pay attention to it, savour it, process the experience. That way, you have a better chance of being fulfilled than having small, hurried, unsatisfying licks of Butterscotch, Pista and Mango, while secretly craving the currently unavailable Chocolate.

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



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India at crossroads on bail for Umar Khalid & UAPA



Pavan K. Varma
Chanakya's View

In the final analysis, the question before India is larger than Umar Khalid. It is whether the republic wishes to preserve the delicate constitutional equilibrium between state authority and individual freedom.

The case of Umar Khalid has become an important test of the Indian republic's commitment to liberty, dissent and constitutional morality. The question is no longer confined to the guilt or innocence of one individual. It has now acquired a much larger significance: Can a democracy, governed by a Constitution that places individual liberty at its heart, keep an accused person in jail for five years without trial and without bail, while the judicial process itself moves at a glacial pace?

For decades, Indian jurisprudence has rested on a foundational principle: "Bail is the rule, jail is the exception." This doctrine was memorably articulated by Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, in the celebrated case of *State of Rajasthan vs Balchand* (1977), where the Supreme Court underscored that personal liberty cannot be casually sacrificed before conviction. The principle was reaffirmed repeatedly, including in *Gudikanti Narasimulu vs Public Prosecutor* (1978), where the Court stressed that deprivation of liberty before conviction must remain an exception justified by compelling circumstances.

More recently, in *Union of India vs K.A. Najeeb* (2021), a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court held that even the stringent provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) cannot eclipse constitutional guarantees under Article 21 when prolonged incarceration and delayed trials become instruments of injustice. The Court observed that under such circumstances, the rigours of Section 43D(5) of the UAPA could "melt down".

Yet, despite this settled jurisprudence, Umar Khalid has remained incarcerated since September 2020 in con-

nection with the Delhi riots conspiracy case. Five years later, the trial has scarcely advanced in any meaningful sense. The delay is staggering. Thousands of pages of documents, innumerable witnesses, procedural adjournments, and the cumbersome architecture of UAPA prosecutions have created a judicial labyrinth from which the accused appears unable to emerge.

The troubling question therefore arises: If the state, with all its powers of investigation and prosecution, cannot conclude the process within a reasonable time, should the accused continue to languish in prison indefinitely? Is this not, in effect, punishment before conviction?

The Supreme Court itself now appears to be wrestling with precisely this dilemma. In January 2026, a bench comprising Justices Arvind Kumar and P.B. Varale denied bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, while granting relief to several co-accused. The bench held that delay in trial could not become a "trump card" for bail in UAPA cases and stressed the gravity of the allegations.

However, in a remarkable development only months later, another Supreme Court bench comprising Justices B.V. Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan publicly expressed "serious reservations" about that earlier ruling. While granting bail to an accused in a separate UAPA-related case on May 18, 2026, the bench emphatically reiterated that "bail is the rule and jail is the exception," even under UAPA. It observed that the earlier denial of bail to Umar Khalid appeared inconsistent with the larger bench ruling in *K.A. Najeeb*.

This is no minor procedural disagreement. When one bench of the Supreme Court publicly questions the sound-

ness of another bench's interpretation on a matter involving liberty, it signals that there is debate on whether or not the balance may have tilted too far in favour of state power at the expense of constitutional freedoms.

There are both legal and practical implications here. Legally, if an accused can be imprisoned for half a decade without conviction, and without meaningful progress in trial, then does not the process itself become the punishment? In such circumstances, acquittal after 10 years would not restore the lost years, damaged reputation, broken family life or psychological trauma endured during incarceration.

In my view, a larger question is involved. It concerns the increasingly expansive use of draconian laws such as the UAPA. Erected originally to combat terrorism and grave threats to national security, these provisions have gradually migrated into the domain of political dissent and ideological contestation. The threshold for invoking anti-terror legislation has, in practice, become disturbingly elastic.

The consequence is that the validity of dissent itself — so vital in any democracy — is under challenge. Criticism of the government, participation in protests or provocative political speech can potentially attract charges under laws where obtaining bail becomes extraordinarily difficult. The message sent to citizens is unmistakable: Even if eventual conviction is uncertain, the state can ensure prolonged incarceration through procedure itself.

A democracy confident of its legitimacy does not fear dissent. Indeed, dissent is not an inconvenience to democ-

cracy; it is one of its essential safety valves. The framers of the Indian Constitution, having themselves struggled against colonial repression, understood this instinctively. That is why they placed such extraordinary emphasis on liberty, free expression and protection against arbitrary state action.

The Umar Khalid case has consequently attracted substantial international attention. Human rights organisations, civil liberties groups, academic circles and sections of the global press have repeatedly questioned how a constitutional democracy can reconcile prolonged pre-trial detention with the presumption of innocence. To raise such concerns is not to prejudice guilt or to justify genuine cases of sedition, terrorism or unacceptable violence. Courts alone must determine culpability on the basis of evidence. But constitutional morality demands that the state prove guilt within a reasonable time-frame, not incarcerate indefinitely while the machinery of justice crawls forward.

The Supreme Court, as guardian of the Constitution, now stands at a critical crossroads. Its recent observations suggest an awareness that excessive deference to stringent statutory provisions can erode the deeper constitutional promise of liberty itself. The court appears to recognise that Article 21 cannot become subordinate to endless procedural delay.

In the final analysis, the question before India is larger than Umar Khalid. It is whether the republic wishes to preserve the delicate constitutional equilibrium between state authority and individual freedom. If liberty can be suspended for years without trial, then constitutional guarantees risk becoming abstractions rather than lived realities.

The apex court has raised the right question. It is reported that this matter of principle will now be referred to a larger bench. One can only hope that this will be expedited. The nation awaits the right answer.

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

LETTERS NOT HIS FAULT

A humble jhalmuri vendor from Jhargram became an overnight sensation after Narendra Modi casually stopped at his stall during an election tour and bought Bengal's favourite street snack. What should have remained a proud memory for a small shopkeeper allegedly turned into fear after threatening calls from foreign-linked numbers reportedly targeted him and his family. Such acts may stem from political polarisation, jealousy over sudden fame or resentment against publicity linked to a national leader. Even if foreign-linked elements are not genuinely involved, agencies may also examine whether the threats were intended to spread fear, provoke tensions or create sensational political narratives.

R.S. Narula
Patiala

A SPENT FORCE

THE CPI(M) has expressed confidence about reclaiming political ground in Bengal, asserting that the ruling Trinamul Congress is rapidly losing its grip and creating space for the Left to emerge as the principal opposition force against the BJP in the state. It has repeatedly accused both the TMC and the BJP of fostering a political binary centred on religion to marginalise the Left and other Opposition forces in the state. But it is only daydreaming as it is a spent force. It shoves its head in the sand when it comes to addressing the vital questions of the day.

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

PURPOSE OF QUOTAS

THE SUPREME COURT bench of Justice B.V. Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan are right in questioning why children of economically and educationally advanced families with backward classes should be allowed to avail the benefits of reservation under OBC category. The creamy layer principle was introduced in 1992. However, children of financially secure and socially influential officers continue to claim the same benefits. An IAS officer enjoys significant social status, financial stability, quality education and access to opportunities that most backward class families can only dream of. The government must review the implementation of creamy layer rules so that deserving candidates from weaker backgrounds receive the support they genuinely need.

Bal Govind
Noida

Anita Katyal
Political
Gup-Shup



Is Vijay going to do a Kejriwal on Cong? BJP sets sights on Punjab

The faction in the Congress which was pushing for an alliance with actor Vijay's TVK well before the Tamil Nadu elections is predictably ecstatic that the party has got a foot into the state government apparatus after nearly six decades. The pro-Vijay lobby has convinced the Congress leadership that TVK's lack of experience and grassroots cadre could prove to be a boon for the party as it can ride on the Vijay wave to revive and expand its footprint in Tamil Nadu. And in time, the Congress could also prevail upon the actor-turned-politician to campaign for them in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka where Mr Vijay is known to have a huge fan base. However, this faction faced a reality check when Tamil Nadu chief minister Vijay skipped the swearing-in ceremony of V.D. Satheesan in Kerala even though he had been extended a special invitation for the programme. Instead, a day before the UDF gov't's swearing-in ceremony, the TVK launched its first expansion drive outside Tamil Nadu in Kerala's Thrissur. Congress leaders who were

opposed to a truck with Mr Vijay are now pointing out that their colleagues who batted for a TVK alliance did not realise that once Mr Vijay starts finding his feet in politics, he will try to expand the TVK beyond Tamil Nadu. There is every possibility that Mr Vijay could prove to be another Arvind Kejriwal who demolished the Congress in Delhi and Punjab and is attempting the same in Gujarat. In fact, there are murmurs in the capital's political circles that Mr Vijay has been set up by the BJP to aid in the disintegration of the Dravidian parties and create space for a national party.

There was palpable tension among waiting Congress leaders when the party's top bosses were closeted in a final meeting to pick the next chief minister of Kerala. A group of Delhi-based Congress leaders were convinced that AICC general secretary K.C. Venugopal would be the chosen one given his proximity to leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi. This group was actively propping up Mr Venugopal and was briefing media-persons

informally that he was sure to be picked. When it was announced that the Congress leadership had decided on V.D. Satheesan, the disappointment among these leaders was all too evident. In fact, one leader had brought several boxes of laddoos which he had planned to take to Mr Venugopal's residence. Instead, he distributed them to presspersons, admitting that he was deeply disappointed that Mr Venugopal had been overlooked. A few Delhi leaders were hoping that once Mr Venugopal moved to Kerala, one of them would be elevated as general secretary in charge of the organisation and hence get close to Rahul Gandhi. Since this script has gone awry, there is now a buzz in the Congress that Mr Venugopal has fallen out of favour and he will soon be removed from his current organisational position.

Now that it has succeeded in winning West Bengal, once considered an impregnable fortress, the Bharatiya Janata Party is preparing for its next challenge — Punjab, a state whose voters have

steadfastly spurned its overtures. The first major step was taken in the midst of the West Bengal Assembly polls when seven Aam Aadmi Party MPs and leaders joined the BJP. It is now expected that there will be further defections from AAP closer to next year's Assembly polls. At the same time, a hunt is on in the BJP for a Sikh leader to helm the party's Punjab unit. Meanwhile, Haryana chief minister Nayab Singh Saini has been given the responsibility of mobilising voters and party cadres in Punjab, with a special focus on the large Saini population in the state. AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal, who has been camping in Punjab after the party lost Delhi, has been using every trick in the book, including cutting off water supply to Haryana, to ensure that Mr Saini is kept busy in his state.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's gift of a packet of Melody toffees to Italian premier Giorgia Meloni took the Internet by storm last week. Memes, reels and quips on X flooded social media platforms as the Prime Minister's choice of pre-

sent was easily the most talked about subject. Commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal was quick to seize the moment with the announcement that India's toffee exports had gone up by 166 per cent in the last twelve years. Candy and confectionery manufacturers may have hit the sweet spot in recent years as pointed out by the minister but it is also a fact that they have some distance to travel if they are to compete with top international brands which have a substantial share in the \$17 billion-dollar international toffee and candy export market. The countries which currently dominate the global market include Germany, Belgium and Netherlands along with China and Mexico. India's products are doing well in the low-cost market but the country does not have any premium recognisable brand, especially in the chocolate segment. It is hoped that the Prime Minister's gift will encourage candy manufacturers to up their game and aim for a seat at the high table.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

SCIENCE

Jharia coal fires may burn hotter, emit more greenhouse gases

Vasudevan Mukunth

Fires have burnt beneath the Jharia coal fields in Jharkhand for decades now, releasing smoke and gases through cracks in the ground. And according to a new study, parts of this underground fire system may burn hotter and release more greenhouse gases than previously estimated.

Researchers from the U.K. and India, including the CSIR-CIMFR, reported in a May 18 paper in *Com-*

munications Earth & Environment that the collapsed structures created when underground fires consume coal seams and destabilise the rock above them can stretch vertically for more than 100 m through the earth, venting hot gases into the air.

When mining exposes coal to oxygen, natural oxidation reactions can trigger underground fires that smoulder for decades. Previous estimates suggested fires in the region already

emitted copious greenhouse gases, but scientists have struggled to track them accurately because the fires spread irregularly.

The new study focused on the Ena, Bastacolla, and Tisera collieries. In 2018-2023, the researchers used numerical modelling and mineralogical analysis to document collapsed structures up to 10 m wide, collected samples of melted rock and glass-like materials, and analysed their composition. The re-

searchers found that larger cavities often had paralava: rock melted and re-solidified by the heat of coal fires. At Ena and Tisera, they found a kind of fused, glass-enveloped rock they nicknamed "birianiite", reflecting the rock's mix of geological ingredients and its resemblance to the popular rice dish.

The researchers combined field observations with computer modelling. Their simulations suggested that large, isolated col-

lapse structures could, on paper, approach 4,000 C in some conditions, much higher than estimates commonly associated with underground coal fires.

Using modelling based on the amount of coal likely burned in the structures, the team also estimated the global warming potential of Jharia's fires at up to 748.72 MT of CO₂-equivalent per year.

While industrial emissions are subject to rigorous monitoring, fugitive

emissions from uncontrolled coal fires like in Jharia are seldom part of global greenhouse gas audits. However, the authors acknowledged their model excluded some real-world processes, including chemical reactions and mechanical deformation, that could alter the temperature estimate. Likewise, the emissions estimate depends strongly on assumptions about the extent of burning, among other factors.

SNAPSHOTS



AI agents Co-Scientist, Robin could accelerate research

Google Co-Scientist and FutureHouse Robin, offer to help researchers accelerate science work. By generating and refining hypotheses, while scientists steered the process and gave feedback, Co-Scientist could identify drug combinations for leukaemia. Robin automated literature search and experiment planning, interpreting biological data and suggesting next steps while researchers performed the lab work. This way, the team found a promising treatment for macular degeneration.

How India uses healthcare: insights from the NSS

New data on health consumption in India show improvements in maternal care and insurance coverage, while also raising concerns about rising private healthcare costs, injury-related illnesses and inconsistencies in reported figures

George Thomas

The 80th round of the National Sample Survey on health consumption shows some encouraging trends, some matters of concern, and some puzzling data. The raw data, if made available, would be a rich resource to understand the way people perceive and manage their illnesses. The survey was based on a field questionnaire with the attendant problems of recall bias and understanding and estimation errors, among others.

It is noteworthy that 98% of women reported receiving antenatal care and around 92% received postnatal care. Over 95% of childbirths now occur in institutions. Considering institutional childbirth is strongly associated with better outcomes for mother and child, this is heartening. The percentage of unskilled personnel attending childbirth is very low in nearly every State except Nagaland, where it is 13.5% in rural areas and 11.5% in urban areas. Deliveries taking place in private institutions account for nearly 51% in urban areas and 29% in rural areas nationwide, but at high costs: an all-India average of ₹37,630.

The morbidity data, collected for 62 ailments, tabulated and presented in 16 broad categories, shows a peculiarly high morbidity in Kerala, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh. In Kerala,

Healing India

Some encouraging trends, some matters of concern, and some puzzling data in the 80th NSS

Most medical care today is provided by qualified medical practitioners.

TAHIR XOLF

- India shows strong maternal health progress with over 95% of childbirths now occurring within medical institutions
- Morbidity data reveals puzzlingly high illness rates in Kerala and West Bengal that require further academic investigation
- Public hospital usage remains stagnant while private healthcare accounts for the majority of in-patient medical treatments
- Despite a significant increase in insurance coverage, high out-of-pocket expenses continue to cause widespread personal indebtedness
- Pursuing universal medical care funded through general taxation remains a vital goal for improving national health outcomes
- Although the survey contains rich insights, certain data anomalies require the release of raw information for analysis

it spans all age groups, while in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh high morbidity is seen in people older than 60. What explains this somewhat strange finding considering Kerala has better public health outcomes according to other data sources? Is it due to the perception of what illness is in different States or more stoic behaviour in some States? Or is it a data collection issue? This merits deeper research.

It is unsurprising that infections are common across all age groups, and lifestyle diseases such as diabetes mellitus and hypertension appear around age 40 and continue to increase thereafter. It is a matter of concern that injuries, a largely preventable problem, is the second or third highest cause of morbidity from the age of

15 onwards. Around 35% of patients in urban areas and 25% in rural areas utilise government hospitals. Utilisation has not changed significantly compared to the 2017-2018 round, when it was 33% and 26% in urban and rural areas. Less than 1% of care is delivered by charitable hospitals.

The percentage of the population covered by insurance has increased remarkably. It was only 14% in rural areas and 19% in urban areas in the last survey, versus 47.4% in rural areas and 44.3% in urban areas now. Given the high out-of-pocket costs in private institutions for hospitalisations – the national average is ₹50,508 – and the fact that about 65% of in-hospital care is still privately accessed, insurance appears to have had limit-

ed impact. Even the lowest quintile of income earners pays around ₹25,000 for private care, which explains why treatment for illness is an important cause of indebtedness.

There used to be a time when government institutions treated patients without requiring insurance. Whatever was available was free at the point of service to any patient. Universal medical care funded through general taxation is a goal worth pursuing. Tamil Nadu presents the paradox of among the lowest out-of-pocket expenditure in government hospitals and, simultaneously, some of the highest costs for private care. It is also noteworthy that most medical care is provided by qualified medical practitioners, with only 3.6% of people in rural areas and 1.4% of peo-

ple in urban areas reporting accessing care through informal medical practitioners. There is no disaggregation by type of qualified medical practitioner, although this information has been collected in the questionnaire, so it is not clear what percentage access modern medicine.

There are some problems with the data. For example, in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, average out-of-pocket medical expenditure in charitable hospitals (₹1.68 lakh and ₹1.51 lakh) far exceeds the average in private hospitals (₹72,979 and ₹55,389 respectively). As a rule, one expects that charitable hospitals will be less expensive. Some entries also seem to be erroneous: for instance, the entry of obstetrics under the 'male' category, since obstetrics pertains to pregnancy and childbirth, and a gastrointestinal entry in West Bengal of ₹7.84 lakh in Table A10 of the data. These anomalies require clarification.

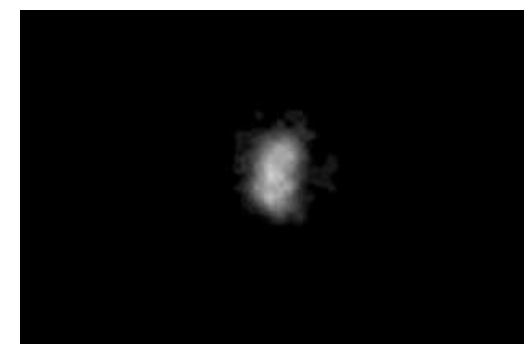
There is rich data about people's perceptions of health care available for analysis and interpretation. The questionnaire attached as Appendix E in the data shows that considerably more data have been gathered than have been published. It would be an even more valuable resource if the raw data were released in the public domain.

(George Thomas is an orthopaedic surgeon in Chennai)



Doubts arise over rock-based climate mitigation scheme

A climate mitigation strategy called 'enhanced alkalinity' involves spreading crushed rocks like silicates on land or in water. When the rocks dissolve, they release minerals that help the ocean absorb and hold CO₂. Now, two researchers from New Zealand and the U.S. have reported a flaw: as the minerals travel from soil to the sea, they're often trapped in secondary minerals like clay, removing the alkalinity needed to store carbon and smothering the method's efficacy.



Neptune's moon Nereid may not be from the Kuiper Belt

Astronomers thought Neptune had captured its moon Nereid from the Kuiper Belt thanks to its unusual looping orbit. However, data from the James Webb Space Telescope suggests Nereid's chemical makeup doesn't match known Belt objects. It features crystalline water ice and a spectral signature. When the team modelled its history, they found Neptune's capture of its moon Triton could have caused gravitational chaos that 'kicked' Nereid into its orbit.

Why CBSE must re-think its on-screen marking system



John Xavier

On May 13, CBSE declared Class 12 results, recording a three point drop in pass percentage to 85.20% from 88.39% last year. Several students, in effect, would have found themselves on the wrong side of the line compared to last year's cohort. The aggregate decline is sharp enough that it cannot be waved away with the usual "tougher papers this year" explanation.

The CBSE introduced a new interface to score Class 12 answer papers – the On-Screen Marking (OSM) system, which was formally announced in a release on February 9. Under this system, physical answer sheets will be scanned, uploaded to a secure digital platform, and handed to evaluators who

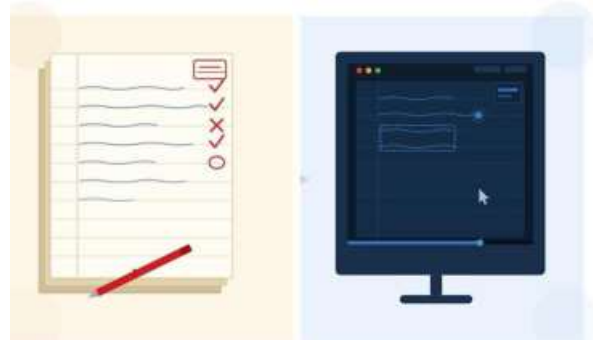
can assess them on computers, instead of on paper.

The move was positioned as a modernisation effort that will make the scoring process faster, more efficient, and more transparent.

Most of us assume that reading is reading, whether it happens on a printed page or a digital screen. This intuition may sound reasonable for a tweet or a news headline. But it starts falling apart the moment you start reading a long essay as the content demands you to track an argument, hold multiple points in mind simultaneously, and make holistic judgments about quality.

That is precisely what a Class 12 evaluator is asked to do, hundreds of times over, under time pressure.

A 2010 study, published in the *British Journal of Educational Technology*, examining whether marking mode influences reliability when evaluating extended essay scripts, found



The CBSE introduced the On-Screen Marking (OSM) system for Class 12 evaluations. AI GENERATED

that while overall marker reliability was broadly similar across both modes, there was notably greater variability in on-screen marking compared to paper.

That study involved only twelve examiners marking relatively short essays, but the CBSE system involves lakhs of answer sheets, evaluated by tens of thousands of teachers, many of whom would be encountering this interface for evaluation for the very first time.

There are practical

wrinkles, too. Legibility of handwritten answers depends enormously on scan quality.

A script that is perfectly readable in its original form can become a smudged, washed-out image on screen – making it harder for an examiner to give a fair reading, let alone a fair mark.

Screen fatigue is another major factor. And so is the cognitive overhead of navigating a new interface.

In 2017, when the board discontinued its marks moderation policy, it trig-

gered a furore that forced a rethink.

The difference then was that the change came after exams. This time, the OSM switch was communicated before exams were conducted, which is marginally better. But communicating a change and preparing evaluators for it are two different things.

The time given to examiners to genuinely internalise a new interface, to get comfortable marking essays on a screen rather than circling answers on paper with a pen, appears to have been wholly inadequate.

What CBSE should have done, and what it still can do, before embedding this system further, is run a proper A/B evaluation. Take a statistically significant sample of answer sheets. Have one group evaluate on paper, another on screen. Compare not just final marks but the distribution of marks, the frequency of outliers, and the

gap between lenient and strict evaluators.

That kind of empirical groundwork would tell you whether the system is working as intended.

A three-percentage-point drop in pass rates, in the very year a new evaluation system was introduced, is not proof of causation. There are other variables. Exam difficulty matters. Student preparedness matters.

The academic futures of millions of young people run through these marks as a Class 12 board score is a gate to college admissions, and scholarship eligibility that will shape entire trajectories for students from modest backgrounds.

The board has an obligation to demonstrate, rigorously and transparently, that its evaluation system is delivering fair outcomes. It should not treat modernisation as a virtue in itself, but find out whether that effort serves the people it is meant to serve.



Question Corner

Undulating heat

Is a heatwave really a wave of heat?

A heatwave is not like a wave or pulse of heat travelling through the air. The name probably comes from the way a heatwave feels, as something that spreads, surges, and overwhelms before subsiding. Some meteorologists prefer the term "heat event" instead. For example, in April and May, the sun is almost directly overhead over most of peninsular India, and the ground heats for weeks. When a stable, high-pressure weather system settles over a part of the peninsula, air slowly sinks down from higher in the atmosphere. This

suppresses the process that forms clouds, which allows sunlight to keep beating down. At this time, the peninsula also bears hot, dry continental winds from India's interior rather than from the seas. Finally, if the soil is dry, less heat goes into evaporating water and more into heating the air. When these conditions persist for a few days, a heatwave can occur. This said, large undulations in the jet stream called Rossby waves can sometimes create high-pressure 'domes' of heat that stagnate over an area.

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

PROFILES

The old man and the siege

Raul Castro

The Trump administration, which has imposed a punishing blockade on Cuba, has indicted the 94-year-old former revolutionary leader and President, in a replay of the farcical accusations that led to the U.S. abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro early this year

Srinivasan Ramani

Earlier this month, after months of strangling life in Cuba by blockading fuel supplies, the Trump administration moved to indict the 94-year-old former President Raul Castro Ruz over the 1996 shootdown of two civilian aircraft over the Florida Straits. Mr. Castro was then the Defence Minister of Cuba. The then President and Raul's brother, Fidel Castro, had publicly taken responsibility for the attack, which killed four, in what Havana said was its own airspace.

While sections of the U.S. media invariably describe the shootdown of the 'Brothers to the Rescue' – the group that flew the aircraft towards Cuba – as an unprovoked murder, records show the group indulged in significant provocation. Its founder Jose Basulto, a Cuban emigre and veteran of the failed, covert U.S.-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961, told *The Atlantic* he had been "trained as a terrorist" by the U.S. The 'Brothers' had repeatedly flown into Cuban airspace to drop anti-government leaflets, seeking what Basulto described as "confrontation". Cuba had warned the U.S. authorities; on the day of the shootdown, Cuban air controllers warned the pilots off, and Basulto replied: "We are ready to do it. It is our right as free Cubans."

The immediate outcome was a tightening of the U.S. embargo – in place since 1962 and what Havana has always termed an economic blockade – most notably through the Helms-Burton Act passed barely three weeks after the shootdown. But it is for this 30-year-old incident that Raul Castro is being charged, in a replay of the farcical accusations that led to the U.S.'s abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro early this year.

Why has a frail 94-year-old, by many accounts weak of hearing and slow of speech, found himself in the crosshairs of a Trump administration once again? It is worth knowing the biography of a remarkable revolutionary long overshadowed by his charismatic elder

brother, Fidel.

Raul Castro was born in Biran, eastern Cuba, in 1931 – the youngest of three brothers their landowning father sent to school together. Fidel, in *My Life*, tells the journalist Ignacio Ramonet that he practically raised Raul during their school years. But Raul's politics were his own. As a law student at Havana University he joined the youth wing of the Popular Socialist Party (PSP) – Cuba's main communist party at the time – and travelled to a Soviet-organised youth congress in Vienna in 1953.

'Rank-and-file combatant'

When Fidel, along with other Orthodox Party (left nationalists) members, laid out the plan to attack the Moncada barracks as a first step to overthrow the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship, Raul signed on. Raul went in as a "rank-and-file combatant" (in Fidel's words). When his unit was cornered, Raul managed to turn the surrounding soldiers themselves into his prisoners, saving his men from torture and execution. He was eventually caught and imprisoned with Fidel on the Isle of Pines. On release, the brothers left for Mexico, where Raul first met the Argentine doctor Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, whom he introduced to Fidel.

Along with Che and an 80-strong rebel force, Fidel boarded the yacht *Granma* to launch a guerrilla-style insurrection in December 1956, only to be attacked by Batista's troops three days after landing and reduced to a handful of survivors. Two weeks later, Raul caught up with his brother's group in the Sierra Maestra, carrying five rifles to add to Fidel's two – prompting Fidel's famous declaration: "Now we can win this war".

Out of that nucleus the rebels slowly built columns and bases across eastern Cuba. By March 1958, Raul was given his own command – the Second Eastern Front 'Frank Pais', in the mountains north of Santiago. At just 26, he ran not only a military front but a rudimentary state apparatus. When his front came under aerial attack, he retaliated by kidnapping U.S. citizens working in the area – drawing



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

international attention and forcing a halt to the air raids. Fidel would later call Raul's Second Front "strategic" to the war's outcome.

When the Revolution triumphed in January 1959, Raul became Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, a post he would hold for 49 years. He is credited with building a state from a guerrilla army – purging the Batista officer corps, raising the National Revolutionary Militias and building Cuba's defence forces. He helped lead the defence at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 and was sent to Moscow during the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis with a hand-written military agreement that was accepted by Soviet leader Nikita

Khrushchev. Through the 1970s and 1980s, Raul oversaw what became Cuba's largest overseas deployment – internationalist forces to Angola in support of the MPLA government of Agostinho Neto against South African intervention. The 15-year engagement ultimately forced Pretoria to the negotiating table and helped accelerate the end of apartheid in southern Africa – a contribution acknowledged by none other than Nelson Mandela.

If the 1980s were a test of Raul's military thinking, the 1990s challenged his organisational skills on a far larger scale. Following the collapse of Cuba's main economic benefactor, the USSR, he played a key role in addressing the

resulting crisis. He turned the FAR into an economic institution, declaring that "beans are worth more than cannons", and put it to work in agriculture. Out of these reforms grew the military's commercial conglomerate Grupo de Administracion Empresarial S.A. (GAESA), which over the last two decades has become a behemoth controlling vast tracts of the Cuban economy.

Short-lived thaw

Today, GAESA has been explicitly targeted by the Trump administration – yet another turn in U.S.-Cuba relations, which had briefly thawed before Mr. Trump first came to power.

That thaw came under Raul's presidency, which began formally in 2008 after he had already taken the reins in 2006 when Fidel fell ill.

Under President Barack Obama's second term, Raul worked towards the thaw leading to the announcement of December 17, 2014, when the two leaders simultaneously declared the restoration of full diplomatic ties after more than five decades of estrangement. The embargo remained in place, but restrictions on travel and remittances were eased. The opening proved short-lived. Under the first Trump administration, much of it was rolled back, the embargo tightened, and Cuba redesignated a "state sponsor of terrorism".

Today, with the January 2026 executive order branding Cuba "an unusual and extraordinary threat" to U.S. national security, the fuel blockade choking daily life, the Pentagon reportedly drafting plans for military action, and now an indictment against Raul, all indications point to a naked attempt to bring down by force a state that the U.S. has long sought to upend through other means.

Cubans have marked the indictment with rallies in Havana in solidarity with their veteran revolutionary leader, who, despite being long dismissed by detractors as merely Fidel's brother, remains a deputy of the National Assembly and a defining figure of the Cuban state following the 1959 Revolution.

THE GIST

When Fidel Castro, along with other Orthodox Party (left nationalists) members, laid out the plan to attack the Moncada barracks as a first step to overthrow the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship, Raul signed on

By March 1958, Raul was given his own command – the Second Eastern Front 'Frank Pais', in the mountains north of Santiago, during the civil war

When the Revolution triumphed in January 1959, Raul became Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, a post he would hold for 49 years

A deadly pathogen

Bundibugyo ebolavirus

The strain that causes an often-fatal viral haemorrhagic fever is the primary causative agent in the current Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda

Ramya Kannan

At the heart of the current outbreak of Ebola in Central Africa is a quirky name – Bundibugyo. The less-known Bundibugyo ebolavirus strain that causes an often-fatal viral haemorrhagic fever is the primary causative agent in the outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda. While related to the more common Zaire ebolavirus and the Sudan ebolavirus, there have been only two documented Bundibugyo-related outbreaks (Uganda in 2007, and another in the DRC in 2012). Currently, there are no vaccines or specific therapies against it, though efforts are on to fast-track the development of a vaccine.

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared with unusual alacrity, a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) even bypassing conventional consultations with expert bodies to do so. Soon after the DRC and Ugandan governments declared an outbreak of Ebola, on May 15, the WHO announced a PHEIC.

The name Bundibugyo comes from the days when pathogens used to be named after the places they were discovered in, though that naming convention is no longer considered fashionable. It was



REUTERS

first identified in 2007 in the Bundibugyo district of western Uganda. Bundibugyo, in the Western Region of Uganda, bordering the DRC, is the headquarters of the Bwamba Kingdom. After a mysterious illness broke out in 2007, the Bundibugyo ebolavirus was identified in diagnostic samples submitted to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, U.S., in November 2007, according to a 2010 article in the journal *Emerging Infectious Diseases*.

Previously documented Bundibugyo outbreaks have reportedly had case fatality rates of 30% and 50% – more or less the same fatality rate as the more common Zaire ebolavirus strain that caused havoc in Africa between 2014 and 2016. While this has caused fears that the virus is probably as deadly, the extra concern is because the outbreak has started in a conflict-ridden area, making case detection and contact tracing difficult and access to care uneven.

As of May 21, 2026, a total of 83 confirmed cases, including nine deaths, and 746 suspected cases, including 176 deaths, have been reported from 15 health zones in the DRC. Four health worker deaths have been reported to date. An American national who was working in the DRC as a surgeon has also been confirmed to have Ebola, reportedly having been exposed to the virus during a procedure he performed on May 11. He is being treated in isolation in Germany.

Similar symptoms

According to an article in the *Scientific American*, the symptoms of an infection with the Bundibugyo virus resemble those of other orthoebolaviruses. Early on, they include an intense headache, high fever, body ache and fatigue. This is known as the "dry symptoms", but as the infection progresses, people can develop "wet symptoms" or intense vomiting and diarrhoea, which can become

life-threatening. It further says: the viruses are also known to cause hemorrhagic fever, infecting specific immune cells and triggering a massive inflammatory response that can lead to internal bleeding and organ failure. Efforts are in place to improve identification of persons with suspected infection, trace their contacts, contain the spread of infection and make sure that everyone with the symptoms receives appropriate care at a health facility.

Meanwhile, the WHO has raised the public risk from the Ebola outbreak in DRC from 'high' to 'very high'. The scheduled India-Africa Forum Summit has been cancelled due to the ongoing crisis. British media has reported that scientists at Oxford University are working on developing a new vaccine to tackle the Bundibugyo strain, and that it might be ready for clinical trials in two or three months. Additionally, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, a global partnership working to accelerate the development of vaccines and other biologicals, has claimed that it is working at pace with partners, including Africa CDC, WHO and national authorities, to identify opportunities to rapidly advance vaccine development.

Daughter of the soil

Yang Shuang-zi

The Taiwanese author, who won this year's International Booker Prize, says literature cannot be separated from politics

Radhika Santhanam

Yang Shuang-zi first developed the idea for her genre-bending novel, *Taiwan Travelogue*, in 2017. In an interview on the Booker Prizes website, she says she formally began work on the book in February 2019 and completed the first draft by August the same year. Each chapter in it is named after a Taiwanese dish – roasted seeds, jute soup, beef and vegetable hotpot, leftovers soup, and so on. "Research for the novel's central themes of travel and food changed my life in two obvious ways: my savings went down; my weight went up," she joked.

When she went on stage with her translator, the Taiwanese-American, Lin King, to jointly receive the £50,000 International Booker Prize for 2026 at Tate Modern in London last week, King quipped that Yang had cake on her hands, a detail which "epitomises this whole book". *Taiwan Travelogue*, published by And Other Stories, is the first English translation of Yang's work and has catapulted her to literary fame. She is the first Taiwanese writer to win the International Booker Prize.

Yang was born Yang Jotzu in 1984 in a village near Taichung, Central Taiwan. She adopted the pen name 'Shuang-zi', meaning



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

twin sister, Yang Jo-hui, who died of cancer in 2015. As a child, she developed a love for books especially after reading Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Ball*, which sparked her lifelong passion for Manga. In the 1990s, Yang dove into the romance novels and queer literature that flourished in her country. She also grew fascinated with yuri, a sub-culture in Japan that focuses on intimate relationships between women.

Taiwan Travelogue is set in 1938 – a few decades before Yang was born – when Taiwan was under Japanese rule. It follows a Japanese novelist, Aoyama Chizuko, on a government-sponsored trip. She decides to explore Taiwan through its food, guided by her "monstrous appetite". She is her interpreter and also an extraordinary cook. Chizuko becomes infatuated with her, but Chizuru maintains a distance. Whether Chizuru returns

Chizuko's feelings is the question that propels the novel forward.

Complexity of power

Their relationship – shaped by their different class backgrounds, with one woman a 'Mainlander' and the other an 'Islander' – reflects the complex dynamics of power. Yang has said in interviews that she wanted to write a historical novel from a female perspective. *Taiwan Travelogue* is also her attempt, she said, to "help them [Taiwanese] dissect the complicated emotion" they have towards the period of Japanese colonialism.

Yang, who is also a writer of Manga, video game scripts, and fiction, was awarded Taiwan's highest literary honour, the Golden Tripod Award, for the original Mandarin Chinese version of *Taiwan Travelogue*, published in 2020.

Lin King's English-language translation won the National Book Award for Translated Literature in

2024. Now, the book has been published, or is slated for publication, in several languages including Japanese, Korean, Norwegian, Ukrainian, Italian, German, Dutch, Danish, and Greek. It is not available in the People's Republic of China, though Yang told *The Observer* that some of her Chinese friends bought copies and quietly smuggled them into the country. She also expressed a wish that the Chinese would read it and come to realise that the Taiwanese are culturally, and therefore nationally, a distinct population. "Some of us believe ourselves to be Chinese and then others believe that we are Taiwanese, and I wanted to express that somehow through my book," she told *The Guardian*.

On receiving the prize, Yang made it clear that she does not believe that art and literature must be kept far from politics. "I believe that literature cannot be separated from the soil in which it has grown," she said during her speech at Tate Modern. She found the right translator in King, who told the audience that following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, she made the "explicit decision that rather than translating Sinophile works indiscriminately", she would "only translate writing from Taiwan in the foreseeable future".



REFLECTIONS

THE BIG PICTURE

Sikkim and five treasures of the Khangchendzonga

From its exemplary social harmony to its education sector that opens the doors to the future while respecting tradition, Sikkim showcases a thoughtful vision of development

As school students, many of us first encountered Sikkim through geography textbooks and atlases that spoke of the mighty Khangchendzonga. The "mountain massif" stood before our imagination as distant Himalayan peaks wrapped in Lungta prayer flags, clouds and snow. Nearly one-fourth of Sikkim's land is embraced by the Khangchendzonga National Park, but facts alone never fully explained the reverence it commands across the state. For centuries, Khangchendzonga has lived in the folklore of the indigenous communities as a sacred civilisational force — the protector of land, memory and consciousness of Sikkim itself. The great Lama Lhatsun Chempo interpreted this belief with poetic brilliance, calling the five summits as the Five Treasures of the Eternal Snow, "the peak most conspicuously gilded by the rising sun is the treasury of gold, the peak that remains in cold grey shade is the storehouse for silver and other peaks are vaults for gems, grains and the holy books."

During my recent visit for Sikkim's 51st Statehood Day celebrations, this lore revealed itself with renewed contemporary relevance.

The first treasure is gold, and nowhere is

Sikkim richer than in its people. Development acquires permanence only when it grows from the confidence of communities, and Sikkim offers compelling evidence of that truth. At the Statehood Day celebrations, the traditional attire, a symphonious performance on "Lepcha, Bhutia, Nepali *milkar baney pehchan sachhi*" (united, they form a true identity), and ceremonial customs of the Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali communities reflected that social harmony. Conversations around me moved seamlessly between Nepalese, Hindi and English. Today, it has become one of Sikkim's defining strengths, that many larger regions continue to aspire towards. Such harmony has translated itself into governance and public life with remarkable maturity.

This takes us to the second treasure, silver, which manifests itself through Sikkim's elemental beauty and biodiversity. The Teesta and Rangtee rivers revealed themselves between the dense forests and clouds, while unbloomed cherry trees stood amongst the slopes of tea gardens, awaiting the onset of winter. The silver of Sikkim revealed itself most vividly at the Swarnajayanti Maitreya Manjari Orchardarium, where 120+ varieties of orchids welcomed tourists. Each flower bloomed with remarkable delicacy, carrying colours and forms that truly reflected the botanical richness of the state. I watched tourists pause before each exhibit with curiosity, scanning QR codes and plaques to understand their origin and conservation journey.

What fascinated many visitors, was the realisation that the orchidarium was only a window to the world of Sikkim's botanical wealth. One-fourth of India's floral diversity

is found within this small Himalayan state. This gives its ecological wealth scientific, cultural and economic significance of immense national value, as Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi aptly observed during his recent visit, describing the state as "heaven on earth". This acquires greater meaning upon witnessing how environmental responsibility continues to shape infrastructure and tourism across Sikkim with a vision of sustainable development.

The third treasure is gems, and in Sikkim these gems are cultural, spiritual and civilisational. They appear in various monasteries, in the grand Buddha Park at Ravangla, in the Bhaleydhunga skywalk overlooking the valley and in the sacred geography blessed by Guru Padmasambhava himself.

Sikkim continues to preserve a sense of spirituality that feels increasingly precious and pristine in today's restless world. This spiritual inheritance now coexists with modern aspirations.

The Namchi-Temi-Ravangla tourism circuit, being conceptualised by the ministry of development of north eastern region (MDoNER) with the Sikkim government, reflects a developmental vision that strengthens ecotourism while simultaneously deepening spiritual and cultural circuits across the region. Among its most ambitious components is the Bhaleydhunga ropeway and skywalk project. Deeply rooted in local tradition, Bhaleydhunga has long been revered by villagers who undertake pilgrimages to seek blessings at the sacred summit. Today, the journey has become significantly more accessible through the 3.5 km ropeway, the longest in India that will take you to the Bhaleydhunga Skywalk at 3200



Development acquires permanence only when it grows from the confidence of communities, and Sikkim offers compelling evidence of that truth.

SHUTTERSTOCK

metres, the highest in the world.

The fourth treasure, grains, carries the story of sustenance. Sikkim's journey as a 100% organic state, is among the most important developmental achievements in contemporary India. The state's success in organic farming, cardamom cultivation and sustainable agriculture demonstrates how mountain ecosystems can sustain prosperous local economies.

To support this, we launched Mission Sikkim Organics, a ₹360-crore initiative designed to transform Sikkim into a globally integrated premium organic economy through targeted interventions in the value chain. The treasure revealed itself most memorably during my visit to Temi Tea Garden, Sikkim's only tea estate and among the most distinguished agri-tourism enterprises in the world.

At Temi, I tried plucking tea leaves alongside the swift pluckers moving steadily across the slopes. My pace lasted only a few moments before laughter broke out around me and the pluckers resumed the task effortlessly with their practised ease. Perhaps, it is this closeness to the land that gives Temi tea its toasty warmth and subtle floral finish. Though its true distinction lies in the fact

that the tea is entirely organic. The fermentation, drying and final bamboo packaging — every stage at Temi is processed organically. In a century increasingly defined by climate uncertainty and strain, the state has demonstrated that environmental responsibility can strengthen economic resilience rather than constrain it.

The fifth treasure, the holy books, is Sikkim's intelligence. It lives in education, where the new educational institutions and the permanent campus of Sikkim State University in Namchi reflect a future that respects tradition while opening doors to knowledge, skill and innovation. The future of Viksit Bharat shall depend substantially upon how effectively such institutions nurture talent across frontier regions of the country. PM Modi's visit made this clear, as he spoke of education, connectivity, health care, urban development and tourism as the pillars of Sikkim's next phase. The old and the new meet here with unusual grace, and the result is a development model rooted in heritage.

The five treasures of Khangchendzonga continue to illuminate Sikkim's journey with remarkable relevance even today, and their influence is visible even in the state's devel-

opmental achievements. India's smallest state by population, with 6.5 lakh people, today possesses the highest per capita income in the nation at ₹7.07 lakh. Sikkim embraced organic farming at a time when the world remained preoccupied with chemical yields, and today stands as the world's first and only fully certified organic state. This is a land that could have yielded to the constraints of geography, mountainous, remote and landlocked, yet transformed every apparent limitation into possibility.

When India completes one hundred years of Independence in 2047, Sikkim too shall approach the milestone of its platinum jubilee of statehood. The aspirations of Viksit Bharat 2047 and Viksit Sikkim 2047 shall continue to strengthen one another with shared purpose. Perhaps generations from now, school students reading about Khangchendzonga will understand that the mountain never merely guarded Sikkim. It shaped one of India's most thoughtful visions of development.

Jyotiraditya Scindia is minister of development of north eastern region and minister of communication, Government of India. The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar



Sorry, it is very British & means many things

Sorry is a word we hardly ever use in India. Even when it's necessary, we tend to avoid it. Apologies are not our forte. In Britain, on the other hand, it trips off the natives' tongues with astonishing frequency. An article on the BBC website claims that "Brits say the word on average nine times a day — more than 3,000 times a year". But it's not necessarily an apology. The BBC describes it as "a cultural reflex — a five-letter pressure valve used to soften requests, smooth over awkwardness, fill conversational gaps and avoid the horror of seeming rude."

The website has six examples of the different ways sorry is used. They reveal a lot of the British people and their culture.

When spoken on the street it may sound like an apology but it is, in fact, an expression of "the UK's deep discomfort with accidental intimacy". It usually means "excuse me", "after you" or

"please move" or, even, "let's pretend this tiny collision never happened". As the BBC puts it, "the point is not blame, but social repair".

