

Ramanujan’s troubled nationalism

ANAMITRO BISWAS

The same year as Asia’s first Nobel, an FA dropout clerk of the Madras Port Trust gathered courage to write to Prof. G. H. Hardy, who led the mathematical establishment of Britain in his era, with a small sample of his mathematical results backed by no institutional credibility or proof. What followed in the next few years was a collaborative hurricane of unbelievable findings, scribbling of ideas that would take more than a century to realize, and international scientific limelight straight on the face of an ‘enigma like the Hindu Ramanujan who arrives unexpectedly out of nowhere’. Shockingly, apart from academic circles locally, contemporary nationalists remained oblivious to the existence and the untimely death of perhaps the most brilliant Indian brain of the 20th century.

The year Ramanujan died was that of the Khilafat and Non-cooperation movements. No prominent leader in British India bothered to pay homage to the man of international acclaim as the second Indian F.R.S., the first Indian Fellow of Trinity, and arguably

the most productive Indian mathematician ever, all in 32 years of life. Witnesses saw in Ramanujan ‘the immemorial wisdom of the East’. No mortal could comprehend the mind map to his striking insights. Almost always right, he could do more math in his head than most of his peers could on paper - and by math here, I do not mean just numerical manipulations, but analysis of structures abstract and vast. For Bruce Berndt ‘still covered by a curtain that has barely been drawn’, to E. T. Bell his artistry was ‘all but supernatural’. Bell particularly identified him with his affiliation to the exotic land of Hindus. His



advent in England was mythically majestic, and veni, vidi, vici! Ramanujan led a life of strict religious observance, up to his personal space. He continued with his vegetarian diet into the sanatorium of Matlock. For him, his deity Namagiri uncovered secrets of mathematics. He pictured equations as thoughts of God. He went deep enough into spirituality to attribute human action, like in anelectric streetcar, to ‘the current that flows in the overhead wires. That is the way maya works in this world.’

Hardy, his colleague, insisted that his religion was simply ‘a matter of

observance and not of intellectual conviction’. Baron Snow chose not to trust Hardy’s insight in this. Hardy’s self-proclaimed ‘distaste for all forms of mysticism’ might have affected his view, but on the contrary, ‘Hardy’s deep reverence for mathematics... was precisely of the same kind as impels other people to the worship of God.’ To Dr. George Andrews, a special case of mathematicians’ reacting to subconscious flashes of insight was Ramanujan’s attachment of that to his Hindu outlook.

The earliest extant mathematics of India is embedded in texts of architecture and rhythm, the

Śulbasūtras and the Chandahśāstras, where principles of geometry and combinatorics are stated and utilized to make the perfect yajña altar and the exquisitely resonating hymn. Scholars like Baudhāyana and Piṅgala have stated the synopses of their deductions as Vedic truths. Following Alexandria’s fall, more original work had been produced here, of which the use of zero as a number apart from place value has taken up all prominence, but which also encompasses Brahmagupta’s extension of Euclid’s magnum opus and Bhāskara’s work on Diophantine number theory. Dr. Cajori’s book, published by AMS Chelsea, calls it the phase of “the Hindus”.

The UGC’s new undergrad syllabus emphasizes math ‘made in India’. Algebra, often misattributed to Arab compiler Khwarizmi’s Al Jebr, and Varāha Mihira’s development of trigonometry as a tool for astronomy flourished here before the medieval Dark Ages after the eclipse of Nalanda and Taxila. By the time Ramanujan was born, India was a subcontinent engulfed in ignorance and shadowed by colonialists. Ramanujan hailed from a corner distant in infrastructure and culture from the anglicized capitals of Bombay and Calcutta. Ramanujan, with all his familiarity of Sanskrit, could not have read the works of the Indian stalwarts, which had been pushed to obscurity.

As India had to re-learn math from a British framework, so did Ramanujan. With no formal training, he studied Carr’s textbook that listed just formulae, so never cared for rigorous deduction. His style of writing in notebooks that hide to date a mine of surprises, erasing any deduction on slate, is similar to the assertions of Vēdāṅga math, but in a manner adapted from perhaps the worst example of an English formula manual, not from

sages to whom formulae were as important as their mystic interpretation. His inheritance of Hindu spirituality tuned into perfect harmony the non-academic faith and the secular math he had picked up from distinct sources. Truths, whether in mathematics or in the Upanishads, mattered equally to him. In an age when the flood of wartime technological advances would motivate the acceleration of theoretical sciences, Ramanujan, like his advisor Hardy, remained faithful to pure mathematics not ‘useful’ in war or amenity, that Hardy was convinced did not make, ‘for good or ill, the least difference’ to the material world’. They both defied gracefully the peril of civilization during the world war and dedicated their efforts to the unadulterated pursuit of Truth, which to Hardy was, as to Keats, synonymous with beauty, and to Ramanujan stood for his religious integrity.

Besides sourcing his math from Carr, Ramanujan willingly learnt the literary conventions of modern mathematics at Trinity. He kept his mysticism to himself; his cultural affiliation packed in his suitcase. Hardly in a position to flaunt his nationalism, not being born in affluence that allows one to toss aside a job under the British, he never spoke against the British Raj nor indulged in politics. If he had made friends with Indian students like Mahalanobis in Cambridge, that was only because of shared roots and emotions. Yet, the Tamil man in European attire, with his hair tuft cut off and his tilak wiped off, to his Western peers seemed to personify the treasures of clouded India that Max Müller, Vivekananda and Tagore were revealing to them - perhaps more vividly than Gandhi in dhoti and chaddar.

(The writer is a research scholar in the Department of Mathematics, IIT, Bhubilai.)

India and Nepal must repair ties

BRABIM KARKI

Recent youth protests in Nepal, set off by a ban on social media and discontent with corruption and economic inequality brought drastic changes in Nepal’s political landscape. The Gen Z movements led to the resignation of the KP Sharma Oli government and the dissolution of parliament. The two-day Gen Z protests on September 8 and 9 resulted in 76 deaths, many injuries, and thousands of prisoners escaping. Many politicians’ homes were vandalised, and government buildings and parliament were torched.

The events in Nepal definitely affect India as Nepal is not just a neighbor, it is family, tied by history, culture, and an open border. But after this Gen Z uprising, the situation feels different, as if the ground has shifted under our shared foundation.

The office of Nepal’s president announced that the country would hold elections on March 5 following a week of deadly violence as an interim government headed by the country’s first female prime minister took charge.

As India aspires to be a superpower, a stable neighbour is essential for its global aspirations. Such instability distracts India from its aspirations to be a superpower. So, India should be worried about the situation in Nepal as there is still uncertainty in the country. Ignoring its neighbour and failing to show leadership only

emboldens China. India and Nepal need to rethink their relationship in this new era.

The recent Gen Z movements exposed cracks in ties between the two neighbours that have been widening for years. The two nations share strong economic, social, cultural, and political ties. Traditional bonds like cross-border marriages, Nepali students in Indian colleges, and Gorkha soldiers in the Indian army once kept both nations close. Now, with a new wave of leaders in Nepal, those old connections are fading fast.

Deepening cooperation, especially nurturing economic ties between two nations, can make partnership sustainable. India can support Nepal in various sectors like tourism, trade, energy, construction, and infrastructure.

The relations between Nepal and India have soured in the past decades. Anti-India sentiments surged when India imposed an economic blockade on Nepal in 2015 just a month after a powerful earthquake shook the country. The blockade caused severe fuel shortages and pushed up the price of food. India has always denied imposing a blockade but Nepal accused India of imposing the blockade as punishment for refusing to amend its newly promulgated constitution. Nepal and India share a border of around 1,850 kilometres. Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand of India border Nepal. The two neighbours have several territorial disputes.



During the tenure of Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli, Nepal had unveiled a new political map, showing Lipulek, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura areas as Nepal’s territory in May 2020. Later, it was endorsed by Parliament. India reacted sharply to Nepal’s move at the time, calling the revised map a unilateral act and termed it as artificial enlargement.

Nepal had protested when India inaugurated the 80-kilometre Lipulekh road to reach Kailash Mansarovar in 2020, saying it was built on disputed territory which falls at a strategic three-way junction with Tibet and China. Nepal raised objections to the inauguration of the

road by India. Nepal also objected when China and India agreed to reopen trade through Lipulekh. The understanding was reached during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s visit to New Delhi. These anti-India sentiments are pushing Nepal towards China.

Both nations should pivot to economic cooperation that plays to

both countries’ strengths. Hydropower is a prime example. Nepal has huge potential. The 2024 power trade deal lets India import up to 10,000 MW over a decade, boosting Nepal’s economy while meeting India’s energy needs. Expanding transmission lines and joint ventures could create jobs and stability on both sides.