Then there's the sorry spoken in conversation. What it's actually saying is "I didn't hear you" or "I need a bit of time to process what you've said". This time it's akin to saying "pardon" or "I just need a second". It's politer than saying "what?" and it's very useful in places like pubs or crowded trains where the noise level makes hearing difficult. The inflection in tone usually makes the meaning clear.

However, sorry plays a very different role when it's said as "Sorry, can I just...". Here it's a polite request to fit into a tight space or squeeze past a narrow opening. For instance, "Sorry, can I just squeeze past?" or "Sorry, is anyone sitting here?" The speaker is not apologising. He or she is simply softening the act of asking, entering, sitting or reaching beyond. This is sorry as a form of politeness or, even,

politesse.

The one you hear often when other people tread or trample on your rights is "Oh, sorry". It's a way of objecting disguised behind an apology. Actually, it's a way of making your point without being too direct about it. For instance, "Oh, sorry, I think I was next" or "Oh, sorry that's my seat" or, even, "Oh sorry, I was using that".

As the BBC puts it: "The pause after 'oh' does the damage. It lets them object while remaining technically polite — a very British compromise between saying nothing and saying exactly what you think."

This is, of course, rather different from "Sorry, but". This sorry signifies contradiction or, even, objection. To quote the BBC: "Try as I might to agree with you, I can't. I'm about to explain why you're wrong and I don't care what you think." The use of sorry at the outset is civility. It cushions the fact you're about to strongly disagree. Incidentally, this form of sorry is least likely to be used in India. When we disagree — or are disagreeable — we don't really care about how it comes across!

Finally, there's the curt sorry when someone queue-jumps or takes your turn at the bar in a pub. As the BBC explains: "The queue is sacred territory — like Westminster Abbey or Wimbledon — and a politely interjected 'sorry' acts as an etiquette reminder that everyone must adhere to the rules." Put more pith-

WHEN SPOKEN ON THE STREET, SORRY MAY SOUND LIKE AN APOLOGY BUT IT IS, IN FACT, AN EXPRESSION OF 'THE UK'S DEEP DISCOMFORT WITH ACCIDENTAL INTIMACY'. IT USUALLY MEANS 'EXCUSE ME', 'AFTER YOU' OR 'PLEASE MOVE' OR, EVEN, 'LET'S PRETEND THIS TINY COLLISION NEVER HAPPENED'

ily, "it's a correction dressed up as a courtesy." It's the British way of saying "get to the back" or "don't push in" or "keep your distance".

Perhaps, the closest to the British sorry is India Today TV's "so, sorry" cartoon. Here sorry is playing the part of an insincere apology. A sorry that's said but not meant. Perhaps it is intended to take the sting out of the bite but what follows can hurt nonetheless. In fact, it's often meant to.

Now, all that remains for me to say is, I'm sorry if I've wasted your time.

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

ANOTHER DAY

Namita Bhandare



More than correction of a medical misnomer

It's a condition that affects one in eight women around the world. Diagnosed through a matrix of clinical symptoms, ultrasound tests and guesswork, it has no known cure, has been historically underfunded and was, until last week, even wrongly named for close to a century.

When he started his endocrinology practice 42 years ago, Dr Ambrish Mittal, endocrinology head, Max Healthcare, knew PCOS, or polycystic ovary syndrome, was a misnomer. "Ovarian cysts were a small part of the story," he says. "Some women had no cysts at all, others had excess hair growth, and not everybody was obese," he says of the condition's varied symptoms. How is it that a name slapped on in 1935 stuck even though doctors knew it inadequately described a complex endocrine disorder with a wide range of symptoms and health implications including diabetes, cardiovascular disease and mental health?

"Historically, this has been considered an ovary condition with minimal funding for research outside of that, which limited understanding of the broader features," Helena Teede, an endocrinologist and professor of women's health at Monash University, Australia said in an email interview.

It took Teede 14 years, the involvement of 56 organisations and over 14,000 patients to change the name to PMOS, or polyendocrine metabolic ovarian syndrome. It was important to engage globally, she said, "as often these decisions are made by developed countries without considering cultural nuances or implications of a change."

What's in a name change? Plenty. The most obvious is the hope for better understanding and diagnosis. In her gynaecology practice, Dr Shaiba Saldanha said she has seen patients who had been wrongly prescribed hormonal medicine for years due to a misdiagnosis. "Many of the symptoms of PCOS can be caused by other factors like stress around exams for instance," she said. "Removing the word polycystic could help

shift the focus towards hormonal and metabolic health."

The renaming reminds us also that women's health has a long history of being under-termined, even ignored. Endometriosis, for instance, a condition whose symptoms include debilitating pain especially during periods, continues to be under-diagnosed with the pain, very often, being dismissed. It's a dismissal that is reflected in policy — a refusal to recognise that some women need paid menstrual leave. Women are still expected to tolerate pain as a "natural" process, whether it's periods or even child birth. The insertion of an intra-uterine device (IUD) for birth control is often carried out without pain management. And those who ask for pain relief run the risk of being shamed.

It's telling that the ancient Greek word for uterus was *hysteria* and, even today, the surgical removal of the uterus is called a hysterectomy. But *hysteria* is also the root of hysteria, a term used to dismiss physical suffering that can be found in medicine today.

Women's pain is far more likely than a man's to be framed in emotional rather than physiological terms. So, a heart attack can be misdiagnosed because doctors are trained to look for symptoms common in men — crushing chest pain — whereas women have symptoms that include jaw pain, fatigue and nausea.

Fortunately, there is growing recognition that the male body is not the medical and research default. There is new attention on conditions like menopause, which affects half the world's population and has been long under-researched and under-funded.

The shift from PCOS to PMOS is more than a medical correction. It is part of a larger reckoning where women's health has been seen as somehow less important, less legitimate, and less deserving of attention or funding.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

The joy of sadness in children's stories

Bernadette's daughter asks her not to come to her school theatre performance because she wouldn't be able to handle its heightened emotions. My husband and I looked at each other immediately, only to burst into silly faces. Of course, we had to pause Cate Blanchett's underrated performance in *Where'd You Go, Bernadette?* How I have never been able to read the many adventures of Pippi Longstocking to my daughter, or never finished watching *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, or howled my way through both *Inside Out* films, and how I'll never pick up *Charlotte's Web*, is a significant part of my family's favourite party-tale repertoire. The latest addition is me crying through *The Sheep Detectives*.

Fortunately, I'm not the only one with such adventures involving children's stories. Some of the most hardened men and women I know have confessed to turning into a tear tap while watching children's films or reading children's literature. Why are these stories almost inevitably so sad? Yes, there's the pedagogical side of it. Children must be taught to deal with unexpected hardships and find a way to work through grief. Through sadness passes the light of joy and redemption. There's a happy ending waiting for both the character and the reader. Just hold yourself together a bit longer.

But what these stories do to adults is

more fascinating. Beyond nostalgia and mythologised childhoods, these stories are about people and processes that were simpler, even if not easier. Friendships are non-narcissistic, and enemies are mostly clearly defined, even if they happen to be scary monsters. Scholar Louise Joy, author of *Literature's Children*, says that children's literature "refracts adult consciousness, offering and enabling us to pass on to our own children the world as we wish it, and precisely not as we find it". Children's stories for adults are *Narnia* minus any real danger.

The creator of the *Narnia* universe, CS Lewis, said, "A children's story that can only be enjoyed by children is not a good children's story in the slightest." The story must tug at the heartstrings of all and sundry. The sadness evoked by a children's story appears heavier because it sits in that part of us which we keep hidden. We were all vulnerable and straightforward once before we understood the machinations of networking and wore the garb of invincibility. I'm not sure if I enjoy being a snufface as an adult waiting for my car after watching a film in the Playhouse, though. The joy of these sad stories is in the moment of a neat denouement. Mufasa is dead, but long live the Lion King!

These moments elude us with such cruelty in real life that any semblance of them is coveted. Children's sad stories are



The adult experience of a child's universe is a sobering thing. Children are essentially powerless in an adult world.

HT ARCHIVE

about hope that we find dimming with each report coming from Gaza, Iran, Sudan, or closer home, with unmistakable regularity of anticipated horror. Psychologists have found that reactions of children to crises like death are not essentially different from those of adults. They also find that adults may not have completely let go of the child within. Children toughen up to behave like adults to survive. Perhaps it's time for adults to be more childlike for survival purposes. It must be added, however, that scams like "inner-child healing" programmes must be kept at bay, for they prey on the very vulnerability that these children's stories celebrate and turn into a survival kit. You need not betray the friend to slay the dragon. Or, you don't

have to give up the dragon to those who want to kill it.

The adult experience of a child's universe is a sobering thing. Children are essentially powerless in an adult world. Our decisions impact them in ways that we have conveniently taught ourselves to forget. Adult life is defined by forgetfulness, real and feigned. Maybe a film like *The Jungle Book* or *Taare Zameen Par*, or children's books by Rudyard Kipling, Lewis Carroll, JM Barrie, RK Narayan, and E Nesbit, are vital to trigger the act of remembering what we do not even realise as lost and forgotten.

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

SUNDAY LETTERS

Minority concerns

This is with reference to "Nation and its largest religious minority" by Karan Thapar (May 17). The declining presence of Muslims in legislatures can't be ignored. India's strength lies in its diversity and the promise of equal opportunity to all. A truly developed India must ensure that no section feels reduced to second-class citizenship.

Sanjay Chopra

Bring women into the EV mainstream

This is with reference to "Making capital's EV policy women-friendly" by Lalita Panicker (May 17). The government should start giving subsidies to women apart from making suitable arrangements for them at charging stations. They should be trained in the upkeep and operation of EVs as well to foster employment.

Abhilasha Gupta

From subsidies to easy loans, free driving training programmes to well-lit charging stations to reserving EV permits for women entrepreneurs, a large number of such initiatives can make Delhi's EV policy inclusive.

Bal Govind

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Beyond marriage, ways to live, love



MRIDULA MANGLAM

CAN A society truly claim to oppose dowry while continuing to treat marriage as an unquestionable marker of respectability? What would it mean to respond to dowry deaths not only with outrage, but with the courage to imagine different ways of living, loving, and belonging?

It is always the extreme forms of violence that unsettle the public conscience. Images circulate, testimonies emerge, anger intensifies, and demands for justice grow louder. For a few days, grief appears collective. Yet, almost as predictably, the moment passes. The spectacle of outrage fades, while the social world that produces such violence remains remarkably intact and even glorified. Marriage continues to be celebrated as aspiration, security, prestige, and inevitability, even as the economic transactions surrounding it remain deeply normalised.

Dowry may be publicly disavowed in principle, yet it is routinely reframed through the language of "gifts", status, family honour, or the assumption that a man, as the economic provider, is entitled

to compensation.

Weddings continue to function as performances of social worth, where financial display is not merely tolerated but admired. Conversations around daughters still carry the language of burden, settlement, and responsibility, revealing how deeply marriage remains tied to economic and social anxieties. In such a context, violence within marriages cannot be understood as an aberration alone; it emerges from a structure whose underlying logic continues to be socially legitimised.

Women continue to enter marriage under profoundly unequal conditions. Across classes and communities, they are still more likely to adjust careers, relocate homes, absorb care work, manage emotional labour, and bear the burden of preserving relationships and family cohesion. The expectation of sacrifice remains feminised, even when articulated softly through the language of compromise, care, or culture.

This is perhaps the limit of outrage: it allows society to condemn violence without confronting the conditions that normalise it. Violence is treated as an exceptional moral failure of individuals, rather than as symptoms of a social order in which marriage remains deeply tied to economic exchange, gendered labour, caste anxieties, and social legitimacy.

The question here is not simply why violence persists, but what kind of institution marriage has historically been allowed to be-

Marriage has historically operated as far more than a personal relationship between individuals. It has functioned simultaneously as an economic arrangement, a mechanism for maintaining caste boundaries, a system for organising gendered labour...

come. Marriage has historically operated as far more than a personal relationship between individuals. It has functioned simultaneously as an economic arrangement, a mechanism for maintaining caste boundaries, a system for organising gendered labour, and a site through which families negotiate status, security, and social mobility. Under such conditions, the expectation that marriage should involve transaction does not appear accidental to society; it appears rationalised within the very logic of the institution. The violence, then, is not confined to moments of visible brutality. It is present too in the quieter forms of coercion that rarely acquire the language of violence at all: the fear surrounding unmarried daughters, the social panic around ageing without marriage, the normalisation of women's adjustment as virtue, the expectation that intimacy must culminate in sanctioned union, the idea that care, companionship, sexuality, and legitimacy can only exist respectably within one institutional form.

What appears as "choice" often emerges within an environment where alternatives have been systematically delegitimised. Perhaps this is why violence so rarely destabilises the institution itself. Society absorbs it, mourns it, briefly condemns its excesses, and then returns to preserving the same structure with renewed urgency. The problem is not simply hypocrisy; it is that marriage has been made foundational to social existence itself. To question it, or even to im-

agine life beyond it, is treated as threatening the moral and emotional order of society.

Consequently, alternatives remain underdeveloped not because human beings are incapable of forming different modes of intimacy, care, and interdependence, but because existing social arrangements systematically deny them legitimacy, visibility, and support. What remains absent, then, is not merely reform, but imagination.

The possibility of different futures may lie precisely here: in expanding the forms through which people are allowed to seek intimacy, care, security, and belonging. It could mean creating more collective and community-oriented forms of living, where care responsibilities are shared rather than feminised and privatised within the household.

This is why the conversation cannot end at legal reform or moral condemnation alone. What remains necessary is the willingness to imagine forms of living in which dignity, belonging, intimacy, and security are not so singularly dependent upon marriage and the family structure attached to it. Individual acts of violence clearly continue to shock the public conscience. The more difficult task, however, is confronting society's emotional, economic, and moral dependence on the very institution within which such violence repeatedly becomes thinkable, absorbable, and survivable.

The writer is a researcher

Hope in a cockroach



FIFTH COLUMN BY TAVLEEN SINGH

FIRST, FULL disclosure. No creature on this planet terrifies me as much as a cockroach. The terror this insect invokes in me is so great that I find it hard to say its name in conversation and usually spell it out letter by letter. My wicked younger sister exploited my dread to her advantage when we were small children. Her superpower was to somehow seek out cockroaches everywhere so she could wave them in my face and watch me flee for my life. A scar on my left knee is from one of these episodes when I ran so fast that I fell down a flight of stairs.

Last week for the first time ever, I began to take a fresh look at this creature with new eyes and with politics in mind. I have spent the past two weeks in a Swiss village and so it was only when I got back to Mumbai that I discovered that a nascent political outfit that calls itself the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) has caused such incredible political panic that the mighty Home Minister of India asked 'X' to kill its account. This order was duly obeyed and within hours it had reinvented itself under a new handle.

In the shortest time the CJP has managed to garner so much social media attention that it is has more followers than the Bharatiya Janata Party and Congress put together. When I consulted my new best friend Claude about this, it confirmed that, 'As of May 21, 2026, the Cockroach Janata Party's Instagram account had over 16 million followers -- a staggering 1,400% increase in a single day -- along with 200,000 followers on X.'

It is no wonder then that when I posted on X about the CJP, my timeline filled up instantly with abuse from the BJP's two-rupee trolls. I was warned that I seemed to be supporting a Pakistani plot. That it was funded by the CIA, that Abhijit Dipke who started the CJP was one of Arvind Kejriwal's proteges. That he believed in violent revolution and reservations for Dalits and opposed the abrogation of Article 370. These charges were accompanied by personal attacks on me that questioned my patriotism. I am used to being trolled so I mention this only to make the point that it is time that our ruling party stopped being so thin-skinned.

Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, this party has gone from strength to strength, and he personally is regularly described as the most popular political leader in the world. So, what is there to fear from an entity that has barely been born and that seems more like a satirical attempt to mock our mainstream political parties than anything else? Could it be that under the veil of invincibility that shields the Modi government, there are today a bunch of scared, aging political leaders who are terrified that a younger political party could end up taking them on one day?

The CJP's instant social media success appears to be mostly because young Indians are unhappy with our established political leaders and desperate for new leaders who would give them more hope? As someone who travels into small towns and villages, I can report that the biggest problem is the absence of jobs for young, educated Indians who aspire to a higher standard of living. Everywhere I go, I meet young people who are 'graduates' but who have failed to find employment after they leave college. These are young people who are too poor to ever hope to migrate to other countries in search of jobs and a better life but not rich enough to start living the middle-class dream.

Less than five percent of Indians ever manage to travel abroad so it is here in our own beloved homeland that they hope to see their lives improve.

These are the same young Indians who once placed all their hopes and dreams in Narendra Modi when he first became prime minister. And things have improved for India. We have better roads, airports, train stations and ports. There has been a huge jump in prosperity at the very top and millions of very poor Indians have been lifted out of poverty because of welfare schemes and generous handouts at election time. But, for the people in the middle there has been little change and now that dark clouds hover over the world economy, a deep desperation is beginning to grow and spread.

The opposition parties have failed totally to use this desperation for their own political ends and are perhaps as startled by the upsurge of support that the CJP has garnered at least on social media. Clearly there is room for a new political party to emerge even if it comes dressed up as a cockroach. It is entirely possible that by next week we will hear no more about cockroaches in politics but if there are alarm bells going off in the highest echelons of political Delhi, it is a good thing.

Those ensconced in their cocoons of political power need to be reminded from time to time that they are there because of ordinary people who rest their hopes and dreams in their votes. They do not ask for much. They want to be able to live in decent homes, send their children to halfway decent schools and live their lives with dignity.

The writer is a career bureaucrat

Editor (Planning & Projects) Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column

Why Vagdevi idol faces a long road home



DIVYA A

THE MADHYA PRADESH High Court recently declared the 11th-century Bhojshala-Kamal Maula Mosque complex in Dhar a temple. In its judgment, the court addressed claims concerning the idol of the temple's reigning deity, Saraswati or Vagdevi, that's believed to be housed in the British Museum in London. The court formally ordered the Centre to evaluate requests for the idol's return and potential reinstallation.

The idol was excavated or recovered during clearing operations in Dhar by a British colonial officer, Major General William Kincaid. Following its removal from the Bhojshala complex, the idol was shipped to England, arriving in the UK in 1886. It was officially acquired by the British Museum in 1909. As per the British Museum website, the "Standing figure of the Jaina yakṣiṇī Ambikā carved in a coarse white marble" comes from the Paramara dynasty, and has a 'production date' of year 1034.

The British Museum does not provide an exact count of "colonial artefacts", as the term encompasses millions of items acquired during the British Empire. Of the museum's collection of around 8 million objects, an estimated 90% did not originate in Britain. The museum is legally prohibited from permanently deaccessioning and returning items from its collection due to provisions in the British Museum Act.

Other UK museums have, however, started returning historical items to India. For example, the Wellcome Collection returned a landmark collection of over 2,000 ancient Jain manuscripts to India, while the Glasgow Museum has repatriated stolen antiquities in recent years.

Faced with calls to return artefacts, the British Museum has introduced a programme to loan those from former colonies back to their countries of origin for up to three years.

The British Museum's collection has grown since 1753, it says on its website, adding that "objects have been acquired in a variety of ways. Some objects are subject to questions about, or requests for, return to other countries".

The museum now has a special dedicated section on 'Contested objects', includes Benin Bronzes from the ancient West African kingdom, Magdala collection from Ethiopia, and even an early shield from Australia.

There are active, ongoing campaigns by Indian groups and petitioners requesting the permanent return of specific artefacts — from the Vagdevi idol to the Amaravati marbles.

In many cases, governments and museums frequently find pathways for repatriation through bilateral agreements and cultural exchanges. Recently, the 1,000-year-old Chola-era Leiden Copper Plates returned to India following an official diplomatic restitution by the Netherlands on May 16.

However, every debate for the return of any colonial artefact from the UK invariably turns to the Kohinoor. Recently, New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani urged King Charles III to consider repatriating the Kohinoor to India, sparking renewed global conversations regarding colonial-era artefacts and historical justice.

While the Indian government has repeatedly called for the diamond's return, its ownership is highly contested. The governments of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan have also staked historical claims to the gem, complicating its potential restitution.

However, the UK and India have reportedly held discussions regarding "shared access" to historical artefacts stemming from the colonial era. British officials like Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Lisa Nandy have engaged with their Indian counterparts to ensure that people in both countries can benefit from the shared heritage.

Meanwhile, even as diplomatic channels are being pursued, at the Bhojshala complex, devotees have installed a replica of the Vagdevi idol for their newly granted, unrestricted daily rituals.

The writer is Senior Assistant Editor, The Indian Express

What a raingauge tells us about Indian science history



HISTORY HEADLINE BY SOLOMON VIMAL, ASIT K BISWAS & VJAY P SINGH

INDIA'S CONTRIBUTIONS to global scientific and technological developments are quite significant, but sadly, neither India nor the rest of the world knows much about them. A primary reason is that, unlike the West, not a single Indian university, IITs, or IISc has a credible research unit on the history of science and technology.

Consider rainfall measurement. Imagine a government official in the Mauryan Empire, sometime around 300 BCE. He stands at the entrance of a state granary in the weeks after the monsoon. In front of him is a clay bowl: wide-mouthed, standardised, placed precisely where the chief minister had dictated. The official reads the water level, converts it to *dronas*, and records the figure for the state. His report then travels up the administrative chain to formulate important evidence-based policies: the relief that farmers should receive, tax owed, and harvest levels. The state has measured its rainfall, and it was done because of law. This is explicitly documented in one of the most consequential administrative Indian texts.

The *Arthashastra*, attributed to Kautilya, chief minister to Chandragupta Maurya, is a treatise on statecraft, economics, and administration written roughly around the 4th-3rd century BCE.

What is mostly unknown is that it contains the details of a complete operational system for measuring rainfall — a standardised instrument, defined units of measurement, prescribed placement locations, and a regional data collection system for six distinct zones of the subcontinent. This is an example of evidence-based hydrological knowledge that drove Indian public policy.

The unit of measurement was the *drona*, approximately 13.2 kg by weight of water, translatable into a depth reading. The text then enumerates expected annual rainfall for six distinct regions of the em-



The *Arthashastra*, attributed to Kautilya, chief minister to Chandragupta Maurya. The 4th-3rd Century treatise has details of a system for measuring rainfall. FILE

pire: Himalayan foothills, Gangetic plains, regions toward the western and southern coasts, and drier inland zones. Actual rainfall was used as a proxy for economic conditions of a primarily agrarian country to decide on taxation and also subsidies when rainfall was low.

The next development in raingauge came more than 17 centuries later. The Korean Cheugugi, installed under King Sejong in 1441 CE, is consistently cited in international hydrological literature as the world's first standardised raingauge network. European instrumentation began even later: with Benedetto Castelli's rainfall observations in 1639, followed by Christopher Wren's tipping-bucket gauge in 1662.

If the *Arthashastra's* system is accepted on its own terms, it represents the earliest documented, state-administered rainfall measurement system in the entire recorded human history.

What makes this finding genuinely remarkable is not merely the instrument. The measurement was mandatory, not a matter of local discretion. The gauge was placed at a specific government facility, the storehouse, ensuring consistency across locations. The data was fed directly into tax policy. The text explicitly connects rainfall totals to the remission of agricultural taxes. Farmers in drought-stricken regions received state relief calibrated to what the gauge recorded. This is integrated, evidence-based governance, a hydrological information system embedded

in the machinery of an ancient state.

That this achievement has gone unrecognised in global science history reflects a problem deeper than neglect. The dominant narrative of scientific progress was written during the European Enlightenment and hardened during the colonial era. Measurement and systematic observation were framed as Western contributions to civilisation. India's colonial education system, designed to produce administrators rather than historians of indigenous knowledge, did little to contest this. Post-Independence, investments in research on the history of science have remained conspicuously thin, not because the evidence is absent, but because institutions to pursue it rigorously have never been built.

The correction is not difficult to envision. What is needed is a coordinated national programme: new critical translations of texts such as the *Arthashastra* by teams combining Sanskrit scholars with historians of science and technology; peer-reviewed publications in leading international journals that place India's contributions squarely and accurately within the global scientific timeline; and curriculum reforms that give Indian students an honest picture of where their civilisation stood in the long arc of scientific development.

Solomon Vimal is CEO and Chief Scientist of Geothara; Biswas is an international authority on water; Singh is at Texas A&M University

All about red carpets and representation

WATCHING THE Miss World/Miss Universe competitions live on television in the mid-1990s was an exercise in entertainment — hours of visual spectacle with multiple elimination rounds, fashion parades, a Q&A and the final crowning of a Cinderella amidst tears of joy. Sushmita Sen, Lara Dutta, Aishwarya Rai, Priyanka Chopra, Yukta Mookhey et al "represented" India. We were all in our 20s, them, me and my friends. We were happy for the winners as we thumbed the glossy pages of *Femina* a fortnight after, but thought nothing of the representation bit. It was merely *girling the girl*, with pageants being sponsored by cosmetic brands looking for a foothold in India. Many of us who were not even 5 feet tall, were not eligible to participate in such pageants in the first place.

Thankfully, it was just once a year. The scarcity added value by following a simple economic law. Over the past fortnight, Met Gala happened. Before anyone could re-

cover, Cannes was underway. It was high fashion, drama, movies, paparazzi, parades, poses, and photography for magazines and digital platforms that left one wondering about the modern-day hyperreality that Baudrillard famously talked of. As self-styled celebs walked the red carpet, a bored audience got exhausted with the unending #BTS, #grwm and the glib talk of being representatives of the country and its culture.

In the global stage, where openings and galas have become an everyday affair, walking the red carpet and calling it representation has become tiresome. It is sure a personal milestone, but to self-appoint oneself as cultural ambassadors, robed in bushy velvets studded with twinkling diamonds seems vapid in a world that is ridden with wars, sex scandals, scarcity and gaping inequalities.

There is the heritage-vintage axis, handcraft and handmade, for the perfect pirouette that makes one's head dizzy with pigeon-blood rubies, vivid green emeralds and other rocks that are deliberately meant to stun.



SHE SAID BY SUSAN THOMAS

And even as social media zooms in on the details of the clothes and jewellery, there is also equal visibility to people standing in queues for fuel and children begging for food amidst war. We have flung out decency through the gilded windows of capitalism a while ago, as an unwanted distraction.

Art and culture has an intellectual heft. Ever since interdisciplinarians looked at body, politics and fashion through the lens of postmodernism, the paradigm of fashion has become a crisp currency of the leisure class to carry. Add to it the rise of social media and the discourse of aesthetics, there are now oil barons, influencers, pop culture icons and tech billionaires, who now want visibility, respectability, and acceptability as patrons of art and culture.

And so what unfolds on a daily basis is an airbrushed vulgarity — in the practise of fashion as seen on Meta platforms, where photoshop and AI tools compete for a lazy perfection and the 1,000-word cap-

tion journalism that evaluates who 'nailed it', 'ate it' and 'left no crumbs'. The horde of influencers who lip sync to handcraft, the collective chest heaving when a heiress points to her mom's jewels -- a Nizam's *sarpech* that had crawled down to the thoracic spine from head. It all reminds one of the title of a 16th century essay by Montaigne "that the soul expends its passions upon false objects, where the true are wanting".

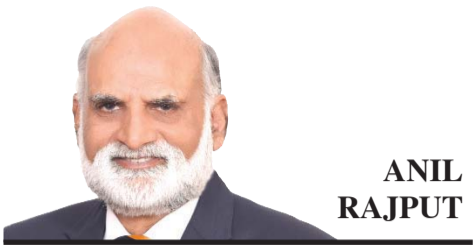
We are all participants of this great Foucauldian panopticon where we are not only looking at each other but there is data surveillance too. But are we representative of a country and a culture that is as vast and varied as ours? Are the auric embroideries and anorexic pouts inside voluminous capes paying obeisance to Raja Ravi Varma's paintings representation?

The writer is a career bureaucrat

Editor (Planning & Projects) Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column

"WE ALL LIVE WITH THE OBJECTIVE OF BEING HAPPY; OUR LIVES ARE ALL DIFFERENT AND YET THE SAME"
— ANNE FRANK

Ganga Dussehra: Where sacred waters meet seasonal cuisine



ANIL
RAJPUT

Ganga Dussehra, also known as Gangavatan, celebrates the descent of the sacred River Ganges from heaven to earth. Normally commemorated over ten days commencing from Dashami (10th day) of the waxing moon in the Hindu month of Jyeshtha, the main rituals are being held on May 25 when the summer sun is at its most intense and the human body instinctively seeks coolness and renewal. The primary ritual is bathing in the Ganges at sunrise in the belief that lifetimes of sins are washed away, as Maa Ganga is revered not merely as a river, but as a purifier, nourisher and civilisational force. Her waters have shaped settlements, pilgrim routes, agricultural lands, rituals, songs, stories and collective memory across generations. To speak of Ganga Dussehra, therefore, is not merely to speak of a sacred observance, but of a living relationship between water, faith and life itself.

The sacred narrative of Ganga Dussehra recounts how King Bhagirath undertook intense tapasya so that the souls of his ancestors might attain liberation. His penance moved the divine order after which Ganga, a purifying force for spiritual cleansing, agreed to descend from heaven. Because her force was too powerful for the earth to withstand, Lord Shiva caught her in his matted locks and released her in gentle streams, allowing her waters to flow across the land. Within this episode lies a profound civilisational insight that grace must be received with humility, and nature must be approached with reverence.

Across places such as Haridwar, Rishikesh, Varanasi, Prayagraj, and other regions touched by the Ganga and her tributaries, devotees gather in devotion, to take a holy dip, chant prayers and perform aarti to seek ablutions for themselves and their ancestors. Flowers, lamps, milk, fruits and sweets become part of the offering, but the mood remains one of humility rather than display. Water, food, fruits, hand fans, umbrellas and cooling drinks are distributed as acts of charity and service. It is within this framework that the cuisine of Ganga Dussehra has been shaped, not as a single fixed menu, but as a living tradition influenced not only by purpose but the season, sattvic discipline, riverine culture and the ethics of sharing.

The food associated with the day often begins with offerings that are simple, pure and cooling. Fruits such as banana, mango, melon, watermelon, cucumber and seasonal produce are placed before Maa Ganga or offered during household worship. In the heat of Jyeshtha, fruit carries the wisdom of the season as it is light on digestion, nourishes and refreshes, and reminds the devotee that sacred food need not always be elaborate. Alongside fruits, many families offer batasha, mishri, peda, small laddoos and portions of halwa or kheer. These foods are first offered, then received as prasad, and only afterwards enjoyed. This sequence is central to the meaning of the festival, because it places gratitude before consumption. From this foundation of prasad, the house-

hold kitchen gradually opens into a fuller festive meal. In many homes of the Ganga belt, sooji halwa or atta halwa is prepared after the morning worship. Soolji halwa is made by slowly roasting semolina in ghee until its fragrance deepens, then cooking it with water or milk and sweetening it with sugar or jaggery. Cardamom, raisins and nuts may be added, though the preparation often remains simple. Atta halwa, made with whole wheat flour, carries a warmer, earthier taste and a denser texture. Both dishes are associated with worship because they transform everyday grain into something sacred through patience, fire, ghee and offering. When served with puri and sometimes kala chana, the meal becomes familiar, comforting and festive without losing its devotional character.

Kheer brings another important sweetness to the day. Chawal ki kheer is prepared by slowly cooking rice in milk until the grains soften and the milk thickens into a creamy consistency. It is sweetened and flavoured with cardamom, and sometimes enriched with saffron, almonds or raisins. In households observing a fasting discipline, makhana kheer or sabudana kheer may be preferred. Makhana is lightly roasted in ghee before being simmered in milk, while soaked sabudana pearls are cooked until they become soft and translucent. They are enjoyed after puja, shared with children and elders, and often served in small portions because their purpose is not indulgence alone, but auspicious nourishment.

The savoury side of the Ganga Dussehra meal usually reflects the tradition of North Indian sacred cooking. Puri is one of the most familiar preparations, made by kneading wheat flour into a firm dough, rolling it into small discs and frying them until they puff up. It is often paired with aloo sabzi cooked without onion and garlic, using cumin, ginger, green chilli, turmeric, tomato and coriander. The potatoes are simmered until they soften and partially break into the gravy, creating a dish that is simple, satisfying and suitable for a post-puja meal. When fasting rules are stricter, regular flour may be replaced by kuttu or singhara flour, and the puris are prepared with boiled potato added to help bind the dough. These are then served with vrat-style aloo sabzi or plain curd.

Alongside aloo, seasonal vegetables bring balance to the plate. Kaddu ki sabzi is widely suited to festive meals because pumpkin carries a natural sweetness that responds beautifully to cumin, fennel, ginger, turmeric, amchur and

a hint of jaggery. It is soft, mildly tangy and comforting, and pairs well with puri or kachori. Lauki, or bottle gourd, brings an entirely different quality. It is cooling, light and gentle on the stomach, which makes it especially appropriate for a summer festival. Lauki may be cooked dry with cumin and green chilli, or prepared in a light gravy with minimal spices. In a meal that also includes fried items and sweets, such vegetables remind us that Indian festive cooking is not only about richness. It is also about balance, digestion and seasonal intelligence.

In some households, the meal becomes more elaborate with kachori, chana and lentil preparations. Moong dal kachori or urad dal kachori is prepared by stuffing spiced lentil paste into dough and frying it until crisp. The filling is usually seasoned with fennel, asafoetida, cumin, coriander and mild spices. It may be served with aloo sabzi or kaddu, creating a festive combination that is enjoyed after worship or offered to guests. Kala chana, soaked overnight and boiled until tender, may be tempered with cumin, ginger and mild spices, then finished with coriander and lemon. Sometimes it is served as part of a prasad-style combination with halwa and puri. In other homes, moong dal khichdi may replace richer foods. Rice and split moong dal are cooked together with turmeric, cumin, ginger and ghee, resulting in a soft, nourishing preparation that reflects simplicity rather than celebration for its own sake.

For those who observe vrat, the cuisine of the day adapts appropriately. Sabudana khichdi is prepared with soaked tapioca pearls, roasted peanuts, cumin, green chilli, boiled potatoes and sandha namak. A squeeze of lemon brings freshness, while coriander adds aroma. Sama rice khichdi, made from barnyard millet, is cooked with potatoes, cumin and mild spices, and often eaten with curd. These foods allow the devotee to remain within the discipline of fasting while still receiving energy during the summer day. Dahi also plays an important role in this seasonal logic. Plain curd, cucumber raita, boondi raita or dahi aloo may accompany the meal. Cucumber raita, made with grated cucumber, curd, roasted cumin and rock salt, is especially suited to Jyeshtha because it cools the body and softens the heaviness of fried foods besides being a natural probiotic.

The sweet foods of the festival extend beyond halwa and kheer into the broader festive traditions of the Gangetic region.



The significance of this cuisine is therefore not confined to the dining table. It begins at the riverbank, in the offering, in the home

kitchen, in the act of preparing prasad, in the sharing of fruit, in the serving of water, and in the gathering of family after worship. Elders often guide the ritual order, women shape the offerings with care, children help arrange fruits and sweets, and the household meal becomes a continuation of prayer. In pilgrimage towns, the atmosphere is shaped by temple bells, crowded ghats, flower sellers, lamps, chants and the smell of food being prepared for families, pilgrims and those in need. In homes far from the river, the same spirit is recreated with Ganga jal, seasonal food and remembrance.

What makes Ganga Dussehra cuisine meaningful is not the claim that every dish belongs exclusively to this one festival. Its significance lies in the way these foods gather around a sacred idea. The river gives water, the fields give grain, the cow gives milk, the trees give fruit, and the household gives thanks. Food becomes the bridge between ecology and devotion. Central to this way of life, the flowing waters of Maa Ganga symbolizes both physical nourishment and the possibility of inner purification and spirituality.

In our time, Ganga Dussehra also carries a greater responsibility. To revere Maa Ganga cannot mean prayer alone but respect for rivers, water bodies and the natural systems that sustain life. The cuisine of the day teaches us these lessons and asks us to offer before consuming, share before storing, eat according to season, and recognise that nourishment is never produced by human effort alone. I believe that in preserving such festivals and their culinary traditions, we preserve more than recipes. We preserve a civilisational understanding of gratitude. Ganga Dussehra reminds us that when food is prepared with purity, shared with generosity and received with humility, it becomes more than a meal. It becomes a continuation of sacred memory, flowing like the river herself from one generation to the next.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)

The cognitive battlefield: Insights on 'The Jihad Tech Complex'

The Jihad-Tech Complex by Lt Gen Shokin Chauhan (Retd) bridges military doctrine and transnational security policy, offering a blueprint for modern national security

NAVITA SRIKANT

Maj Gen Deepinder Singh (Retd) eloquently opened the launch of *The Jihad-Tech Complex* by Lt Gen Shokin Chauhan (Retd) at the India International Centre on May 15, 2026, marking a critical intervention in contemporary literature. The event brought together distinguished military leaders, veterans, and security analysts to confront a sobering reality: future conflicts will transcend conventional battlefields, morphing into a complex matrix of radicalisation, proxy warfare, cyber capabilities, and information manipulation.

I was privileged and honoured to attend the launch of this strategic book, with a foreword by Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain (Retd), alongside Lt Gen Dhiraj Seth, Vice Chief of Army Staff, and Lt Gen Gautam Moorthy (Retd).

The evening, seamlessly guided by Maj Gen Deepinder Singh (Retd) as the Master of Ceremonies, featured acute assessments from India's top military minds. Lt Gen Shokin Chauhan's (Retd) core presentation exposed the dangerous convergence of jihadist ideology and technology, laying bare the future architecture of asymmetric conflict.

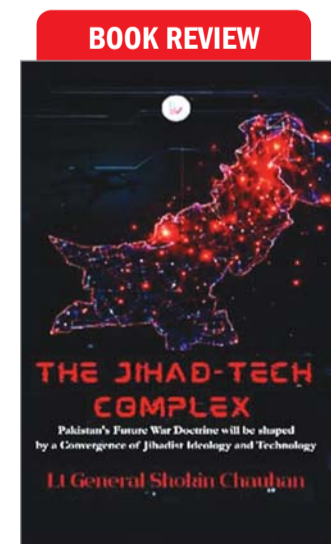
Reflecting on this threat, Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain (Retd), Hon'ble Governor of Bihar, noted in his foreword that Pakistan's jihad complex has progressively discarded conventional, old-style irregular and proxy warfare. He warned that this "deadly combination" is an emerging threat that must be studied aggressively across both technological and ideological spectrums. Echoing these concerns, Lt Gen Dhiraj Seth, Vice Chief, observed that the book arrives as a necessary guide, preparing modern forces to adapt to the technological dimensions of ideological warfare and navigate modern security challenges with strategic clarity.

At the heart of The Jihad-Tech Complex is the realisation that the sub-conventional battlefield has evolved into a digitised, borderless ecosystem. Lt Gen Chauhan's (Retd) assessment is a reminder that future conflicts may not always be conventional battlefields alone, but a complex mix of radicalisation, proxy warfare, cyber capabilities, information manipulation, and asymmetric tactics. Understanding these changing dimensions is essential for preparedness, resilience, and strategic clarity.

Terror networks no longer depend solely on physical terrain or rugged sanctuaries. Instead, they weaponise encryption, cyber capabilities, and global digital platforms to scale radicalisation, manage logistics, and execute information warfare with precision and speed. Lt Gen Shokin Chauhan's (Retd) work on the convergence of jihadist ideology and technology offers important insights into the future architecture of asymmetric conflict.

The book's themes closely resonated with discussions at the 2022 Special Meeting of the UN Security Council's Counter Terrorism Committee in New Delhi, where I addressed the role of emerging technologies in countering terror financing, as well as at the 15th South Asia Conference under the aegis of MP-India in 2023, where, in my "Special Address", I examined regional instability and cross-border terrorism as major impediments to economic integration in South Asia. A critical takeaway from the text is that terror infrastructure survives not just through weapons, but through sophisticated financial ecosystems and weak accountability mechanisms.

The strategic takeaways from *The Jihad-Tech Complex* took me back nearly 25 years to a mission where I was involved in investigating the diversion of funds to FARC guerrillas in Colombia. Resources



Title: The Jihad-Tech Complex
Author: Lt General Shokin Chauhan
MRP: ₹1250
Publisher: HAR-ANAND PUBLICATIONS PVT LTD

allocated to the Colombian peace process were diverted because ideological ecosystems do not disappear overnight, and financial safeguards proved inadequate to prevent misuse.

Under the garb of humanitarian assistance and sustainability relief, funds often travelled through vul-

nerable channels, eventually strengthening networks that thrived on violence and instability. The experience reinforced an enduring lesson: that terror infrastructure survives not only through weapons and ideology, but also through financial ecosystems, influence structures, and weak accountability mechanisms. My shortlisting in 2022 for the UN Security Council's ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaeda, and Taliban Sanctions Monitoring Team further deepened my understanding of the nexus between terror financing, ideology, and emerging technologies. This underscores a vital military lesson: kinetic success against individual terror cells is temporary if the grey-zone financial channels feeding them remain intact.

Because technology-enabled ideological warfare respects no physical borders, it frequently expands under the guise of diplomacy, influence, and regional outreach. Consequently, countering state-sponsored terrorism requires shifting national security away from a purely military theatre. It demands unwavering political will backed by a long-term strategy that synchronises state capacity across economic, diplomatic, and technological domains to dismantle the broader ecosystem nurturing state-sponsored terrorism.

In my view, this book is not just

essential military literature, but equally a must-read for the diplomatic cadre. Ideological and technology-enabled warfare today often expands across borders under the garb of diplomacy, influence, and outreach.

As an India-Nepal Relations Observer, I found the book particularly relevant in understanding the intersection of ideology, technology, and regional geopolitical security dynamics in India's neighbourhood. One cannot fight terrorism through a purely military solution alone. Countering state-sponsored terrorism requires unwavering and non-negotiable political will backed by a systematic, long-term strategy across economic, political, diplomatic, technological, and military theatres.

Pakistan's terror infrastructure has evolved through sustained nurturing, financing, ideological conditioning, and technological enablement over decades. Addressing such ecosystems requires far more than tactical responses. It demands coordinated state capacity, financial vigilance, diplomatic clarity, technological preparedness, international cooperation, and resilience against information warfare.

This makes vigilance not merely a military responsibility, but also a diplomatic imperative. India's diplomatic leadership must therefore remain alert to the evolving nature of ideological warfare, influence operations, and technological ecosystems that seek to destabilise national security interests from within and beyond borders.

The challenge is not only to neutralise acts of terrorism, but also to dismantle the networks, narratives, financing channels, and strategic ecosystems that enable and sustain them.

(The book reviewer is a financial, geopolitical, and security analyst, India-Nepal Relations Observer, and former shortlisted candidate for the UN Security Council's ISIL, Al-Qaeda, and Taliban Sanctions Monitoring Team)

Finding inner balance

SHALINI SRIVASTAVA

In a world that glorifies speed, reaction, and constant emotional exhaustion, *The Power To Pause* arrives as a gentle yet deeply relevant reminder that transformation often begins in silence. Written by Malini S, an Identity & Self-Worth Leadership Coach, the book explores the emotional patterns many women quietly carry — overthinking, self-doubt, emotional overwhelm, and the pressure to appear "strong" while internally feeling unsettled. Rather than offering loud motivational formulas, the book takes a softer and more introspective route: awareness before action.

What stands out most is the simplicity of the writing. The language is accessible, conversational, and emotionally honest, making the reader feel guided rather than instructed. Malini does not position healing as perfection; instead, she presents it as a gradual process of understanding oneself with compassion. The central idea of "pause" is explored not as avoidance, but as power — the power to observe emotions before reacting, to recognise recurring patterns, and to respond with clarity instead of emotional impulse.

This makes the book particularly relevant for readers navigating anxiety, emotional burnout, relationship stress, or a loss of inner confidence.

The visual presentation of the book also deserves mention. The cover art — featuring a woman looking into her own reflection — beautifully captures the essence of self-awareness and inner rediscovery. It immediately communicates the emotional tone of the book: calm, reflective, and personal. One of the strengths of *The Power To Pause* is that

it avoids sounding overly clinical or overly spiritual. Instead, it sits comfortably between emotional wellness and practical self-leadership. The author's coaching background subtly comes through in the structure of the thoughts and reflections, giving the book a grounded and encouraging voice. At times, readers may wish for deeper real-life exam-



Title: The Power To Pause
Author: Malini S
MRP: ₹200
Publisher: Notion Press

ples or more structured exercises, but the simplicity is also part of the book's charm. It feels less like a manual and more like a quiet conversation with someone who understands emotional overwhelm firsthand.

Overall, *The Power To Pause* is a thoughtful and emotionally intelligent read for anyone seeking greater self-awareness, emotional steadiness, and inner clarity. It is especially likely to resonate with women learning to rebuild confidence, redefine self-worth, and reclaim calm in an increasingly noisy world.