India and Nepal should be open to constructive interactions on outstanding boundary issues through diplomacy and dialogues. Both neighbours should be on board based on historical facts. Imagine backchannel talks, where envoys from both sides revisit historical documents with fresh eyes, perhaps involving neutral historians to clarify the Kali River’s course.

The Nepal government should intensify diplomatic efforts with India and China to solve this issue. A joint boundary commission could be revived with genuine intent, treating Nepal as an equal partner. New Delhi should invest in people-to-people diplomacy that

can build

goodwill. New Delhi can play a vital role in assisting Nepal in conducting upcoming elections after the Gen Z protests that shook Nepal.

India sends the most visitors to Nepal. Better connectivity can draw more. Joint marketing campaigns and skill-sharing in hospitality would help Nepali youth find opportunities. The existing barriers on trade should be eased. Streamline customs, cut red tape on certifications, and update transit treaties to let Nepali rail freight move smoothly.

Encouraging Nepali organic farming exports to India could balance the scales and support rural economies. Collaborating on startups would appeal to Gen Z, fostering innovation.

Some in Nepal worry about over-dependence on India, fearing it could fuel nationalist backlash or play into China’s hands, given Beijing’s investments in infrastructure. And in India, hardliners might push for a tougher stance and heavy-handed diplomacy.

Still, the risks of inaction are bigger. We cannot let eroding ties turn into resentment. Leaders in Delhi and Kathmandu should start with honest and constructive dialogues to resolve misunderstanding, border issues, and commit to economic pacts. Deepening this cooperation is the best way to a partnership that lasts, one where both nations thrive together.

(The writer is a freelance contributor and author.)

NOW AND AGAIN

A poet’s musings

SWAPAN K BANERJEE

Ever since 2018, when Irwin Allan Sealy, known the country over and beyond as the poet of prose, visited Kolkata for the last time, my heart aches every time a New Year approaches and the canopy of string lights appears arching over Park Street, turning it into a fairyland. I remember with a throb in my chest how, despite the press of seasonal sorrow, we could celebrate the occasion when he put up at the Hotel Lytton in 2016 and Fairlawn in 2018. Only a handful of people were privy to his gracious presence in Sudder Street, and he had kindly kept me informed about his itinerary, setting aside time specifically for us to walk around under the mellow sun with no particular destination in mind. Some time ago, I dropped him a few lines through email: “Here in Park Street, things have begun to live up. Recently, Trinacas have resumed what they call the Breakfast Buffet after more than a few decades. Only the other day I was walking past it when you came to my mind.” Hearing about the iconic restaurant, Allan sounded rather ecstatic as he wrote: “Great to know Park Street is aglow. A breakfast buffet at Trinacas would go down well with me but I’d have to fast the day before and after to make it worthwhile. Here we have a chap called Chetan whose alu Puri breakfasts have made him a fortune. For the longest time a hole in the wall but lately smartened up. Now listed among Dehradun’s top eateries, right in the heart of the old city by the Gurdwara where it all began in 1699. Sabji Mandi and macchhi bazar next door so we sometimes go there after early morning shopping. The hills always a bit hazy at this time of the year, and many of the birds we see in December are quitters on their way south. Tempting to join them but the lesson of the last burglary was: stay put” (Sealy’s Race Course Road residence was despoiled by a gang of prowlers and house breakers a few years ago). When an article by me based on a trip to Santiniketan was carried in this column on 22 June 2025, and I forwarded him the e-copy of the op-ed page of The Sunday Statesman, he not only read my article, but also those written by other authors placed alongside, and then Allan, the word-weaver, sent me a stirring account of the opinion pieces on the page. “Pleasure to accompany you to Shantiniketan. Delightful walking alongside you, every step of the way. I got a vivid feel of the place ... In a very different vein were the political pieces alongside. Most instructive analyses of current affairs and surely a notch above most other papers. You’re lucky to have The Statesman as your local paper...” His travelogue, FLYING YOGINIS (Seagull Books), born out of his visit to Kanchipuram (Tamil Nadu), Kansas City (American Midwest) & Minneapolis (Upper Midwest), is slated for release in May 2026.