(The book reviewer is a Founder of Vizion Beyond consulting)

"LOOK WELL INTO THYSELF; THERE IS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH WHICH WILL ALWAYS SPRING UP IF THOU WILT ALWAYS LOOK"
— MARCUS AURELIUS

Why must we serve?

If you feel guilty or stressed for not finding enough time to serve, or wonder about how much you can serve or achieve on your own, remember one thing. You will never be asked to do what you cannot do. If you are not a doctor, you will not be expected to treat a sick person. Nothing is expected of you that is beyond you

GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

The whole world, the entire universe, is one organism, one living being. Each mind is a part of that organism. This is the highest knowledge, and all knowledge must lead to this universal truth.

People suffer when consciousness gets trapped within the boundaries of 'me' and 'mine'. These boundaries are, in fact, mostly a creation of the mind. Examine them closely and you will find they have no real substance. At the most fundamental level of existence, there are no boundaries at all.

When you walk through a city and see someone fall and get hurt, you feel that pain too, even if it is for a moment. That feeling isn't weakness. It is the truest sign of your humanity. If you aren't sensitive to another's pain, even at a small level, something important has become numb inside you.

Every time one feels lonely, one is simply coming in touch with their own boundaries. It is that limitation, that boundary, which is the real cause of your unhappiness. You feel lonely when you seek something from others. This is also the main cause of why we feel depressed. But when you step out from wanting, when you become a giver of happiness to others, how could you be lonely anymore? The whole world will wait to receive your love. Service alone can bring contentment and self-worth.

But the path of service is also not easy. Many people begin seva but stop when they don't receive recognition. They step back when they are humiliated or when they are not given the appropriate position. What they forget is that service without arrogance, love without reason, and knowledge without intellect are what you actually are. When you bring relief or freedom to someone through seva, good vibrations and blessings come to you in abundance. That is the reward, and it arrives before you even look for it. You feel oneness with everyone around you.

There are two types of joy. One is when you receive something. For example, look at kids, how happy they are when they get gifts. This is the infant form of joy. And then, look at your grandparents. They become happy when they give you something.

Your grandmother is so happy to cook for you. This is the second type of joy, the joy of giving, the joy of serving. This is a more mature form of joy.

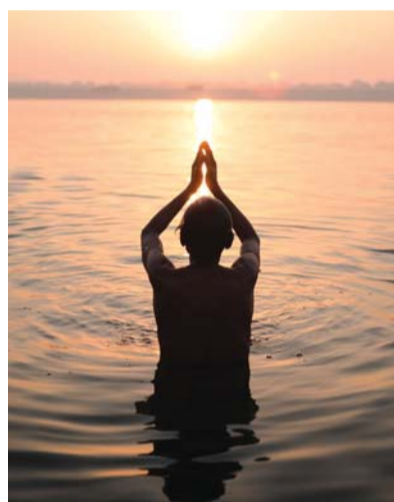
You only need to graduate from the infant joy of receiving to the more mature joy of giving.

What does 'service' really mean? The word 'service' comes from the Sanskrit word 'seva'. Seva means being like the One Divine. When you act like Him, it is called seva. Any faith in God is seva. God doesn't expect anything from serving you. When you do something just for the joy of it, not to get anything out of it, that is seva. God doesn't even want to get joy out of serving the creation. God is joy Himself. The nature of consciousness is joy. Hence, when you are happy with whatever you do, it is an expression of the divinity. So, seva is to do something without expecting anything in return. The more you do, the happier you are. Seeing love inside you is meditation, and seeing God in the person next to you is seva.

Service alone can bring contentment. But service without silence or enough rest tires you. Service without



"SEVA IS TO DO SOMETHING WITHOUT EXPECTING ANYTHING IN RETURN. THE MORE YOU DO, THE HAPPIER YOU ARE" — GURUDEV



GOD DOESN'T EXPECT ANYTHING FROM SERVING YOU. WHEN YOU DO SOMETHING JUST FOR THE JOY OF IT, NOT TO GET ANYTHING OUT OF IT, THAT IS SEVA. GOD DOESN'T EVEN WANT TO GET JOY OUT OF SERVING THE CREATION. GOD IS JOY HIMSELF. THE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS IS JOY. HENCE, WHEN YOU ARE HAPPY WITH WHATEVER YOU DO, IT IS AN EXPRESSION OF THE DIVINITY

spirituality becomes shallow and can't be sustained for long. On the other hand, the deeper your silence and meditative insight, the more dynamic you become outside. Both these elements are essential. They grow together. They are fertiliser for each other. If your meditation is not deep enough, do more seva. Seva brings merit, and merit allows you to go deeper in meditation. Meditation brings back your smile. Meditation offers you the knowledge of the Self. That your innermost source is joy, not sorrow. Sorrow arises only when you forget that. Knowledge

of the Self reverses the tendency to seek love and comfort somewhere outside. When you know that you yourself are love, and that you yourself are light, it is absolutely impossible to be depressed. The way to overcome personal misery is to share in universal misery with knowledge. The way to expand personal joy is to share in universal joy with knowledge. When everyone believes they can contribute something to this world, a divine society begins to emerge.

If you feel guilty or stressed for not finding enough time to serve, or wonder about how much you can serve or achieve on your own, remember one thing. You will never be asked to do what you cannot do. If you are not a doctor, you will not be expected to treat a sick person. Nothing is expected of you that is beyond you. Doing service means only doing what you can do. No one will expect you to be someone you aren't. This realisation itself brings deep rest.

Another way to serve without being tired is to do it without a sense of 'doership'. Work doesn't tire you as much as the sense of doership does. "I" did this. "I" did that. When you carry the weight of being the doer, exhaustion follows quickly. Seva done without that doership is light. It isn't a burden. After doing seva, you feel grateful, not proud. And that gratitude is itself a kind of rest.

Let me share a few practical tips on seva. Make an intention to do public service for even one day a week. Reserve 3 to 4 hours and watch it transform your life. If you think you have done much, you will do very little. If you see that you have done little, you will find yourself doing more. Be grateful for any opportunity to serve. Before age steals your physical abilities, make this breath and body useful to the people around you. If you practise these tips, depression could never bother you.

There is an opportunity for seva wherever you look. Use the awareness cultivated through meditation to see these opportunities and act on them. Authentic seva is guaranteed satisfaction. Not because someone promises it, but because the universe itself is structured that way.

Gratitude: A Powerful Life Transformer

Every person enjoys success, yet no success is born from the efforts of one individual alone. Behind every achievement stand countless visible and invisible hands. But in the race to claim credit, modern man has forgotten to acknowledge them. Gratitude is the forgotten virtue that heals restless minds, strengthens fragile relationships, and fills empty hearts with contentment. A thankful person spreads warmth in the family, harmony in society, and humanity in the world



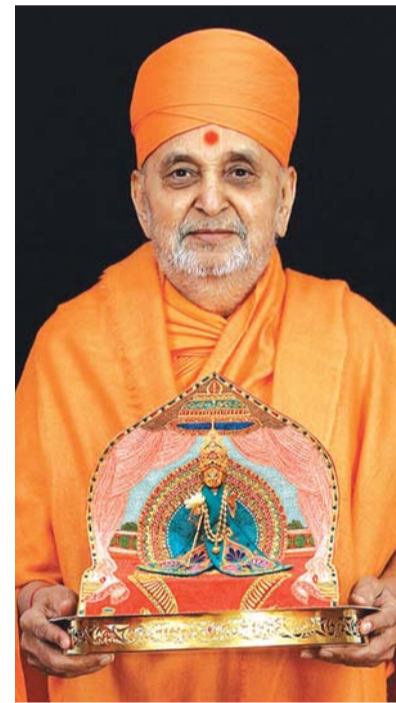
DR SWAMI GYANANANDDAS

On November 6, 2005, the banks of the Yamuna witnessed a moment that entered the cultural history of modern India. The inauguration of Swaminarayan Akshardham, New Delhi, was not merely the opening of a grand Mandir; it was the unveiling of a civilisational dream carved in pink sandstone and white marble. As the evening sky glowed with lights and devotion, distinguished dignitaries from across the nation gathered to honour the occasion. Among those present were the then President of India, APJ Abdul Kalam, PM Manmohan Singh, former Deputy PM Lal Krishna Advani, and the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi. Eminent leaders, diplomats, scholars, sadhus, and thousands of devotees filled the vast assembly grounds. The atmosphere carried both national pride and spiritual reverence.

Speaker after speaker praised the magnificence of Akshardham. Some admired its breathtaking architecture; others marvelled at the organisational excellence behind such a colossal undertaking. Many described it as a modern wonder that had revived the soul of Indian culture. Ultimately, all eyes turned towards Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the quiet and pious guru, whose inspiration, leadership, and relentless sacrifice had transformed an impossible vision into reality.

Yet what followed left the entire gathering deeply moved. When Pramukh Swami Maharaj began to speak, there was no trace of triumph in his words. No sense of personal accomplishment. Standing before one of the grandest Hindu cultural monuments ever built in modern times, he folded his hands with profound humility and offered every ounce of credit to his guru, Yogiji Maharaj. With emotion-filled eyes and a voice soaked in gratitude, he said that whatever had happened was solely due to Yogiji Maharaj's blessings, prayers, and divine vision.

At that historic moment, the audience witnessed something greater than architecture. They witnessed the feeling of gratitude in Swami's pure eyes. The leaders on the stage appeared visibly touched. The dignitaries who had gathered to celebrate a monument were now witnessing the rare grandeur of



humility itself. In an age where achievement often breeds ego, Pramukh Swami Maharaj transformed praise into gratitude and success into surrender.

Akshardham stood tall in stone, but that evening, an even greater monument arose silently in the hearts of millions: the monument of thankfulness. Today, we have conquered distances, mastered technology, and built civilisations of extraordinary comfort. Yet, amidst this advancement, one precious virtue, 'gratitude', is quietly disappearing from daily life. Modern society often teaches people to claim credit, highlight personal accomplishments, and place themselves at the centre of success. Yet truly elevated personalities think differently. They recognise the invisible hands behind every achievement; the blessings, guidance, sacrifices, and support that shape one's journey.

Gratitude is not merely saying "thank you". It is a refined vision of life, the noble ability to recognise goodness, acknowledge kindness, and value even the smallest acts of care. A grateful person does not merely live life; he experiences its beauty. Indeed, he walks on the path of true transformation, a transformation that leads from

negativity to positivity, from restlessness to contentment, and from ego to humility.

Surprisingly, the greatest transformations often begin not through grand revolutions, but through small daily acts. A child thanking his mother for preparing food, a husband appreciating his wife's silent sacrifices, a student expressing respect towards his teacher, or a friend acknowledging another's support, these simple expressions create invisible waves of positivity. They soften hearts, dissolve bitterness, and strengthen human bonds.

Human psychology itself confirms this truth. The mind gradually becomes what it repeatedly contemplates. If a person constantly focuses on complaints, shortcomings, and failures, negativity becomes their habitual mental climate. But when one consciously practises gratitude, the direction of thinking changes. The mind slowly shifts from dissatisfaction to contentment, from anxiety to hope, and from scarcity to abundance.

A person who begins the day with thankfulness carries a different energy throughout life. Instead of grumbling over what is absent, he becomes aware of what is already present: the gift of health, family, opportunity, friendship, and existence itself. This awareness generates emotional stability. Even difficulties appear smaller before a thankful mind.

In our daily life, a simple sentence such as "Thank you for always supporting me" can revive affection in relationships that have grown cold. Gratitude acts like oil in the machinery of family life; it reduces friction, prevents emotional wear, and keeps relationships harmonious.

And perhaps that was the deeper message hidden in the emotional eyes of Pramukh Swami Maharaj at the inauguration of Swaminarayan Akshardham. True greatness does not lie merely in achieving great heights; it lies in preserving the depth of humility amidst greatness. Gratitude transforms accomplishment into worship, success into service, and life itself into a celebration of blessings.

(The writer Dr Swami Gyanananddas is a dedicated follower of the Swaminarayan tradition and has earned a PhD from MS University)

Weekly Overview

The week opens under the Leo Moon, bringing confidence, expression and stronger personal assertion. Midweek, Virgo shifts focus toward practical decisions, routines and finer details. By the weekend, Libra brings attention to relationships, balance and thoughtful responses.



Aries (Mesh): The week begins with stronger confidence and a natural urge to take charge, making the opening phase useful for personal initiatives or stalled discussions. Midweek asks for practical correction, especially in work matters where details may demand closer attention than expected. Avoid rushing decisions simply because momentum feels favourable. By the weekend, relationships and communication become more important, and balance will matter more than force.



Taurus (Vrisahbh): The early part of the week may draw your attention toward domestic matters, emotional comfort or practical concerns linked to stability. Midweek brings a noticeably lighter and more constructive tone, supporting creativity, communication and clearer thinking. This can be a useful period for personal expression or organised progress. By the weekend, practical responsibilities return, and routine matters may demand discipline.



Gemini (Mithun): The week opens with movement, communication and a stronger exchange of ideas. However, early confidence should not lead to speaking too quickly where sensitivity exists. Midweek shifts attention toward practical concerns, home matters or responsibilities requiring structure. By the weekend, emotional lightness returns, and communication improves again. Social interactions or creative discussions may become more rewarding.

WEEKLY MOON SIGN FORECAST | 24-30 MAY

Confidence, Course Correction and the Search for Balance

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.



Cancer (Karka): Financial awareness and practical judgment may dominate the opening phase of the week. This is a useful time to remain realistic rather than emotional in material decisions. Midweek brings stronger personal focus, with the Moon's movement encouraging greater awareness of your own needs, routines and emotional responses. By the weekend, family matters or relationship expectations may require softer handling. Listening quietly may achieve more than attempting to control the pace of events.



Leo (Simha): With the Moon opening the week in your own sign, confidence, visibility and personal presence naturally increase. This can be a productive phase for decisions, leadership or conversations requiring assertiveness. Midweek, however, practical realities may demand greater discipline, particularly around work, finances or commitments. The weekend shifts focus toward communication, meetings and relationship dynamics. Strong presence is useful, but measured expression will bring better outcomes than ego-led reactions.

Virgo (Kanya): The opening days may feel quieter, with some matters moving behind the scenes rather than openly. Midweek becomes your stronger phase, as the Moon enters Virgo and brings sharper thinking, practicality and better



organisational clarity. This is the time to correct pending matters or simplify what has become unnecessarily complicated. By the weekend, financial thinking or relationship expectations may require balanced judgment. Avoid overanalysing situations where timing itself is still unfolding.



Libra (Tula): The week begins with social movement, discussions or interaction with wider circles, though not every conversation will require equal emotional investment. Midweek becomes more inward, where responsibilities or unresolved concerns may weigh more heavily than expected. Avoid carrying emotional assumptions into practical decisions. By the weekend, the Moon enters Libra, restoring clarity, confidence and emotional balance. This closing phase suits relationship repair, negotiation and thoughtful self-expression.



Scorpio (Vrischik): The opening phase may bring attention toward responsibilities, visibility or situations where others expect stronger performance from you. Midweek offers useful support through discussions, planning or perspective-building, making it easier to rethink practical concerns. By the weekend, emotional energy becomes quieter and more reflective. Some matters may require observation rather than immediate action. If something feels unclear, waiting briefly may produce better understanding than forcing conclusions.



Sagittarius (Dhanu): The Leo opening supports broader thinking, confidence and movement, making this a constructive time for learning, planning or outward-facing efforts. Midweek shifts attention toward responsibilities, work structure or practical expectations that require steadier discipline.

Avoid impatience with slower-moving matters. By the weekend, relationships and social interactions become more supportive, and perspective improves. Constructive conversations may help clear confusion that seemed heavier earlier in the week.



Capricorn (Makar): The week begins with practical seriousness, especially around shared responsibilities, commitments or material concerns requiring realistic judgment. Midweek strengthens professional focus and supports better organisation. This is a useful period for correcting inefficiencies or addressing unfinished matters. By the weekend, visibility increases, but so may emotional sensitivity in interactions. Strong judgment will help, though relationships may respond better to diplomacy than rigid control.



Aquarius (Kumbh): Partnerships, communication and interpersonal dynamics may dominate the opening days, requiring patience where others appear emotionally stronger or more expressive. Midweek shifts focus toward practical adjustments, commitments or deeper review of pending matters. This is not a poor phase, but one requiring realism. By the weekend, confidence improves, perspective widens and emotional pressure becomes lighter. A broader outlook will help restore balance.



Pisces (Meen): The week begins with routine matters, responsibilities and practical structure demanding stronger attention. Midweek brings clearer personal rhythm, though emotional sensitivity may still colour decisions if left unchecked. By the weekend, emotional depth increases, but so does intuitive clarity. Creative thought and relationship awareness improve during this closing phase. Practical judgment should remain present, but emotional intelligence becomes equally important.

The case of Umar Khalid has become an important test of the Indian republic's commitment to liberty, dissent and constitutional morality. The question is no longer confined to the guilt or innocence of one individual. It has now acquired a much larger significance: Can a democracy, governed by a Constitution that places individual liberty at its heart, keep an accused person in jail for five years without trial and without bail, while the judicial process itself moves at a glacial pace?

For decades, Indian jurisprudence has rested on a foundational principle: "Bail is the rule, jail is the exception." This doctrine was memorably articulated by Justice V R Krishna Iyer in the celebrated case of *State of Rajasthan vs Balchand* (1977) where the Supreme Court underscored that personal liberty cannot be casually sacrificed before conviction. The principle was reaffirmed repeatedly, including in *Gudikanti Narasimulu vs Public Prosecutor* (1978) where the court stressed that deprivation of liberty before conviction must remain an exception justified by compelling circumstances.

More recently, in *Union of India vs K A Najeeb* (2021), a three-judge Bench of the Supreme Court held that even the stringent provisions of the Unlawful

Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) cannot eclipse constitutional guarantees under Article 21 when prolonged incarceration and delayed trials become instruments of injustice. The court observed that under such circumstances, the rigours of Section 43D(5) of the UAPA could "melt down".

Yet, despite this settled jurisprudence, Umar Khalid has remained incarcerated since September 2020 in connection with the Delhi riots conspiracy case. Five years later, the trial has scarcely advanced in any meaningful sense. The delay is staggering. Thousands of pages of documents, innumerable witnesses, procedural adjournments and the cumbersome architecture of UAPA prosecutions have created a judicial labyrinth from which the accused appears unable to emerge.

The troubling question therefore arises: If the state, with all its powers of investigation and prosecution, cannot conclude the process within a reasonable time, should the accused continue to languish in prison indefinitely? Is this not, in effect, punishment before conviction?

The Supreme Court itself now appears to be wrestling with precisely this dilemma. In January 2026, a Bench comprising Justice Aravind Kumar and Justice P B Varale

When process becomes punishment!

If liberty can be suspended for years without trial, constitutional guarantees risk becoming abstractions

CHANAKYA'S VIEW



Pavan K Varma

denied bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, while granting relief to several co-accused. The Bench held that delay in trial could not become a "trump card" for bail in UAPA cases and stressed the gravity of the allegations.

However, in a remarkable development only months later, another Supreme Court Bench comprising Justice B V Nagarathna and Justice Ujjal Bhuyan publicly expressed "serious reservations" about that earlier ruling. While granting bail to an accused in a separate UAPA-related case on May 18, 2026, the Bench emphatically reiterated that "bail is the rule and jail is the exception," even under UAPA. It observed that the earlier denial of bail to Umar Khalid appeared inconsistent with the larger Bench ruling in *K A Najeeb* case.

This is no minor procedural disagreement. When one Bench of the Supreme Court publicly questions the soundness of another Bench's interpretation on a matter involving liberty, it signals that within the highest court there is debate on whether or not the balance may have tilted too far in favour of state power at the expense of constitutional freedoms.

There are both legal and practical implications here. Legally, if an accused can be imprisoned for half a decade without conviction, and without meaningful progress in trial, then does not the process itself become the punishment? In such cir-



cumstances, acquittal after 10 years would not restore the lost years, damaged reputation, broken family life or psychological trauma endured during incarceration.

In my view, a larger question is involved. It concerns the increasingly expansive use of draconian laws such as the UAPA. Enacted originally to combat terrorism and grave threats to national security, these provisions have gradually migrated into the domain of political dissent and ideological contestation. The threshold for invoking anti-terror legislation has, in practice, become disturbingly elastic.

The consequence is that the validity of dissent itself - so vital in any democracy - is under challenge. Criticism of the government, participation in protests or provocative political speech can potentially attract charges under laws where obtaining bail becomes extraordinarily difficult. The message sent to

citizens is unmistakable: Even if eventual conviction is uncertain, the state can ensure prolonged incarceration through procedure itself.

A democracy confident of its legitimacy does not fear dissent. Indeed, dissent is not an inconvenience to democracy, it is one of its essential safety valves. The framers of the Indian Constitution, having themselves struggled against colonial repression, understood this instinctively. That is why they placed such extraordinary emphasis on liberty, free expression and protection against arbitrary state action.

The Umar Khalid case has consequently attracted substantial international attention. Human rights organisations, civil liberties groups, academic circles and sections of the global press have repeatedly questioned how a constitutional democracy can reconcile prolonged pre-trial detention with

the presumption of innocence. To raise such concerns is not to prejudge guilt or to justify genuine cases of sedition, terrorism or unacceptable violence. Courts alone must determine culpability on the basis of evidence. But constitutional morality demands that the state prove guilt within a reasonable timeframe, not incarcerate indefinitely while the machinery of justice crawls forward.

The Supreme Court, as guardian of the Constitution, now stands at a critical crossroads. Its recent observations suggest an awareness that excessive deference to stringent statutory provisions can erode the deeper constitutional promise of liberty itself. The court appears to recognise that Article 21 cannot become subordinate to endless procedural delay.

In the final analysis, the question before India is larger than Umar Khalid. It is whether the republic wishes to preserve the delicate constitutional equilibrium between state authority and individual freedom. If liberty can be suspended for years without trial, then constitutional guarantees risk becoming abstractions rather than lived realities.

The apex court has raised the right question. It is reported that this matter of principle will now be referred to a larger Bench. One can only hope that this will be expedited. The nation awaits the right answer.

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

Modi doctrine works wonders!

I wished to review this little book on Bengal and its cultural icons before the Bengal elections but held it back, lest it would have looked like favouring a party.

Now that the BJP has swept elections, it is worth a read.

The book by two young writers is not a detailed account of the history of Bengal, but in a way, it briefly captures industrial decline, decades of ideologically charged politics and institutional erosion of a state which was out of grip of the BJP for a very long time. First the Congress, then Leftists, followed by TMC ruled the state for decades. BJP has been a die-hard enemy of the Communists; it equally hated Mamata.

Authors seek to suggest that way before the April 2026 elections, Narendra Modi government had been making policies with eye on Bengal's different segments like farmers, youth, marginalised communities while considering the contribution of its icons.

Authors start with Swami Vivekananda under chapter 'Honouring West Bengal's

Book: Bengal Matters: The doctrine of PM Modi
Authors: Anirban Ganguly & Subham Mondal
Publishers: Ink OCCAM
Pages: 142
Price: Rs 250/-

Icons: A Long-Overdue Act of Gratitude'. They detail the story of Bhubaneswari Devi of Bengal who was desiring a son and worshipped Lord Vireswar (Lord Shiva) in Varanasi. Her prayers were answered and Narendranath Datta was born who went on to become India's most revered philosopher monks, Swami Vivekananda.

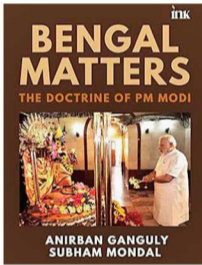
How is this connected with Modi government's schemes for West Bengal? Well, on January 18, 2026, on the eve of elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a train to Varanasi from Kolkata. "Today the Amrit Bharat Express has connected Kolkata to Varanasi," said PM Modi that day.

Several decades later, a leader named Narendra Modi was sent to Parliament from Varanasi who eventually became the PM, the book tells us reminding PM's connect with Swami

BOOK REVIEW



Abhilash Khandekar



Vivekananda and Bengal.

The government also started hosting 'Viksit Bharat Young Leaders Dialogue' regularly on January 12 and laid extra emphasis on sports which Swami Vivekananda had always emphasised.

Next, it tells readers about Sri Aurobindo and his philosophy of 'Swadeshi' which is echoed in the Modi policy of 'Vocal for Local'. Further, "by commemorating Aurobindo's 150th birth anniversary on August 15, 2022, the PM reaffirmed that civilisational thinkers are not museum relics but living guides of our land".

Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, champion of uplifting women and fighting against child marriage or Raja Rammohan Roy, the

social reformist, also figure in the book and are connected with Modi government's policies beyond symbolism.

Not only Vidyasagar's vandalised statue was promised to be rebuilt by Modi, in the budget of 2026-27 a girls' hostel is planned in each district, a decision authors link to honour Vidyasagar by Delhi.

Dealing with the state's intellectual leadership, book details efforts made by BJP government in Delhi to use its powers to make way into TMC citadel and recognise efforts of 'Bengali' intellectuals, among many other decisions.

Arundhati Bhattacharya, the first woman heading State Bank of India (2013-2017), was awarded Padma Shri in 2025 by Modi-led government. And so was Mamta Shankar the veteran artiste who produced more than 50 quality films. She was awarded Padma Shri to restore the dignity to merit.

It is interesting to know how, through governance initiatives, recognising local heroes and awarding Bengali teachers, Modi government penetrated a rival fortress and eventually won in May 2026.

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

Don't mess with cockroaches!

BOB'S BANTER



Robert Clements

There was a time when the ruling politicians frightened people with enemies across the border. Then they frightened us with enemies next door. Then with enemies from another religion. Then with enemies from another caste. After that they looked around desperately and probably even suspected the neighbour's Labrador retriever of anti-national activities.

But suddenly a new fear has entered their lives.

Cockroaches.

And not ordinary ones. Organised ones. United ones. Cockroaches with a political party. The Cockroach Janata Party.

Now before you laugh, let me warn you, these creatures are clever. Very clever. You can hit them with a chappal, spray them with poison, scream at them in three languages and yet two minutes later they stroll casually across the kitchen platform looking healthier than before. Some politicians are now staring nervously at these insects and whispering, "Competition!"

Today's young people are not impressed by giant cutouts, folded hands, temple visits before elections or leaders who suddenly discover spirituality exactly three months before voting day. The youth have WiFi, Google and functioning brains. A dangerous combination for outdated politicians.

They are tired of hypocrisy.

Tired of corruption being rewarded with governorships and advisory posts after retirement. Tired of leaders pretending to fight for morality while their own cupboards rattle with skeletons loud enough to need noise pollution clearance.

Most young people are not interested in manufactured hatred anymore. They want jobs. Clean streets. Better colleges. Honest systems. Faster Internet. Trains that arrive on time. Roads without moon craters. They want progress, not permanent anger.

But our elderly politicians still behave like retired uncles at weddings who insist the orchestra play only songs from 1962 while everybody else wants music from this century.

And so along come the youth dressed as cockroaches.

Fearless. Shameless. Impossible to eliminate. The Cockroach Janata Party reportedly gained more followers in one day than some political parties manage in months. Why? Because people are beginning to enjoy satire more than speeches. Humour has become resistance. Memes are replacing manifestos.

For the first time in years, the cockroaches may actually seem like a refreshing change from the polished hypocrites and well dressed imposters who have crawled through our political system pretending to be saviours while feeding happily on the garbage they themselves created!

Power without character!

Those who wield power without character inevitably destroy what they seek to control. This is not a modern observation, it is history's oldest lesson. That is why the greatness of a nation lies in the greatness of the character of its rulers and its people alike. A nation, however small, is great because of the greatness of its people, and a nation, however big it may be in wealth, arms, area or population, is still small and poor because of the low standard of the morality, morale and spirituality of its people. It has not been wrongly

said, "If wealth is lost, nothing is lost, if health is lost, something is lost, but if character is lost, everything is lost." This old adage has been found correct and amply proved in the conflicts that have played out between nations across Asia. The lesson repeats itself, century after century, and yet each generation seems to need to learn it afresh, often at great cost.

The collapse of any group, movement or regime rarely begins on the battlefield. It begins from within. When those in power treat the vulnerable with cruelty and when inhuman conduct

SPIRITUAL INSIGHT



Rajyogi Brahmakumar Nikunj ji

becomes a tool of control, it reveals not strength but a profound inner emptiness. Thus, it should be clear to leaders and thinkers across the world that moral corruption is not a side effect of failure. It is the cause. Groups and regimes that dehumanise others, particularly women, do not fall because their enemies were stronger. They fall because characterlessness hollows out everything - loyalty, discipline, purpose - until nothing remains worth fighting for.

Character is not a soft virtue. It is, in fact, the hardest and most durable form of strength a person or a nation can possess. And no generation needs to understand this more urgently than the present one. Moral character is the backbone of any nation.

Now is the right time to raise that standard. Not for any ideology, not for any reward, but because a life of character is, quite simply, the only thing worth living.

The victory of the Indian Armed Forces over decades is truly a victory of character. Even in a violent war, the character of the forces as well as of the people plays a decisive role. Because it is character that holds the line when orders run out and circumstances become impossible to predict. History across every civilisation has consistently shown one pattern: Groups, leaders and empires that rot from within, through greed, exploitation and moral compromise collapse not because an enemy was stronger, but because they



had nothing worth holding together. For young people today, this is not an abstract lesson. Just look around. The leaders who last in public life, in business and in communities are rarely the smartest or the most aggressive. They are the ones whose private conduct matches their public face. Thus, character is simply the gap, or the absence of a gap, between who you are when people are watching and who you are when they are not.

The generation enter-

ing public life right now inherits a world that is deeply cynical about institutions, leadership and authority, and rightly so. That cynicism was earned by those who wielded power without character. The only answer to that cynicism is not a better argument. It is better conduct. Remember, integrity cannot be faked indefinitely! Reputation can be managed by PR people for a while, but character, or the lack of it, always surfaces. Every scandal, every fall from grace, every organisation that imploded follows the same script: Somewhere, early on, someone made a small compromise on character and called it pragmatism. The standard, then, is not perfection. It is consistency. It is the daily, undramatic choice to act with honesty, fairness and dignity, especially when it costs something. Hence,

the question for this generation is simple: What kind of people do we want to be when it is our turn to lead? Power will come. Opportunity will come. The only variable is whether character comes with it. So the real work begins now, not in the future, not when the stakes are higher. It begins with how you treat people who can do nothing for you, with whether you tell the truth when a lie is easier and with whether you stand for something when that standing costs you heavily. Now is the right time to raise that standard. Not for any ideology, not for any reward, but because a life of character is, quite simply, the only thing worth living.

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

DECCAN Chronicle

24 MAY 2026



Krishna Shastri Devulapalli
Off the beaten track

If it's Tuesday, it must be strawberry

A couple of days ago, a friend forwarded a link to me with the message "Remind you of anything?"

The link led me to Morioka Shoten, a tiny bookstore in Tokyo. Japan does specialise in tiny things (with the same vigour that the US specialises in the opposite). You think Japan, immediately *bonsai*, *sumi-e*, *bonkei* and *haiku*, of course, come to mind. All examples of how conclusively they've shown the rest of the world that less is more.

So what was unique to the tininess of this bookstore?

Well, it sells only one book. Yes, you read that right. You don't go to this shop to browse, ask the bookstore clerk what she recommends or buy a bunch of stationery items. You go to Morioka Shoten to buy that one book they have on the shelves. All their shelves. For that one week. And if you go the following week, there's still only one book. But a different one. It's like Balkumar Softy Centre in the Ponda Bazaar of my childhood (among the earliest soft serve ice cream vendors in Madras), which, for one rupee on a Monday, would give you Vanilla. Followed by Strawberry on Tuesdays, Pista on Wednesdays... with (drum roll) Chocolate reserved for the weekends. Take it or leave it. And, boy, did we take it.

But who dares do this now, the age of infinite choice, gift-wrapped and served instantly at your doorstep with bells on? How does an entire shop make do by selling just one book, or more precisely, multiple copies of the same book, when others in the business have added stationery, coffee, baked goods and bare-knuckle boxing just to survive? (Okay, I exaggerate a bit there.)

Very well, apparently, considering how many book lovers the shop attracts from all over the world.

I guess my friend sent this link to me because the website of our wee indie publishing house says (rather grandiosely, if the expression on the face of a leading writer — as she was listening to our little speech — was anything to go by) "Bringing real writers to real readers. One book at a time."

Worry not. This piece isn't a sly plug for my business. It's about what limitless choice has made us, and between the options of no choice, limited choice, and infinite choice; why I think infinite choice is no better than no choice at all.

Not too long ago, I watched an old interview with the incomparable George Carlin in which he confesses, that for all his so-called misanthropic humour, he actually likes people. Provided he engages with them one person at a time. But the minute they are part of a group, however small, he instantly finds them less likeable.

I couldn't agree more.

If you've got to a certain stage in life, you'd think you could control this somewhat, having the luxury to say no to most group situations. And strive for individual interactions, whether personal or professional. Not really.

Most interactions today, however exclusive you may think they are, actually involve you unwittingly becoming part of an orgy. Because, thanks to the infinite options one has in the palm of one's hand, almost everyone you come across is secretly or brazenly straddling a bunch of people — choices, basically — every single minute of the day.

You think you are having an intimate conversation, often with someone who has sought you out, while you are actually competing for attention with all the humans on the various platforms they are juggling at that given moment. Whether you like it or not, you are now the member of a group you had no intention of joining.

I don't know about the rest of you, but buffets make me lose my appetite, and art galleries make me nauseous. I don't care which part of the world I am in, giving the pointlessly, insanely large breakfast spread the go by, I invariably stick with what I have at home: scrambled eggs. And when I go to a gallery, I long to be Steve McQueen (or Pierce Brosnan) from *The Thomas Crown Affair*, where I have the liberty of sitting for as long as I want in front of one painting, ignoring the hundreds of masterpieces waiting to overwhelm my senses, and drink in that work. (While suppressing thoughts of stealing it, of course.)

Like the curators of Morioka Shoten and Balkumar Softy Centre at the production end, I think, we, too, should endeavour to be curators at the consumption end. When the world is telling us, look, there's bigger, there's more coveted, there's sexier, one song, one show, one book, one person, one experience at a time is what we should be aiming for. Without the fear of missing out. Muting capitalism's toxic, ever-present voice in our head, going "Hey, buddy, you're settling for this?"

Maybe we would feel less depleted then. And stop wondering about where our inescapable sense of isolation, deprivation and wanting comes from. So, if it's Tuesday, go for Strawberry. Stick with it, pay attention to it, savour it, process the experience. That way, you have a better chance of being fulfilled than having small, hurried, unsatisfying licks of Butterscotch, Pista and Mango, while secretly craving the currently unavailable Chocolate.

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



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India at crossroads on bail for Umar Khalid & UAPA



Pavan K. Varna
Chanakya's View

The case of Umar Khalid has become an important test of the Indian republic's commitment to liberty, dissent and constitutional morality. The question is no longer confined to the guilt or innocence of one individual. It has now acquired a much larger significance: Can a democracy, governed by a Constitution that places individual liberty at its heart, keep an accused person in jail for five years without trial and without bail, while the judicial process itself moves at a glacial pace?

For decades, Indian jurisprudence has rested on a foundational principle: "Bail is the rule, jail is the exception." This doctrine was memorably articulated by Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, in the celebrated case of *State of Rajasthan vs Balchand* (1977), where the Supreme Court underscored that personal liberty cannot be casually sacrificed before conviction. The principle was reaffirmed repeatedly, including in *Gudikanti Narasimulu vs Public Prosecutor* (1978), where the Court stressed that deprivation of liberty before conviction must remain an exception justified by compelling circumstances.

More recently, in *Union of India vs K.A. Najeeb* (2021), a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court held that even the stringent provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) cannot eclipse constitutional guarantees under Article 21 when prolonged incarceration and delayed trials become instruments of injustice. The Court observed that under such circumstances, the rigours of Section 43D(5) of the UAPA could "melt down".

Yet, despite this settled jurisprudence, Umar Khalid has remained incarcerated since September 2020 in con-

nection with the Delhi riots conspiracy case. Five years later, the trial has scarcely advanced in any meaningful sense. The delay is staggering. Thousands of pages of documents, innumerable witnesses, procedural adjournments, and the cumbersome architecture of UAPA prosecutions have created a judicial labyrinth from which the accused appears unable to emerge.

The troubling question therefore arises: If the state, with all its powers of investigation and prosecution, cannot conclude the process within a reasonable time, should the accused continue to languish in prison indefinitely? Is this not, in effect, punishment before conviction?

The Supreme Court itself now appears to be wrestling with precisely this dilemma. In January 2026, a bench comprising Justices Arvind Kumar and P.B. Varale denied bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, while granting relief to several co-accused. The bench held that delay in trial could not become a "trump card" for bail in UAPA cases and stressed the gravity of the allegations.

However, in a remarkable development only months later, another Supreme Court bench comprising Justices B.V. Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan publicly expressed "serious reservations" about that earlier ruling. While granting bail to an accused in a separate UAPA-related case on May 18, 2026, the bench emphatically reiterated that "bail is the rule and jail is the exception," even under UAPA. It observed that the earlier denial of bail to Umar Khalid appeared inconsistent with the larger bench ruling in *K.A. Najeeb*.

This is no minor procedural disagreement. When one bench of the Supreme Court publicly questions the sound-

In the final analysis, the question before India is larger than Umar Khalid. It is whether the republic wishes to preserve the delicate constitutional equilibrium between state authority and individual freedom.

ness of another bench's interpretation on a matter involving liberty, it signals that there is debate on whether or not the balance may have tilted too far in favour of state power at the expense of constitutional freedoms.

There are both legal and practical implications here. Legally, if an accused can be imprisoned for half a decade without conviction, and without meaningful progress in trial, then does not the process itself become the punishment? In such circumstances, acquittal after 10 years would not restore the lost years, damaged reputation, broken family life or psychological trauma endured during incarceration.

In my view, a larger question is involved. It concerns the increasingly expansive use of draconian laws such as the UAPA. Enacted originally to combat terrorism and grave threats to national security, these provisions have gradually migrated into the domain of political dissent and ideological contestation. The threshold for invoking anti-terror legislation has, in practice, become disturbingly elastic.

The consequence is that the validity of dissent itself — so vital in any democracy — is under challenge. Criticism of the government, participation in protests or provocative political speech can potentially attract charges under laws where obtaining bail becomes extraordinarily difficult. The message sent to citizens is unmistakable: Even if eventual conviction is uncertain, the state can ensure prolonged incarceration through procedure itself.

A democracy confident of its legitimacy does not fear dissent. Indeed, dissent is not an inconvenience to democ-

racy; it is one of its essential safety valves. The framers of the Indian Constitution, having themselves struggled against colonial repression, understood this instinctively. That is why they placed such extraordinary emphasis on liberty, free expression and protection against arbitrary state action.

The Umar Khalid case has consequently attracted substantial international attention. Human rights organisations, civil liberties groups, academic circles and sections of the global press have repeatedly questioned how a constitutional democracy can reconcile prolonged pre-trial detention with the presumption of innocence. To raise such concerns is not to prejudice guilt or to justify genuine cases of sedition, terrorism or unacceptable violence. Courts alone must determine culpability on the basis of evidence. But constitutional morality demands that the state prove guilt within a reasonable time-frame, not incarcerate indefinitely while the machinery of justice crawls forward.

The Supreme Court, as guardian of the Constitution, now stands at a critical crossroads. Its recent observations suggest an awareness that excessive deference to stringent statutory provisions can erode the deeper constitutional promise of liberty itself. The court appears to recognise that Article 21 cannot become subordinate to endless procedural delay. In the final analysis, the question before India is larger than Umar Khalid. It is whether the republic wishes to preserve the delicate constitutional equilibrium between state authority and individual freedom. If liberty can be suspended for years without trial, then constitutional guarantees risk becoming abstractions rather than lived realities.

The apex court has raised the right question. It is reported that this matter of principle will now be referred to a larger bench. One can only hope that this will be expedited. The nation awaits the right answer.

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

LETTERS

'COCKROACH' PARTY

The decision of the BJP-led Union Government to withhold the X handle of the satirical "Cockroach Janta Party," which has become an internet phenomenon following the CJJ's controversial remarks comparing sections of the country's youth with fake degrees entering professions such as law, media, and social media to "parasites and cockroaches," raises serious concerns about freedom of expression. Invoking national security and acting on Intelligence Bureau inputs to curb a meme-based platform reflects not strength, but intolerance towards dissent, satire, and humour. The real issue does not lie with the frustrated youth of this country — employed or unemployed, with or without dubious degrees — but with the growing tendency of those in power to weaponise laws to silence criticism.

M. Jeyaram Sholavandan

MORAL EROSION

Neither debates over who is responsible, nor another probe will help stop paper leaks such as the one seen in the recent NEET exam. Similar incidents have occurred before, much like the bridge collapses we keep witnessing, and most of the measures announced after every leak amount to little more than damage control. The problem is the gradual erosion of moral and ethical values in public life. Growing dishonesty, duplicity and corruption reflect this decline, and their impact inevitably rubs off on society as well.

V. Nagarajan Chennai

DOG BITE DEATHS

The SC's assertion that a human life is more valuable when it is endangered in attacks by animals which deserve to be eliminated is correct. More people die in India due to rabies caused by the ferocious street dogs. The death of victims due to rabies is highly fearsome and tragic and contagious too. India essentially being a hot country street dogs with no protection from scorching sun become highly ferocious and bite anyone coming within their sight. Other street dogs also pose the same threat if any stranger crosses their territory. In such circumstances when even walking on roads, streets or anywhere becomes risky it is wiser to eliminate them viz the street dogs by euthanasia techniques. The time has come to strictly enforce licencing system for keeping pet animals known for their fearsome looks and ferocious behaviour in check in the populated environments.

S.Nagarajan Iyer Coimbatore

Mail your letters to chennai@deccanmail.com

Anita Katyal
Political Gup-Shup



Is Vijay going to do a Kejriwal on Cong? BJP sets sights on Punjab

The faction in the Congress which was pushing for an alliance with actor Vijay's TVK well before the Tamil Nadu elections is predictably ecstatic that the party has got a foot into the state government apparatus after nearly six decades. The pro-Vijay lobby has convinced the Congress leadership that TVK's lack of experience and grassroots cadre could prove to be a boon for the party as it can ride on the Vijay wave to revive and expand its footprint in Tamil Nadu. And in time, the Congress could also prevail upon the actor-turned-politician to campaign for them in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka where Mr Vijay is known to have a huge fan base. However, this faction faced a reality check when Tamil Nadu chief minister Vijay skipped the swearing-in ceremony of V.D. Satheesan in Kerala even though he had been extended a special invitation for the programme. Instead, a day before the UDF gov't swearing-in ceremony, the TVK launched its first expansion drive outside Tamil Nadu in Kerala's Thrissur. Congress leaders who were

opposed to a truck with Mr Vijay are now pointing out that their colleagues who batted for a TVK alliance did not realise that once Mr Vijay starts finding his feet in politics, he will try to expand the TVK beyond Tamil Nadu. There is every possibility that Mr Vijay could prove to be another Arvind Kejriwal who demolished the Congress in Delhi and Punjab and is attempting the same in Gujarat. In fact, there are murmurs in the capital's political circles that Mr Vijay has been set up by the BJP to aid in the disintegration of the Dravidian parties and create space for a national party.

There was palpable tension among waiting Congress leaders when the party's top bosses were closeted in a final meeting to pick the next chief minister of Kerala. A group of Delhi-based Congress leaders were convinced that AICC general secretary K.C. Venugopal would be the chosen one given his proximity to leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi. This group was actively propping up Mr Venugopal and was briefing media-persons informally that he

was sure to be picked. When it was announced that the Congress leadership had decided on V.D. Satheesan, the disappointment among these leaders was all too evident. In fact, one leader had brought several boxes of laddoos which he had planned to take to Mr Venugopal's residence. Instead, he distributed them to presspersons, admitting that he was deeply disappointed that Mr Venugopal had been overlooked. A few Delhi leaders were hoping that once Mr Venugopal moved to Kerala, one of them would be elevated as general secretary in charge of the organisation and hence get close to Rahul Gandhi. Since this script has gone awry, there is now a buzz in the Congress that Mr Venugopal has fallen out of favour and he will soon be removed from his current organisational position.

Now that it has succeeded in winning West Bengal, once considered an impregnable fortress, the Bharatiya Janata Party is preparing for its next challenge — Punjab, a state whose voters have steadfastly spurned its overtures. The

first major step was taken in the midst of the West Bengal Assembly polls when seven Aam Aadmi Party MPs and leaders joined the BJP. It is now expected that there will be further defections from AAP closer to next year's Assembly polls. At the same time, a hunt is on in the BJP for a Sikh leader to helm the party's Punjab unit. Meanwhile, Haryana chief minister Nayab Singh Saini has been given the responsibility of mobilising voters and party cadres in Punjab, with a special focus on the large Saini population in the state. AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal, who has been camping in Punjab after the party lost Delhi, has been using every trick in the book, including cutting off water supply to Haryana, to ensure that Mr Saini is kept busy in his state.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's gift of a packet of Melody toffees to Italian premier Giorgia Meloni took the Internet by storm last week. Memes, reels and quips on X flooded social media platforms as the Prime Minister's choice of present was easily the most talked about

subject. Commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal was quick to seize the moment with the announcement that India's toffee exports had gone up by 166 per cent in the last twelve years. Candy and confectionery manufacturers may have hit the sweet spot in recent years as pointed out by the minister but it is also a fact that they have some distance to travel if they are to compete with top international brands which have a substantial share in the \$17 billion-dollar international toffee and candy export market. The countries which currently dominate the global market include Germany, Belgium and Netherlands along with China and Mexico. India's products are doing well in the low-cost market but the country does not have any premium recognisable brand, especially in the chocolate segment. It is hoped that the Prime Minister's gift will encourage candy manufacturers to up their game and aim for a seat at the high table.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

Wealth without well-being: the paradox of India's elderly

TEJ SINGH KARDAM

IN India, senior citizens often find themselves in a paradoxical situation. Indians born in the pre-liberalisation era grew up in a time of scarcity and limited economic opportunities. In this situation their upbringing instilled a deep-seated habit of saving and an aversion to spending. For them, wealth accumulation was not just about financial security but also a means of pacifying their fears about their unknown future needs.

Despite possessing significant assets and savings, many lead frugal lives, unwilling to enjoy the wealth they have painstakingly accumulated. This has resulted in them 'dying rich but not living rich'. This is particularly prevalent among older generations, who, despite being financially sound, feel insecure and choose to live with a cautious, conservative approach. While the younger generation is moving away from traditional investments like real estate and gold, the elderly remain emotionally attached to these assets.

Possible reasons as to why senior citizens tend to die rich rather than living rich:

Living modestly despite wealth:

Many senior citizens in India continue to live modestly despite being financially sound. They often prioritise frugality and self-denial, driven by concerns about potential medical expenses, longevity, and the need to support their children or grandchildren. This conservative approach can lead to an unnecessarily restricted lifestyle, where seniors deny themselves the comforts and experiences they could easily afford. The fear of outliving their

The biggest gift seniors can give their children is not a house or a gold chain but life well-lived. The irony is that many senior citizens live frugally, sacrificing pleasures, only to die wealthy. They were in a way, poor in life but rich in death. There is a need for senior citizens to focus on personal well-being and happiness.

savings, or the possibility of an unexpected medical emergency wiping out their wealth, often looms large in their minds.

Emotional factors:

Senior citizens have retained their emotional attachment to traditional investments. They often see real estate and gold as tangible assets that provide a sense of security, stability and returns in the form of rent. These assets hold sentimental value and are associated with memories and legacy. The older generation grew up in an era when these investments were the primary wealth-building tools, making it harder for them to break away from this mindset. In addition to emotional attachment, they tend to invest heavily in traditional assets - real estate and gold, viewing them as symbols of security and legacy. However, this emotional attachment makes these assets illiquid, leaving them unable to generate regular income for day-to-day comfort.

Invisible burdens-Inflation, healthcare and over-giving:

Beyond emotional letdowns, there is the real challenge of rising costs. Medical inflation in India is growing faster than general inflation. A single health emergency can wipe out years

of savings. Many senior citizens also deplete their retirement funds supporting their children's education, business or weddings. While done with love, it can leave them financially vulnerable later in life.

Generational shift:

Younger generations today value mobility over inheritance, convenience over nostalgia. They are choosing apartments near work, rental flexibility and minimalist living over ancestral homes. The generational shift in financial thinking leaves many senior citizens feeling disconnected and even disappointed.

Changing trends and priorities:

The younger generation, in contrast to their elders, prefer simplicity and minimalism. The next generation are witnessing a significant shift in their investment preferences as well. They are moving away from traditional investments, which were once considered safe and reliable. Instead, they are exploring new avenues such as stock, mutual funds, income plans and even cryptocurrency. This shift can be attributed to various factors, including the desire for higher returns, ease of diversification and the influence of global investment trends.

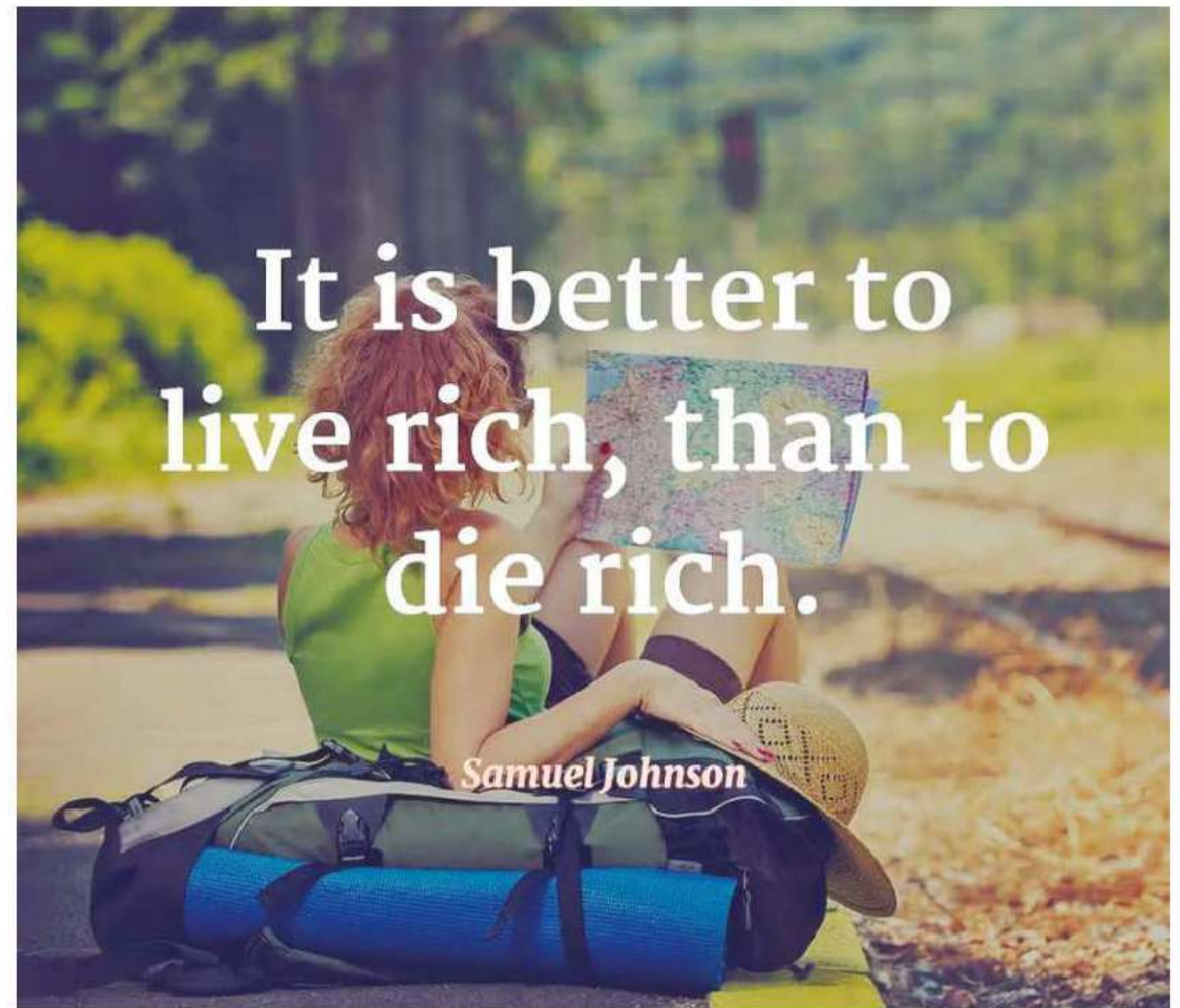
One such example of the

younger generation not being interested in traditional assets is of one senior citizen, who died aged 85. His wife had predeceased him. One son lives in London and the other in New Zealand. They have the nationality of those countries. Neither was interested in the house their father had built in his prime age.

The father had written a will before his death to give all the property equally to both his children. The sons did not have time to get all the property in their names and then sell it. Both made a power of attorney to sell the property in someone's name. Thereafter the proceeds from the sale of the property were sent to their home country.

Benefits of financial planning:

It is important that senior citizens live life to the fullest and explore the reasons behind their emotional investments. It is high time they understand the changing taste and priorities of the younger generation and the rising costs faced by senior citizens. There is a need for the senior citizens to utilise a portion of their wealth for their own comfort and happiness. Going for financial planning like having a well-structured retirement plan can ensure that they have enough funds set-aside for emergencies and long-term



care, while allocating money for travel, leisure and other personal interests. The seniors should explore annuity plans; systematic withdrawal plans from mutual funds with a steady income stream without depleting their core assets. Ultimately, Indian senior citizens need to prioritise their own well-being and happiness, breaking free from the cycle of living economically to make the next generation rich.

Self-care and setting an example:

Retirement should be about fulfilment. Senior citizens should travel, pursue hobbies, attend cultural events, or just

enjoy quiet time with friends. These are not luxuries but are essential to a rich life. They should not forget the power of community like joining clubs, senior networks for emotional support, to combat loneliness and foster a sense of belonging. By prioritising their own well-being, embracing change, and spending meaningfully, they can rewrite what ageing looks like. They can prove that it's possible to live rich - not just financially but emotionally and spiritually. The biggest gift seniors can give their children is not a house or a gold chain but life well-lived.

The irony is that many senior

citizens live frugally, sacrificing pleasures, only to die wealthy. They were in a way, poor in life but rich in death.

There is a need for senior citizens to focus on personal well-being and happiness, diversification into annuities, mutual funds, and income plans to balance financial security with comfort and enjoyment, in addition to balancing the children's education etc.

Further they should break free from the habit of extreme thrift, enjoy the fruits of their hard work, and "live rich" rather than merely "die rich".

(The writer is a retired IFS officer)

Homage to K S Gopal, the architect of sustainable development and agricultural innovation

His pioneering SWAR irrigation framework earned UNESCO laurels

VANAM JWALA
NARASIMHA RAO

DURING the 1990s, while serving as a faculty member at the Dr MCR HRD Institute, I was tasked with planning a training program on the 'Role of NGOs in Rural Development'. The singular, exceptional expert who immediately came to my mind, and whom numerous professional colleagues strongly recommended was KS Gopal. By then, he was steering the Hyderabad-based Centre for Environment Concerns (CEC).

Established in 1984 by a visionary group of activists, the CEC was dedicated to pioneering innovations, fresh ideas, and 'next practices' in the development sector. The broad areas of their operations encompassed poverty alleviation, rural development, environmental sustainability, and inclusive markets to enhance livelihoods.

Through these pillars, they aimed to regenerate natural resources in rain-fed, agriculturally backward dry land areas. The process they envisaged was driven by multi-disciplinary action research, field-level pilots, and a strategic mix of policy and practice advocacy. Against this dynamic backdrop, Gopal joined CEC as its director in 1993. Since joining, he spearheaded initiatives in participatory forest development, foreign funding research in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh, later in Telangana, and local cereal-based community grain banks. His expertise included environmental hotspots, civil society

advocacy, soil enrichment, organic agriculture, chemical-free forestry pest management etc. He also worked extensively on optimal utilisation of River Godavari waters.

Though he passed away at the age of 72 years, his vibrant energy remained undiminished until about six months prior to the tragic day. Since our first meeting, we have enjoyed a lifelong friendship. He was always the life of small gatherings with like-minded friends. He thoroughly enjoyed a social drink and a smoke, generously sharing joyful, unreserved moments with his closest companions.

Gopal left an indelible mark on everyone he touched, and his profound influence will stay with his friends, including me, forever.

Upon hearing the news of his passing on May 16, I visited his residence, offered condolences to his wife, before paying my last respects at the crematorium. Our bond was deeply academic. We shared ideas. Whenever we met, whether at Dr Ulla Balaji's house, my flat, Dr AP Ranga Rao's residence (later Dr Bharat's), or Sashi's home, our discussions were invariably intense yet stimulating. They ranged broadly from politics to development, driven by Gopal's passion.

We shared an intellectual 'common ground,' where Gopal was the undisputed leader. However, the 'actual physical ground' he chose once, for his groundbreaking 'System of Water for Agriculture Rejuvenation (SWAR)' irrigation experiment was a 1000-square-yard mini-farm near the Chilkoor



He foresaw generic commodities transforming into branded 'Farm-to-Fork' (Farm-to-Table) products, moving directly, or with minimal steps, from a local farm to the consumer's plate. However, he warned that this transformation would be aggressively driven by big players with deep pockets, smart information and communications technology systems, and remote management tools. He remarked that whoever commands the marketplace will ultimately dictate the future of our rural economy. Gopal cautioned that a handful of mega-corporations often end up controlling the entire value chain, squeezing farmers, intermediaries, and consumers alike

Balaji temple. His primary focus was always irrigation water efficiency, which he firmly believed was structurally linked to soil and plant root health.

The core concept was delivering water directly to the root zone with minimal waste.

As a first-of-its-kind system, SWAR provided

measured moisture to the roots, cutting water use by 50 per cent compared to standard drip irrigation for horticulture and agroforestry crops. He advocated precise moisture delivery tailored to different soils and crop cycles. When he casually mentioned this seven years ago, I offered our mini farm. Gopal self-funded the entire project, covering all installation and fertilizer expenses.

While I was working with Telangana's first Chief Minister, K Chandrasekhar Rao (KCRs), as his CPRO, Gopal in July 2019 discussed with me a CEC study on the effective use of water for Telangana's prosperous agriculture. This coincided with KCR's massive re-engineering of irrigation projects to ensure state-wide water supply. Gopal's insights directly complemented KCR government's plans to establish specialized crop colonies for efficient, high-quality agricultural service delivery.

In that context, Gopal presented a distinctive proposal: the Kharif season should focus on pulses, coarse cereals, millets, and fodder, boosting productivity through quality seeds, protective irrigation, and sustainable farming practices. Conversely, during Rabi, canal-fed flood irrigation could support crops like paddy, wheat, and cotton. Additionally, he favoured agro forestry to simultaneously enhance farmer incomes and restore local ecology.

Again, in June 2020, aligning with KCR's initiatives, Gopal proposed the framework of 'Right Interventions for Regulatory Farming.'

This concept emerged against the backdrop of 24/7 quality power supply, unprecedented paddy harvests, and landmark agricultural welfare schemes like Rythu Bandhu and Rythu Bima. During this period, KCR suggested strategically converging MGNREGS with core farming operations to directly support landowners while simultaneously securing employment for agricultural labour.

Gopal, who contributed significantly to the evolution of MGNREGS, analysed that the Indian agricultural ecosystem was undergoing deep, structural shifts. These changes spanned procurement models, crop diversification, urban dietary demands, mechanization, and modern supply chains. In this rapidly evolving landscape, he focused on how to social-engineer and unleash human creativity toward building a more equitable rural economy. For him, the pathways and opportunities were always plenty.

He shared an insightful perspective regarding the Research and Innovation Circle Hyderabad (RICH). He envisioned RICH, designed to take lab research from Telangana's top scientific institutions to the market, as a potent force multiplier. For him, this ecosystem could empower a vast number of young people to secure meaningful livelihoods while remaining deeply connected, with their feet and hearts, to the soil.

The strategic suggestions made by Gopal, which we so deeply debated, did not remain confined to

our private conversations. Beyond bringing his visionary ideas directly to the notice of the Chief Minister, who responded with a highly positive, considerate, and accommodating approach, I also documented them from time to time, extensively in detailed articles published across mainstream platforms to ensure they reached a wider audience.

When major agricultural reforms, including the 'One Nation, One Market' framework, amendments to the Essential Commodities Act, contract farming, and public-private partnerships for storage infrastructure were proposed in July 2020 under the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative, Gopal observed that the sector was on the cusp of a structural shift. He noted that traditional peasantry farming was rapidly giving way to corporate agribusiness.

He opined that farmers could no longer rely on Minimum Support Price (MSP) or assured government procurement. Instead, the sector would transition into an era of customized production, dynamic price discovery, and nationally integrated markets dominated by large corporations, food chains, and exporters. He foresaw generic commodities transforming into branded 'Farm-to-Fork' (Farm-to-Table) products, moving directly, or with minimal steps, from a local farm to the consumer's plate.

However, he warned that this transformation would be aggressively driven by big players with deep pockets, smart information and communications technology systems, and

remote management tools. He remarked that whoever commands the marketplace will ultimately dictate the future of our rural economy. Gopal cautioned that a handful of mega-corporations often end up controlling the entire value chain, squeezing farmers, intermediaries, and consumers alike.

He often said, 'Markets are brutal, fierce battlegrounds. Their architecture decides who thrives, who benefits, and who is ultimately subjugated or decimated.'

To illustrate this grim reality, he shared a striking real-life story he personally encountered. In the academic and corporate realms, Gopal was a highly qualified management specialist, with MBA and a Diploma in International Trade. He shared his vast practical knowledge as a faculty member at ASCI and a 'Scholar-in-Residence' at TISS, eventually delivering guest lectures at world-renowned institutions like Oxford and York.

Gopal served on the EPTRI Governing Council and NIRD Research Council. He founded the IDL Rural Development Trust, co-founded the Deccan Development Society (DDS), and promoted communal harmony in Hyderabad. His pioneering SWAR irrigation framework won international accolades, including from UNESCO, leading to his frequent participation in high-level forums convened by the World Bank, UN, UNEP and FAO.

Gopal's loss leaves a deep void. His revolutionary practical ideas nurture our soil.



A war based on satyagraha is always of two kinds. One is the war we wage against injustice and the other we fight against our own weaknesses

Sardar Patel

WAR AS PROFITABLE STATECRAFT AND ELUSIVE PEACE

WAR is peace," wrote George Orwell in 1984, imagining a world where words are hollowed out, logic is perverted and conflict concocted to sustain domination. The 1949 opus is defining global affairs in 2026. The era of giant statesmen is consigned to history, replaced by intellectual pygmies who now write the rules of the game. Orwell's dystopia appears eerily real, emerging as the operating system of geopolitics.

The world is lurching through a disorder that profits the powerful and vaporises the vulnerable. At the epicentre of this modern construct is US President Donald J Trump, who famously promised to end the war in Ukraine in a day. That promise is now 487 days overdue. His presidency, betting on grandstanding to deliver, has wagered on misplaced notions of swift victories.

The Trump playbook has alienated allies and friends like India and enriched adversaries like China and Russia. Liberation Day tariffs targeted Canada, Mexico, India and the EU, while China cocked a snook at Trump. The US now has to refund \$166 billion collected as tariffs—and among the first in the queue is FedEx. Meanwhile, the total US debt soared to \$39 trillion. Yet, Trump remains undeterred: a new 10 percent tariff is under litigation, while his team is weaponising provisions to reset the tariff regime.

This global instability is not unfolding in a vacuum. West Asia burns and Ukraine simmers because war-games are shaped by domestic political calculations—in Washington, Tel Aviv, Moscow and Beijing. The decision to wage war or pursue peace is increasingly dictated by internal political calculus. The human and economic costs of these gridlocked conflicts have triggered global anxiety.

Trump loves the word 'obliteration'. After many Trumpian obliterations, Iran is still in the fight. The objective of the peace talks is keeping open the Strait of Hormuz, which was open before the war. What's more, Iran and Oman may partner to charge tolls on ships. For all the talk of regime change, the best Team Trump could do was to replace an older Ayatollah with a younger Ayatollah.

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Wars have no winners. Ceasefires mock the dead. There is no guarantee when the wars raging now will end. Even if they do end this week, the costs will be paid for years—just in West Asia, restoration of oil output could take 18 months and gas over four years. The casting of domestic politics as geopolitics and the obsession for political domination through wars have pushed the world to the edge of a political and economic catastrophe.

THE POLITICS OF AN ECONOMIC IMPASSE



OPINION

SANJAYA BARU

Former newspaper editor and writer whose latest book is *Secession of the Successful: The Flight Out of New India*

UPON his stunning victory 12 years ago, Narendra Modi addressed a gathering of party faithful and appealed to them that they give him "10 years to transform" the country. As we mark the twelfth anniversary of the Modi government, it is now clear that he has succeeded in 'transforming' India politically but has failed to do so economically. It is worth considering whether the political transformation that has been achieved is among the reasons for the failure on the economic front.

The emerging consensus among political and policy analysts across the country is that Modi has not been able to translate his political success into economic performance. Some, like economist Surjit Bhalla, blame the 'deep state' or the embedded bureaucracy for this. Indeed, even many close to and loyal to the Prime Minister often articulate this view, that the real impediment to better performance is the 'rust in the steel frame'.

Some hold the BJP's essentially inward-oriented, 'swadeshi' thinking on trade policy and the confusion created by multiple interpretations of Atmanirbhara and Make in India responsible. Some castigate Modi's own 'instruments', his loyal ministers, for the inadequacies of the leader. During the Congress era, inter-ministerial policy and personality differences would be spoken of openly and reported in the media. Differences between senior ministers like Pranab Mukherjee and P

Chidambaram were open secrets. Such differences and rivalries exist in Modi's council of ministers too, and some in the media are privy to them. But these are almost never reported.

My friend Parakala Prabhakar, a distinguished political economist, has for long held a very different view on the governance challenges faced by the Modi government. Be it the manner of announcement and execution of demonetisation, or the imposition of overnight lockdown due to Covid, or actions on issues like farm and land laws, foreign investment policy and so on. Parakala blames it all on managerial 'incompetence' at the political, not merely bureaucratic, level.

Perhaps Peter's Principle—the celebrated management theory that "employees are continually promoted based on their success in previous roles until they reach a position where they are no longer competent"—also applies to politicians and senior ministers.

Moreover, it is one thing to win elections, quite another to steer the national economy, national security and foreign policy—the primary responsibilities of the Prime Minister—over a long period of time. Even Jawaharlal Nehru, who had a distinguished decade in office as Prime Minister from 1947 to 1957, began erring after that. The question may well be asked if Modi has outlived his welcome and diminishing returns have set in on the administrative and economic fronts, even as he continues to deliver on the political front.

Reflecting on that 2014 request of the PM, that he be given a decade for 'transforming' India, it seems clear now that his focus was mainly on the Indian republic's transformation into a Hindu

majority polity. On that objective he has largely succeeded, with southern India still outside the grip of Hindutva. The mixing of religious faith and prejudice into public life and politics has generated social and political tensions that are depleting the so-called 'animal spirits of enterprise'.

A growing concern among business leaders, at home and overseas, about the direction of Indian politics is making them risk-averse as investors. An important reason for private investment not picking up, for the flight of capital and the tapering down of foreign direct investment may well be the wider political environment.

Economists often ignore the role of political management in influencing business decisions. Confidence in a government's ability to deal with emergent political and security challenges, at home and overseas, reassures investors. It contributes to positive expectations and encourages risk-taking by investors. Any concern about a political leadership's competence or determination to deal with such challenges contributes to negative expectations and risk aversion.

Consider two examples. It is not often recognised by economists and public policy analysts that a key trigger for the 1990-91 balance of payments crisis episode was the judgement of a variety of economic actors that the government of the day would not be able to handle the challenges at hand. It was the inability of the Vishwanath Pratap Singh and Chandrashekhar governments to act decisively on the fiscal and external front in 1990 that led to a loss of confidence in the economy and the rapid descent into the crisis of 1991. It was then

the decisive actions of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao that restored investor confidence and stabilised the economy.

By contrast, in 2004 the defeat of the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government and the coming into office of a Congress-led coalition supported by communist parties triggered instability in the markets and unease among investors. The reassurance provided very quickly by the newly elected Prime Minister Manmohan Singh set at rest all such worries. In both instances, the quality of political leadership made all the difference to investor sentiment.

We are in a similar situation today. In 1991 and 2004, both business leaders and the media articulated their views openly and played their part in ensuring political action that helped restore investor confidence. Today, a largely timid media and a highly risk-averse and fearful business class are no longer exerting pressure on the political leadership to act in a reassuring manner.

All good news is celebrated in an exaggerated manner and all bad news is buried. Thus, when India was seen as being on the threshold of becoming the world's third largest economy, there was much song and dance about it. Today, when it has slipped to the sixth position, few ask why. In 2017, Prime Minister Modi declared that the country's national income would be \$5 trillion by 2020. Very quickly, the goal was shifted to 2022, and then to 2025, and then forgotten. In 2026, the economy is just over \$4 trillion.

Indian economy's long-term average annual rate of growth from 1990 to 2025 is estimated to be around 6 percent. During 2000-12, the average growth rate was over 7 percent. For India to be regarded as a developed economy by 2047, the goal of Viksit Bharat, the average annual growth over the next two decades will have to be around 8 percent. The question to ask today is what was done over the past decade that the acceleration in growth experienced during 1990-2010 has not been sustained over the past decade.

(Views are personal)



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)

It is an accepted hypothesis that the attack on Iran was fertilised during a February 23 phone call between Trump and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu. It is no mystery that US foreign policy is largely influenced by domestic politics, which depends on campaign financing—and pro-Israel outfits such as AIPAC are among the leading donors for presidential and congressional polls. The February 28 attack on Iran was Trump's nod to the Israeli lobby's quest. The blame-game, the statements of officials, the resignations of Joe Kent and Tulsi Gabbard spell out the saga. For Netanyahu, who is dependent on the Ben Gvir brand of politics for survival, the war is simply an instrument of postponing the day of reckoning—remember, Trump advocated a pardon when he visited Israel. Netanyahu faces his reckoning, rather ironically, in the Fall season.

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TURNING CAR POOLS INTO CAB TRAINS



REVERSE SWING

MADHAVAN NARAYANAN

Senior journalist
Follow him on X @madversty

WHILE petrol prices shoot up and a heatwave builds up, there's a one-liner on social media that throws a third dimension to commuting in the National Capital Region—half of Delhi works in Gurugram and half of Gurugram works in Delhi, and they are all stuck on NH48.

The highway that connects the capital with its affluent satellite is perpetually jammed. But a casual look will show that most of the cars are driven by middle-aged men flaunting their new affluence with no other passenger in sight. The stories in Mumbai, Chennai or Bengaluru are not much different. Choked roads do not go well with aspirational lifestyles, but there's little people do about it.

It appears all the more ironic given the ongoing oil shock. It is good to see ministers combining photoshoot moments aboard metro carriages with appeals to increase car-pooling so that we can save valuable dollars in oil imports. But this needs a reality check.

A hard look at car-pooling in India shows we have barely scratched the surface. More importantly, faced with is-

sues that make the commonsensical idea of sharing car rides to save on fuel costs and, hopefully, commuting time is not as loaded with common sense as it would seem at first.

We need to reverse-swing our thoughts to humbler modes of transport like auto-rickshaws and the increasingly popular e-rickshaws to get a hang of what we can do about it. But before that, a few thoughts on India's automobile culture may be in order.

It is my firm belief that three things drive India's car boom: cheap loans, the image of a car as a status symbol and its position as a middle-class dream that dates back to the days when incomes were low and roads were barren. A lot has changed since, but a cultural hangover remains.

Before I bought my first car, I once had a neighbour down the street in Bengaluru asking if he could park his fancy Ford in my apartment parking space, but he could not afford to pay a rent for it. Another anecdote involves a Delhi colleague who told me about a shopper at a BMW showroom asking if there was a CNG engine option available so he could save on the fuel.

Cars are more of an object of vanity in urban India, even if that involves the inconvenience of getting stuck in traffic jams and paying more for the fuel.

I once worked for an environmental-conscious editor who talked the company's CEO into taking a metro ride one day—and found the boss squirming through what otherwise was a comfortable journey that saved time and cost. Indian CEOs are not supposed to take the metro, though stinking-rich Wall Street traders in New York are known

to. Quo vadis, dear car-pooler?

There is a flip side to this. Car pool apps like BlaBlaCar and QuickRide are trying to solve the commuter's problem with peer-to-peer sharing. Think of them like an Uber for private riders. But quick research reveals they have had only "segmented success". We may well ask in startup lingo: where's the scale in car-pooling?

Despite years of effort and the recent availability of apps, car-pooling has not taken off in India. Maybe the idea of cab trains—shared shuttle rides between fixed points—is better suited for our congested metros

All of that brought back memories of Kolkata, where I took my first Indian metro ride in 1991, preceded by my first shared autorickshaw ride to the metro station. With one auto leaving every minute in a point-to-point journey, from residential areas to the metro hub, the turnover efficiency was high.

E-rickshaws in Delhi's suburbs like Noida, and even tempo vans in passenger mode, do pretty much the same thing. Commuters are familiar with the usual routes, the points where boarding is likely. These pick-up points are like bus stops, but unlike bulky buses that take time and space to move, e-ricks and shared autos are available at a high frequency, with a predictability of service that bolsters confidence in that system.

Mumbai's Churchgate station already does car-pooling without the fuss. People buzz to and from Nariman Point from the station in black-and-yellow taxis with a not a word exchanged between the cabbie and the passengers. The rates are fixed, the route is known and the efficiency is high.

Now picture a scenario in Delhi, Bengaluru or Gurugram or wherever where such a model can be adopted. The way to do it is to make cars behave like the humble rickshaws that provide valuable last-mile services.

The authorities should come up with a plan to help car pools become 'cab trains' running between set pick-up and drop points. You can number them like buses, colour-code them and run them on predictable routes with clear timetables at fixed rates. Throw in rush-hour premiums or happy-hour discounts. Such options are quite common in inter-city rides. It is time it becomes common within metro regions.

Metro trains and e-ricks are doing it. What we need is to make the surfeit of cars blocking highways and city roads to turn into cab-train services that offer the triple play of predictability, frequency and cost efficiency that collectively spell convenience. Perhaps we need to design government tenders to launch branded point-to-point cab services and incentivise them with higher depreciation rates and tax-free status.

Only a scale-first approach to car-pooling can make sense beyond the lip service it is often given. For CXOs still worried about their status, we might launch shared limousines—with electric engines and uniformed chauffeurs.

(Views are personal)

QUOTE CORNER

What a time we have had. Don't ask me the reasons I'm leaving. There is no reason, but deep inside I know it's my time. Nothing is eternal. If it was, I would be here. Eternal will be the feeling, the people, the memories, the love I have for my Manchester City.

Pep Guardiola, announcing he is leaving as manager after a decade during which he won 20 trophies with the team

The Bar Council of India is aware that around 35-40 percent of those seen in court complexes wearing black coats and bands are fake.

Manan Kumar Mishra, BCI chairman, after about two-fifths of lawyers did not fill up the council's verification forms

Making yourself feel powerful by sending special forces to arrest a 94-year-old former leader of an island nation impoverished by US sanctions doesn't exactly suggest a strong, self-confident and ascendant superpower.

Ben Rhodes, former Deputy National Security Advisor of the US, on Cuba

MAILBAG WRITE TO

Fair justice

Ref: *Personal liberty as a constitutional imperative* (May 23). A really interesting, readable write-up on a timely subject. A humanitarian approach is more desirable while granting bails. We have seen deaths following refusal of bail pleas that had been made on health grounds. Prolonged incarceration without trial itself is a punishment denying the constitutional right to speedy trial. The irony is that prolonged bail is granted to politicians while their trials go on at a snail's pace. What is required is immunity from influence rather than harsh laws.

Ramalingeswara Rao, email

NEET solution

Ref: *Centre aims for 100% error-free retest* (May 23). Along with NEET, all state governments may consider conducting separate entrance tests like Tamil Nadu's TANCET. The latter should be for students from the state. Half the government medical

seats may be filled by NEET and the other half from TANCET-like tests. Like Tamil Nadu, there can be 7.5 percent or a similar reservation for students from government schools. So students will have the option of two tests. The basic idea is that only the deserving should study such courses, not those who get in by paying huge 'capitation fees'.

S R Dhruvid, Chennai

Youth awareness

Ref: *Police caution public over viral human chain call* (May 22). Once can now say that every cockroach has its day. An imaginary digital-based party named after it recently gained millions of followers. Young people rallied behind its satirical agenda against politicians, the judiciary and social evils. Social cause was highlighted under the wraps of humour. It shows that the country's youth are keeping abreast of contemporary issues and are ready to express their bold views if a proper channel is available. Though such an online moment tends to be short-lived, it can spread awareness about real issues. One cannot wish away the influence of a youth

movement, however temporary it may be.

D V G Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

Expert ethics

Ref: *CBT arrests Pune-based lecturer for allegedly sharing physics paper* (May 22). It is evident that the question paper leak has happened through experts or those associated with the exam process. It shows a lack of self-discipline or ethics for the concerned persons. A thorough check of the activities of all so-called experts at coaching institutes needs to be made to ensure a fool-proof conduct of competitive exams. There should be a mechanism for checking the activities of NEET-UG coaching institutes in all the states and Union territories.

R Sridharan, Pollachi

Chip challenge

Ref: *ISM 2.0 may get higher outlay than initial \$10 billion* (May 20). It is a good sign that India's semiconductor push is on the threshold of a progressive step that creates research talent and an investment system for not just production, but to promote in-

digenous technology and intellectual property too. This is a big boost towards self-reliance in science and technology. It is not an exaggeration that what India's entrepreneurs and workforce choose to do with a chip could well shape the country's destiny. They are the invisible engines of the modern world as a result of recent innovations in circuitry, design and packaging. The industry seems to be one of the best options for the young today.

M Chandrasekhar, Kadapa

Oil spillage

Ref: *IOCL pipeline burst causes petrol spill in Paradip port* (May 23). It's quite disturbing to know about the latest pipeline leakage in Paradip. There could not have been a more unfortunate time for this to happen. Apart from the environmental pollution it causes, the incident is especially disquieting when there's a crude oil crisis due to the West Asia war. The mishap indicates negligence of officials. We must learn from this and prevent any more mishaps of the kind.

Simran Poniya, Koraput

VARIETY

Uttar Pradesh Govt's new food mapping scheme is redrawing culinary boundaries and throwing up some surprises

ANJALI ABHYANKAR

LAST fortnight, the Uttar Pradesh Government announced its newly approved 'One District, One Cuisine' (ODOC) scheme. The state's Minister for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Rakesh Sachan, unveiled the scheme which broadly follows the guidelines of the ODOP or 'One District, One Product' scheme — Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's much-touted pet project launched back in 2018.

The ODOC scheme, for all intents and purposes, aims to promote local and hyper-regional delicacies from across the state's 75 districts. So far, so good; the list however has proved difficult for many to swallow; not just food experts and critics, but also for many UP-wallahs, who celebrate their state's varied culinary traditions. The reason is simple: the list that features 208 delicacies, has a jaw dropping omission — the complete absence of any non-vegetarian dishes!

Uttar Pradesh, and especially its capital Lucknow, has been synonymous with its unique *Ganga-Jamuni* heritage. For the uninitiated, this translates into a syncretic, symbiotic culture that seamlessly weaves both Hindu and Muslim traditions into one rich societal fabric. And nowhere is this more reflected than in the state's food. Uttar Pradesh's plains were largely part of the erstwhile kingdoms of Awadh, Rampur — vassal states of the Mughals — and countless smaller *thikhaanas*, *nawabi* and Hindu alike, each of whom developed robust culinary traditions. As a result, *Subz ki Tehri* — the quintessential Hindu, UP-style vegetable *pulao* — sits happily alongside a fragrant mutton or chicken *Yakhni Pulao*, and no one sees any contradiction. Which is why many were incredulous that the storied *kebabs*, *qormas* and *biryanis* were all MIA!

Think Lucknow, and the immediate associations are *chikankari* embroidery and the legendary Tunde Mian's silken *Galaouti Kebabs*. On the ODOC list, however, the city has been granted *chaat* (a street food, so a fair shout), *malai makkhan* (a winter-only dessert) and "mango produce" — a catchall phrase if ever there was one! The nearby village of Kakor, which gave the world its paté-like *Kakori Kebab*, is nowhere on the map.

Similarly, Rampur, with its distinctive *nawabi* cuisine, gets *Habshi Halwa* — the word *habshi* is a derogatory word referring to people of African descent — and so, the sweet gets its pejorative name because of its dark brown colour. The eponymous *Moradabadi biryani* has met a similar roadblock, losing out to *dal* dishes, no doubt delicious. This super-popular *biryani* (almost always made with chicken), has migrated — like much of UP's labour force — and is now available on practically every street corner across India's cities. Its distinctive taste, perhaps due to a surprising secret ingredient — a specific brand of green chilli pickle — has earned its manufacturers a pretty packet; but that's a whole other story!

Silence of the lambs



Clockwise from top: Kakori Kebab, Subz ki Tehri, Habshi Halwa, Chicken Biryani, Nihari and Galaouti Kebab once fell in the same culinary map. ISTOCK

There are some pretty absurd inclusions too: Mainpuri boasts of "roasted potatoes", and more baffling, Rae Bareilly gets "spices"! Seriously? When did potatoes (even though almost everyone loves the humble *aloo*), and *masalas* qualify as "cuisines"?

Rather than a definitive guide to eating your way through the state, the list reads more like a *halwai ki dukaan* menu of sweets, rather than distinctive cuisines. Naming the scheme 'One District, One Dish' might have made more sense!

One can only assume that this veg-only mapping is deliberate, though Minister Sachan denies it, saying it is based on surveys conducted by district-level committees — comprising administrators, teachers and experts — and is open to revisions. I have no

idea whether specific guidelines were issued, but the conspicuous absence of meat-based dishes does seem strange.

According to Central government data, upwards of 70 per cent of India's population eats meat, which logically would include many Hindu communities, quite a few of which are Brahmins. In my home state Maharashtra, the Saraswat Gaud Brahmins are non-vegetarian, as are Kashmiri Pandits in North India. While Kashmiri Pandits do eat meat, they skip the onions and garlic in their cooking. My Bengali Brahmin in-laws are enthusiastic fish and meat eaters as is the rest of the wider community; in fact, the Bengali repertoire includes a dish called *Niramish Mangsho* or "vegetarian meat", made during Durga Puja. And no, this is not

a soya chunk curry; again, like the Kashmiri Pandits, it ditches the onions and garlic, and voila, it becomes "vegetarian" and therefore can be offered as *bhog* or *prasad* to Maa!

This high statistic of non-veg eaters in India by no way suggests that these chaps are downing butter chicken on a daily basis; diets are mostly plant-based, with a meatier morsel thrown in from time to time or on special occasions. This basically means that meat (or fish and chicken) is most likely eaten perhaps only a few times a month, if at that. Animal protein in India is typically expensive and largely out of the reach of most, at least on a regular basis. So your subsistence-level Muslim farmer or factory worker is as likely as his Hindu neighbour to make *dal-roti* or *chawal* his staple.

State-wise surveys show the highest consumption in the southern, north-eastern and eastern states (almost 80 to 90 per cent).

In West Bengal, which recently saw an Assembly election, "*maach*" (fish) and "*Mangsho*" (mutton) practically became emotive battle cries. The two are so deeply etched in the Bengali psyche that some star campaigners from the ruling BJP had to double down to reassuringly eat plates of "*maach bhaat*" (fish and rice) alongside their *bhadralok* brethren! Amongst the states with the lowest percentages are Rajasthan, Gujarat (no surprises there) and interestingly Punjab, with nearly half its population eschewing meat, thereby poking a gaping hole into the standard trope of the hearty Patiala peg-swalling, *tandoori chicken*-wielding Punjabi! That said, in Amritsar, most *dhabas* like Kesar, have from the very beginning, served up a purely vegetarian menu.

Back to UP; according to the 2011 census, the largest number of Muslims in the country — roughly 20 per cent of the state's population — live here, the rest making up a Hindu majority. Amongst this majority, the Mathur Kayasth community, for instance, has a remarkable repertoire of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian recipes. They were traditionally employed as book-keepers and lawyers, initially at royal Muslim courts, and eventually, at the British *daftars* and *kacheris*. Their food embodies these fluid influences, while retaining at its core an unwavering Hindu-ness.

Madhur Jaffrey, arguably India's earliest cookery export to the West, hails from an illustrious Mathur Kayasth family. Although based in Delhi's Civil Lines — a road here is named after her grandfather, Rai Bahadur Raj Narain — Jaffrey's parents spent a number of years in Kanpur when the young Madhur Bahadur was a child. Her charming memoir, '*Climbing The Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India*', not only provides an insight into this fascinating, albeit, largely privileged community; but is also peppered with recipes.

Dastarkhwan-e-Awadh: The Cuisine of Awadh, published by HarperCollins and co-authored by Sangeeta Bhatnagar and RK Saxena — yep, you guessed it, both of Lucknow Kayasth heritage — is another treasure trove of classic Awadhi recipes.

Uttar Pradesh is undoubtedly the land of Ayodhya, but it also the home of the Taj Mahal. And if as the minister suggests, the primary aim of the scheme is to promote traditional cuisine through improved branding, packaging and marketing, then surely the slow-cooked *Nihari* or flaky *ulte tawe ka parantha* and *Mughlai sheermals* would benefit as much as Mathura's *lal pedha* (which incidentally I love), and *Agra ka petha* (okay, this one not so much).

Foodies across not just the state, but dare I say the country, would rejoice if some of UP's iconic non-vegetarian dishes re-emerged from behind the *burqa* as it were!

— The writer is a freelance contributor

CAPTION CONTEST 1563



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 1562



SPECTRUM MAY 17 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

- Ne(a)t arrangement — Surendra Miglani via epaper, Kaithal
- Rest assured — Jai Bhagwan Galav, Kurukshehra
- Double network coverage — Harsh Pawaria via epaper, Rohtak
- Split house — Raj Kumar Kapoor, Ropar
- Parallel connections — Bahadur Singh via epaper, Jalandhar

Ashwini Bhatia's 'Orchids of Dharamshala' offers a sneak peek into the world of orchids

WILD orchids hide in plain sight. Between the foliage, under fallen leaves, often behind their diminutive size — their unremarkable persona makes them invisible, just like that. Or so it seemed to Ashwini Bhatia, a photographer, whose life took a turn when he decided to, one day, bend down on his knees and look at one such flower closely.

He is now out with a book, '*Orchids of Dharamshala*', a pictorial guide to wild orchids found in the town and the surrounding Dhauladhars. He still remembers the first time he saw one up, close.

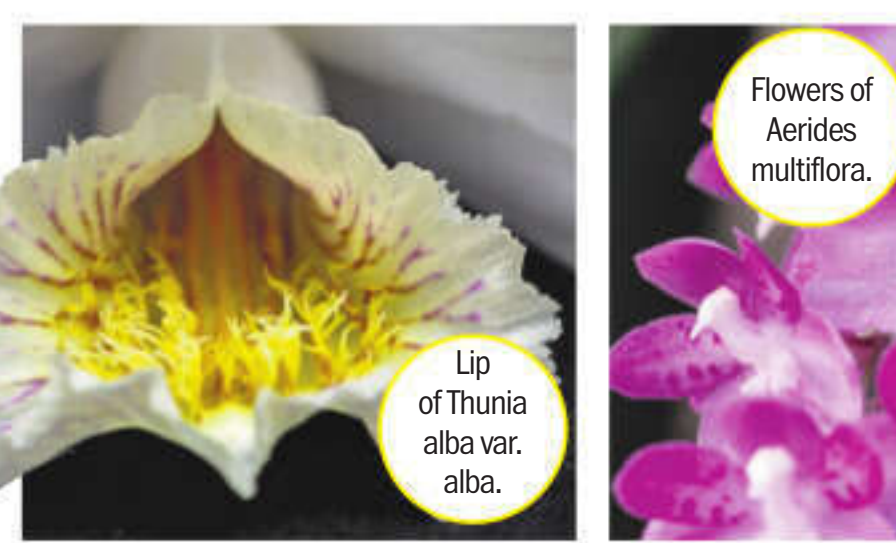
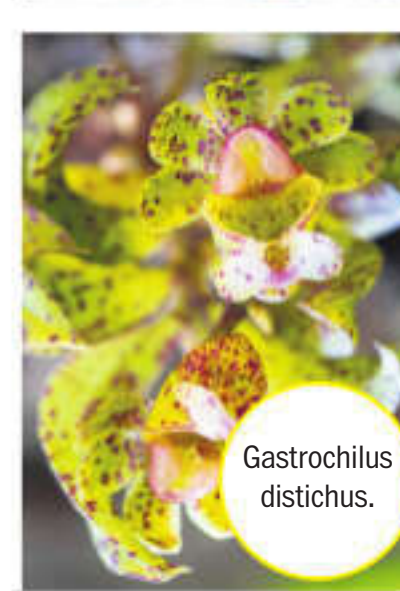
As he writes in the Preface: "I was surprised to see tiny flowers arranged on a thin stalk projecting from the middle of the leaves. Each flower was about 1 cm across and not much taller. It had a flat face with two ear-like projections above, a nose-like peg in the middle, a thin beard and an opening below the nose. I thought it resembled the face of a cartoon mouse. The flower was pale-green with purple markings, suggesting eyebrows. It was incredible!"

The book is the result of over five years of exploration and documentation. It describes 28 orchid species, each one visited time and again.

Photographs describe their complex anatomy, bringing to light their most elusive characters, be it the structure of their reproductive parts or the microscopic seeds — what are orchids, the history of the species, how Darwin's Orchid got its name, mentions in Indian scriptures, uses in Ayurveda, et al.