100 Years Ago

News Items

AIR ACROBATICS

AEROPLANE LAUNCHED FROM AIRSHIP

One of the most successful tests oil record in launching an aeroplane from an airship and then re-hooking it was carried out by R33. The giant airship went up from Pullham Aerodrome and when at a height of about 4,000 feet was reached an aeroplane containing Squadron Leader Rollo Haig was lowered on a trapeze. When 50 ft. below the airship the plane pilot released himself by pulling a lever and the unhooking was accomplished perfectly and the plane went into a dive to enable the pilot to start his engine. Returning to the neighbourhood of the airship Squadron Leader Haig adjusted, as far as possible, his speed to that of the airship. When this was accomplished he pointed the nose of his machine almost directly at the bar of the trapeze. His hooking-on-guide, which is carried on top of the aeroplane caught the bar at once, and after the swinging of the machine had subsided, the trapeze was slowly wound in bringing the aeroplane to its normal position. The tests were considered completely successful

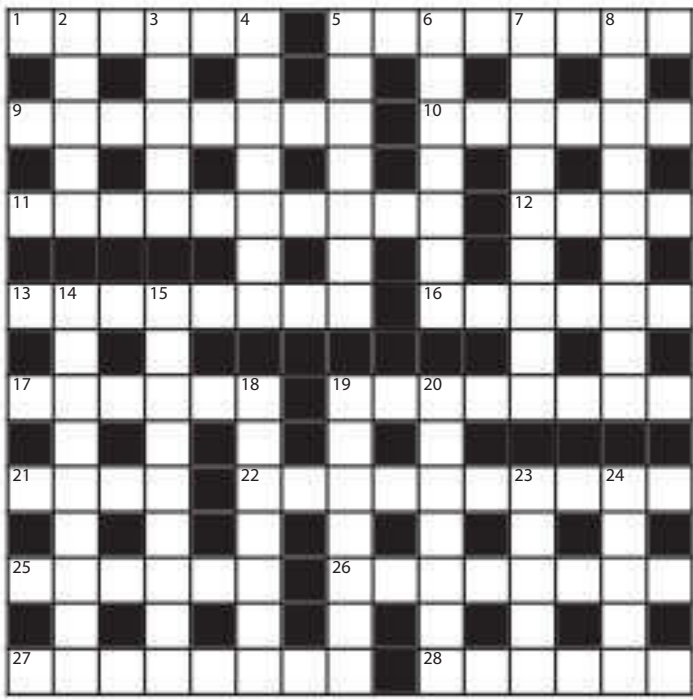
BURMA EX-QUEEN’S

FUNERAL SCENES AT RANGOON


(From Our Correspondent.)
Rangoon, Dec.

Despite the controversies over the burial of ex-Queen Supayalat the funeral, on Thursday last, passed off without demonstration of any kind. The last of the ancient dynasty was laid to rest in the presence of the present head of Burma, His Excellency, the Governor, and many officials and leading citizens of all classes. The arrangement were without stint and should have left those many Burmese who, apparently, still have a soft corner in the hearts for the old royalty convinced of the authorities desire to pay every respect to the historic House. For the last rites at the graveside in Cantonment Gardens the Burmese turned out in their tens of thousands. Those that saw the ceremonies witnessed probably what was the last public exposition of the customs of ancient and dynastic Burma. The whole area in which the funeral was conducted, and which is one of the very few entirely Burmese parts of polyglot Rangoon, assumed on Thursday afternoon a sad air of dying medievalism which was unrelieved by gay Burmese colours against the white of the mourners related to the Royal House. The laying to rest of the Queen was unmistakably symbolic.