Bhatia says the aim of the book, published by The Mythe Guild Trust, is to be part of the evidence of the rich natural heritage of the Kangra valley. "The fragile ecosystems that have supported orchids and other native forms of plant and insect life in these hills are increasingly at risk due to environmental changes and loss of habitat brought about by unchecked growth," he writes. — TNS

Wild beauties



From Raja Ravi Varma's pioneering work to AI-generated political graphics, bold headlines and piercing imagery are hallmarks of this art

Poster as public art

NEELAM MANSINGH CHOWDHRY

IN 1997, Patricia Oberio, an expert on popular culture, curated an exhibition on calendar art at the Government Museum, Sector 10, Chandigarh. In doing so, she accorded a mass-produced visual form the seriousness and reverence usually reserved for high art. Set against lurid pink walls, the exhibition invited viewers to look again at images that had long circulated in the everyday world of posters, calendars and popular devotion.

Popular culture has always been perceived as mass-produced for mass consumption. It is loosely connected to street art and contrasted against the more refined classical or traditional arts. A sort of subaltern or working-class culture juxtaposed against the rigours of high classicism. *Desi* pitted against *Margi*, and *Lok Dharmi* versus *Natya Dharmi*.

Poster art has since fascinated me and the dismissal of poster-making as a secondary craft ignores its unique position. While fine art often invites quiet contemplation, the poster necessitates a visual language that is both urgent and immediate. This sharpness is not accidental; it is a calculated blend of psychology and aesthetics.

As a tool for messaging, it has served as the "people's newspaper". From the recruitment drives of the Agniveers to the protest graphics of the human rights movement, posters have turned streets into galleries of resistance. They possess the power to simplify a movement into a symbol — a raised fist, a hammer and sickle, a dove. Its minimalistic tools allow a single image to communicate complex ideologies or emotions in a matter of seconds.

The artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec is synonymous with the genre. In the late 19th century, he revolutionised the Parisian nightlife scene by creating lithographs for 'Moulin Rouge'. His work blurred the line between commercial advertising and fine art. By treating the poster with the same technical rigor as a canvas, he forced the art world to acknowledge the medium as a valid art form. Pablo Picasso's journey into poster art often leaned into a cutting-edge simplicity. His most famous contribution, the 'Dove of Peace' for the 1949 World Peace Congress, stripped the image of all complexity to cre-

ate a universal icon. Maqbool Fida Husain's origins are intrinsically linked to the sharp and vibrant world of cinema posters.

In the 1930s, Husain earned his living by painting massive cinema hoardings in Bombay. This required him to work on a huge scale, often perched on a scaffolding, using quick-drying paints and broad, confident strokes. This poster aesthetic didn't leave him even during the height of his fame as a studio artist. The energy of his famous horses and the bold black outlines of his figures in his later canvases can be traced to his experiences of painting posters that required a need for visibility and drama.

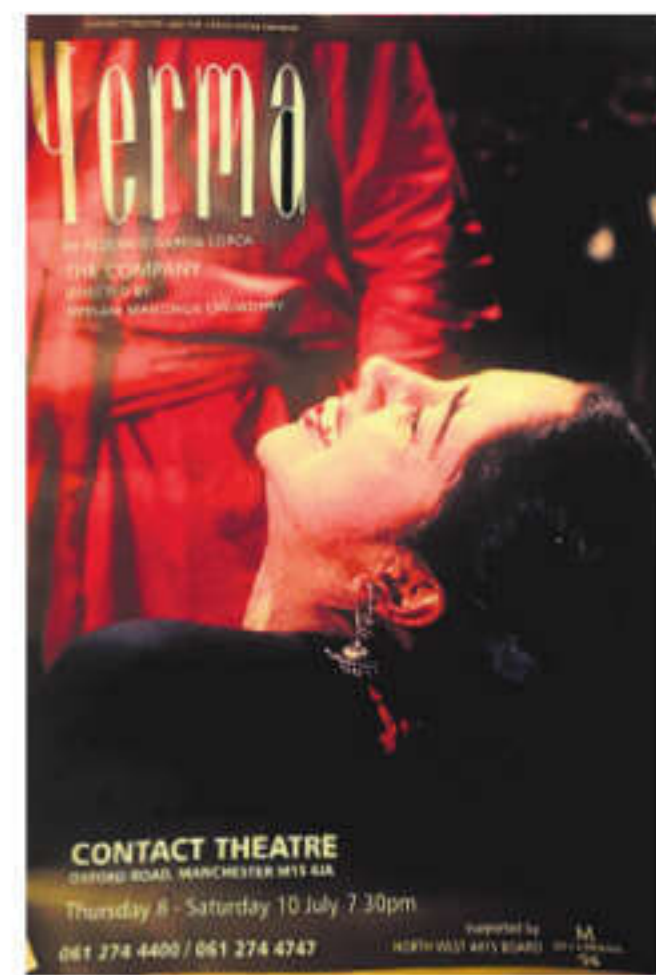
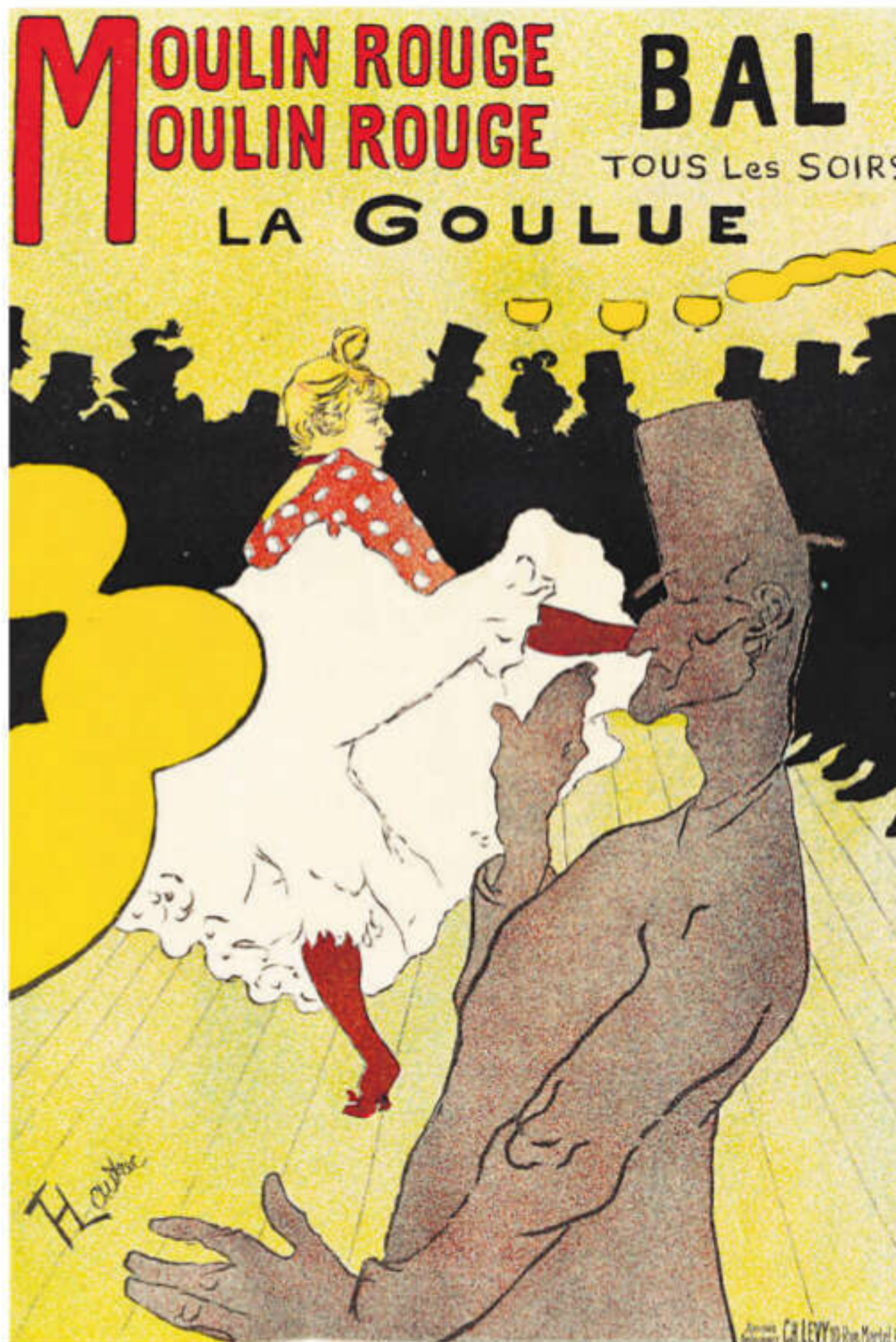
This impact was vividly realised in the evolution of Indian performance arts, particularly in Parsi theatre and the subsequent rise of cinema. Parsi theatre posters were pioneers in using lithography to create a sense of wonder, blending mythological grandeur with flamboyant, stylised portraits of the actors.

The Parsi theatre companies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were pioneers in visual marketing, treating their posters not just as advertisements, but as the soul of the production, capturing the narrative essence in a single visual image. This stemmed from the fact that the poster was the audience's first encounter with the play's universe. These posters had to compete with the sensory overload of bustling Indian marketplaces by using high-decibel visuals and sensational storytelling framed within a single image.

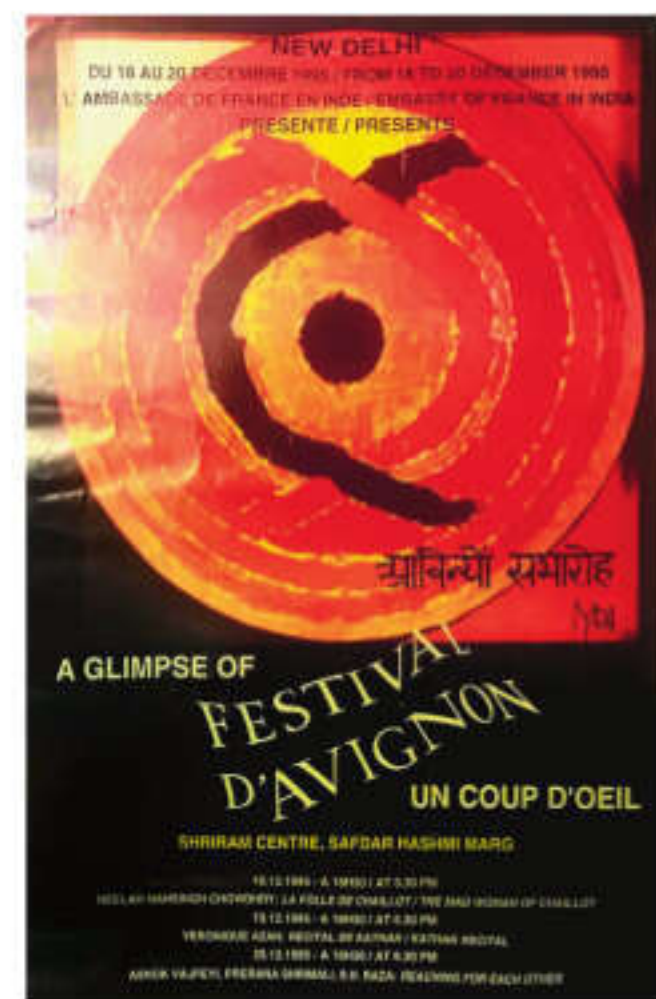
When announcing a play like 'The Man Who Cheats on His Wife', the poster art wouldn't shy away from the scandalous. It utilised high-contrast lithography to depict the domestic tension. The headlines were assertive and authoritative and designed to trigger curiosity in the passerby.

Similarly, for a narrative like 'The Thief Who Became a Saint', the poster acted as a visual shorthand for the entire character arc. The artist would often use a 'before and after' composition or a single, striking image of the protagonist bathed in a divine light while still holding the tools of his former trade. This sharp juxtaposition of the profane and the sacred was a hallmark of the Parsi theatre aesthetic.

These posters were precursors to the modern trailer. By distilling complex human fail-



(Clockwise from left) A poster of 'Yerma', directed by the writer; SH Raza designed the poster of Festival d'Avignon in 1995, which came to Delhi too; colour lithograph by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec revolutionised the Parisian nightlife scene by creating lithographs for 'Moulin Rouge'. ISTOCK



ings into bold headlines and piercing imagery, Parsi theatre posters carved out a genre of art that was as unapologetic as the performances themselves.

In the golden age of Indian cinema, posters for films like 'Mother India' and 'Pakeezah' were not just advertisements; they were national iconography. The 'Mother India' poster is a masterclass in symbolic sharpness, featuring Nargis as Radha, often depicted in a world-weary silhouette against a fiery, blood-red sky. The visual language used earthy, saturated tones to represent the soil and the struggle of a nascent nation, elevating the actress to a deity-like status. Conversely, 'Pakeezah' utilised a different kind of visual intensity — melancholy and opulence. These posters used deep purples, golds and the haunting gaze of Meena Kumari to create an atmospheric impact, signalling to the audience that they were about to witness something epic.

While Raja Ravi Varma is celebrated as an artist, he was arguably the most influential

poster artist India ever produced. His decision to move beyond the single canvas and embrace the printing press changed the way art was viewed. In 1894, he established the Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press, which was less about "high art" and more about the "power of the multiple".

Through his press, he turned his oil paintings into oleographs — vibrant, textured prints — that could be sold for a few annas. These were essentially the first mass-produced posters in India. Suddenly, the gods and goddesses that had been locked away in royal sanctums were now plastered to the walls of tea stalls and village huts. He created a sharp, definitive visual language for Indian divinity that was so powerful it remains the standard template even today. When we think of Goddess Lakshmi or Saraswati, we are often seeing them through the lens of a Ravi Varma poster.

His imagery was used to sell everything — from soaps to matchboxes — and became a tool for commerce. His influence on Parsi

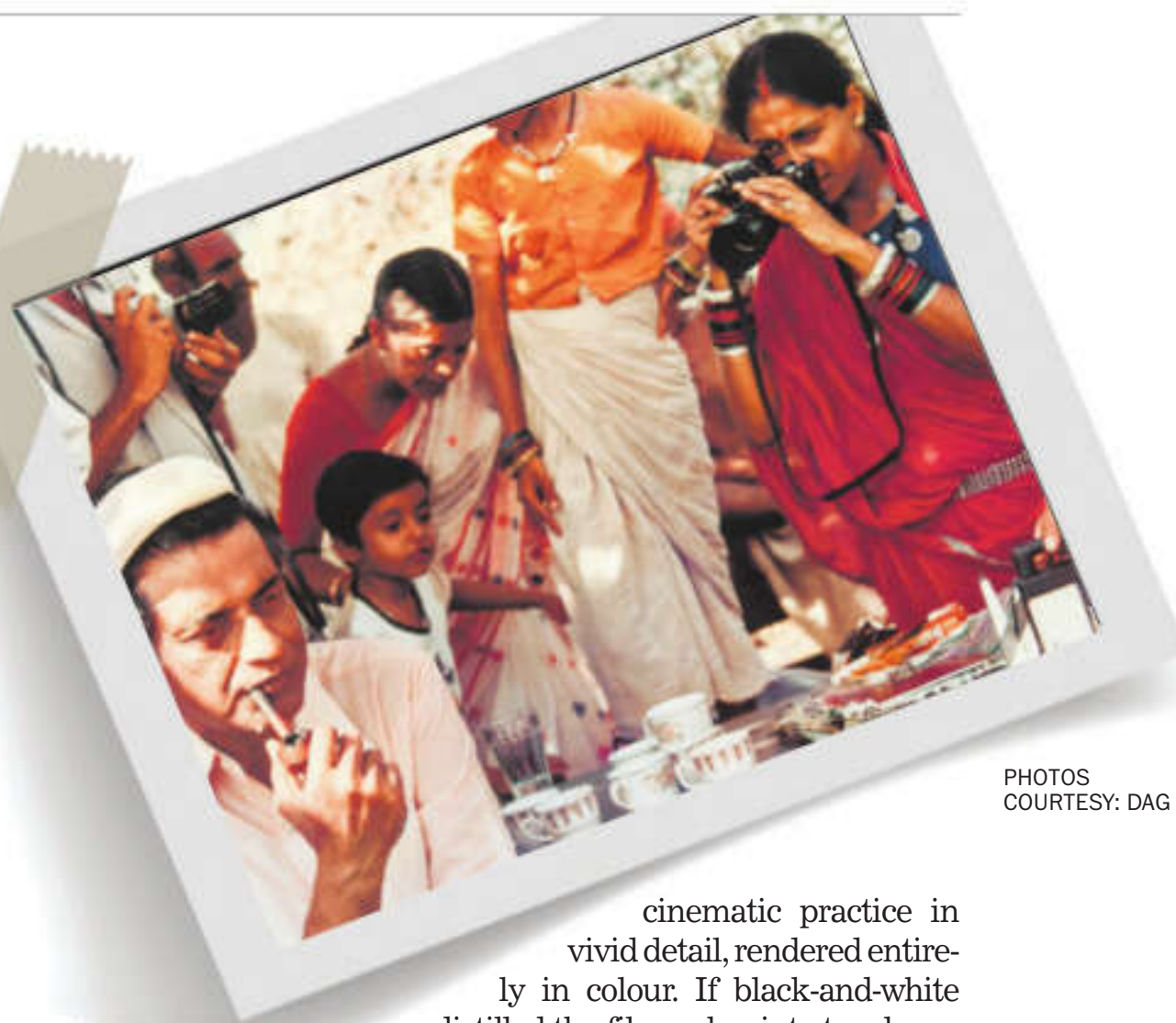
theatre and cinema cannot be overstated. The dramatic lighting, the theatrical staging of characters, and the lush, saturated colours he used became the blueprint for the cinematic hoardings that followed.

Today, political posters have moved from the walls of the city to the digital screens of social media, turning the medium into a 'demand' for immediate response. Modern political graphics often adopt a meme aesthetic, characterised by high contrast, bold text and easily shareable dimensions. These are designed to trigger an emotional reaction — be it outrage, pride, or humour — before the user scrolls past. Unlike the hand-painted posters of the past that remained on walls for weeks, digital political art is iterated by the hour, using visual hooks to cut through the relentless noise of the information age.

The journey of the poster has come full circle, but the goal remains unchanged: to arrest the eye and appeal to the mind with a single, sharp image.

— The writer is a theatre director

Examining auteur Satyajit Ray's life and creative legacy through the lens of his long-time visual chronicler Nemai Ghosh



PHOTOS COURTESY: DAG

RAY'S WORLD IN COLOUR

SATYAJIT RAY playing the piano, location hunting near Darjeeling, demonstrating a scene to Swatilekha Chatterjee, sketching a costume for a character, at the editing table, in deep thought at home, meeting Benode Behari Mukherjee... 'Faces and Facets: Satyajit Ray in Colour' is a rich exploration of auteur Satyajit Ray's life and creative legacy, as examined through the lens of his long-time visual chronicler Nemai Ghosh. Currently on display at DAG in New Delhi, the show is devoted exclusively to the colour photo-



graphs of Ray by Ghosh. This vast and valuable photographic archive presents Ghosh's decades-long documentation of the auteur and offers a window into Ray's life and art. These never-before-displayed photographs are as much about his cinema as they are about the acute understanding between Ghosh and Ray that allowed the photogra-

pher to position his camera squarely, yet unobtrusively, where the action was.

DAG's earlier exhibition, 'Nemai Ghosh: Satyajit Ray and Beyond', foregrounded Ghosh's iconic black-and-white portraits of Ray, evocative film stills, and select glimpses from the sets of Ray and contemporaries such as Gautam Ghosh, Aparna Sen and Shyam Benegal, among others. It situated Ray within a wider cinematic fraternity. The present body of work adopts a more concentrated lens: Ray alone and his

“Nemai Ghosh, a friend of Satyajit Ray for 20 years, is his photo-biographer. Through his visual gift, he allows us to be intimate with filmmaking, and to feel with great fidelity the drive, the alertness and the profundity of this giant of cinema in all his majestic stature.”

— Henri Cartier-Bresson, French photographer

cinematic practice in vivid detail, rendered entirely in colour. If black-and-white distilled the filmmaker into tonal contrasts and sculptural gravitas, colour restores atmosphere and immediacy, bringing forth the warmth of interiors, the modulations of light across surfaces, and the subtle textures of the environments within which Ray conceived his films.

Presenting several iconic as well as rare images of actors, scenes, sets and locations from the filming of Ray's films, alongside photographs of the filmmaker at work taken over a 25-year period, the exhibition showcases his unparalleled genius and magic. "Ray's dedication to his craft led Ghosh to follow him like a shadow and conditioned him to the exacting demands of the maestro. Over the course of a 25-year association that began on the sets of 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne', Ghosh remained steadfast in upholding the values that defined Ray's artistic vision," says Ashish Anand, CEO and MD of DAG. Ghosh was later credited by Ray as 'Unit Stills Photographer'.

An accompanying book presents a vast selection of colour photographs, with a preface by Nemai Ghosh and text and descriptive captions by Andrew Robinson, author of 'Satyajit Ray: A Vision of Cinema'. The exhibition is on view until July 4. — TNS

Demons of complex past, present

MANDIRA NAYAR

KARAN MAHAJAN can't escape Delhi. He left over 20 years ago, but the city looms large in his books. 'The Complex', an instant hit, is his third foray into the city's literary landscape, and in many ways, his most ambitious, complex novel.

The book is a sprawling saga of a Punjabi family, a milieu that he is intimately acquainted with. Unlike the Delhi of Aatish Taseer, Arundhati Roy or Kiran Desai, this does not chart the broad road leafy avenues of Lutyens' Delhi. It is set in North Delhi: in A-19, Modern Colony, 'the Complex' built by SP Chopra, the famous family patriarch, after Partition. SP had been a freedom fighter, a "deity of the family", Governor of the Reserve Bank of India — a man who everyone wants to measure up to but never can.

The Chopra *khandaan* is large, dysfunctional and deeply enmeshed, especially as they all live together in this complex. Their entanglement — physical and internal — serves as the backdrop of the novel. Their dreams, desires, hopes, jealousy and frustrations play out in the space of the two squat bungalows of the Complex — and Karan's writing evokes the suffocation that each character feels. "[T]he rest of the family was close — unlike the country, it [the Complex] had suffered no partition," he writes.

His characters are carefully etched. There is Sachin, who goes off to America to find a



THE COMPLEX
by Karan Mahajan.
HarperCollins.
Pages 413.
₹799

better life and finally patents the squishy plastic bottle. His wife Gita, 29 years old when the story begins, an editor in a publishing firm in India, is unable to find a job in America. She discovers that her work experience in the "boonie" — India, her home — counts for nothing. Laxman, SP's ambitious son, is ruthless, a sexual predator and the heart of the novel. His wife Archana, who he cheats on, is entrepreneurial but with limited choices. Brij, Laxman's nephew, had gone into the Air Force, but wasn't cut out for it; he found himself stuck in a dead-end job and constantly angry. His wife Karishma — compliant, attractive — is an equal match for Laxman's ambition. Her own entanglement with Laxman becomes the trigger of a violence that is inescapable. The book begins with a bang. Brij, in jail for

killing his uncle Laxman, is being set free after 25 years. His son, Mohit, the narrator, is gently advised by family members — who he had not spoken to in years though they all "resided in the same ramshackle complex" — that his father stay somewhere else.

It is at the cusp of what will be a "tamasha" for the family that the reader enters the book and the Complex, poised very much for an edge-of-seat thriller. Karan has everything that can go into a hit show — murder, secrets, a not-so-secret scandalous affair, rape, betrayal and blackmail — everything that you would want in a family saga.

But what Karan does is transform this into a reflective deep-dive — the shift in the dynamics of the family mirroring the changes in India. It is intense, deep, complicated, layered, vividly told.

In his dense 400-odd page book, Karan has captured post-Partition Delhi tumbling through the politics of the 1980s — whether it was the Mandir, Mandal or the mass massacre of Sikhs in 1984 to the arrival of Hindu nationalism. Karan recreates the turbulent decade. It is a fictional journey that feels real, but lies in the shadowy world conjured up by Karan, amid thinly disguised leaders of the BJP — TTP in the book — and real people.

To confuse the reader further, Karan's note at the beginning of the book suggests that this is a posthumous collaboration between Mohit, the narrator, and him, who made him his literary executor by leaving him an unfinished novel of the Chopra

clan in his 'draft' folder. The book is also a portrait of marriage. Karan has explored the gambit — from the love marriage of Sachin and Gita, born through letters, the old-fashioned romance, to the other end of the spectrum with Brij and Karishma. "Sachin and she loved each other but could apparently talk about nothing." Or a line that is both cautionary and tender: "Having another person's voice in your head: That was marriage."

It is not an easy book to read. Or write. In laying out the inner worlds of Laxman — easily the most amoral character in the book — Karan forces the reader to enter his head to confront the demons that live there, no different than anyone else's.

The victimhood of Partition, which Laxman has passed down, becomes lethal in the Masjid-Mandir politics era. The *rath yatra*, and Laxman's role in it, solidifies what was casual bigotry into the ideology of Hindus left behind. He may be the least likeable character, but is the most powerful — and he refuses to go away after the book finishes.

In a literary landscape littered with trying to unravel the 'new' India, Karan offers no easy answers, choosing to reflect the fractures that existed, hate secreted away and the divisions that were slowly sharpened. His world is believable, and his characters familiar — because it is impossible to have lived in Delhi and not encountered a version of Laxman, Brij or Sachin — and it is in this discomfort that really lies the novel's power.

— *The reviewer is a literary critic*



BACKFLAP



INDIA OUT OF WORK
by Santosh Mehrotra and Jajati Parida.
Bloomsbury.
Pages 338. ₹699

With barely 15 years left of its demographic dividend, India faces a stark possibility: growing old before it grows rich. Millions remain unemployed, underemployed, or trapped in precarious, low-quality work — a crisis that cannot be ignored. The authors argue that India must sustain 8 per cent annual growth by 2047 to secure its future and offer solutions to achieve it — job creation at the rate of nothing short of 10 to 12 million new non-farm jobs per annum. India must address the challenges of a structural economic crisis and simultaneously, its employment and education crises.

Women's Himalayan burden Cracks in Canadian dream

ANIL K JOSHI

PUBLISHED by Doon University, this is an extremely well-researched book, compiled under the 'One University, One Research' concept mooted by the current Governor of Uttarakhand. Broadly speaking, it focuses on the problems faced by women in the state of Uttarakhand, which has completed 25 years of its existence, and has, therefore, been dedicated to them.

Economic self-reliance has long been regarded as a marker of women's empowerment, more so in states like Uttarakhand, where the means of livelihood are limited, scarce and are diminishing by the day on account of a variety of factors.

A hill state with rugged terrain, Uttarakhand has comparatively less scope for productive agriculture or other profitable enterprises. With a major chunk of men preferring to join the Army or paramilitary forces, the womenfolk are

left behind to fend for themselves.

Divided into four sections and spread over 14 chapters, this voluminous work purports to present a gendered view of women's livelihoods in the Himalayan region and the myriad challenges confronting them.

The problems related to women's livelihoods have been quantified and analysed through an exhaustive district-to-district survey, factoring in indicators such as population ratio, intra-regional imbalances, caste dynamics, literacy, health, hygiene, nutrition, access to government schemes, etc.

The alarming issue of migration, which is the bane of life in the hills, has pushed more and more women towards agriculture. They sweat it out in the fields while also tending

to cattle, foraging fuelwood from forests and collecting fodder from grasslands. The yawning gap between formal education and employment-worthy skills aggravates their plight further. Arable land being scarce, judicious land use becomes paramount, and this has been discussed at length.

Most interesting is the correlation between rural road connectivity and migration, which establishes that poor transport infrastructure leads directly to high out-migration, not merely because of the dearth of livelihood prospects, but also because of poor access to critical services like health and education.

Despite progress in formal skill training in Uttarakhand, women at large remain wary of availing the opportunities on offer. The lack of aspiration for self-employment reflects systemic barriers, including inaccessibility of credit, absence of mentorship and weak market linkages. This is borne out by district-wise data showing the distribution of micro and small enterprises in rural areas, including diverse means of livelihood such as dairy farming, vegetable production, poultry farming, tourism, etc.

The study rightly notes: "Uttarakhand occupies a transitional space as compared to other Himalayan states, as it is seen to be moving away from dependency on agriculture-dominant livelihoods towards a more balanced income composition with rising formal wages and non-farm activities."

While underscoring the plethora of problems related to women's livelihoods, the authors present a model for remedial action, which may not prove to be a panacea for all troubles, but could become an economic multiplier in the long run, provided government bodies and stakeholders work in tandem.

One does not come across many shortcomings, barring the sheer volume of data, which at times arrests the flow of the narrative. On the whole, the book is an absorbing work of serious and purposeful research.

— *The reviewer taught history at Kumaun University*

SONYA J NAIR

LINDSAY PEREIRA'S 'Super' is a deeply disturbing book. Not only because it talks about the darker side of the politics of immigration and the entire industry it has spawned in parts of India, but also because it vividly presents the sense of claustrophobia and anger increasingly visible online among white males.

The novel centres on Sukhpreet, an immigrant from Jalandhar, working as an assistant superintendent of a residential building in Toronto. The sense of loneliness, alienation, fear and the problems of language, all compound in the figure of this young man, who has come so far away to help his mother recover their land from creditors.

There is Harnet in India, whose parents have pinned their hopes on her scoring well in IELTS, getting a visa to study abroad and snagging a good match. An entire culture has sprung up around migration where the sole expectation is that children will leave home. Pereira, whose works I have closely followed, has made each voice stand out.

There are characters such as Deepanshu, Sukhpreet's cousin in Canada, and Diego, the superintendent of the building, who represent the various rungs of the immigration ladder and whose presence furthers the narrative rather than serving as mere garnish.

At 213 pages, the work is taut. There are two standout aspects. One is Maynard Wilson, the disenfranchised white male who embodies the dangerous tendencies of those who feel their opportunities are being taken away by immigrants. Pereira gives an interesting shading to Wilson through his ailing dog, Woody, and attempts to present the story through Wilson's lens as well. The other is the laying bare of the economics of the immigration industry and what it might possibly be doing to Canada's economy. The issues the author presents are now talking points in Canadian politics and society.

There have been some defining works of

migration literature in recent times that have been India-centric, such as Sunjeev Sahota's 'The Year of the Runaways', which go beyond nostalgia and discuss migration as a social symptom. 'Super' does a 360-degree recon of how young people leave their countries through honest or fraudulent means and come to Canada in search of better opportunities.

They find empty colleges, no native Canadian students (read white, in the understanding of students like Sukhpreet); they work for less than minimum wage and discover that more of their own ilk have swamped the job market and the housing sector, making everything unaffordable while reducing the value of their labour.

The book makes one think: why are our young people still leaving our shores in such large numbers? Economics, sociological history, politics and much more lie at the heart of the answer. The absolute absence of First Nations people from the novel points to how little they matter. Wilson, at one point, rants about how his father and grandfather built this 'great nation', and one cannot help but raise an eyebrow in consternation.

'Super' is a brilliant book that leaves one breathless — because of the depth of the calamity it portrays and the indefatigable sadness of what the world has now become.

— *The reviewer is the author of 'No Blushes: Renju Renjimar'*



SUPER
by Lindsay Pereira.
HarperCollins.
Pages 217. ₹699



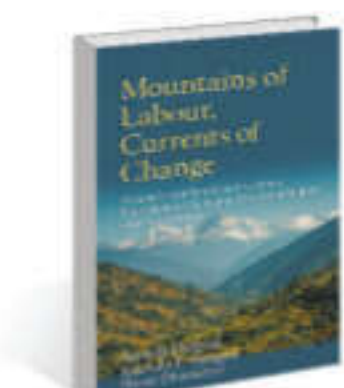
THE GREAT KANCHANA CIRCUS
by Vishwas Patil.
Westland.
Pages 392. ₹599

World War-II is at its peak. The famed Great Kanchana International Circus is touring Burma when Japanese fighter planes bomb Rangoon and Mandalay, razing the British administrative and military installations to the ground and killing the local population. Kanchana Sarang Shine, proprietor of the circus company, risks her life to ensure a safe passage back to India for her 300-strong troupe, walking through treacherous mountains and jungles.



THE LANE BY THE TEMPLE AND OTHER STORIES
by Rajesh Chander Sharma.
Ukiyoto Publishing.
Pages 233. ₹350

This book is a collection of seven stories, short and long, each a different portrayal of daily life. The first three stories belong to the wonderful world of women. While the fourth one is a sad love story, the next is a lively picture of hostel life. The sixth one captures, in a cheerful voice, the highs and lows of tenant life in a cosmopolitan city. The last one is a tiny tale of childhood — and terror.



MOUNTAINS OF LABOUR, CURRENTS OF CHANGE
by Surekha Dangwal, Rajendra P Mangan and Shrutika Dhaundiyal.
Doon University.
Pages 334. ₹2,499

How the Bhils stood up for dignity, livelihood, identity

SALIL MISRA

THE tribal communities of South Asia have been generally concentrated in the north-east, north-west (now in Pakistan), and in central and western India. Three different religions — Islam (in north-west), Christianity (in north-east) and Hinduism (in central and western India) — made inroads into these communities.

Their absorption into these religions was always partial and tentative and never to the satisfaction of the big religions. Relative isolation, internal coherence, absence of the written word and of private property, and a loose connection with the outside world characterised these tribal communities.

They often occupied territories extremely rich in natural resources. This attracted the outside forces. The maximum encroachment happened in modern times when the predatory economy entered these areas for resources, thus disrupting both their livelihood and culture. The tribals invariably resisted, leading to conflict and violence.

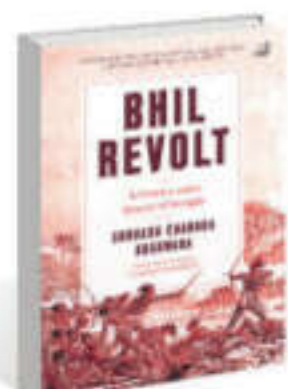
The book under review tells the story of the

struggles of the Bhil community for their dignity, livelihood and identity.

Bhils, as a large tribal community, were scattered across much of central and western India, in present-day Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. Traditionally, they were nomads, peasants and forest dwellers. Their nomadic pursuits led to their dispersal across a large area. However, they remained internally connected through cultural ties. Numerically a very large community, they also developed their own political structure and small principalities, ruled by chieftains.

Through much of their history, the Bhils moved about voluntarily. Their first major encounter with the outsiders happened when the warrior Rajputs, riding their horses, entered into what later became the Rajputana region, from 11th-12th centuries onwards. As a result, some Bhils retreated to the hills and forests. Some other Bhil chieftains entered into alliances with the Rajputs and became their subordinate partners in the new political system.

However, a much larger and qualitatively different encounter developed closer to mod-



BHIL REVOLT: A CENTURY AND A QUARTER OF STRUGGLE
by Subhash Chandra Kushwaha.
Translated by Naresh 'Nadeem'.
Niyogi Books.
Pages 428. ₹750

ern times. The British were interested not only in political domination but also in complete control over the rich natural resources. One such region, Khandesh, attracted the British because of its fertile soil and cotton cultivation. The region was prosperous and so was its Bhil population. Whereas the Bhil-Rajput encounters had created new alliances and political arrangements, the nature of the

encounter with the British was different.

The medieval Indian polity, prior to the arrival of the British, was centralised at the top but at the regional and local level, accommodated various groups and interests which retained their autonomy. The traditional Indian sovereignty was both diffused, negotiated and shared across regions. The British, by contrast, introduced an impersonal bureaucratic system, in which various stakeholders had to either become subordinates or face total marginalisation.

Many Bhil chieftains responded by rebelling. The new system endangered not just their traditional rights over jungles and mountains, but their very lifestyle. Thrown off their natural habitat, and deprived of their dignity, the Bhils had no option but to take to violence. This often led to their being declared as criminal tribes.

The book by Subhash Chandra Kushwaha, written in Hindi, and brilliantly translated into English by Naresh 'Nadeem', tells the stories of rebellions and protests by the Bhils. These struggles were only superficially against the Rajputs, Marathas and the British. Deep down, they were against a new

economic system that had begun to be established in the 19th century, in which all the natural wealth was seen as investible resource to be utilised in the service of the industrial economy.

The original custodians of this natural wealth were the victims in this venture. The marginalised and displaced tribals revolted and it took many forms, ranging from open warfare, non-payment of taxes, violation of rules to theft, kidnapping and dacoity.

One weakness of the book is that it adopts a very unselective and omnibus approach while studying protest and violence. The British designated all protests as criminal activities. This book has gone to the other extreme and designated every act of individual theft and robbery as revolt and protest. The trouble with both these approaches is that the supreme importance of protest as a critique and a questioning of the system gets overlooked. We need an account of the tribal protest that makes a distinction between genuine protest and routine acts of crime and violence.

— *The reviewer is a visiting faculty at BML Munjal University, Gurugram*

This can't be the way forward



TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

IF this week's column is all over the place, blame the unbearable heat that has cooked my brain. If the Met Department is to be believed, then there's no respite in sight either. However, even as I moan and groan along with so many others, we must also be aware that the low pressure that builds up after such an intense spell of heat is also what creates the right conditions for the monsoon. Let us hope that Trump or El Nino don't nix that as well.

It is believed in rural Rajasthan that the nine days before the monsoon arrives (*navatapa*) must have the highest temperatures to destroy the eggs of locusts and other pests, prevent rats from breeding along with snakes and scorpions and also bring typhoid and such diseases later. I must say there is some wisdom in this belief and perhaps this is why, even as we curse the heat, we bear it. Water and power outages become easier to deal with if you bear this in mind.

Now a brief detour into the tsunami results from Bengal. I wonder how so many journalists who had spent hours poring over facts and figures in their offices here or even those who were criss-crossing the state, microphones in hand, were still predicting a close finish. Close? It was a wipeout but many still believe that the results were not fair. Why is it that they did not see or believe what was widely known? The extortion rackets run by the *tola-baaz* gangs, the I-Pac brats taking over running the government by proxy and the huge level of corruption and a systemic breakdown of governance? I am not even going to mention the sexual exploitation of hapless girls and women because a certain section of the media was determined to ensure victory, how-

ever slim, for the TMC. The sad fact is that even Mamata Banerjee, the doughtiest fighter in the Opposition and its most tireless worker, had lost control over her party and government. Sadly, she now looks a shrunken version of her roaring self and will have a tough time building up the party once again.

This may be a difficult truth to accept but no matter how deeply we may admire Banerjee's courage, it was time she hung up her *chappals*. Free to speak without fear of reprisals, the common people of Bengal now tell us exactly what they suffered. So while those liberals who are cosily ensconced in foreign universities were talking of the civilisational uniqueness of their motherland, the common Bengali decided that they could no longer rot in poverty and fear.

The entitlement of the elite, indifference to waste and public transport, ignoring uncomfortable truths are all part of the education that we have forgotten to emphasise sufficiently

Those non-resident Bengalis who spoke of a different Bengal could come back and create once again. If Shantiniketan is now just the name of the *sheesh mahal* of the man who grabbed public land to build his fortress, Tagore's famed *ashram* (the original Santiniketan) is all but gone. Jadavpur University along with so many other famous educational institutions are now remembered only for what they once were.

This brings me to my current concern: the state of education in the country. Forget Bengal, even the most rapidly developing states have lost their way in their hurry to build roads, highways and tourist routes. Unlike Kerala and some southern states, the great Indo-Gangetic plain is

now largely bereft of a network of government primary schools. I have often written about the sorry state of even our higher education but there is one more point I wish to add here. Our university education — especially in our posh private ones — is now tilting dangerously towards indoctrination rather than education. The bright young faculty being wooed and hired have courses designed to awaken social concerns but more often than not, these are provided with solutions and directions that are strongly tilted towards one ideology or another. I will not be alive to see what this will mean for the young minds lapping this up, but there is a world outside gender, fascism, caste and creed.

In the schools that we attended as children, moral science and civics were compulsory subjects. The first gave us our ethical moorings and the second instilled in us our responsibilities as citizens. Today, citizen rights are more popular (as they must be) but the responsibilities that go alongside are not sufficiently emphasised. Including children from under-privileged sections is a wonderful initiative. However, in practice, such children are ghettoised in many cases. The class snobbery that privileged children see around them at home makes them insensitive to those who do not 'belong'. So while we pay lip service to social inclusion and egalitarianism, the truth is often the very opposite of what was intended.

The reduction of education to gathering information rather than knowledge and good values, the inordinate importance of exams and results (remember the recent hoo-ha after the paper leak of NEET?) and the attention paid to singing *Vande Mataram* — all these are facile and predictable ways of creating a generation that only values money and success. The entitlement of the elite class who speak English more fluently than their own mother tongues, their indifference to the state of public transport, to garbage and plastic waste, as well as those who look the other way when faced with uncomfortable truths are all a part of education that we have forgotten to emphasise sufficiently.

This cannot be the way forward.
— *The writer is a social commentator*

Your Lordship, an apology may work



AVAY SHUKLA

Hon'ble Chief Justice,

May I, a humble member of the *Blatta* (Oriental) genus of cockroaches, may be so bold as to express my utter stupefaction at your recent statement in open court in which you termed unemployed youth, RTI activists, media personnel and social media activists "cockroaches" and "parasites"? Posterity will record these uncalled-for and demeaning words as the nadir of judicial propriety and gravitas. Kindly allow me to explain why.

It appears, from what is available in the public domain, that you were at the time dealing with the issue of proliferation of lawyers with dubious degrees. Your desire to identify and weed out such elements from the legal profession is understandable, and even commendable, and should be supported by all. But your subsequent "leap of hubris", not faith, was totally unwarranted and a step too far even in these dismal times when the vocabulary of public discourse has plumbed new depths.

The contemptuous characterisation of our youth and civil society is something we have come to expect from our politicians, but not from the senior-most judicial officer in the country, the custodian of the letter and spirit of the Constitution, whose every word is engraved in time, the beacon and conscience keeper of the nation.

Which is why, My Lord, it pains me to say that your unfair and insensitive *obiter dicta* has dimmed the glow of the beacon. It has at one fell swoop insulted and humiliated these sections of society, cast on them aspersions which are neither true nor justified and, even more dangerous, exposed a heart of darkness in the country's judicial anatomy which does not bode well for a liberal democracy.

Your Lordship's subsequent "clarification" does not dispel the apprehensions your comments have generated.

A democracy remains healthy not only on the basis of institutions of the state, but on the shoulders of a vibrant civil society and non-state actors. These participants — activists, NGOs, social media, RTI applicants, fact-checkers — are the benign bacteria in our body politic that maintain our immune systems, keep in check those organisms that would destroy us, and ensure that democracy and a liberal order survives. By castigating them in such derogatory language, My Lord, you have exposed a side of the higher judiciary we did not imagine existed. It has left us confused, apprehensive and fearful.

Are you aware, your Honour, there are 28 million educated unemployed youth in the country, and an additional 100 million who have stopped looking for jobs? (*The Wire*). As many as 67 per cent of the unemployed youth today are graduates, as compared to 32 per cent in 2004 (Azim Premji University State of Working India Report, published in *Deccan Herald*).

This worsening position is not due to the indolence of these unfortunate youngsters, but because of faulty government policies in education, industrialisation and economic "growth" which promote inequity, concentration of wealth and capital intensive projects, and have decimated the MSME sector. They deserve our empathy, not an elitist condemnation.

Finally, My Lord, heed the power of language and choose carefully the patois you employ. For, language is a double-edged sword, it can soothe or it can wound, it can demean or it can dignify, it can sustain or it can destroy, it can be a paean or it can be a dog-whistle. It is dangerous to employ words loosely. History is replete with instances where carefully chosen words have preceded, and laid the ground for, mass persecution, ethnic cleansing, even genocide.

The killing of a million Tutsis in Rwanda was preceded by a campaign that classified them as "*inyenzi*" which, coincidentally, means cockroaches; in Hitler's Germany, the Jews were called parasites and rats; the Zionists later termed the Palestinians "vermin" and "animals". Nearer home, minorities from Bangladesh are stigmatised as "termites" and protesters as "*andolanjeevis*". All such branding is invariably followed by dehumanising of entire sections of society and their persecution on a large scale.

To err is human, to admit it is divine

It is possible your unfortunate vocabulary may have the same effect in India, for your words feed into the executive's own narrative: the segments of society you have, perhaps unwittingly and unintendedly, vilified are precisely the ones the government of the day considers its enemies and obstacles to its authoritarianism. It may now be emboldened to move against them even more aggressively, confident that it now has your institution's support. That would be a disaster; an opening of the floodgates that shall eventually consume all the pillars of democracy, including the one over which Your Honour presides.

At the end of the day, Your Lordship, this unnecessary disparagement of the youth, civil society activists and social media may lead to a loss of credibility in the institution you head, in its ability (or even willingness) to confront an authoritarian executive, to protect the rights of the minorities, and to uphold the letter and spirit of a liberal and inclusive Constitution. A democracy cannot long survive such a loss. Which is why, sir, you may consider a more explicit retraction and withdrawal of the statement made by you, not just a clarification.

An apology to the nation at large will go a long way in restoring the confidence of the citizenry in an institution which is, after all, the last bastion of rights and liberty. To err is human, to admit it is divine.

With profound regards and my own humble apologies for intruding on your valuable time, I remain, Your Lordship, AC Roach

— *The writer is a retired IAS officer*

How Vagdevi merged into Saraswati

THE goddess we call Saraswati today begins as Vagdevi, the Goddess of Speech, identified primarily with the Vedic deity Vac. Her earliest stories foreground the immense power, and sometimes the deceptive nature, of the spoken word. These are found in ritual Vedic texts known as the Brahmanas.

When the Gandharvas stole the sacred Soma, the gods offered Vac as a young woman to trade for it. A competition followed: the Gandharvas recited the Vedas, but the gods sang and played the *veena*. Vac chose music over recitation, returning to the gods and establishing her eternal link with the instrument. This myth quietly explains how a speech-goddess acquired her *veena*.

In another tale, Vac disputed with Mind, or Manas, over who was superior. Prajapati ruled in favour of Mind, declaring that Speech merely imitates and communicates what Mind has already understood. Offended by this subordinate status, Vac refused to serve as oblation-bearer, which is why Prajapati's rituals are performed in a low voice today.

In the Sautramani ritual, Vac acts as divine physician, restoring Indra's faculties and manly energy after he becomes ill from drinking too much Soma. In yet another myth, Vac hid in the waters and then the trees; when the trees gave her up, she was distributed into four wooden objects that sing: drums, lutes, axles, and reed-pipes, explaining the origin of musical instruments themselves. Over time, Vac merged into Saraswati, and the figure we recognise today emerged as a composite, assembled over centuries from distinct religious streams. Three separate iconographic traditions converged, each carrying its own theological cargo.



UNIVERSE

DEV DUTT PATTANAİK

Jain Saraswati carries no musical instruments. Instead, she holds accounting beads and books, embodying the Jain code of knowledge, record-keeping, and disciplined learning. This form reflects the Jain emphasis on precise transmission of doctrine and the sanctity of the written word. Saraswati here is the guardian of scriptural memory, not the patron of song.

Buddhist Saraswati appears armed. Her weapons mark her as a defender, a fierce protectress of the Dharma. In the Sutra of Gold-

en Light, she figures as the Eloquence Talent Deity, or Vagishvari, granting memory and flawless speech to those who preach the Law, ensuring sacred knowledge never goes extinct. The weapons signal that speech itself is a kind of combat, that preserving teaching requires force.

Saraswati with the *veena*, the form most familiar today, originally belonged to courtesans, singers, and dancers. She was the goddess of performers, music, and the embodied arts. Only later were these distinct goddesses drawn together into a single figure.

Crucially, the idea of Saraswati as goddess of the Vedas emerges only later, in the *Mahabharata*. The earlier Saraswati was the Jain custodian of beads and books, the Buddhist armed defender of speech, the courtesans' patron of music. The Vedic-knowledge identity is a subsequent layer, retrofitted onto an already plural figure. What we now call Saraswati is less a single goddess than a confluence whose seams the unified iconography conceals.

It is from Jain traditions that the practice of linking goose and peacocks with Saraswati began. The Shvetambara sect said the goddess of speech, Shurta-devi, rides a goose that can separate milk and water from a mixture, indicating discrimination. The Digambara sect said the goddess of knowledge, Gyan-devi, rides a peacock, the symbol of male pride and humbles it.

— *The writer is an acclaimed mythologist*

The forest is burning, but men want to talk about one tree



MEGHNA PANT

A WOMAN dies by suicide. Before her body is even cold, men begin dissecting her character online like vultures circling carrion. Was she manipulative? Did she file false cases? Did she "destroy a good man"? Did she deserve sympathy at all?

And then comes the familiar chorus from the Men's Rights Activist (MRA) ecosystem: "What about men?"

It is a question that deserves compassion when asked in good faith. Male suicide is real. Male loneliness is real. Men suffer under impossible expectations of masculinity, financial pressure, emotional repression, and social isolation. India's suicide statistics clearly show that men form a large percentage of deaths. That should concern all of us. But here is what is deeply disturbing: many

online MRAs do not stop at asking for empathy for men. They demand the erasure of women's suffering in exchange for it.

The moment violence against women is discussed, the conversation is hijacked. Not expanded. Hijacked. A woman speaks of abuse — "What about false cases?" A woman speaks of rape — "Men get raped too." A woman dies by suicide — "She probably drove someone else to it."

This is not advocacy. It is retaliation. And retaliation is not justice.

The National Crime Records Bureau data paints a horrifying picture of what Indian women endure. In 2022 alone, India recorded over 4.45 lakh crimes against women. The single largest category — nearly one-third — was cruelty by husbands or relatives.

Read that again. Not strangers in dark alleys. Not cinematic monsters. Husbands. Families. Homes. The very institutions women are told will "protect" them.

Thousands of women continue to die in dowry-related violence every year. NCRB-linked reporting shows over 6,000 dowry deaths annually — roughly 18 to 20 women every single day. And those are merely the women whose deaths entered the system. For every woman who files a case, there are

countless others who are silenced by shame, fear, financial dependence, children, family pressure, or the simple exhaustion of surviving daily humiliation.

This is the forest. This is the inferno women are talking about. But online, many MRAs point to a few cases involving abusive women or alleged misuse of laws and scream: "See? Women are the real oppressors."

A few trees are indeed diseased. Some women are cruel. Some manipulate systems. False accusations do exist and innocent men should absolutely be protected under law. Any humane society must care about that.

But to use isolated incidents to dismiss systemic violence against women is intellectually dishonest. It is like standing before a city consumed by wildfire and angrily pointing at one burnt matchstick in a sink.

Why does the mention of women's suffering provoke such visceral hostility online?

Why does women's suffering provoke such visceral hostility online?

Because for many men, empathy has become transactional. They believe acknowledging women's pain somehow diminishes male pain. That feminism stole attention that belonged to them. That women speaking openly about abuse is an accusation against all men. And so the response becomes punitive.

Punish the woman who speaks, who leaves. Punish the woman who dies. Especially the woman who dies.

That is what horrified me most while reading the comments under discussions around female suicide cases. The sheer inability to allow a dead woman even basic dignity. Men who claim society ignores male suffering were themselves mocking a woman who clearly reached a point of unbearable despair.

No nuance. No grief. No humanity. Just contempt. Even more chilling was the hostility toward women trying to defend her. As though compassion itself were now a political act deserving punishment.

This is what online misogyny has become: not merely disagreement with feminism, but active resentment toward female vulnerability. A woman cannot even die quietly anymore. She must submit her corpse for public cross-examination.

And this culture has consequences. Women reading these comments internalise something terrifying: If I speak, I will be mocked. If I leave, I will be hated. If I die, they will still come for me.

What kind of society does that create? Certainly not one where men heal.

Because here is the truth: patriarchy harms men too. The same system that teaches women to tolerate abuse teaches men to suppress emotion. The same culture that burdens women with unpaid care burdens men with financial worth. The same rigid masculinity that silences female victims also silences male depression.

But feminism did not create this system. It named it. And perhaps that is what truly enrages people. Not that women suffer. But that women are no longer suffering silently.

We can hold two truths at once: men deserve mental health support, and women face widespread systemic violence. One reality does not erase the other.

Compassion is not a limited resource. But if your empathy for men requires the humiliation of women — especially dead women — then what you are defending is not justice. It is power.

— *The writer is an acclaimed author*

As Andhra Pradesh announces a questionable incentive to go in for larger families, a debate rages worldwide on the likely impact of the falling fertility rate and how to combat it

Third child bonus, first child reluctance

SEEMA SACHDEVA

ON May 31, Garima will celebrate her seventh wedding anniversary with her childhood sweetheart, Siddharth. For years, both their parents and in-laws urged them to have children and expand their family. But over time, even their families have stopped trying to convince the couple.

Garima and Siddharth, both senior managers in Gurugram-based multinational companies, say their demanding work schedules leave them with little time for themselves, let alone the emotional and financial bandwidth required to raise a child. They have also seen many colleagues struggle to balance careers with parenting responsibilities.

According to them, even raising one child today involves immense challenges and long-term commitments — something they are not yet prepared for, especially at a time when the cost of living has soared. At present, their priority is paying instalments for the flat they recently purchased in an elite housing society. “Only after we achieve financial stability will we think of having a child,” says Garima, who will turn 35 in November.

Their story reflects the reality faced by many urban working couples, a trend clearly mirrored in India's declining fertility rates. According to latest figures from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), India's total fertility rate (TFR) has fallen to 1.9, slipping below the replacement level of 2.1. The TFR measures the average number of children per woman, while replacement level refers to the number of babies at which a population replaces itself from one generation to the next. When the TFR remains below the replacement level, the population's age structure shifts. Once the dependent ageing population outnumbers the young workforce, it puts immense pressure on the country's healthcare, social security and economic output.

As per the Economic Survey 2025-26, among the 31 states and UTs where the TFR has fallen below replacement levels are Sikkim at 1.1, Goa 1.3, Punjab 1.6, Chandigarh 1.4, J&K 1.4, Delhi 1.6, Himachal Pradesh 1.7 and Haryana 1.9.

Responding to Andhra Pradesh's falling TFR, which stands at 1.7, and concerns over an ageing workforce, Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu recently announced in the state Assembly a new Population Management Policy — the first-of-its-kind in the

country — aimed at shifting the state's focus from family planning to population growth. “If the TFR continues to decline rapidly, the number of working-age people could reduce significantly, potentially slowing the state's economic growth,” he said.

Andhra Pradesh has been at the forefront of population control — even using coercive measures such as target-driven sterilisation and policies barring citizens with more than two children from contesting local panchayat elections. To boost the state's falling fertility rate, the draft policy proposes financial incentives of ₹30,000 for a third child and ₹40,000 for a fourth child, besides enhanced parental leave and maternal health benefits.

“Globally, none of the countries that have implemented such incentives have achieved much success. Take South Korea, which has the lowest TFR in the world at 0.75. Despite government incentives and progressive policies, the country has managed to see only a marginal rebound of 0.1,” says Dr Srinivas Goli, associate professor in demography at the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai. While the document presented by the Andhra Pradesh CM will help highlight falling fertility levels in the state as well as the country, the incentives offered may only widen the inequality gap, he says, adding, “Only the poor will get attracted to such offers.”

Similar pro-natalist incentives such as child support and long paid maternity leave have not helped reverse shrinking fertility rates in the West either, says Dr PM Kulkarni, former professor of Population Studies at the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. “In the 1950s, women who produced more children were called heroines of the Soviet Union and were bestowed with medals,” he says.

Russia's TFR stands at 1.37, while the TFR across the European Union is at a record low of 1.34 live births per woman.

Fertility cannot be addressed through financial incentives alone, says Poonam Mutreja, executive director at Population Foundation of India. “Countries that have done relatively better, particularly some Nordic countries, are those that invested in long-term structural support such as affordable childcare, paid parental leave, public healthcare, workplace flexibility and more gender-equal caregiving norms.”

The larger concern, says Mutreja, who co-conceived the popular transmedia initiative *Main Kuchh Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon*, is that ferti-



lity debates can quickly shift pressure onto women. Women in India already face immense social expectations around marriage and childbearing, and pro-natalist messaging can intensify pressure to conceive, continue pregnancies, or prioritise motherhood over education and employment, she says.

“The focus should be on strengthening childcare systems, reproductive healthcare, maternal health, workplace flexibility and greater participation of men in caregiving, rather than treating women as instruments of population policy,” adds Mutreja.

According to Prof KS James, visiting professor at Princeton University, “We are yet to develop good institutional work culture and social practices for childcare, especially when women enter the workforce. There's a very unfair division of care at home. Working women are expected to take care of the family while the same rule doesn't apply to men, thus delaying child bearing.”

According to the Time Use Survey, 2024, women in India spend nearly five times more time on unpaid domestic and caregiving work compared to men. The survey, conducted by the National Statistics Office, found that 41 per cent of females aged 15-59 years participated in caregiving for household members, while male participation in the same age group stood at 21.4 per cent. Female participants spent about 140 minutes a day on caregiving activities, compared to 74 minutes by male participants.

The current pattern of falling TFR in India is temporary, arising primarily due to postponement rather than a real decline

in fertility, observes Prof James, former director and senior professor at IIPS. Real TFR decline, such as that seen in countries like South Korea and Japan, occurs when a substantial proportion of women and men remains unmarried.

“There is no such evidence here. In fact, more than 90 per cent of young people in India get married. That's because remaining unmarried is not a viable option in our country, given the familial pressures and weak social security system. Most young Indians are postponing marriage or childbirth mainly to complete their education or achieve enough financial stability.”

Prof Kulkarni views Andhra Pradesh's population push more from a political perspective. The delimitation amendment proposed last month has already raised concerns among states with lower population growth. There are fears that the situation will become severe after 2050, when many states may see population decline while others continue to grow.

“Developed states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Punjab, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, which are already facing a decline in TFR, will witness actual population decline over the next 20 years. Population growth in higher-TFR states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar is also falling. They will overcome this lag over the next decade,” says Prof Kulkarni.

Unlike the fertility transition in the West, which took 100-200 years, family planning campaigns across developing Asian countries led to a much faster decline in birth rates, says Prof Goli. “It took 44 years for this

transition to take place in India, while China reached it in 29 years and South Korea in just 19-20 years. China and South Korea rapidly developed infrastructure, education, skills and human capital to become East Asian Tigers but India has not been able to fully reap the benefits of its demographic dividend,” he says. The lack of strong work-family policies in India is responsible for the wage and employment penalties experienced by working mothers — often referred to as the motherhood penalty, he adds.

According to the World Bank Group, in urban India, mothers face a wage penalty of nearly 18 per cent compared to non-mothers, while rural areas show negligible wage effects but a steep decline in overall labour force participation.

The youth population, which once represented more than 30 per cent of India's total population, is expected to shrink as the fertility rate continues to fall and fewer children are born, say economists Santosh Mehrotra and Jajati Parida in their latest book, *India Out of Work*. With the country's population expected to start shrinking from 2062, the demographic window of opportunity is narrowing for India, they warn, adding that the country needs to rethink its growth story.

“We are empowering women with better careers and education but the traditional gender roles continue to impose a double burden on them as caregivers,” says Prof James. “If India wants to capitalise on the advantage of its large female workforce, women need to be assured of social and financial security, even when they take leave to give birth.”

Women in India spend nearly five times more time in caregiving as compared to men. ISTOCK

Cable TV, SIM cards and physical wallets are fading as we race towards a digital future

The great tech disappearing act has begun



LOOK around you. That SIM card tray, the tangled charging cable, the cable TV remote your dad guards with his life — they're all heading for the exit. The world is in the middle of a massive tech makeover, and India? Very much in the thick of it. From UPI eating cash for breakfast to passkeys slowly murdering passwords, the signs are already everywhere, steadily rewriting how we pay, move, unlock, search and live. And honestly, it's just happening, one software update and one dead habit at a time, whether you have noticed or not. So here are some everyday things that may look completely different or simply disappear in the near future.

NO PASSWORDS, ONLY PASSKEYS

The pain of forgetting your password is about to be over. Passkeys, where your face scan or fingerprint is your login, have become mainstream. Microsoft made passkeys the default for all new accounts in May 2025 that triggered a 120 per cent surge in usage overnight. Google, Apple and Amazon have all followed suit. In India, the RBI has been pushing banks and fin-tech platforms toward phishing-resistant authentication, which is exactly what passkeys are built for.

PHYSICAL SIM CARDS ON WAY OUT

The days of little plastic chip are numbered. eSIM, where your SIM lives digitally inside your phone, is already here. Airtel, Jio, BSNL and Vi all support it, letting users activate connections remotely without any physical SIM card. TRAI has man-

dated eSIM support for all new smartphones sold in India from 2025 onwards. GSMA Intelligence projects India will hit 150 million eSIM users by the end of 2026.

NO TANGLED CHARGING CABLES

Wireless charging is now standard on every flagship phone — from the iPhone to OnePlus to Samsung Galaxy. MagSafe-style snap-on charging is catching on fast and over-the-air power transfer (charging without any pad at all) is already in early development globally. The humble USB cable isn't gone yet though, especially with budget phones still dominating India's market, but it is definitely on the clock.

AI MAKEOVER FOR SEARCH ENGINES

“Ask ChatGPT might soon replace ‘Google it’.” With 900 million weekly ChatGPT users globally and Google now showing AI-generated answers at the top of 50 per cent of searches, traditional search is transforming. AI tools like ChatGPT, Gemini and Perplexity are rapidly becoming the go-to research tools for students and professionals alike, especially after the JEE/NEET aspirants discovered that AI can explain complex concepts in easy ways. Global research firm Gartner predicts search volume will drop 25 per cent by 2026.

PHYSICAL CARDS ON LIFE SUPPORT

The UPI revolution has already made plastic cards near-redundant. In India, UPI clocked a record 21.63 billion transactions in December 2025 alone. That's over 650 million payments every single day, surpassing even Visa's daily count globally. Annual UPI volume hit 228.3 billion transactions in 2025. PhonePe, Google Pay, Paytm now dominate 98 per cent of all UPI volume among them.

CASH LOSING ITS CLOUT

After cards, next on the disappearing list is cash. The shift away from cash didn't



Passwords, SIM cards, credit/debit cards, car and house keys are at the verge of vanishing in a digital world. AI-GENERATED IMAGE

happen overnight. Demonetisation cracked the habit. Covid-19 broke it for good. India's cash usage indicator, measuring cash's share of private consumption spending, dropped from 81-86 per cent in early 2021 to just 52-60 per cent by early 2024. In recent surveys, over 91 per cent of respondents said they switched from cash to digital payments in the past 2-3 years and more than 80 per cent now carry significantly less cash. From *golgappa* seller to cabs to even *prasad* stalls at temples — everyone has a QR code.

DWINDLING CABLE TV SUBSCRIPTIONS

Your dad still pays for that DTH subscription. But for how long? Pay TV sub-

scribers in India fell from 151 million in 2018 to 111 million in 2024, a drop of 40 million households in just six years. Meanwhile, India's OTT audience has crossed 601 million in 2025. That's 41 per cent of the entire country streaming online videos. Connected TV users surged 87 per cent to 129.2 million people watching OTT on their actual television screens, and 110 million Indians now skip traditional TV entirely. The set-top box is becoming structurally obsolete.

PHONE TO REPLACE CAR KEY

Digital car keys, where your phone is the key, are already here. Apple CarKey was launched back in 2020, and car brands like

Hyundai and Kia support it. App-based keyless entry is already standard on Tata Nexon EV, MG ZS EV and several Hyundai and Kia models. You unlock via the brand's app, share access with family members digitally, and track your car's location. No physical key required. The traditional metal key is still there, but every new EV launch is chipping away at it.

Not everything on this list will vanish completely. Cash, cable and car keys will likely stick around for some time yet. But the direction is clear. Convenience always supersedes and right now it is digital, wireless and increasingly AI-powered. So which of these do you think will disappear from your life first?

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



يَنْتَهِي الْحُبُّ عِنْدَمَا نَبْدَأُ بِالضَّحْكَ مِنْ
الْأَشْيَاءِ الَّتِي بَكَيْتُمْ بِسَبَبِهَا يَوْمًا
(أحمد مستغانمي)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

Love ends when we start laughing
about things that one day made us cry!

Ahlam Mosteghanemi

(Contemporary Algerian writer)

Opinion

Barghouti's election shows Fatah congress matters

DAOUD KUTTAB



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The eighth congress of the Palestine Liberation Organization's leading movement, Fatah, was held in Ramallah last week. It concluded with the election of the group's highest body, the 18-member Central Committee, and its quasi-legislative body, the 80-member Fatah Revolutionary Council.

Much has been said about Fatah's lack of a clear political strategy for liberation and the efforts to engineer the elections to serve the ruling power in Ramallah, but one result is without question. It is an indisputable fact that the imprisoned Marwan Barghouti and some of his key supporters emerged victorious.

Despite languishing in prison, Barghouti received the highest number of votes in the Central Committee elections — 1,879 out of 2,514 — while his wife, Fadwa Barghouti, had the second-highest vote total for the Fatah Revolutionary Council following Dalal Erekat. A number of prisoners

and recently released inmates did well. These are not symbolic results. They are a reminder that, more than two decades after his arrest, Barghouti remains the most important figure in Palestinian politics.

While the Palestinian leadership has largely been shunned by Israel (except for security coordination) and by the US (at the request of Israel), the fact that a popular, uncorrupt leader mustered such a high vote count while imprisoned dismisses the regularly repeated Israeli-American excuses for not engaging with the Palestinian leadership.

For the extremist Netanyahu government, Hamas is much easier to demonize than the moderate Palestinians, whether that is President Mahmoud Abbas or Barghouti. The popularity of Barghouti transcends the Fatah movement, as his supporters and worldwide solidarity groups echo the support that South Africa's Nelson Mandela received while in jail for a similar length of time.

What is little known is that, while in

jail, Barghouti has had a positive influence on many fellow inmates, including hard-liners. In May 2006, he initiated a "Prisoner Document" that he convinced Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders to sign. It called for the establishment of a Palestinian state on the June 1967 borders, putting aside the ambitions and public efforts of some to negate Israel. Barghouti has never changed his moderate stance, despite the constant attacks and humiliations by Israeli guards and politicians while in prison.

In the many interviews he has transmitted through friends and lawyers, Barghouti has insisted on the need for a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Barghouti, who is fluent in Hebrew as a result of his decades in Israeli prisons, can do more to present the need for a negotiated settlement based on the two-state solution and a nonviolent strategy for the liberation of Palestine than anyone else. No wonder that about 160 of the UN's 193 member states have recognized Palestine on the June 1967 borders.

These might be dark times for Barghouti, being held in isolation and unable to communicate with the rest of the world, but his success in the Fatah congress sends a signal that uncorrupt, serious and moderate Palestinian leadership does exist.

For now, it is unacceptable to continue isolating and humiliating the Palestinian leader, who is being held in Israeli jails by occupiers whom he has refused to recognize as having the right to try him and imprison him.

It is incumbent on anyone genuinely interested in solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to engage with Barghouti, as well as his wife.

The new crop of Palestinian leaders who are part of his orbit, such as Jibril Rajoub from the Hebron area and the recently released Zakaria Zubeidi from Jenin, must be empowered to usher in the post-Abbas Palestinian era with confidence, moderation and an insistence on the Palestinians' right to self-determination and statehood.

More than two decades after his arrest, Barghouti remains the most important figure in Palestinian politics

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Their murders have been pushed aside as America continues to strengthen its political bonds with Israel

No justice for Americans killed by Israelis

RAY HANANIA



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Nine Americans who have been killed either by Israeli soldiers or radical Israeli settlers since 2022 have not received any form of justice. The victims — a journalist, a grandfather, women, several teenagers and an aid worker — were all American citizens.

- Omar As'ad was a 78-year-old man who died in January 2022 after being detained and bound by Israeli forces at a checkpoint that only stops Christians and Muslims, not Jews.
- Shireen Abu Akleh was a prominent Palestinian American journalist who was shot in the head by Israeli forces in the West Bank in May 2022 while covering a news story.
- Tawfic Abdel Jabbar was a 17-year-old boy killed by gunfire in the West Bank in January 2024.
- Mohammad Khmour, also 17, was fatally shot by Israeli occupation forces in the West Bank in February 2024.
- Jacob Flickinger was a 33-year-old

US-Canadian dual citizen and World Central Kitchen aid worker killed in an Israeli strike in an area of Gaza where civilians were lined up trying to get food in April 2024.

- Aysenur Ezgi Eygi was a 26-year-old Turkish American activist who was shot in the head by an Israeli soldier during a protest in the West Bank in September 2024.
- Sayfollah Musallet was a 20-year-old who was fatally beaten by Israeli settlers in the West Bank in July 2025.
- Khamis Ayyad was a 40-year-old man who died of smoke inhalation after a fire was set by Israeli settlers in the West Bank in July 2025.
- Nasrallah Abu Siyam was the most recent murder victim. He was a 19-year-old who was killed in the West Bank in February this year.

All were American citizens. None were ever charged with any crimes. All have been denied their rights. Despite repeated

requests for accountability from members of Congress, their murders have been pushed aside as America continues to strengthen its political bonds with Israel.

The Arab and Muslim victims are treated as if they lack any human rights. In contrast, Jewish Americans who are killed in Israel or the Occupied Territories are prioritized by America's political elite and the mainstream news media. This bias is not just driven by politics but also racism and Islamophobia.

There is no doubt that Americans killed in Israel and the Occupied Territories are widely ignored if they are Arab and mourned if they are Jewish. This is the reality of an apartheid system in a country protected by a hypocritical US foreign policy.

How insignificant is the killing of an American when the perpetrators are Israeli soldiers, police or settlers? Very.

The US Senate has 100 members, yet only 31 agreed to sign a March 5 letter

urging Secretary of State Marco Rubio, US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee and Pam Bondi, who was attorney general at the time, to explain the circumstances of the murders and to assure other Americans that, when their loved ones are killed in Israel or the Occupied Territories, there will be accountability.

The letter, organized by Sen. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland following Abu Slyam's killing, has gone unanswered.

Despite public declarations by Rubio that the safety of American citizens is "our No. 1 priority" when it comes to the US' military attacks on foreign nations like Venezuela and Iran, he has not addressed the killings of Americans by Israelis.

The failure of the US to take a strong stand on the killings of these nine Americans raises questions about the real purpose of its justifications for foreign military interventions and, more importantly, its relationship with Israel's government.

Opinion

Armenia walks a tightrope ahead of high-stakes poll

LUKE COFFEY

Armenians go to the polls on June 7 in the country's first parliamentary election since 2021. The stakes are unusually high. Voters will not only choose a new parliament and, by extension, a prime minister. They will also help determine Armenia's future trajectory: whether the country continues this difficult but much needed shift toward normalization with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, closer ties with the Euro-Atlantic community, and greater regional connectivity, or whether it drifts back toward the old days that left it isolated, dependent, and vulnerable.

The election comes at a moment of deep division. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his ruling Civil Contract party are campaigning on stability, normalization with Armenia's neighbors, and what Pashinyan calls "Real Armenia." The idea is straightforward but politically sensitive: Armenia should focus on improving the prosperity, sovereignty, and security of the internationally recognized Republic of Armenia rather than pursuing maximalist visions of a "greater Armenia" beyond its borders.

The opposition is fragmented but serious. Among the main challengers is Strong Armenia, associated with Russian-Armenian billionaire Samvel Karapetyan, whose movement has emerged as a major opposition force. Another is the Armenia Alliance, led by former President Robert Kocharyan, which represents a more nationalist, old-guard opposition current with closer ties to Moscow. The result is a contest not merely between parties, but

between competing visions of Armenia's place in the region.

This election also comes after a historic breakthrough in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations brokered by the Trump administration last year. After decades of conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh

region, which is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, Yerevan and Baku have taken steps toward ending the conflict and focusing on stability in the South Caucasus.

This process remains incomplete and politically fragile. But it is the most serious opening for peace in a generation.

Pashinyan's willingness to pursue peace with Azerbaijan has not been universally popular in Armenia. Yet he has been the



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only Armenian leader in years willing to engage in sustained negotiations with Baku. Although polls suggest Civil Contract is likely to remain the largest party, it may still fall short of the majority needed to govern easily or the support required for constitutional changes.

Three geopolitical issues make the June 7 election especially important.

The first is whether Armenia continues on the path toward peaceful coexistence

with its neighbors. As part of the US-brokered process, Azerbaijan has insisted that Armenia amend its constitution to remove what Baku considers implied territorial claims against Azerbaijan. Pashinyan has said the matter should be addressed through a referendum after the parliamentary election. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has made clear that without constitutional changes a final peace agreement cannot move forward. If Pashinyan loses power, the peace process could stall or even collapse.

The second issue is Armenia's Euro-Atlantic orientation. Since regaining independence in 1991, Armenia has been closely aligned with Moscow. Russia still

has a major military presence in Armenia, and Moscow has long shaped the country's security, energy, and economic choices. But many Armenians have lost faith in Russia, especially after the 2020 war with Azerbaijan in Karabakh, when Moscow failed to help in the way many Armenians had expected.

The third issue is regional connectivity. Armenia is landlocked, poor, and has been cut off from major regional transport and

infrastructure projects for much of its modern history. Pashinyan's "Crossroads of Peace" initiative, unveiled in 2023, envisions Armenia as a hub for trade routes linking the Caspian, Black Sea, Türkiye, and the wider Eurasian landmass.

For decades, the South Caucasus, in part, has been defined by the closed borders, frozen conflicts, and great-power competition that took place through the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. The June 7 election could help determine whether that era begins to end. Rarely does a single election in the region carry such far-reaching geopolitical consequences. Policymakers across Eurasia and the broader region should be paying close attention.

Voters will not only choose a new parliament and, by extension, a prime minister

This election also comes after a breakthrough in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations

Sustainable economies will own the future

BRUNO BOUYGUES AND BERTRAND BADRE

Environmental and climate concerns appear to be in retreat worldwide. The word sustainability has become politically charged, the Trump administration openly mocks corporate ESG (environmental, social, governance) criteria and many companies are shelving their net-zero emissions pledges.

But look beneath the surface and you will see something else. Though the political and cultural backlash against "sustainability" is real, so is the global economic transition toward cleaner energy technologies and electrification.

After all, the work of establishing corporate sustainability standards has continued. A growing number of jurisdictions are adopting the International Sustainability Standards Board's disclosure framework and, in Europe, the European Sustainability Reporting Standards remain in force. Despite their differences, such initiatives are converging into a single global architecture.

This convergence is driven not only by complementary regulations but also by the world's largest pools of capital. Pension funds, sovereign wealth funds, insurance balance sheets and development finance

institutions are increasingly bound by net-zero commitments, taxonomy-aligned reporting and transition risk frameworks.

This is no passing trend. We are witnessing a fundamental repricing, one that is being applied gradually through fiduciary and prudential decisions. Companies that can produce credible carbon-reduction strategies are recognized as investable assets and can often borrow on more attractive financing terms. Those that cannot run the risk of being priced

accordingly.

Such signals are unlikely to change. The COVID-19 pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and Iran have reframed the issue of sustainability, which is now as much about sovereignty and economic security as it is about the planet. Reducing dependencies on fossil fuels is the most direct route to energy security, just as shorter supply chains build industrial resilience and circular material flows ensure strategic autonomy. Captains of industry and national security strategists are increasingly reading from the same playbook.

Of course, the West has been slow to come to this realization, whereas China made a deliberate strategic choice years ago to become the world's leading sustainable power. China now manufactures



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about 80 percent of the world's solar panels, dominates battery supply chains and is rapidly scaling up green hydrogen, offshore wind and electric mobility technologies. Clean technology is the global economy's competitive frontier and China intends to own it.

European and American manufacturers face a formidable, state-backed competitor — but the global energy transition is, by definition, an undertaking of enormous scale. The question is not whether that story will be written but how many leading authors it will have.

Europe is well positioned here. It boasts deep industrial expertise, world-class engineering institutions, a sophisticated financial system and — crucially — the world's most developed regulatory framework for creating sustainable products and mobilizing sustainable capital.

The European Green Deal, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive and the digital product passport are more than compliance regimes, they are the necessary infrastructure for building a sustainable industrial economy. Europe is the world's most demanding market. Any manufacturer that meets European standards holds a de facto credential that should be recognized anywhere.

Europe can treat this architecture as a defensive perimeter or it can deploy it as an open platform. The latter path — working with Japan, South Korea, Canada and willing emerging economies to build interoperable standards and share technical capacities — would position Europe as the convening authority of a genuinely global sustainable economy. That is a role worth playing.

But the global industrial transformation that is currently underway is not a matter

of policy debate. It is part of a historical sequence. European industry has managed new quality certification processes in the 1990s, sustainability ratings in the 2010s and a steep tightening of product-level regulation through 2025.

Now comes the fourth act, with the rollout of digital product passports, taxonomy-aligned financing and carbon accounting in procurement. The recent political backlash cannot be allowed to reverse this trend.

Sustainability and competitiveness are not competing priorities. They are the same project, viewed from two angles. Recognizing that this convergence is not a passing fashion but a structural shift is essential to implement the economic and financial policies that are best suited to the frontier ahead.

The issue of sustainability is now as much about sovereignty and economic security as it is about the planet

The industrial transformation that is currently underway is not a matter of policy debate. It is part of a historical sequence

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To infinity and beyond, with the SpaceX IPO

Ordinary investors can at last bet directly on AI's potential – with caveats

Elon Musk made history this week with the launch of SpaceX's IPO, the dawn of a new AI era in public stock markets. But, as with everything Musk, it's hard to tell whether the era will be historic for the right reasons or the wrong ones.

The Nasdaq flotation of Musk's chatbots-to-rockets company will be followed by the listing of large language model makers OpenAI and Anthropic. SpaceX alone could be worth \$1.75tn. The trio's total value could top \$3.5tn.

The listings at last give ordinary shareholders a shot at the pot of gold at the end of the generative AI rainbow, after years when only wealthy private investors and funds have been able to buy direct stakes in hyperscaling startups. Soon, these private empires will have to submit to transparent reporting,

analysts' scrutiny, regulators' attention and board directors' challenges.

The 200,000-word SpaceX prospectus – surely the most audacious ever published – sets out a vision of extraterrestrial data centres, asteroid mining and developing a "lunar economy". Musk's ambition is to harness the sun to "power a truth-seeking" AI. Many investors will find it hard to resist strapping in for lift-off.

But the document has caveats as big as the pay deal offered to its founder. The largest, also applicable to OpenAI, is that investment in AI hardware is burning through billions, racking up debt and pushing SpaceX into loss.

Then there is the overhang of stock. Musk is subject to a longer than usual 12-month lock-up but other existing shareholders will be able to offload parts of their holdings quickly. The consequences for already febrile equity markets are uncertain.

Traditional governance checks are almost absent. Musk already runs car-

maker Tesla and had a chaotic stint as adviser to President Donald Trump. Here, a two-tier share structure common to tech firms is even more heavily weighted in the founder's favour. He will have a virtually unchallengeable grip on voting rights and the board.

Only three months ago, SpaceX absorbed another Musk venture, xAI, developer of chatbot Grok. The long-held goal of colonising Mars has for now been eclipsed by his desire to win the costly AI race. If Musk changes direction again and SpaceX turns out to be a trillion-dollar strategic bait-and-switch, there will be little shareholders can do.

Apart from breathing a sigh of relief that Musk's plans to inhabit their planet are now a lower priority, what would a Martian beamed down to Wall Street make of this? Their normal retort would be: "Let the buyer beware. If you want to grab the tail fins of a stock market rocket, expect a wild ride."

But passive investors will end up owning slivers of SpaceX, OpenAI and

A two-tier share structure common to tech firms is heavily weighted in the founder's favour. Musk will have a virtually unchallengeable grip on voting rights and the board

Anthropic destined for public markets, whether they like it or not. Index providers have been vying to loosen their rules, making room for the AI developers. This, then, is an epoch-defining test for market authorities, company directors and the promoters of these IPOs as they balance self-interest against the need to protect ordinary investors.

We have been here before. Revelations in WeWork's 2019 prospectus of the co-working company's continuing losses and founder Adam Neumann's attempts to secure outsized influence cost him his job and torpedoed its listing. By contrast, Facebook's stock halved within four months of its 2012 IPO, but investors have done well since.

Musk's goal at SpaceX is to "extend the light of consciousness to the stars"; the AI tycoons' valuations, ambitions and potential rewards match the scale of their vision. The fate of markets – if not of humanity itself – depends on whether their missions prove possible or impossible.

Opinion Data Points

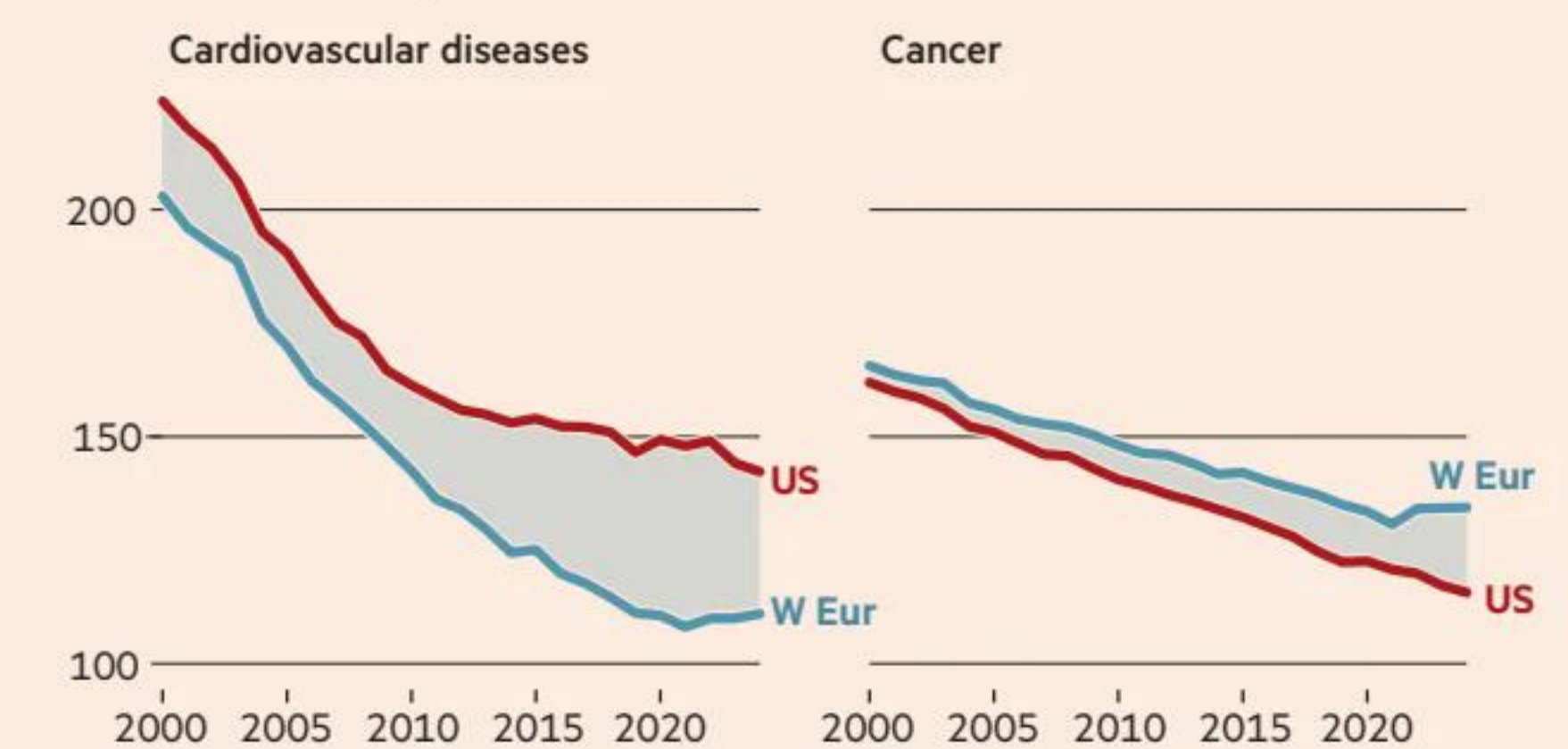
America's surprising turnaround on crime and health

John Burn-Murdoch



The US deficit on cardiovascular mortality is now narrowing, while its lead on cancer outcomes is widening

Age-standardised mortality rate for leading causes (deaths per 100,000), US vs western Europe



Sources: Global Burden of Disease; ONS; Eurostat; US CDC

What could Europe possibly have to learn from America on crime, health and mortality? Perhaps more than you might think.

For decades the stereotype of the US has been of an unhealthy and dangerous society, with eye-watering rates of violent crime and obesity, and appallingly low and stagnant life expectancy. In terms of levels, much of that remains true. But on direction of travel the story is beginning to change.

Life expectancy has increased in most countries in recent years as mortality rates receded from their Covid highs. But US lifespans have not merely returned to pre-pandemic (or even pre-fentanyl) levels, they are on a record-setting climb. Today, American men can expect to live to 77.3 years, 1.5 years longer than a decade ago. In the UK the equivalent gain has been a mere six months. In Germany it has been essentially zero. The American lifespan deficit to western Europe is on course this year to be its narrowest since 2012.

Similarly, US rates of homicide and crime more broadly have not merely returned to their baseline after the wave of deadly disorder between 2020 and 2023 – rates of violence and criminality are setting all-time record lows in cities and states across the country.

These two stories overlap to a certain extent. Violence and drugs disproportionately take young lives, meaning they have exerted an outsized drag on average US lifespans. As these distorting scourges subside, we can begin to see what the underlying trends in America's health and society look like. The answer is perhaps less grim than some might have imagined.

As always, such trends are shaped by a huge number of factors, but it is worth unpacking some of the leading theories behind such robust improvements.

On health, a big part of the story is cancer, where US mortality rates are lower than those in western Europe and also falling faster. Discussions about the merits and performance of US and European healthcare systems often gloss over the fact that poor American outcomes are concentrated in the conditions most related to unhealthy lifestyles such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes. But diseases like cancer afflict a wide range of people regardless of behaviour, mak-

ing death rates a more direct reflection of outcomes in the healthcare system. On this score Americans' above-average healthcare spending comes with above-average success.

What is more, as high US uptake of GLP-1 weight-loss drugs begins to reduce obesity-related disease, it's possible the US will see further catch-up.

On crime there are several factors to note. The clearest lesson is that policing matters. The wave of violence that swept much of the US between the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and 2022 coincided with American police pulling back from frontline enforcement. The exact contribution of this relative to other factors remains contested, but its role has broad support. It aligns with the finding that police station closures in the UK during austerity were followed by sharp upticks in violent crime in the surrounding area.

A particularly interesting addition to the debate on crime has been the role of America's pandemic relief public spending: billions of dollars were spent by local governments on public safety and community infrastructure. This unexpected injection of money allowed local officials to tackle long-term problems – cleaning up areas of urban decay and trialling new approaches to combating gun violence. In one notable success, Detroit used money from the American Rescue Plan to fund new dedicated local ShotStoppers groups, which could receive a bonus equivalent to 100 per cent of their initial funding for achieving reductions in shootings. The areas these groups operated in saw far larger reductions than elsewhere.

The story of well-funded local governments having the means to tackle their most pressing problems contrasts with the UK, where local government funding has never recovered from austerity measures, leaving resources stretched and infrastructure crumbling.

America has long been a cautionary tale on crime and healthcare. Certainly in many ways its deeply imperfect system remains a lesson in what not to do. But when a bad situation improves – and does so beyond most reasonable expectations – we should pause to consider what it may be getting right.

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Letters

Politicians wrong to claim airport capacity is good for growth

Each time the debate over Heathrow's third runway resurfaces ("CAA wants Heathrow to open bidding for runway", Report, May 16), politicians reach for the same unreferenced assertion – that runway capacity correlates with per capita GDP growth.

Yet the direction of causation, if any relationship exists, almost certainly runs the other way: wealthy economies build airports because they are wealthy, not the reverse. Japan sustained its position as the world's second-largest economy for decades while Narita, its principal international

gateway, operated under severe capacity constraint, its second runway delayed by land disputes until 2002.

A third runway at Heathrow would principally serve connecting passengers transiting between long-haul routes – passengers who spend little in the UK economy and generate none of the high-value trade linkages the advocates conjure.

In today's age of meetings via video, emails and everything one could possibly need to promote one's business easily and accessibly online, it seems unlikely that runway expansion

creates much more than congestion during the construction phase followed by permacloud from the jet exhaust trails left by aircraft (for the most part built in other countries).

The primary economic beneficiaries would be Heathrow Airport Holdings' shareholders, in other words French private equity, Gulf and Asian sovereign wealth funds, an Australian pension fund (the last UK stakeholder, the Universities Superannuation Scheme, sold its 2 per cent share in 2025) – oh, and the slot-holding carriers, of course.

The costs, in terms of construction emissions, induced operational demand and noise, are socialised and ignored or forgotten.

I write as someone who flies, values aviation and has no objection in principle to a coherent long-term strategy for Heathrow. My objection is to an economic argument stated as settled fact, amplified as received wisdom and subjected to critical scrutiny by almost nobody.

Gregory McDonald
Chief Executive, Goodfish Group,
Cannock, Staffordshire, UK

Fossil fuels' critics can learn from Big Tobacco's demise

Pililla Clark's magazine piece "Inside the chaotic quest to phase out fossil fuels" (Life & Arts, May 16) makes parallels to the tobacco industry saga.

Perhaps it should have gone further. After decades of intense litigation, what finally turned the tide was "attributing" the harmful effects (loss of life, huge medical expenditures etc) of smoking to the tobacco companies. Once this liability was associated directly with the industry, the industry capitulated.