Crossword | No. 293333



Last Sunday's Solution



ACROSS

15 Time to stop evil lasting forever (8)

18 Maximum speed when horizontal? (4,4)

19 Man perhaps follows American females into battle (6)

21 Cowboy from Oregon thrown out of introduction to radio presenter (8)

23 Six-footer in mascara blushes (6)

26 Black Country is uninspiring (5)

27 He put neat rum in to increase risk (2,3,4)

28 Hurry up, or skip a payment at work (4,2,6)

DOWN

1 Choose an entrance for dictator and Spanish provocateur (7)

2 Piece of music about infiltrating Republican Party (5)

3 With timely preparation, professional books inspiring film with nothing omitted (9)

4 Rock and roll dance? (4)

5 Propositions those desperate to introduce rock band (8)

6 Welsh girl shaving bottom following love letter (5)

7 Excited at talk, pointlessly (8)

8 Gold transaction is nightmare (6)

14 Farewell a son provided (2,4,2)

16 Rank Stones "close to perfection" in real life (3-6)

17 Pale bum certain to provide amusement (8)

18 Class times for George? (6)

20 Run away from raid after youth initially displays toughness (7)

22 Jeopardy host returned holding aquatic creature (5)

24 Accumulate in period prior to event (3,2)

25 State itself rejected after leader rejected (4)

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



This Dehradun is not my home



ALIND CHAUHAN

THIRTEEN HOUSES. Eight colonies. Seven cities. Learning and unlearning addresses were an integral part of my childhood. Friendships were brief. Familiarity with neighbourhoods was ephemeral. And no local dish became a staple. Only the thud of cardboard boxes and the ripping sound of packaging tape were a constant.

Despite this, I called Dehradun, where I spent four years as a school-going teenager, my home. It had a rustic charm, with deodar-covered hills, orchards, and a scent of flowers. Summers were pleasant — hot afternoons were often followed by gentle showers. While monsoons brought charcoal-edged clouds and sudden rains, they turned the surroundings lush green. And winters covered the hills with a blanket of snow.

On most days, after school, my friends and I would cycle to a nearby forest. We would then walk through tall trees and



ILLUSTRATION: SUVAJIT DEY

thick grass to reach a causeway, where we spent hours talking — mobile phones and the Internet were yet to enter our lives. I usually returned home after sunset, gazing at the distant lights of Mussoorie, which floated in the night sky like fireflies.

Once my parents got me a scooter, the outskirts of Dehradun became more accessible. There we found several other isolated spots, much like the causeway. While one gave us the entire view of the city from above, the other was next to a stream. These places were our refuge from the relentless demands of excelling at school



and figuring out a career. They allowed us to simply exist, without a purpose or plan.

It was this calmness that kept bringing me back to Dehradun, even after I had left to pursue my undergraduate studies in Delhi-NCR. My new residence had no space for a pause. It was riddled with peak-hour traffic, a rush for the metro, the piercing sound of construction, the smell of gasoline, and a sense of urgency. So, I would rush to Dehradun on weekends, crashing at a friend's place or cheap hotel rooms.

Although my visits became substantially infrequent once I started to work, I tried to go to Dehradun at least once a year. However, after a while, it stopped feeling the same. The city had changed.

First came the fancy cafes, then the tall apartments, followed by new colonies, road expansions, malls, and finally, the numerous flyovers. Dust subdued the scent of flowers. Houses replaced forests. Buildings obstructed the view of Mussoorie's floating lights.

The inflow of tourists skyrocketed as well — there was no off-season anymore. The isolated spots were exposed by Instagram influencers. Hordes of people descended to these “Must Visit Places”, and soon they became littered with broken beer bottles, cigarette buds, and packets of chips. Loud music and honking overtook the rustling of leaves

and the chirping of the birds.

But most significantly, the city's temperate climate seemed to have changed. Summers became brutal and muggy, as the showers after a hot day disappeared. Rains became erratic and more intense. Snowfall was inconsistent during the winter months.

All these alterations paved the way for what happened to Dehradun in September this year. A cloudburst triggered flash floods and landslides, wreaking havoc on the city, with areas like Sahastradhara and IT Park submerged. The rain left more than 23 roads blocked, and bridges damaged. At least 13 people were killed, and 16 went missing due to the extreme weather event.

Dehradun reminds me of the *Ship of Theseus* paradox. It continues to look the same on the map. All of my spots still carry the same name as before. The roads through the city that take you to Mussoorie have also not changed. And it has continued to be governed by the same administration that was set in place after Uttarakhand was separated from Uttar Pradesh. But when I visit the city now, I ask myself: Is it the same Dehradun that I once called my home?

The writer is a senior correspondent, The Indian Express

In service of India



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

HINDUTVA'S FEARLESS foot soldiers had a busy time last week risking life and limb in service of Mother India. Arming themselves with sticks and stones they set about erasing all signs of Christmas. They smashed the heads of Santa Claus statues they came across, and demolished Christmas decorations outside malls and other public places. If they came upon people getting in the Christmas mood by wearing Santa Claus caps, they tore these red and white caps off their heads and warned them that if they wanted to celebrate Christmas, they should do it at home.