There was no mention of a similar strategy being applied in the current fossil fuel scenario. Yet the harmful effects caused by the misalignment of incessantly and irrationally promoting the use of fossil fuels on a global scale is massive.

The thought is, if global fossil fuel subsidies, year after year, hover around \$1tn, how does that compare to the total global costs of covering the harm caused by burning such fuels? If that value is also about \$1tn, and direct attribution can be proven, then the subsidies would have to cover liability first, then go towards further extraction.

Creating a spreadsheet of the cost of harm may not seem feasible but it must start somewhere. The range is from property insurance premiums (tripling in the past few years to cover losses due to climate change) to compensating Tuvalu, the Polynesian island nation, for its extraordinary circumstances.

The burning of fossil fuels affects everyone and that cost must be evaluated to determine how much can be attributed to the companies. The tobacco industry thought it enjoyed impunity also, which turned out to be a costly miscalculation.

Thomas Paino
Hudson, NY, US

Executives must speak up in times of political crisis

Regarding the Lex note "Dimon and peers risk failing UK popularity contest" (FT Weekend, May 16), there is an important distinction to be made between partisan activism and responsible economic leadership.

Business leaders are not elected politicians and should be cautious about straying into party politics. Public trust is fragile and corporate interventions can easily appear fashionable, selective or self-serving.

But silence is not neutrality. When decisions materially affect trade, investment, competitiveness and long-term national prosperity, business leaders have a responsibility to contribute evidence, experience and judgment to public debate.

The uncomfortable truth is that, before Brexit, many senior executives



Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American essayist, philosopher and abolitionist

privately expressed serious concerns about the economic consequences of leaving the EU's economic structures while remaining publicly silent because the issue was considered "too political". It was political. But it was also the single most important economic question facing the country. Too many confused caution with leadership.

Business voices should be measured and evidence-based. Companies should not attempt to substitute for democratic government. But nor should leaders retreat into convenient silence whenever difficult national questions arise for fear of criticism or political backlash.

If those with experience and evidence say nothing at moments of major national consequence, we should not be surprised when short-term populism overwhelms long-term economic reality.

Silence is not neutral. It is a position.
Paul Drechsler
President, Society of Chemical Industry;
Former President, CBI, London SE24, UK

I'd rather three months of chaos than Farage in No 10

For years the FT has been full of news, opinion pieces and editorials complaining of the terrible economic impact of the hard Brexit and the need for a sensible immigration policy. Now you are complaining about an attempt to have a governing party that can see off Nigel Farage, the author of that Brexit disaster ("UK risks paralysis amid Labour fight", Report, May 16).

If people think three months of uncertainty over a competition to decide who can best do this is problematic, they should pause to consider the absolute chaos that would be unleashed by a Reform UK government. If you will the end, you must will the means.

Helen Goodman
Former Labour MP for Bishop Auckland (2005-19), Barnard Castle, Co Durham, UK

Millennial businesswoman reads Labour Party runes

Anthony Seldon's analysis of Britain's governance crisis is compelling ("Is being prime minister now an impossible job?", The Weekend Essay, Life & Arts, May 16). Of all the ingredients he identifies, one towers above the rest: the absence of a vision bold enough to make the inevitable stresses of cabinet politics secondary to the work of actually building something.

Experience, institutional knowledge and execution track record matter, but they are kindling without a fire. Here are three illustrations of what bold vision could look like in practice. First, fast-track all non-listed brownfield sites within a 15-minute walk of public transport for residential development, bypassing full planning consent. (England's homes now cost 7.6 times median earnings and incremental policy will not close that supply gap fast enough.)

Second, build those homes with an explicit national jobs programme, shifting the discussions on welfare handouts to one of dignity of contribution.

And third, lead a Nato-wide technology exchange with Ukraine. Allied nations have committed more than £90bn; the UK should champion converting into licensing rights Ukraine's battle-tested drone technology, creating manufacturing jobs here and genuine strategic leverage so the UK can hold its own against US President Donald Trump.

None of this is easy. It requires a government that can imagine it, communicate it and deliver it.

Tiama Hanson-Drury
Millennial Executive, London NW3, UK

A perplexing decision by the National Trust

Thank you for the very apt headline on Tom Robbins's piece about the axing of National Trust holiday cottages ("Paradises lost", House & Home, May 16). We had a two-week booking cancelled at Thrang in the lovely Duddon Valley, and we're still sad about the sudden closure of High Hallgarth two years ago, another fine, remote Lakes property that we visited twice yearly for 13 years. We thought we could holiday for life in these beautiful places, but our four favourites have now had the chop.

We know we're not alone in having made so many repeat visits, and this makes the situation more perplexing. Visitors tend to be loyal Trust supporters, and we at least feel we were helping to preserve these beautiful vernacular buildings, often gifted to the Trust for safekeeping. If this is not one of the Trust's main functions, what is?

Debbie Raven
Whitley Bay, Tyne & Wear, UK

Trump and Emerson – great minds thinking alike?

I would add another example of Donald Trump's American "unoriginality" to Edmund Fawcett's list (Books Essay, Life & Arts, May 16).

When Trump said "I don't need international law. My own morality . . . It's the only thing that can stop me," he was articulating, in his own way, Ralph Waldo Emerson's fundamental American belief in self-reliance, in the primacy of the individual conscience. As Emerson put it: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men – that is genius."

Michael Collins
Bethesda, MD, US

But you don't speak like your emails

I have been a reader of the FT for many years. While my English and grammar have not yet reached the standard of your publication, I have certainly improved since I first began reading.

Regarding your editorial (May 2) on AI spelling and grammar checks, a challenge arises during live interactions, where there is often a disconnect between how people communicate via email and how they speak in person. This can create a "split personality" effect, where individuals may struggle to verbally explain or understand the sophisticated vocabulary used in their own AI-assisted emails.

Nevertheless, AI is a powerful tool for remote correspondence. It allows someone to project the professional image of an Oxford graduate, even if they are actually using voice-to-text features and Gemini within Gmail, as I am for this letter.

Tushar Vashnavi
Dubai, UAE

Austrian naval gazing

In response to your headline connecting Austrian writers and ocean liners (arising from a novella about Gustav Mahler) Malcolm Shifrin's letter (May 20) adds that Austria is "completely landlocked".

Has he never watched *The Sound of Music*? Captain Georg von Trapp, the patriarch of the singing family, was an officer in the country's navy, which at the beginning of the first world war had 106 vessels, including 18 destroyers and six submarines. Throughout Mahler's life, the Austro-Hungarian empire had a coastline of more than 1,000 miles. After the Anschluss, the von Trapp family moved to the US, travelling, of course, on an ocean liner.

Yes Austria is landlocked today, but that wasn't always true.
Dr John Doherty
Vienna, Austria

Opinion

America's 'simultaneity' nightmare

WORLD AFFAIRS

Patrick Foulis



If they exploded concurrently, another Middle East emergency, a Chinese escalation in the Taiwan Strait and a Kremlin incursion into Nato would push the US military to breaking point. The autocracies could also collude over nuclear threats, destabilising 80 years of deterrence. By 2035 China, Russia and North Korea are together expected to have twice as many deployed warheads as the US. All have missiles that can reach America.

The Biden administration's response was to try to rally weak allies into an anti-autocratic coalition. The Trump team believes this was luxury thinking and there is a better answer: pre-emptive attacks to sequence inevitable wars or to degrade enemies, and diplomacy to split up the other axis powers. That buys time for the US to re-arm.

While this is a traumatic break with the ideals of a liberal, globalised world, the playbook is not new. America has fought precautionary or pre-emptive wars before, including the invasions of Panama in 1989 and Iraq in 2003. Nixon

embraced Mao Zedong in 1972 to try to deepen the Sino-Soviet divide. Now US secretary of state Marco Rubio says the post-1945 security order is obsolete, and hails the use of pre-emption against Iran. Elbridge Colby, the Pentagon's strategist, argues policy is "designed precisely" to avoid concurrent wars.

Judged on its own ruthless terms, the strategy has had some success. Pentagon generals now fly to Caracas to meet Nicolás Maduro's obedient successor. On May 19 the US military claimed in Congress it had destroyed 80 to 90 per cent of Iran's defence industry, missiles and naval mines; disabled its warplanes, radars and navy; and that the nuclear programme has had a "devastating setback". While Iran is holding Hormuz hostage with what is left of its arms, it had the capacity to do this before the war and was on a trajectory that could have held the world hostage, too. China and Russia have not tried to rescue their clients in Caracas and Tehran. Xi could have engineered a Taiwan crisis, to exploit the US's depleted missile inven-

tories and diversion of naval and air power to the Gulf. But so far he has co-operated in the first of four planned meetings with Trump this year. Putin calls America a "partner".

Meanwhile the US defence budget plan for 2027 is a staggering \$1.5tn, double the sum in 2020. It includes upgrades to the nuclear force, home-

Trump's pre-emptive attacks are a break with the ideals of a globalised world but the playbook is not new

land interception weapons, space-based tracking and a munitions surge. Industry is cranking up. Lockheed Martin will raise capital spending by 62 per cent this year. The US share of global military spending could rise to about 45 per cent, near its cold war average. If all goes to plan, the legacy of Trump second-term shock tactics could be weaker rogue

states, allies jolted out of their coma, stability with China and Russia and an ultra-modern military.

But the new simultaneity solution has three flaws. The first is US staying power. Defence spending will rise to about 4.5 per cent of US GDP by 2027. The last time America carried this level of burden or higher, throughout the 1980s, and briefly in 2009-12, it had far lower public debt levels. Now it is re-arming amid high debt and deficits and a looming fiscal crunch. The Iran energy shock has sapped public support.

The second is that allies have to play the strange role America has chosen for them. They are supposed to be frightened enough to re-arm, but not betrayed enough to abandon their alliances with the US, and not weakened so badly that they invite attack. It is a precarious line. If America's friends and enemies are selected solely on the grounds of what is demonstrably useful for its security, it is difficult to see why it should keep its promise to defend all of its 40-odd treaty allies.

The final problem is that the autocracies also have to play the part written for them: agreeing to be placated by America while it re-arms and slowing their own collaboration. Six days after Trump left Beijing, Putin flew in to meet Xi. They are buying time, too, to see how big America's concessions are – fewer weapons to Taiwan, Ukrainian territory, troop drawdowns in Europe. If they do not get them, they may come to believe there is a shrinking window of opportunity to pursue their territorial goals and damage US alliances, while Trump is still in office but before US rearmament is complete.

The simultaneity problem is all too real. It is being addressed, but in exchange for a fiscal problem, simultaneous allied panic – and a timing dilemma for US enemies that could yet take the world to the brink.

The writer is an FT contributing editor, a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution and author of a forthcoming book on globalisation

Fashion brand founder's son is being investigated for foul play in connection with his father's death, writes *Barney Jopson*

It was shortly after noon on a mild winter day when Isak Andic, the founder of Mango, stopped to photograph the view from a jagged peak outside Barcelona, his son later told police. Jonathan Andic, the billionaire's eldest child, was the only person hiking with him that day. He claims he walked ahead, ending up a few metres away, out of sight of his father.

Jonathan then "heard the sound of stones falling". He swivelled around and "saw a body tumbling through the brush". Isak, the man behind a global apparel chain, was plunging to his death. His son "heard a loud impact and a groan of pain from his father".

That was the account Jonathan provided to police on December 14 2024, the day a hike on Montserrat, a mountain that is home to a monastery, turned deadly for one of fashion's richest men.

The death of Isak Andic, who was born in Turkey and moved to Spain in the 1970s, was initially reported as an accident. But a judge's bombshell decision to lift a secrecy order this week revealed that Jonathan is now a suspect in a homicide investigation.

It also cast a spotlight on Jonathan's troubled time running Mango – a stint that Isak brought to an end – and raised doubts over the future of the family fortune, which was \$4.5bn at the time of Isak's death and remains one of the largest in Catalonia, Mango's home region.

Images of Jonathan arriving handcuffed at a court building stunned Barcelona, where the tight-knit business elite whirrs with rivalry and intrigue. The Andic family have defended Jonathan's innocence, stating that there is no legitimate evidence against him and none will be found.

But Judge Raquel Nieto Galván's order setting out the evidence pointing to possible homicide also lifted the lid on a Shakespearean story of father-son rancour over money. Their relationship was poisoned, according to Galván, by Jonathan's loss-making run as Mango's executive vice-chair, his lust for an inheritance, and his "emotional manipulation" of Isak.

The two men were "very different", said one person who was interviewed by both for a job at Mango several years ago. "Isak was very nice, very friendly," the person said. "Jonathan was more haughty, more arrogant, quite cocky."

On Isak's death, Jonathan and his two sisters inherited 95 per cent of Mango, with the remaining 5 per cent in the hands of chief executive Toni Ruiz.

One well-connected figure in Barcelona said Jonathan was known for his "flamboyant lifestyle". His wife, an influencer who goes by the name Paula Nata, fills Instagram with pictures of Balearic beaches, yacht trips and herself in high-end outfits. Six weeks after Isak's death, the celebrity magazine *Hola!* reported that the two had postponed their wedding party due to the "terrible blow".

Jonathan's lawyer, Cristóbal Martell, has decried the order. "The homicide theory is unfounded," he stated. "But above all, it is painful. It stigatises



Person in the News | Jonathan Andic

The Mango heir turned homicide suspect

an innocent man." Jonathan was released on the day of his detention on €1mn bail.

But the judge pointed to "contradictions" in his account of what happened on the fatal hike. Jonathan told police at first that his father had stopped to take photos, but when Isak's body was recovered his phone was in his front trouser pocket – and it contained no images taken in the last place he stood.

Jonathan said he had hiked along the same route roughly two weeks earlier, but vehicle-tracking data showed he had driven to the area three times in the previous week. His own phone also vanished in what the judge called "strange circumstances". His secretary said it was stolen during a three-day trip to Ecuador in March 2025, which Galván noted coincided with media reports that investigators had reopened a case into Isak's death.

In 1981, the year Jonathan was born, his father was running a business that began selling blouses imported from Turkey. It started its international expansion in 1992. By the late 1990s Mango had stores in more than 30

countries. Jonathan got his first job in the business in 2005 and became head of menswear division Mango Man in 2007. By 2014 he was one of two executive vice-chairs and Isak, then the chair, said Jonathan was "acting as" chief executive.

Then things went off the rails. The company embarked on an ambitious plan to renovate old stores, open big new ones and launch an array of fresh

Judge Galván pointed to 'contradictions' in his account of what happened on the fatal hike

product lines. Ruiz, then chief financial officer, told the FT four years ago: "The collection lost its overall coherence and, in the end, we lost some of the DNA that had defined us." Mango accumulated more than €600mn of debt in 2016 and plunged into the red, losing more than €100mn from 2016-18.

The judge said witnesses confirmed

that Jonathan descended into a "professional, personal and family crisis". Isak retook the reins of the business. He appointed Ruiz as general manager in 2018, the business returned to profit in 2019, and Ruiz was promoted to CEO in 2020.

Jonathan was sent back to lead Mango Man and kept his seat on the board. But he remained at odds with his father, Galván wrote. Jonathan had an "obsession" with money and wanted to secure an early inheritance. In private messages he expressed "feelings of hatred, resentment and thoughts of death, and blamed his father for his situation".

After Jonathan learnt in mid-2024 that Isak intended to put part of his fortune into a philanthropic foundation, his attitude flipped, according to Galván. The priority became defusing tensions. Thus arose the plan for a hike. "The father, in an attempt to reconcile with his son, agreed to the outing his son proposed," the judge wrote, "so the two of them could talk alone."

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Additional reporting by Carmen Muela

Investing in the era of scarcity

FINANCE

Gillian Tett



A couple of weeks ago, a striking snippet of news emerged from Down Under: the New Zealand government signed a pact with Singapore which guarantees that the two countries will send each other food and fuel if global shortages erupt.

"The past few months have shown we live in a volatile world – Kiwis are seeing that every time they fill up their car," Chris Luxon, New Zealand's prime minister, said. "That is why we are hustling in the world to protect [ourselves]."

He is not alone. Australia recently signed a similar pact with Japan to maintain flows of rare earth minerals, fuel and agriculture to offset any crisis. The EU is considering regional stockpiles of fertiliser amid fears of a food crunch. And, as I have written, governments and companies around the world are now quietly stockpiling key items. Call this, if you like, a new fashion for hoarding and huddling as fears that we are entering the era of scarcity intensify.

This is ironic, in a cultural sense. Most western business and political leaders grew up in a world where scarcity seemed an old-fashioned problem. Seamless free trade and efficient supply chains that drive growth were the leitmotifs of the era of neoliberal globalisation. Moreover, the prevailing wisdom in Silicon Valley today is that technological innovation will remove future capacity constraints in many areas of our lives.

Indeed when the American writers Derek Thomson and Ezra Klein published a thoughtful book last year about rebooting America, they called it *Abundance*, in the hope of unlocking that future, and it quickly became a best-seller.

Investors have absorbed this cultural vibe too. In the last couple of years there has been a stunning rally in the tech stocks that purport to use innovations, such as AI, to unleash that "abundance". As a result, the so-called Magnificent Seven Big Tech companies now account for around 35 per cent of the S&P market, compared to 12 per cent a decade ago.

This is striking. But what is doubly noteworthy, as Jeff Currie of Carlyle wrote on X, is that while "information and technology services [are] 42 per cent of the S&P 500" today, "energy and materials [are] roughly 6 per cent" and "commodity hedge fund AUM [assets under management] is essentially nil."

Or to put it another way, investors have been so dazzled by services that they have long overlooked stocks linked to old-fashioned industrial and energy processes. Thus the "Heavy Asset, Low Obsolescence", or Halo trades, have all

"been starved of capital" in relative terms, Currie wrote.

However, this approach jars with the current direction of world events and the threat of scarcity. The crisis around the Strait of Hormuz has already created shortages of energy and industrial inputs, and these are likely to worsen.

The US war with Iran has also demonstrated the longer-term vulnerabilities around global trade, given that the strait is not the only transport chokepoint in the world and Iran is not the only country seeking to use such chokepoints for leverage.

And what investors sometimes overlook is that the eye-wateringly large capital investment plans being rolled out to support AI require not just hundreds of billions of dollars, but also molecules in the form of materials such as copper, water, gallium, lithium and concrete.

The supply of these has been undermined in the US, among other countries, by the lack of capital investment in key industries or mines. And the more that politicians erect nationalist or protectionist barriers, the more that pressure to use capital to invest in local markets in order to ensure ready access to molecules will increase.

"This is not an AI-disruption story. Halo is better read as *Hard Assets, Local Operations*," wrote Currie, who forecasts a major repricing as investors shift from tech to Halo trades. As Craig Tindale, an Australian investor, noted on X: "The financial world and the physical

Markets should pay attention to a new trend among governments for hoarding and huddling

world are pulling in opposite directions, causing the old economic rules to fail entirely."

Many observers in Silicon Valley might disagree. Indeed, on a recent visit to America's West Coast I was struck by tech's confidence that the stock market and AI boom can weather geopolitical turmoil. "Does anyone really care if the Strait of Hormuz is open?" one banker observed during the Milken conference, which was dominated by excitement about SpaceX's upcoming initial public offering.

Maybe future historians will conclude that the techies were right. But investors today should nonetheless pay attention to how governments, in New Zealand and elsewhere, are already nervously adopting a scarcity mindset, and then ask if current weightings in the stock market index really reflect this.

After all, as Robert Rubin, former US Treasury secretary, wrote in the FT this week, "markets can be out of sync with reality for an extended period, and then react rapidly and harshly". Once again, reality is likely to eventually exact its revenge.

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FT BIG READ. MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

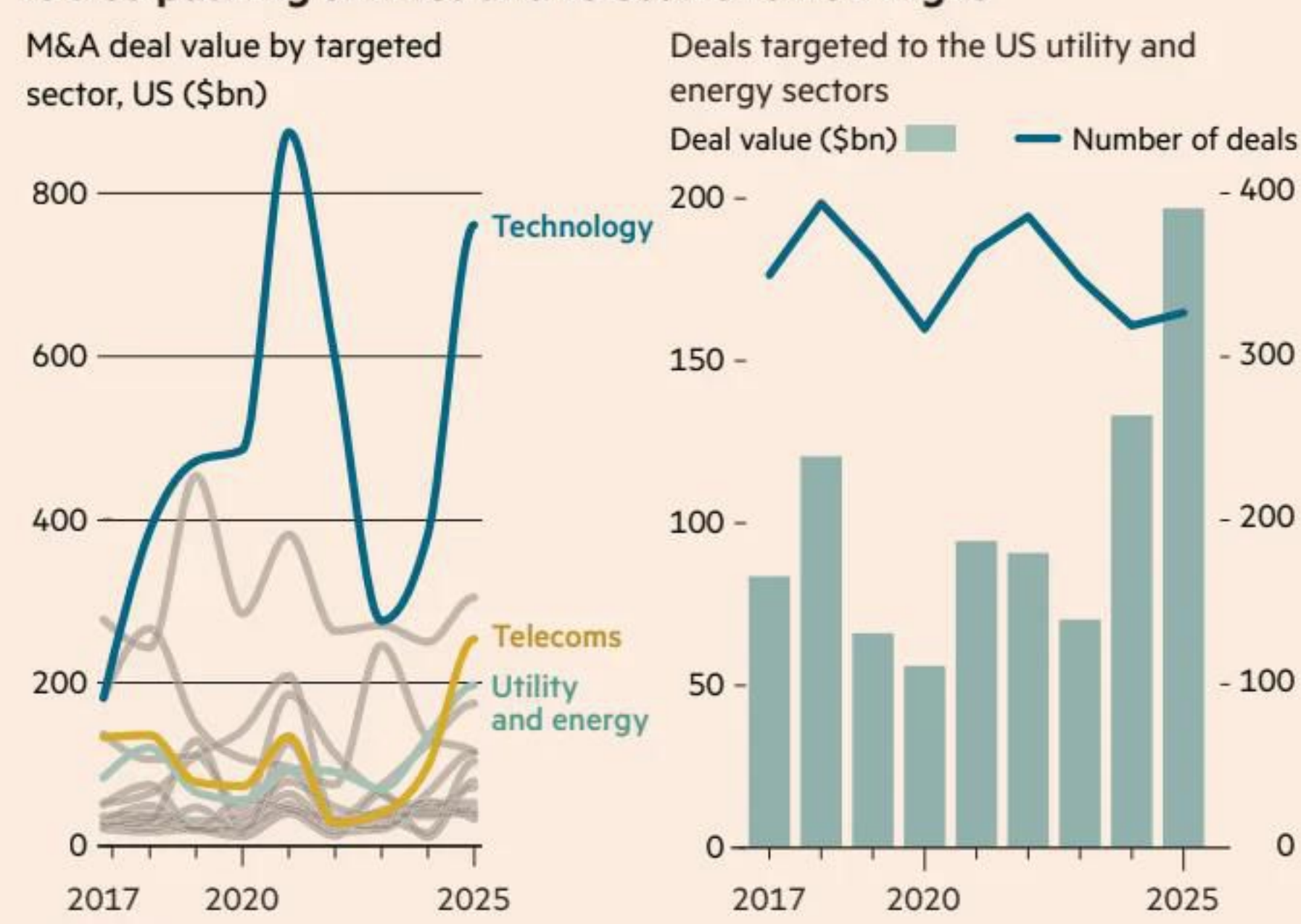
The size of deals is hitting new peaks, unloved companies are becoming attractive and private equity has found a new gold mine. To some, the momentum seems unstoppable.

By James Fontanella-Khan, Arash Massoudi and Oliver Barnes

How AI has changed M&A

By the numbers A boom and its transformative power

Data centre deals have propelled tech M&A but the AI build-out is also pushing utilities and telecoms to new highs



The dizzying rise of Sandisk and other groups linked to AI

Share prices rebased in \$ (Feb 2025 = 100)



AI dealmaking has seen a surge in activity since 2024

M&A-related press releases worldwide from companies of at least \$1bn in market cap that mention AI



AI is extremely unpopular among Americans

Surveyed US registered voters, Mar 2026 (%)



from this global industrial renaissance that we're going through is just off the charts," Marc Rowan, Apollo's chief executive, told investors late last year.

For smaller players in the private capital industry, particularly mid-sized buy-out firms, the AI boom has been far more punishing. Valuations and margins have been compressed across large swaths of the software sector, intensifying a market shift in which scale is essential to survive.

All the while the giants are pursuing aggressive plays. Blackstone recently unveiled a \$5bn plan to construct a "neocloud" from the ground up in partnership with Google. The venture aims to deliver high-octane computing power for AI models, using Google's proprietary microprocessors — a bet that could reach a valuation in the tens of billions.

"Winners haven't been set yet. We are building at cost," says Jas Khaira, the veteran Blackstone executive spearheading the Google partnership. "This is the biggest cycle in capital in my entire career."

Will it end in tears?

The AI boom is good news for M&A, previously unfavoured companies, engineers hired at vast expense and the titans of private capital. The rest of America is not so convinced. This month former Google chief executive Eric Schmidt was booed at the University of Arizona when he compared AI to the transformational impact of the computer in a commencement address.

"I know what many of you are feeling," he said. "There is a fear in your generation that the future has already been written, that the machines are coming, that the jobs are evaporating."

Across the American heartland, communities are mobilising against the rapid proliferation of sprawling data centres, citing the strain on local power grids as electricity bills soar.

Such strength of feeling may yet decide how far the AI revolution sweeps all before it — and how long the valuations premised on its success endure.

The SpaceX, OpenAI and Anthropic IPOs — all of which are due in the coming year — are designed to finance the relentless capital expenditure on the models behind the AI boom, one of the biggest peacetime investments in history. With such enormous sums at stake, some investors question the maths and the projected profits of the companies involved, evoking the memory of the dotcom bubble.

In the interim, global M&A is now dominated by the AI-inspired race to control the world's energy, fibre networks and computing capacity.

For McClure at Goldman Sachs, the transformative power of the AI revolution is highlighted by the sheer ambition of utilities and other groups that have suddenly made their way into the limelight. "A decade ago, these enterprises were categorised as stable, GDP-correlated performers," he says. "The insatiable demand for data centres has pivoted them towards a trajectory of exponential expansion."

The question is how long that exponential expansion can continue for the beneficiaries of the AI boom — and the dealmaking it has set off.

Additional reporting by Sujet Indap and Ryan McMorrow

Until this week, NextEra Energy, the Florida-based power company that has just unveiled swashbuckling plans for one of the largest mergers in history, was best known as America's clean-energy champion, more focused on renewables than transformative takeovers.

Now its planned \$420bn combination with its rival Dominion Energy has set out in stark relief how much the AI revolution has affected not just sleepy utilities but the whole phenomenon of mergers and acquisitions in the US.

The boom — and what it means for sectors such as power and memory chips, as well as its broader economic impact — has transformed the scale, structure and logic of dealmaking.

It has redefined which companies matter, how transactions are structured and who finances them, as private capital investors and banks hurry to reposition themselves.

"AI has become a tailwind for dealmaking, and equity markets more broadly," says Matt McClure, global co-head of investment banking at Goldman Sachs. He adds that demand for the technology is creating "a cascading impact across more traditional industries", with power companies and data centre equipment suppliers "among the biggest beneficiaries".

NextEra is a prime example. Until a few years ago, its bid for Dominion — intended to create a 240-gigawatt giant catering to data centres and other big clients — would have seemed almost unthinkable. Utilities were viewed as too regulated, politically sensitive and vulnerable to backlash over energy prices for large-scale consolidation.

AI, together with the Trump administration's deregulatory drive and America First approach to antitrust, has changed that.

The AI boom is also reshaping Wall Street, the US corporate order and the real economy, as established businesses desperately seek scale to compete with trillion-dollar technology companies.

CEOs and boards have caught deal fever Fomo — fear of missing out — while their rivals transform themselves for the AI age.

Groups previously unloved by Wall Street have become the target for multi-billion-dollar transactions, such as Globalstar, a satellite operator, bought by Amazon for \$11.6bn last month. Others have seen their shares soar. The market capitalisation of Sandisk, the computer storage group, has increased by 4,000 per cent since going public in February last year due to demand for its chips.

To some, the momentum seems unstoppable. But two tests are looming. In the coming months, capital markets will have to absorb IPOs of a size never experienced before, with SpaceX, OpenAI and Anthropic all set to be valued at around \$1tn or more apiece.

The shift to AI at the heart of the M&A upheaval is also facing a backlash from Americans who blame data centres for increasing electricity bills, threatening jobs and disrupting their communities.

Scale, scale, scale

A quarter of a century ago, the internet revolution was defined by companies that could conquer the world with relatively little capital. Software groups

'What is required to run and operate an AI data centre requires more power at the chip. The industry needs to move at the speed of chip design'

scaled at extraordinary speed without needing factories, power plants or vast physical infrastructure beyond logistics hubs and cell phone towers. The AI revolution is overturning that model.

Jensen Huang, chief executive of Nvidia, recently argued that "trillions of dollars of infrastructure still need to be built" to support the AI boom.

That race for scale is driving the new era of megadeals. Utilities are pursuing transformational mergers to secure power generation capacity, infrastructure investors are hurrying to finance data centres and technology groups are striking increasingly unconventional transactions to lock up talent and supply chains before rivals do.

The shift is being accelerated by geopolitics and Donald Trump's return to the White House. Peter Orszag, chief executive of Lazard, describes the trend as part of a broader move towards "discretionary state capitalism", in which governments play a more active role in directing capital and industrial policy.

Dealmakers increasingly believe consolidation will be tolerated — or even encouraged — if it supports the administration's broader Maga agenda of AI dominance, domestic manufacturing and economic nationalism. The result is

a corporate environment in which size itself has become a strategy.

Second life

For much of the past decade, hardware groups such as Sandisk were dismissed as low-growth relics in a market obsessed with high-margin software.

The AI boom has transformed their fortunes. As demand for data storage and computing capacity has surged, investors have rushed into Sandisk as well as groups such as Western Digital and SK Hynix, in recognition that the large language models which dominate AI depend on vast memory and chip infrastructure.

The shift has also transformed the energy sector. Constellation Energy, operator of the country's largest nuclear fleet, has become a market darling as hyperscalers race to secure the power needed for data centres.

Constellation's nearly \$27bn takeover of rival Calpine is part of a wave of utility consolidation tied to AI demand, alongside BlackRock-backed deals worth a combined \$39bn for power groups AES and Allete.

Industrial groups providing the physical "plumbing" of the AI era have also become strategic assets. Eaton's \$9.5bn

Obituary

Academic who transformed understanding of inflation

Edmund Phelps
Nobel-winning economist
1933-2026

Edmund "Ned" Phelps, the man who helped explain why inflation expectations are crucial to macroeconomic stability, died last week at the age of 92.

In the late 1960s, Phelps wrote two groundbreaking articles which contained the work for which he would later be awarded the 2006 Nobel Prize for Economics.

The breakthrough in the first, published in the journal *Economica* in 1967, highlighted the role of people's expectations in setting wages and prices. Phelps argued that if people expected higher inflation, workers would ask for higher wages and managers would raise their prices. The result would be a wage-price spiral.

In such a scenario, Phelps insisted, the best policy for the monetary authorities would be to bring those expectations down, even if it meant raising interest rates at the expense — at least temporarily — of jobs.

The second paper, published in the *Journal of Political Economy* in 1968, argued that attempts by central banks to maintain employment above its equilibrium level would end in an inflationary upsurge.

Orthodox Keynesians had thought

that higher inflation was a price worth paying for lower unemployment. But this idea was abandoned after the experience with high and unstable inflation in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Phelps could consider himself vindicated. As he noted in his Nobel address, his 1967 paper was the intellectual ancestor of the inflation targeting that guides central banking to this day. As he put it: "Inflation will still be capable of ups and downs, but it cannot go far if the expected inflation rate is under control."

The faith in central bankers' capacity to keep inflation expectations under control is widely considered to have enabled them to steer the global economy towards a soft landing after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Born in Evanston, Illinois in 1933, Phelps grew up in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, where he played lead trumpet in his high school band. He went on to attend Amherst, where he focused on humanities before turning to economics. He did his PhD at Yale, where he came under the tutelage of James Tobin, an intellectual leader of American Keynesians and a Nobel laureate.

Phelps researched and taught at Yale

until 1966. He then moved to the University of Pennsylvania, where he wrote the papers that made him famous. He moved to Columbia University in the summer of 1971, where he met his future wife Viviana Montdor. They married in 1974.

The contributions by Phelps came at around the same time Milton Friedman was establishing the concept of a "natural rate of unemployment". But Phelps was not awarded the Nobel Prize until 2006 — weeks after the death of Friedman, who had become a laureate 30 years earlier.

Harvard University's Kenneth Rogoff, a former chief economist of the IMF, told the FT that "Phelps, along with Friedman, argued that central banks can largely dictate long-run inflation but have little control over long-run average output growth. Modern-day research has qualified these results in some important dimensions but they remain a core starting point for discussion."

Olivier Blanchard, also a former chief economist of the IMF, adds that "his style was highly idiosyncratic... He did not listen much to others, pursuing his agenda with focus and passion."



Phelps made seminal contributions to the field of macroeconomics

'His style was highly idiosyncratic... He did not listen much to others, pursuing his agenda with focus and passion'

Prior to his seminal contributions to macroeconomics, Phelps published papers on the "Golden Rule" of capital formation. The aim, he said, should be to maximise what economists call "steady-state" consumption per head. To achieve this, the savings rate should equal the share of income going to capital.

Phelps was committed to understanding the social, political and philosophical context for markets. In 1997, he published the book *Rewarding Work*, in which he argued for wage subsidies as a way of ensuring that prosperity could be better shared.

He was founding director of the Center for Capitalism and Society at Columbia, from 2001 to its closure in 2024. In 2013 he published the book *Mass Flourishing*, a statement of his belief that "modern values" — a shared desire to create, explore and meet challenges — were the wellsprings of economic dynamism, but were being lost.

"That he remained so engaged in thinking, writing and debating till so late in life — another parallel to Friedman — is an inspiration to all of us in the profession," says Raghuram Rajan of the University of Chicago. *Claire Jones and Martin Wolf*

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YOUR VOICE

I resisted playing mahjong, fearful that it was an admission

By Kerry Lester Kasper

I have spent a large portion of my adult life attempting to prove that I am strong, tough and efficient. To myself? Absolutely. And to others and the outside world? Admittedly, there is a needy, vain element of that. “Pick me,” some unloved inner child begs.

This has led me, over recent years, to run marathons, striving to hit Boston qualifier times, and complete law school and pass the bar exam. I’ve battled to stay at the same number on the scale I was before child-birth. (If Fred Rogers was able to maintain the same weight his entire adult life, I have frequently remarked, I can, too.)

Every day, I count miles and calories, work hours, and my younger daughter’s sugar, fruit and vegetable consumption. Once age 40 hit, I added a multistep skin-care routine, and I have been recently tracking my sleep score and weekly alcohol units.

Still, I had, until recently, steadfastly refused to participate in mahjong’s trendy resurgence among the Chicago and suburban mom set.

Getting invited to mahjong parties feels a bit like the adult version of the training bra meetings in “Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret.” (For those of us who grew up reading Judy Blume.) Who’s going? Who’s organizing? Am I part of a popular crowd?

“If I have any extra time, I want to spend it on a run, maybe have a cocktail,” I remarked to my neighbor and running pal on a recent morning during our regular 5:50 a.m. trek through Lincoln Park. Our route, down a swath of the lakefront path, always ends



People play mahjong at the Mahjong Lair at Dragon Well on Oct. 28, 2025, in San Francisco. JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY

at an overpriced coffee shop where I’ve become fearful the mornings baristas think of us as Karens.

We’re different in many ways, my neighbor and I, but align closely regarding how to spend our free time, which we both purport to have very little of.

But enter a school fundraiser thrown by a group of first-grade mothers at my 7-year-old’s school. Mahjong De Mayo — an event that could not be more quintessentially “Lincoln Park Mom” — was to be held at Summer House, the spot that keeps bottles of rosé wine within easy reach around the restaurant in pastel Yeti coolers.

A classroom mom asked if I was going.

“These are nice people! You should be more social!” my inner voice nagged. I found myself purchasing a ticket, while simultaneously contemplating my outs.

“You’ll be back from Springfield late Tuesday, right?” I asked my husband, who lobbies at the Capitol during the spring session. “No, I should be back by early evening,” he told me, eliminating any thought I had of claiming to be landlocked with the kids. “I don’t really like to go out,” I thought to myself, partly true. But after a spring juggling one daughter’s maniacal Irish dancing schedule during St. Patrick’s Day season, and another’s lacrosse season and recent pre- and post-prom gauntlet of

events, even that excuse rang a little hollow. I needed a reminder that I was not just a source of rides and snacks and permission.

As the event approached, I thought about just why I have become so averse to learning to play mahjong, in particular.

This wasn’t about the company, the timing or location of the event or even the cost of admission.

It was what mahjong suggests about me.

Playing the game admits I have time. It admits I’m getting old. It admits I’d be a part of a sort of “ladies who lunch” set.

There’s also something about it that feels decisively unfeminist, conjuring up Betty Friedan using bridge games to symbolize being trapped in a shallow, stifled life in “The Feminine Mystique.”

That Tuesday night, I sat at a table with a lawyer, a doctor and a junior kindergarten teacher, a glass of wine balancing on my lap as I learned some of the rules and lingo. Bam. Dot. Crack.

“You won’t be able to pay attention to anything but the game at hand,” our instructor Jen said.

And perhaps, therein, lies the draw. For an hour and a half, I did think — but not of work, parenting or the endless to-do list. I moved my tiles from east to west, questioned and strategized.

But could that energy and engagement be channeled into something more productive?

Something to think about over that run or cocktail. Though I’m glad I tried one game, for now, I fold.

Kerry Lester Kasper is a Chicago-based writer.

Voice of the People

Invisible to Black Chicagoans

Mayor Brandon Johnson’s vision for Chicago 2050 sounds inspiring on paper (“Building the city for a bright future,” May 17). The words are polished, hopeful and ambitious. But for many Black residents who have lived through decades of broken promises, disinvestment and exclusion, this vision feels more like political theater than lived reality.

Johnson speaks of equity, opportunity, affordable housing and economic growth “for everyone,” yet many grassroots Black communities still see little evidence that these investments are truly reaching us. According to recent data from the city of Chicago and advocacy organizations, Black-owned businesses continue to receive a disproportionately small share of major city contracts and access to development capital compared with their representation in the city’s population. At the same time, many longtime Black residents have been displaced from historically Black neighborhoods due to rising costs, lack of homeownership protections and uneven economic investment.

Large-scale developments, billion-dollar projects and tourism records may look impressive in headlines, but who is truly benefiting? Too often, these opportunities circulate among well-connected developers, corporations and outside interests, while longtime Black residents and small Black contractors remain locked out. Many Black communities are not experiencing revitalization — they are experiencing removal.

The reality on the ground does not match the rhetoric. Families are still struggling to access affordable housing, quality mental healthcare, sustainable employment, and real pathways to ownership and wealth creation. Black entrepreneurs continue to face tremendous obstacles securing funding, city contracts and institutional support. According to U.S. census data, the median household wealth and homeownership rates for Black Chicagoans remain significantly lower than those of white households, reflecting long-standing systemic inequities that speeches alone cannot solve.

Chicago cannot claim progress while entire Black communities feel invisible within that progress.

If Chicago 2050 is truly about building a city where every resident can thrive, then accountability must accompany vision. Equity cannot simply be a talking point used in speeches and press releases. It must produce measurable outcomes in Black neighborhoods that have historically carried the burden of economic inequity, violence, environmental injustice and political neglect.

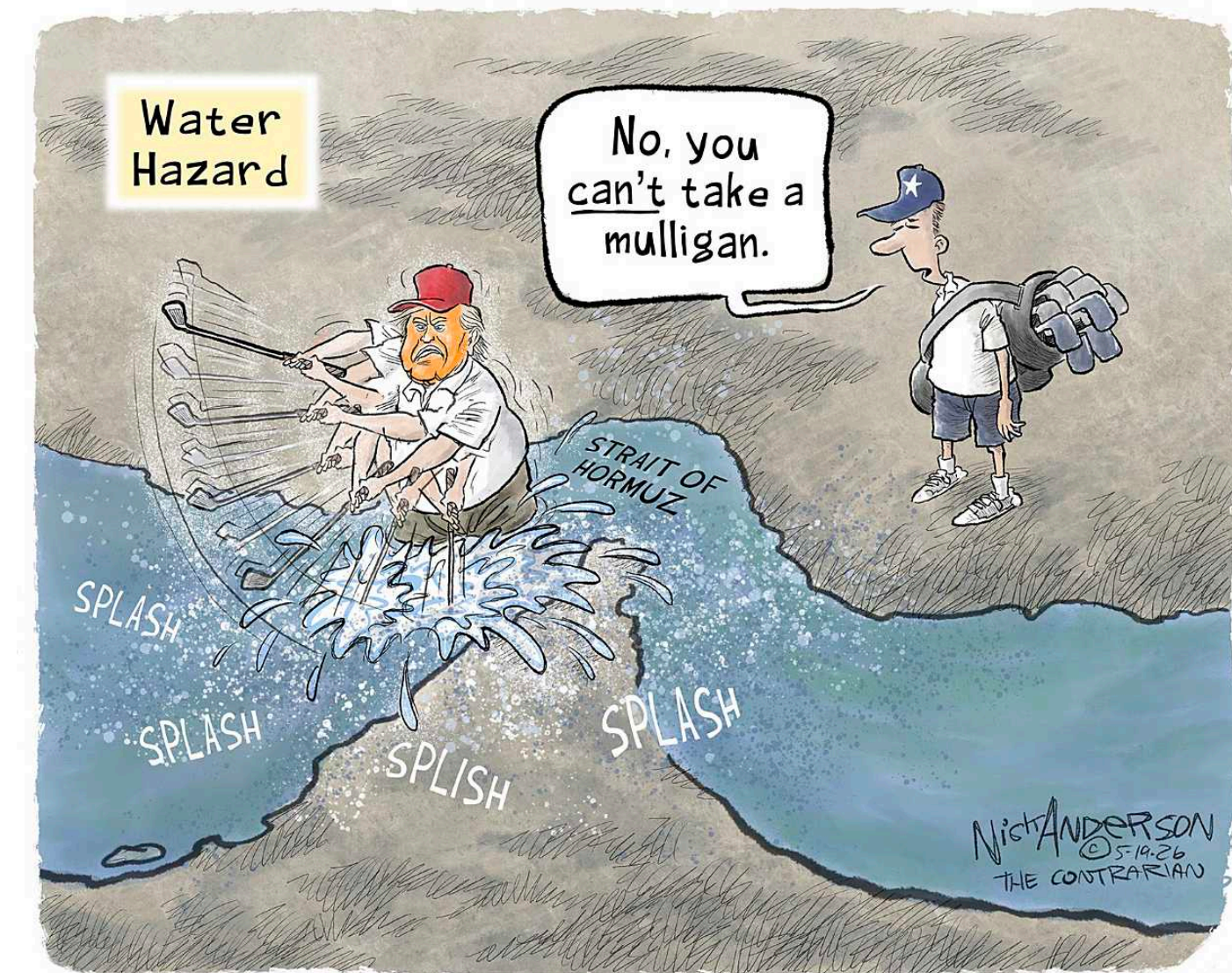
Chicago’s future should not be built on smoke and mirrors. It should be built on transparency, inclusion and direct investment into the people who have remained committed to this city despite decades of being pushed aside.

The question remains: Will Black communities finally be true participants in Chicago’s future prosperity — or merely witnesses to it?

— *Theresa B. Hughes, Chicago*

How will state fix oil well sites?

I read with interest the May 17 article “I



NICK ANDERSON

mysterious company, 603 abandoned oil wells” about abandoned oil wells in Southern Illinois, the continuing contamination dangers facing the area and the potential cost to the state to resolve the issue. The reporters present a through explanation on what led up to this crisis, but other than giving a cost figure on resolving it, they do not offer any answers on how the state can resolve it.

A follow-up article on how and when state officials are planning to do so would be appreciated by all, particularly those in the areas where these wells are located.

— *Bernard Biernacki, Aurora*

Memories of Sianis, the Goat

I worked my way through college at the Tribune when its offices were on Michigan Avenue at Tribune Tower. I was 21 and living paycheck to paycheck. My co-workers and I would go out on payday (every other Friday) and enjoy a little of the downtown bar scene, but would always end the night back at Billy Goat Tavern. It was a good meeting spot as it was conveniently located underneath the Tower, and the cost of a beer was a better fit for our budget.

I remember stopping in many times with my friends just before the closing hour to get a cheeseburger and a beer before calling it a night. At that hour, the place was fairly empty. But you would always see the owner, Sam Sianis, talking with one of the regular barflies. Of the many in that cate-

gory, the two most memorable to me were Mike Royko, the famous local columnist, and Charlie Finley, the wealthy businessman and owner of the Oakland A’s. One or the other always seemed to be there when we stumbled in.

We would respectfully sit down and try to join in their conversations. I recall Royko didn’t suffer fools very much and accordingly didn’t engage much with our group. But Finley was a fun-loving, storytelling guy who embraced our drunken company despite all the stupid trade proposals we made on behalf of our beloved White Sox and Cubs.

I was sorry to hear about Sam’s recent passing but had to smile as it rekindled fond memories of late nights gone by.

— *Steven Fortuna, Naperville*

Visit firefighter memorial, too

Regarding the op-ed about the 1934 Union Stock Yards fire and the suggestion to go see the Stock Yards Gate (“The Union Stock Yards burned in a city still holding on to a century of progress,” May 19), I would also recommend viewing the nearby memorial to Chicago firefighters. It’s only a few steps behind the gate in a shaded park. A sculpture “The Fallen 21” commemorates the 21 firefighters killed in a more deadly Stock Yards fire in 1910. Also etched in the base of the memorial are the names of the many Chicago firefighters killed in the line of duty.

— *Linda LaMontagne, Willowbrook*

Stop giving store owner publicity

Will the Tribune please explain why it continues to give free publicity to the Trump Truth Store? A story about it was on the front page twice previously and was on Page 3 of the May 16 paper.

— *Alice Herman, Highland Park*

Make the prep liquid palatable

I’m in 100% agreement with Dr. Andrew Albert (“Get screened for colorectal cancer,” May 17) regarding the importance of getting screened for colorectal cancer.

However, I have found it to be one of the great mysteries of life that science has been able to put a man on the moon but unable to make a colonoscopy prep liquid that tastes like chocolate.

— *David Grossman, Chicago*

Note to readers

We’d like to hear from CTA riders about what frustrates you about the CTA as well as what you’re grateful for. (Sincere thoughts only.) Send a letter by Thursday, May 28 of no more than 400 words to letters@chicagotribune.com. Be sure to include your full name and city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

Opinion

People will die of Ebola because of U.S.A.I.D. cuts

We now have far less capacity to fight outbreaks.

Craig Spencer

As soon as I heard about the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo, I knew it was going to be catastrophic.

Last Friday, the D.R.C. reported 246 suspected cases. Most Ebola outbreaks end before they get that big. The same day, reports emerged that someone had died of Ebola hundreds of miles away in Kampala, Uganda's most populous city. About a week after it was first declared, this is already the third-largest Ebola outbreak in history.

I've seen Ebola up close. I got it while treating patients in West Africa in 2014. I know how destructive the disease can be — and how unprepared we are for its return.

After the 2014 outbreak, which killed over 11,000 people, the world strengthened systems to catch and contain Ebola outbreaks early. Much of that infrastructure — surveillance networks, rapid response teams and diplomatic partnerships — has been dismantled over the past year, as the United States abdicated its longstanding role as a leader in global health and humanitarian response.

Ebola is often called a disease of compassion because it finds its victims among the people who stay close when loved ones or their patients fall ill. This means parents taking care of their sick children, family members who wash the bodies of their dead relatives and

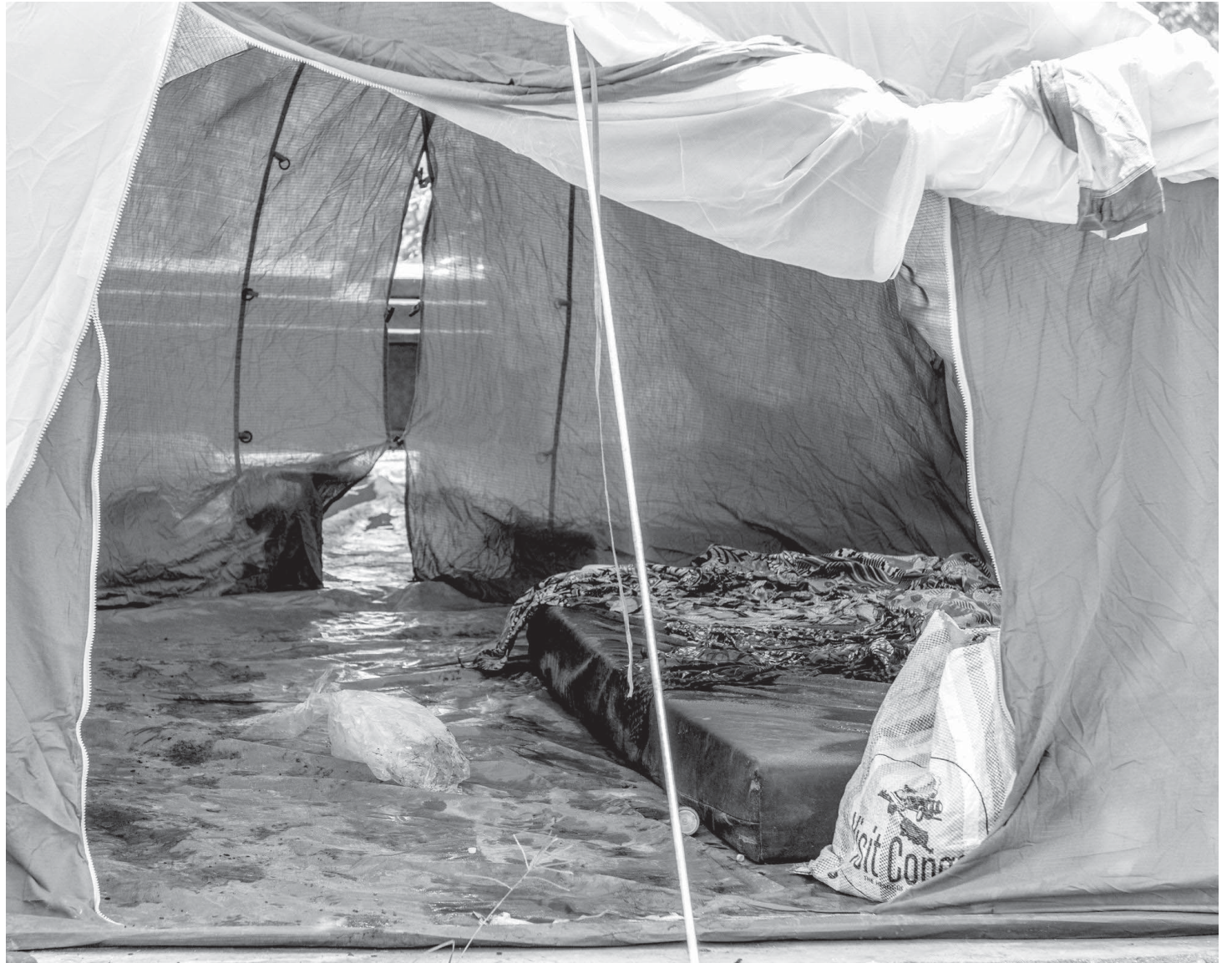
Elon Musk boasted about feeding the aid agency into a "wood chipper."

health care providers who take care of patients at the most contagious stage of their illness. When I was working in Guinea, I admitted seven members of one family into our Ebola treatment unit. Even as the parents battled Ebola, they spent all day taking care of their children. In the end, only the parents survived.

If the outbreak were caused by the more common Zaire strain of Ebola, we'd now be able to provide a recently developed vaccine to family members of infected patients and to health care workers. But we have no effective treatments or vaccines for the rare Bundibugyo strain of Ebola driving the current outbreak.

We'll need to rely on bread-and-butter outbreak response measures, like contact tracing, isolation and community support. These are hard to carry out under ideal conditions. And the eastern part of Congo, where this outbreak is concentrated, is anything but ideal. Armed conflict has forced millions from their homes and left many health facilities damaged or destroyed. An Ebola outbreak in the region in 2018 took nearly two years to contain.

This time around, we have far less capacity to respond. In the first weeks of the second Trump administration, Elon Musk gleefully boasted about feeding the United States Agency for International Development into a "wood chipper." The dismantling of U.S. foreign aid left clinics, community health workers and humanitarian



MOSES SAWASAWA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

organizations that formed the backbone of health care across eastern Congo without crucial funding.

Slashed alongside the agency was a specialized rapid response team — dozens of experts, including people with direct Ebola response experience, trained and ready to deploy for exactly this kind of moment. During previous Ebola outbreaks, these teams would fund efforts to train communities on safer burial practices to limit spread from highly contagious corpses and set up airport screening to prevent symptomatic travelers from boarding planes.

At a cabinet meeting weeks after his wood-chipper post, as an Ebola outbreak was developing in Uganda, Mr. Musk sheepishly admitted, "one of the things we accidentally canceled, very briefly, was Ebola and Ebola prevention," but assured everyone that the funding had been restored.

We're already seeing the fallout of

these cuts. The New York Times reported that the delay in detecting the virus stemmed in part from the fact that samples had been transported to a lab in Kinshasa at the wrong temperature, something U.S.A.I.D. would have previously overseen. By the time U.S. officials learned of the outbreak, it had been nearly a month since the first death.

In his first term, President Trump dissolved the National Security Council's global health security team, put in place after the 2014 Ebola epidemic, and now, in his second term, he has hollowed out the White House's Office of Pandemic Preparedness and Response Policy. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — which helps coordinate early response and contact tracing in a crisis like this — lost a quarter of its staff members in the past year and has had no permanent director for 15 of the last 16 months.

In 2015, after surviving Ebola, I

returned to Guinea with Doctors Without Borders. I distinctly remember C.D.C. and World Health Organization colleagues working side by side, tracking the outbreak and chasing down new cases. Such collaboration would be much more difficult today; ever since the Trump administration withdrew from the W.H.O., C.D.C. staff members have been barred from working with the organization.

The United States cannot quickly reverse our abdication of leadership on the global health stage. But we can bolster our response to this crisis. There should be a steadfast commitment to working closely and coordinating with essential partners like the W.H.O. We need to mobilize funding and experts, speed up the development of new treatments, and increase resources for protective equipment and expanded testing.

I've responded to many outbreaks and conflicts, but treating Ebola pa-

tients was the hardest thing I've ever done. Ebola is a cruel and horrific disease. I'd often speak to patients in the morning and come back in the afternoon to find them dead. In 2014 I treated two brothers, just 6 and 8 years old. After their mother died, their grandfather brought them to our treatment center. When I first met them, they were rambunctious and relentlessly smiling. We found them toys to play with, and every day I encouraged them to eat, drink and rest. Over the next week, both rapidly declined. I was in their room when they died. Weeks later, when I was in the hospital with Ebola myself, I thought of them every day. And 12 years later, I still start crying as I think about losing them.

CRAIG SPENCER is an emergency medicine physician and an associate professor at the Brown University School of Public Health.

There are no effective treatments or vaccines for the rare Bundibugyo strain of Ebola driving the current outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The agony around the Democrats' mysterious autopsy

After this fiasco, Ken Martin, the chair of the D.N.C., should be replaced.



Michelle Goldberg

Rarely has a document been at once as mysterious and anticlimactic as the Democratic National Committee's autopsy of what went wrong in the 2024 election, which, after much drama and angst, was finally published on Thursday.

The committee's chair, Ken Martin, promised a full audit of party operations when he was running for his seat, and again when he won it. Last July, officials said it would be out in the fall. Fall came and went, and in December, Martin said it wouldn't be released at all. By hiding it, Martin made the report an object of suspicion and fascination. Some thought he was protecting Kamala Harris ahead of 2028. Many progressives were convinced that the D.N.C. quashed the autopsy because it would show Harris was done in by Gaza. Rob Flaherty, who'd been deputy director of both the Harris and Joe Biden campaigns, speculated that it didn't even exist: "The members of the 'autopsy team' were in over their heads and struggled to put the thing together."

Flaherty was partly right. On Thursday, in response to reporting by CNN, Martin released an incomplete version

of the report, a project he'd assigned, on a part-time, volunteer basis, to the Democratic consultant Paul Rivera. The document, it's now clear, was kept under wraps not because it was impolitic, but because it's a disaster.

What's most striking is its utter lack of substance. The words "Israel" and "Gaza" don't appear once in its 192 pages. It offers little insight into why the Democratic Party lost large numbers of Black and Latino men, or its failure to speak to disconnected, irregular voters. Much of it is a string of platitudes, like this: "It's imperative that Democrats meet the moment — by identifying and preparing the leaders and organizers who will deliver positive change for America." I wondered if it was written by A.I., though A.I. probably would've done a better job.

At one point, the autopsy notes that in North Carolina, Josh Stein, the successful Democratic candidate for governor, significantly outperformed Harris. The report acknowledges that Stein had the benefit of a ridiculous opponent, the former lieutenant governor and porn message-board habitué Mark Robinson ("a self-described Nazi most voters would never support"). Still, based on Stein's victory, the audit asserts, with startling complacency, "The problem wasn't Democratic policy or party brand" but "Harris as a candidate."

Elsewhere, the autopsy claims that Harris's campaign didn't sufficiently incorporate polling data into its messaging, as if her operation suffered from a surfeit of authenticity and spontaneity. It's the opposite of the conclusion reached by Flaherty, who published his



DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

own much more trenchant version of an autopsy this month in *The Bulwark*. "We tend to poll-test our way into running a lot of mealy-mouthed ads about prescription drugs or whatever," he wrote of Democrats, while Republicans are better at driving viral narratives.

Rivera's report makes a few fair points. It's correct, for example, that the right has far outdone progressives in building permanent infrastructure like Turning Point, the organization for young conservatives, while Democrats and their allies "make massive investments in media towards the end of an election cycle and then go dark." But even where the autopsy is right, it's often so airy as to be almost meaningless. Democrats, it tells us, need to do more year-round organizing, invest

more in digital advertising, and speak about "kitchen table" concerns rather than "identity politics." "The losses in the states are the key trend Democrats need to reverse," it says. Rivera might have added that Democrats need to win more votes.

In a statement, Martin acknowledged that the autopsy was a failure. When he received it, he wrote, he knew "it wasn't ready for prime time — not even close — and because no source material was provided, it would have meant starting over." What's most bizarre and damning, however, is not the shoddiness of the work itself, but the way Martin let his initial screw-up fester until it looked like a coverup.

Martin might have defused the situation by telling the truth — that the draft

he received was a mess — and commissioning a new one. Instead, he let it become a crisis. At a time when the D.N.C., under his leadership, appears to be nearly insolvent, multiple Democratic donors are reportedly withholding contributions because of Martin's handling of the report. "I talk to donors constantly who refuse to give to the D.N.C.," said Amanda Litman, head of Run for Something, which recruits young progressives to seek office. "They cannot trust Ken Martin. They cannot trust the institution is doing its job well." A project that was supposed to restore trust to the party instead undermined it.

Now that the autopsy is out there, it does tell us one important thing about the Democratic Party's future: Martin should be replaced. I've spoken to Democrats, progressives and moderates alike, say who say he's insular and thin-skinned, a man who won his seat by promising perks to voting members rather than articulating a compelling vision. "Ken Martin is in way over his head and doesn't know how to do politics at the national level," said Phil Gardner, a founder of the centrist Blue Dog Action. The growing displeasure with Martin's leadership isn't ideological. It's operational.

Democrats know they have a problem. As *The Associated Press* reported this month, operatives have already approached Litman to gauge her interest in replacing Martin. She said no — she likes the job she has — but still believes he needs to go. "We can't tolerate mediocrity," she told me. Every step of this autopsy process shows Democrats doing exactly that.

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Trump pardons himself and his family forever

Jeffrey Toobin
Contributing Writer

For decades there have been disagreements among constitutional scholars about whether a president can pardon himself. But Todd Blanche, the acting attorney general, just gave President Trump something even better: preemptive exoneration from all potential criminal liability for certain financial crimes. He also guaranteed that the federal government would not be able to pursue tax claims against the president (or his family or his businesses).

Mr. Blanche wrote a new chapter in the history of the presidency, elevating the office to a point where Mr. Trump and his family are declared exempt from the rules that apply to his fellow citizens.

The details of this gift were posted on the Department of Justice website on Tuesday. The document is only a single page, and the language is (perhaps intentionally) convoluted, but the meaning turns out to be clear.

The president is now exempt from the rules that apply to his fellow citizens.

The United States agrees that it is "FOREVER BARRED and PRECLUDED from prosecuting or pursuing" President Trump, his eldest sons or any of their businesses.

The agreement covers matters "whether presently known or unknown" and cases that "have been or could have been asserted" by the government.

This means that the longstanding Internal Revenue Service audit of Mr. Trump, which dates back to his days as a television star and real estate developer, will most likely end on terms favorable to him. An adverse ruling in that case could have cost him more than \$100 million.

But that's just the beginning. The document places off limits the investigation of any tax disputes (or tax crimes) regarding returns that were filed before this week.

If something comes to light in the future about misconduct or malfeasance relating to the Trump family's tax filings, as long as it took place before the agree-

American do not apply to him or his family. By my reading, the document explicitly forbids the government to challenge the legality of any trusts, which can survive in perpetuity. In this way, Mr. Blanche's memo is a gift to subsequent generations of the Trump family.

Mr. Blanche's largess appeared in the aftermath of Mr. Trump's \$10 billion lawsuit against the I.R.S., which he and his two eldest sons filed in January to demand compensation for the leaking of his tax returns. Since Mr. Trump was both the plaintiff and in control of the defendant agency, the case from the beginning was fatally compromised by a conflict of interest. For that reason, it's hard to describe its conclusion as a settlement, which implies the end of a lawsuit that involves actually opposing parties.

Another part of the resolution of the case was the creation Monday of a \$1.776 billion federal "Anti-Weaponization Fund" to compensate supposed victims of unfair federal investigations. Decisions about who receives payment, and how much, are to be left to a five-member panel, whose members the attorney general will appoint and the president can remove at will.

The likely main claimants on these dollars are the nearly 1,600 rioters at the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, whom Trump pardoned on the first day of his second term. As Mr. Blanche testified Tuesday, all of the rioters are welcome to apply, including those who were convicted of assaulting police officers and others who have subsequently committed further crimes.

The creation of the fund set a theme of presidential exception that extended to Mr. Blanche's document the next day relieving Mr. Trump of significant financial liability. The fund's panel, which Mr. Trump will effectively control, will be able to dispense millions of dollars to his allies, unconstrained by checks and balances, especially those that direct that Congress, not the president, holds the power of the federal purse.

The Supreme Court's 2024 decision in *Trump v. United States* already foreclosed investigation or prosecution of the president for any "official" actions taken while in office. But the Blanche document excuses him from federal inquiry for civil enforcement like tax audits and lawsuits to recover back taxes.

It's this civil immunity that makes Mr. Blanche's offering better than a presidential pardon, which can offer protection only from criminal charges.

What can be done to overrule this action by the acting attorney general? Lawsuits will surely be fruitless; no plaintiff has standing to sue because it's hard to imagine that anyone could assert having been injured by the Blanche document. A new Congress could attempt somehow to overrule Mr. Blanche's decision, but the courts would very likely find that the acting attorney general's determination was within his discretion as the nation's chief law enforcement officer.

A future Justice Department could try to investigate or charge Mr. Trump in spite of the Blanche document, on the grounds that it was somehow corrupt and unenforceable. But such an action, years in the future, sounds like a law school hypothetical.

By establishing this precedent, the Blanche document could echo into the future, creating an expectation among future presidents that they and their families, like the Trumps, deserve to be elevated to this new caste.

Mr. Blanche has demonstrated his fealty to his boss and, he presumably hopes, won Mr. Trump's agreement to nominate him to be the confirmed attorney general. The Blanche document shelters the president and his family from significant legal liability, once more adapting the law to the man.

JEFFREY TOOBIN is the author of "The Pardon: The Politics of Presidential Mercy."

What schools are forgetting in their race to embrace A.I.

David Wallace-Wells

Emerging from a bunker into 2026 and, among other disorientations, it might seem a bit strange that just as a wave of phone bans is sweeping America's schools, so too is A.I. — with children as young as kindergarten now learning to read on tablets running interactive "learning agents." You might think that the winds of pedagogical change have begun to blow in a bit of a Waldorf direction, but the first lady, Melania Trump, has made the cause of putting A.I. in every classroom her equivalent of crusading for libraries or healthy eating, and 5- and 6-year-olds across New York City are already learning to read from what The New Yorker's Jessica Winter called a "gamified reading bot" named Amira.

In New York State, phones are now banned in all public schools, from kindergarten to 12th grade. More than two dozen other states have enacted similar policies. The early data on such bans looks pretty ambiguous to me, less like a silver-bullet cure-all for what ails American teens and more as if we've achieved what might be a small uptick in well-being and achievement. But I can't really object to the restrictions, even as a relative skeptic of the smartphone theory of everything. That's because attention in class is pretty precious and there's no way the presence of phones doesn't degrade it, even if only on the margins. Nobody used to tolerate a Walkman or a gaming console in algebra either, and I can't say I'm surprised that, in those places where phone bans have been implemented, teachers seem pretty elated.

But in many places where phones are being withdrawn and sealed in Yondr pouches, A.I. has infiltrated already. Not all technology is the same, of course, and A.I. tutors represent a different kind of educational promise, at least in theory. But over the past few decades, one dream techno fix has followed the last in the imagination of education reformers, sometimes with great fanfare: laptops in classrooms, tablets, Khan Academy video tutorials or MOOCs. The hope, each time, was that technology could do some of what we'd always relied on scarce humans to deliver, allowing more customization of learning and freeing up overworked teachers to spend their time in more targeted ways. And overall, the returns have been disappointing at best. Some researchers even suggest that it is precisely the arrival of technology in American classrooms, starting about 25 years ago, that best explains recent declines in American academic performance. "This has been the greatest blunder in the past decade of K-12 education," Molly Worthen wrote in *The Times* last month — "the decision to give every child a personal computer and to gamify everything from standardized test preparation to recess."

"My son's math homework is essentially just Pokémon," *The Atlantic's* Will Oremus recently lamented, observing that more than 10 minutes of work his 11-year-old had done involved only about 30 seconds of math — and a few bursts of pop-up ads. Thanks to technology in the classroom, unsupervised video intrudes, too: Last month, *The Wall Street Journal* documented the experience of one seventh grader in Kansas who'd gained access to more than 13,000 YouTube videos during school hours between December 2024 and February 2025. In New York, one second grader had watched over 700 videos during school hours in just two months, *The Journal's* Shalini Ramachandran reported. A 10th grader in Oregon watched 200 in less than three hours on a single day.

And now comes A.I. In New York City, Amira listens to children trying to read, offers feedback and correctives and collects data. It's already in place in approximately 150 schools across the city, teaching many thousands of children, *New York* magazine recently reported, under the headline "Help! My Kindergarten Is All in on A.I.," in San Francisco, Amira administered reading assessments for first and second graders. In Boston, sixth graders had prepared for year-end standardized tests by working with ChatGPT and Claude, according to *The New Yorker*; in L.A., fourth graders using A.I. in art class produced a "highly sexualized" Pippi Longstocking book cover.

These are not exactly isolated incidents, small hallucinations in an otherwise sane and stable system. In April 2025, one month after he issued an executive order aimed at abolishing the Department of Education, President Trump issued one calling for A.I. to be incorporated into the curriculums of American public schools at all grade levels.

A majority of parents and high schoolers believe that doing so would be harmful to students, RAND found

last fall. But only 22 percent of district leaders agreed. When New York City began soliciting public input on guidelines for A.I. use in schools this spring, the Department of Education gestured at the importance of human relationships, but also framed its outreach this way: "The question is not whether A.I. belongs in schools. The question is whether we will collectively build a system that governs A.I. to serve every student and every stakeholder." As Winter put it last month, "It's quite the rhetorical sleight of hand — opening a debate by declaring its central premise off limits."

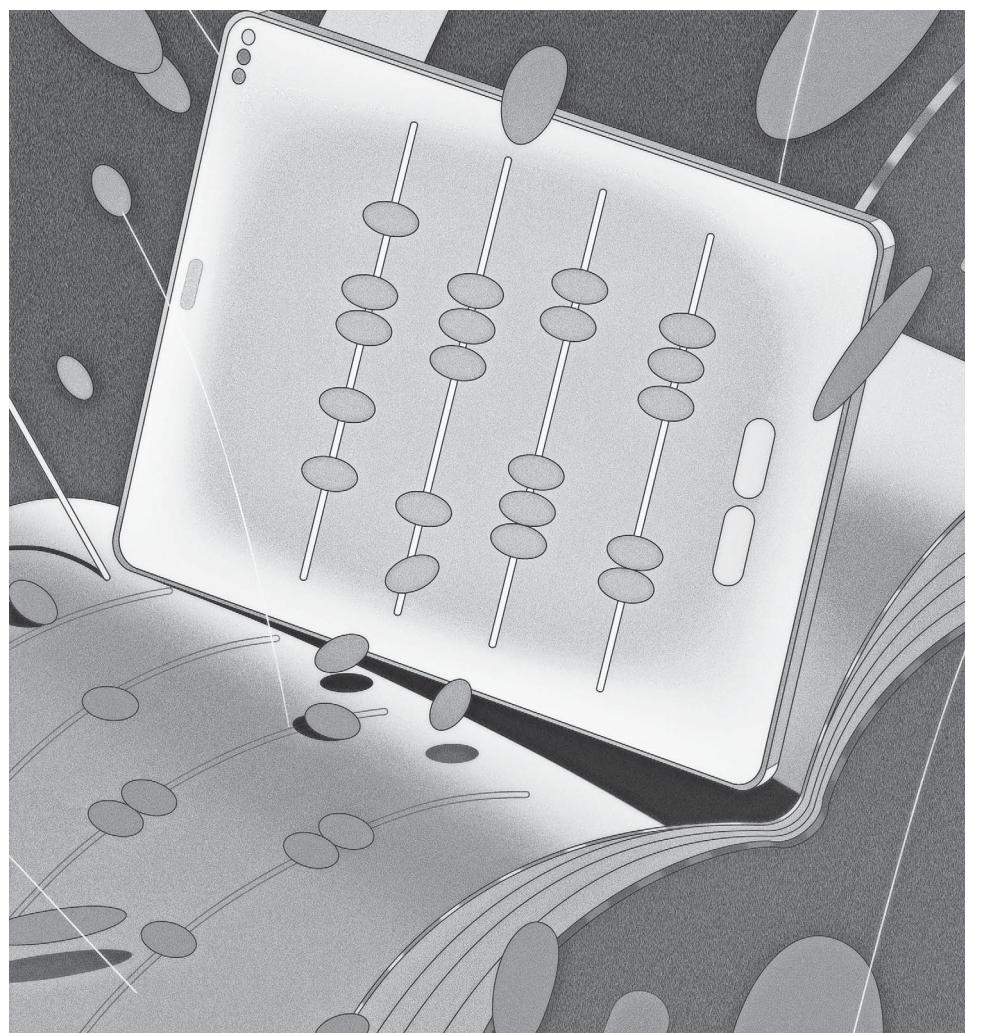
Parents and advocates haven't entirely abided by such restrictions, as my colleague Natasha Singer reported last month. In late April, the new New York City schools chancellor announced that, in the face of public outrage, an A.I.-focused high school that had been scheduled to open next fall would now be put on hold. The city needed more time to plan, he suggested; the chairman of the city's Panel for Educational Policy admitted

Utah town hall to demand, about a 62-square-mile, \$100 billion project proposed for Box Elder County, "who asked for this?" the answer isn't difficult to come up with. It's the developer trying to build the data center and the hyperscalers desperate to make use of it.

With schools, it's a lot less obvious how exactly we got here in the first place, with A.I. planted so quickly in classrooms and curriculums that parents and advocates are left to try to weed it out. Or at least institute some common-sense guidelines: more public input, more transparency about what products are being used, more restrictions on data collection and student privacy and above all, perhaps, more rigor regarding whether or to what degree the tools being used are actually helpful to student achievement. This isn't just resistance from the familiar coalition, in other words. It's parents shocked at how quickly some very new technology has so hastily remade school for their kids. These are 5- and 6-year-old brains we're now

themselves out of an actual education by using A.I. tools; the basic worry was that A.I. would find its way into the classroom, and into schoolwork, almost regardless of the precautions taken by teachers and administrators. But in many cases, now, it is the schools themselves that have incorporated A.I. tools into their curriculums, and while not all such tools are the same, to date there is pretty limited evidence that they might help.

So how did it happen all over again, and so fast, with yet another new technology? One partial explanation comes from genuinely hopeful evangelism, the possibility that new tools might allow us to do better. Another comes from a kind of related desperation about how hard it has been to end the stagnation of American educational achievement. (Would-be reformers have worried that American students were falling behind for many decades, and the past dozen years have traced some striking test-score declines.) To their boosters, the tools promise to unburden teachers and deliver some-



IBRAHIM RAYINTAKATI

that the panel had had no briefings on A.I. research at all. Soon thereafter, enough parents flooded a P.E.P. hearing that the meeting ran almost seven hours, with more than 100 speaking out against A.I. even though it was not meant to be the focus of the meeting. "The intense outrage among parents in New York City is as great as I've seen it on any education issue that I've been working on for 25 years," the education advocate Leonie Haimson told *The Times*. She put it more baldly to me: "The opposition is growing like a tidal wave."

You hear similar things, these days, about the broader A.I. backlash that has lately flooded into town halls and community meetings around the country, with data centers offering a focal point around which Americans have clustered various social and political anxieties — about water use and the cost of energy, about oligarchy and the immense power of a small handful of A.I. founders, about the rapid conquest of our

imagined future by A.I. and how little democratic control has been exercised over that future. Whoever can channel the backlash into political energy has an enormous advantage in upcoming elections, political analysts have begun to project, as poll after poll shows resentment and hostility growing swiftly.

But the fight over A.I. in schools isn't just a piece of the broader opposition. The logic of how A.I. infrastructure is being built remains somewhat intuitive and recognizably American — big companies with cash to burn buying up plots of land to develop for their own purposes. If a protester stands up at a

running our Amira experiment on. Most Americans first heard of L.L.M.s less than four years ago, after all.

And it isn't just the smartphone backlash that makes this rush to embrace A.I. so confounding. It was just four or five years ago that Covid-era school closures had produced widespread anxiety — among parents, among policymakers — about the inadequacy of remote learning and the costs to students of conducting school through a small, personalized screen. Much of that alarm looks to me, in retrospect, excessive, given the way that what was called "pandemic learning loss" did not significantly accelerate long-running declines in test scores that both predated school closures and have outlasted them. But the impression lingers enough that parents object when local officials propose that, in the wake of massive snowstorms, schools might go remote for a single day. Working from a laptop in class is not the same thing as remote-only school, of course, but the lessons we thought we learned five years ago — about the downsides of screen dependence and the importance of embedding learning in a social environment — would certainly seem to counsel some caution.

Three or four years ago, the arrival of sophisticated A.I. chatbots produced a wave of panic about the catastrophic impacts on learning in high school and especially college: an epidemic of cheating and plagiarism; a work-around for deep reading and critical thinking; and the onset of what has been called "cognitive atrophy," the result of turning away from education as a kind of intellectual training and toward an approach to schoolwork as a matter of mechanical output. (You generate a term paper the way you buy a Snickers at the vending machine.) Much of the alarm was about how kids were essentially cheating

thing between a smaller class size and a genuinely personalized tutorlike school experience — a favorite fantasy for tech-minded reformers. And while many parents are likely to feel a reflexive queasiness about turning kindergarten over to A.I. tools, it's not entirely clear how representative those voices are. There is also a fear of being left behind — among parents, schools and districts — and a sense that, if the world really is changing this fast, maybe kids really would benefit from early exposure.

But I'd add another factor, not specific to schools: the fact that technological history is now narrated by way of what the political scientist Henry Farrell called, memorably, "feral thought experiments." By this he meant that, almost daily now, Americans are treated to glib forecasts of the technological future, with neat just-so stories about where we are headed — as though the changes had already happened, and the fights over them, too. The natural setting for these thought experiments might be the podcast studio or the conference stage, but they also beam out from opinion pages and congressional hearings. The result: Even amid remarkable resistance, the technology appears from many vantages to possess the shimmer and the solidity of a fait accompli. We tell ourselves that we know artificial intelligence will remake education and then race to make it so, without asking too many questions about what kind of future we're actually building. "The obvious rebuttal is no: We actually can't see the future of A.I.," Farrell writes. And it's not just in schools that we may be forgetting that.

DAVID WALLACE-WELLS is a writer for *Opinion* and *The Times Magazine* and the author of "The Uninhabitable Earth."

OPINION

Don't sleep on the power of great oratory

Ben Rhodes
Contributing Writer

When did you last hear a speech that made you hopeful about the future? Here in California, speeches have not played much of a role in the campaign for governor. Instead, the primary has been a roller coaster of scandals, omnipresent ads, shout-filled debates, focus-grouped talking points, podcast appearances and the all-too-familiar pursuit of viral moments. The net result is that it feels as if you simultaneously know a lot and nothing at all about the candidates. Steve Hilton is a British-born Fox News personality who talks up California while talking down its big government. Tom Steyer is a billionaire investor who supports a progressive wish list. Xavier Becerra is either credentialed or disqualified by his lengthy government experience. Katie Porter is either celebrated or scorned for her sharp elbows. But where do these people want to lead us, and why? The last Californian who ascended to the height of American politics was propelled by a speech. In 1964, Ronald Reagan was an out-of-work actor recently let go by General Electric. Then he delivered a nationally televised speech — “A Time for Choosing” — that repackaged conservatism as a blend of common sense, unabashed religiosity and patriotic nostalgia; it was a story that vaulted him to the governor’s mansion and ultimately the White House. Forty years later, Barack Obama, then a state senator, had a similar success with his speech to the Democratic National Convention by casting liberalism and multiracial solidarity as a unifying formula for change. Reagan and Mr. Obama spoke their parties out of the political wilderness. Democrats today should recall that the pathway from their 2004 heartbreak to a 2008 landslide depended upon more than policy proposals or ideological positioning: It was forged through storytelling about American identity. The alchemy of democracy is the interplay between movements and power, culture and politics. Try, for a moment, to imagine the Reagan revo-

lution or the Obama coalition without the speeches that defined them. Or try to imagine the culture war without the grievance-filled language of Pat Buchanan, the civil rights movement without the oratory of Martin Luther King Jr. or abolitionism without the moral clarity of Frederick Douglass. History shows us that the words spoken by Americans matter — persuading, mobilizing and ultimately remaking the country itself. In recent years, technology has fractured how we consume information. Whereas radio prized plain-spoken explanation and television elevated charisma, the internet created infinite competition for our attention. Then social media sorted us into algorithmically polarized tribes. Political speech is now consumed in bite-size pieces designed to motivate or trigger the consumer. Storytelling has been eclipsed by viral moments and images. With artificial intelligence, human beings are no longer even needed to sustain this feedback loop. Much has been lost in the process: the capacity to make, or listen to, an entire argument. This has limited our experience of opposing views while making our own arguments poorer because they are often designed not to persuade but purely to reinforce pre-existing views. In this closing stretch of the California primary, every communication I see on a screen seems designed to convince me that a candidate either shares my views or cannot be trusted to do so. It is no coincidence that Donald Trump has dominated this era. Like that of other authoritarians, his emergence owed something to his ability to frighten and embolden a crowd, attacking a vast and amorphous Other. But it also depended on the breakdown of our capacity to speak to one another, to share a national identity or even to inhabit the same reality. Even those who disagree with the president often feel compelled to mimic his manner or forms of communication. Democrats from Hillary Clinton to Gavin Newsom have fired back at him on social media. Podcasts



DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

and YouTube shows have become a proving ground for presidential aspirants. Strategists pine for a communicator who can sell popular policy in pithy videos. Of course, it makes sense to reach voters where they are. But while speeches can summon Americans to a higher purpose, our current politics is lowering our expectations not just for the president but also for ourselves. Donald Trump is not simply a conductor of our national discourse: He is a mirror held up to the nation.

THE CLOSING ARGUMENT at the Constitutional Convention came from Benjamin Franklin. His speech defended the virtue of compromise itself. In it, he implored the delegates to rally behind an imperfect document as the best possible result. He also offered a warning. The new government “can only end in Despotism, as other Forms have done before it, when the People shall become so corrupted as to need Despotic Government, being incapable of any other.” The Constitution’s compromises

made the United States possible, but they also left the question of American identity unsettled. Are we a multiracial democracy committed to the ideal of equality for all? Or are we, as JD Vance argued last year, not a nation defined by a creed, but rather “a particular place, with a particular people and a particular set of beliefs and way of life”? The battle between these stories has shaped our politics for 250 years. And Mr. Trump has tapped into currents that have been there all along: populist grievances of the working class; white Christian nationalism that delegitimizes self-criticism; the demonization of immigrants, be they Irish, Chinese, Salvadoran or Somali; the deification of wealth; and distrust of government. These currents converge in a story of exceptionalism as old as the nation itself: America feels entitled to do whatever it wants to people within our borders, or to others beyond them. Politics feels existential today in part because Mr. Trump has sought to declare this battle over: He and his cronies have won. Power is concentrated in the hands of a strongman who starts wars and builds monuments to himself. The rich are looting the nation and its unraveling empire while most people cannot afford a tank of gas or imagine a future that is better for their children. This has opened a gap between the way most people feel and how most politicians communicate. In California, it has been dispiriting to watch candidates shout at each other about their credentials to reform housing laws while investors make billions off an A.I. boom that could wipe out jobs needed to pay rent. Our political debates feel divorced from how power functions, apportioning shrinking resources while Wall Street and Silicon Valley make record profits. We live in a cynical time, surrounded by forces that feel beyond our control. The world spirals into chaos, the algorithm shapes what we see, the oligarchy profits while people are impoverished, and our kids make friends with chatbots. Corruption, as Franklin worried, abounds. Through it all, Democrats have failed to tell a coherent story about what is happening to America, why it

matters and how we can get out of this spiral. In times like this, we need leaders who tell us hard truths while insisting that the present state of our politics is not permanent. The people don’t need despotic government, but they do need someone to tell them how to get out from under it. **WE ARE GETTING** close to the despotism Franklin feared. And it’s going to get worse before it gets better. We’ll get through this only if we have leaders who call on us to believe in something bigger than ourselves. Ironically, California disproves the MAGA story that seeks to govern our lives. We are not a particular place: At the time of America’s founding, much of what we now know as California was a distant province of the Spanish empire, populated by Indigenous tribes. We are not a particular people: The demographics of California looked nothing like those of any of the 13 colonies. We are not a particular way of life: California has incubated more ways of living than anyone could count, creating ripples that remade the world. For all those reasons, California ought to be a place where Democrats can make a case for an American identity that transcends nostalgia. Across the country, a few younger Democrats are beginning to paint a picture of a nation that stands for more than gratuitous displays of power and wealth, the bombs we drop on Iranian children or an oligarch purchasing the pageantry of the Met Gala: Jon Ossoff is arguing persuasively that rooting out corruption is the key to making government serve the people. James Talarico is describing how his faith compels a brand of politics in which we care for one another. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is demonstrating a cheerful fearlessness that defangs the powerful forces arrayed against her. They aren’t offering up pabulum about the past; they are making Americans believe in the future. And what could be more American than the lone voice in front of a crowd, insisting upon a morality infinitely bigger than our imperfect selves? **BEN RHODES** is the author, most recently, of “All We Say: The Battle for American Identity,” from which this essay is adapted.

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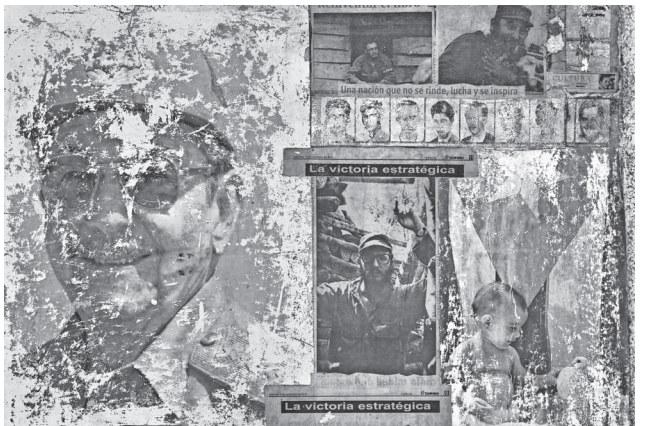
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Cuba needs a new story, not a new war

BUSTAMANTE, FROM PAGE 1 reopen the past if it hopes to move forward? Can it afford not to? The choreography around Wednesday’s indictment highlights the stakes. The announcement of the indictment on May 20, Cuba’s original independence day, was calibrated to conjure larger battles over Cubans’ collective memory. The date in 1902 marked the end of four years of U.S. military occupation after the United States intervened in the midst of Cuba’s final war for independence against Spain. Washington thereafter imposed strict limitations on the island’s sovereignty as a condition for allowing Cubans to govern themselves. For the Trump administration, the date neatly resonates with its pursuit of renewed hemispheric dominance. For many Cuban Americans, it still represents the birth of a republic they romanticize as a kind of paradise lost to the revolution. But Fidel Castro’s government stopped celebrating the holiday after 1959, seeing it as a symbol of incomplete liberation. While his first goal was to end the authoritarian rule of the dictator Fulgencio Batista in the 1950s, Fidel Castro and other activists also portrayed the revolution as the delayed realization of the island’s original independence struggle, promising to deliver Cubans from the dependence on the United States that had haunted the Cuban Republic since its birth. Revolutions, though, are not simply the culmination of history. They create histories of their own. Cuba’s transformation into a one-party Communist state in the early 1960s generated new layers of trauma and injustice: political imprisonment, labor camps, counterinsurgency campaigns, property confiscations, exile, surveillance and censorship. Over the following 30 years, Cuba became as tethered to Soviet subsidies and trade as it had once been to the United States. When that support collapsed, economic precarity and a stubborn resistance to liberalizing reform helped drive new waves of migration that further fractured Cuban families. Still, the Cuban state was hardly the only actor to leave scars. Anti-Castro militancy produced its own victims, too. Take another aerial tragedy: Cuban exiles’ 1976 bombing of Cubana Airlines Flight 455, which killed all 73 people aboard, in one of the largest acts of airborne terrorism in the Western Hemisphere. Do these innocent dead matter any less than the individuals on the Brothers to the Rescue planes, which were brought down by the Cuban Air Force? Despite living mostly openly in the United States in their later years, the presumed architects of the Cubana attack never faced justice before an American — let alone a Cuban — jury.



Images of Raúl Castro adorn walls around Havana, Cuba.

Nor is the U.S. government some distant participant in this saga. For more than 60 years, Washington has shaped Cuban life through covert operations, shifting immigration policies and comprehensive sanctions that have constrained the island’s economy and reinforced the Cuban government’s political paranoia. Even in 1996, the Brothers to the Rescue tragedy unfolded amid repeated Cuban complaints to the Federal Aviation Administration, and the group’s own admission, that the flights had evolved, beyond humanitarian operations assisting migrants at sea, into provocative incursions into Cuban airspace. That does not absolve Cuban authorities of responsibility for their brazen and, according to the International Civil Aviation Organization, illegal attack, nor do U.S. actions excuse the Cuban government’s other legacies of repression or abuse. But broader historical justice cannot be brought to bear through the American court system alone. It’s true that any Cuban-led effort to deal with the past, should a new government eventually take shape, would face enormous questions of legitimacy on and off the island. The impulse in a transition scenario would most likely be to prioritize the claims of those most visibly persecuted by the previous regime. But any attempt to selectively adjudicate the past would risk reproducing the same zero-sum logic that has divided Cubans for decades. What of the victims of Batista-era repression before 1959? What of the many migrants who died in the Caribbean Sea in the 1990s, pushed out by so-


cialism’s failures but drawn by the enticement of the United States’ past preferential treatment of Cuban refugees? What of families and hospital patients experiencing the effects of the United States’ economic coercion of the island today, not as a necessary prelude to liberation, but as collective punishment? It might be tempting to conclude that Cuba would be better off leaving old traumas alone. But troubled pasts tend to resist suppression. That has proved true in Spain, where the post-Franco “pact of forgetting,” or deliberate silence about the crimes of the dictatorship, has been under great strain in recent decades. In the Cuban context, old accusations resurface constantly in government billboards, social media campaigns and political rituals on both sides of the Florida Straits. Any future Cuban political transition will require something more difficult than high-profile prosecutions or a rewriting of school textbooks to suit the narrative of the victor. Cubans will have to find a way to acknowledge the harms they have endured and inflicted on one another without making the nation permanently captive to them. The United States, too, should be willing to account for its own role in Cuba’s long and tortured trajectory. Cubans and Cuban Americans deserve more than endless historical war, or symbolic indictments in a U.S. court. They deserve the possibility of a new national story — one that is all their own. **MICHAEL J. BUSTAMANTE** is the author of “Cuban Memory Wars: Retrospective Politics in Revolution and Exile” and a professor of Cuban and Cuban American studies at the University of Miami.


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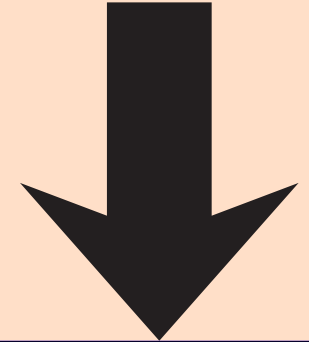
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