The more intrepid of these Hindutva warriors stormed into churches and disturbed services with vandalism and violence. Videos of these ‘accomplishments’ were uploaded on social media. In one of them, I saw a BJP legislator enter a church in Jabalpur and harangue a blind woman, whom she accused menacingly of trying to convert Hindus to Christianity. According to unverified estimates, there were nearly a hundred attempts to disrupt Christmas festivities and nearly all of them occurred in states ruled by the BJP. Nobody was punished and no chief minister openly deplored the violence.

The Prime Minister did speak. On ‘X’ he posted this, “Attended the Christmas morning service at The Cathedral Church of the Redemption in Delhi. The service reflected the timeless message of love, peace and compassion. May the spirit of Christmas inspire harmony and goodwill in our society.” Did nobody tell him about how Sangh Parivar stormtroopers were violating the spirit of Christmas in towns and cities across India? Did nobody tell him that Christians in India live in fear these days because of the actions of Hindutva's warriors? Did nobody tell him that their activities have been reported in the international media? Did nobody alert him to the Christmas Day bombing of Nigeria by his ex-best friend Donald Trump to protect Christians from further attacks by jihadi groups?

It is not so much India's image abroad that we need to worry about so much as the damage that is being done to the fabric of Indian society within our borders. In his Independence Day speech from the ramparts of the Red Fort this year, the Prime Minister went out of his way to praise the RSS. He said of his Alma Mater, “Its 100 years of national service has been a proud and glorious page (in India's history) ... service, dedication, organisational strength and unmatched discipline are the identity of the RSS.”

What we need to ask is why this ‘service’ has spawned organisations like the Vishva Hindu Parishad and its youth wing the Bajrang Dal, whose only motivation is hatred. It was a deep hatred, or perhaps a deep inferiority complex, that inspired young men and women from the Sangh Parivar to attack Christians as they celebrated their most important festival last week. Which leads me inevitably to my next question.

In the 100 years of its ‘service’, why is it that the RSS has never noticed that what they should be trying to initiate is an era of enlightenment? A renaissance. This would need BJP chief ministers to make drastic reforms in the education system in their states. A vital requirement because it is only when young Indians become educated (instead of just literate) that they will appreciate the magnificence of the civilisation they inherit and the wisdom of Indic religions that allow questioning of gods and prophets.

Instead of this happening the RSS, since one of their own became prime minister has concentrated its energy and its resources on attacking Muslims and Christians. Sadly, this is turning India into a mirror image of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Is this service to our ancient land? Or is it a dangerous disservice? As for me, I confess that one of the reasons why I became a Modi Bhakt was because I hoped he would usher in an Indian renaissance, that is still badly needed, but was more badly needed when he first became prime minister.

Decades of rule by the Dynasty had done little more than perpetuate the colonial ideas that we inherited from the British Raj. There was almost nothing done in that time to revive knowledge of India's immense contributions to the civilisation of the world. Contributions in the arts, architecture, literature, languages, music and religion. The ruling class, of which I was very much a part, was made up mostly of people who knew almost nothing about India and who seemed determined to preserve all things colonial including a brutally colonial system of governance. We were a pathetic lot, but two Westernised ideas that we did manage to preserve were pluralism and parliamentary democracy.

As Shashi Tharoor wrote in this newspaper last week, parliamentary democracy is today in danger of total collapse, and this is something that we all need to be worried about. But it will almost certainly be revived some day in the not-too-distant future. What will be much harder to revive is pluralism. As of last week, it appears that it is being systematically destroyed by semi-literate thugs who are so blinded by hatred they do not notice that attacking Santa Claus and Christmas are hardly likely to persuade Hindus to resist converting to Christianity. In any case, they have every right to worship in whichever way they want, not just because this right is enshrined in our Constitution, but because it is enshrined in India's civilisation.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films



INSIDE TRACK | BY COOMI KAPOOR

ART OF DEAL

In 2025, foreign policy and trade relations completely trumped domestic events. Even this columnist, though on unfamiliar territory, has perforce to focus on the all-important issue. Ironically, 2025 began on an optimistic note. “Unlike some, we are not nervous of a Trump-led US administration, there is a convergence of interests,” External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had pronounced in January.

Just months later, we were shell-shocked when Trump unilaterally slapped 25% tariffs on Indian goods, later upped to 50%. Our foreign office appeared to have little inkling of Hurricane Trump hitting our shores. But signs were evident in the aftermath of the Pahalgal terrorist attack. Our old adversary Pakistan, in the form of Field Marshal Asim Munir, outmanoeuvred us with the same agility with which he dispensed with the last vestiges of Pakistan's democracy. Even before India could retaliate militarily for Pahalgal, Munir hastily tied up a hugely lucrative cryptocurrency deal with a Trump family firm, with the Trump's business partner Zachary Witkoff making a flying visit to Pakistan. Munir was later greeted as an honoured guest by Trump. The US did not protest even when he boasted on its soil of destroying India, strangely comparing Pakistan to a dumpster truck and India to a shining Mercedes. He won Trump's heart conclusively by announcing he was nominating him for the Nobel Peace Prize for ending the Indo-Pakistan conflict.

FLAT-FOOTED DIPLOMACY

The Indian diplomatic counter to Pakistan was flat-footed, pompous and preachy. One wonders why Modi arrived at Trump's *darbar* empty-handed. Surely, one of our well-networked billionaires could have accompanied him? In contrast, Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's companion at the White House was holding a platter of rare-earth minerals, with the far-fetched claim that they were mined from insurgency-ridden Balochistan. Meanwhile, our clueless envoys were at sea in securing an entry into Trump's inner circle, despite the services of highly paid lobbyists. With the MAGA legions targeting Indian immigrants for stealing jobs, the once vocal NRI lobby discreetly disappeared. A major diplomatic blunder was to repeatedly counter Trump's boast that he had ended the war between nuclear neighbours. To pander to Trump's ego, we could have simply thanked him for bringing Pakistan to its senses; giving credit without compromising our national sovereignty.

Modi's move of politely declining an invitation to the White House when he was next door in Canada was universally applauded. Munir was in Washington and Trump would no doubt have sought to get a photo of the two leaders together, hyphenating the two countries. But the jury is out as to whether the Tianjin summit in August, where Modi meaningfully held hands with Vladimir Putin and our old antagonist Xi Jinping was helpful. It was certainly a powerful statement that India had alternatives. An infuriated Trump dubbed India's economy as “dead”, though the world's fourth largest economy continues to grow at a fast pace. Modi's absence from the Gaza Peace summit was noticeable, even as heads of states from Europe and the Gulf region displayed cringeworthy obedience to Trump. Liberal Western commentators, for whom Modi has seldom been a favourite, hailed his credibility and independent position.

Trump's National Security Strategy, released this month, indicates that the US is pulling back from Indo-Pacific ties, even if it means destroying a strategic partnership with India built over 25 years as a counter to the looming Chinese threat. Trump now speaks, instead, of an exclusive G-2 club with China, whose economic, military and technological heft compelled him to retreat on tariffs. For the transactionally minded Trump, India's bargaining chips are not so compelling.

OUTLIER DISADVANTAGE

In a new multipolar world, India is an outlier. Despite the optics of bonhomie, China remains a major threat, both as Pakistan's main military supplier and hostile claimant of our border territory. True doomsday predictions on the stalemate with the US on a tariffs deal were belied by all-time high exports this November and an impressive economic growth in 2025. On the downside, the rupee was Asia's worst-performing currency because of trade uncertainty with the US leading to foreign investor outflows. In deal-making, India could perhaps learn a lesson from Pakistan. An offer of intent is not necessarily a delivery. The US will be hard-pressed to drill successfully for oil or mine peacefully for minerals in Balochistan, rife with rebellion, but Pakistan displayed ingenuity and audacity in offering a tempting deal. India, because of geography, an increasingly illiberal democracy and growing Hindu majoritarianism, which may work to the ruling party's advantage domestically but harms the country's reputation internationally, has an inbuilt disadvantage in foreign policy. We need to tread nimbly to face the challenge.

Famine relief to job scheme: A forgotten history of public works



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY AJIT RANADE

LONG BEFORE the language of “rights”, “safety nets” or “social protection” entered policy discourse, Indian rulers confronted a stark and recurring reality: droughts meant destitution and unrest. A response to this challenge was the use of public works as famine relief — not charity, but work that preserved dignity while sustaining livelihoods.

A striking early example is the construction of the Bara Imambara in Lucknow in the 1780s. Built during a devastating famine under Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula, the project stretched over several years and was consciously designed to generate employment for thousands who otherwise would have starved. Legend and record both suggest that labourers worked during the day, while the nobility discreetly dismantled portions of the structure at night so that work could continue the next morning. The underlying principle was that in times of distress, the state must provide work, not alms.

This idea resurfaced repeatedly in colonial India through relief works, canals and roads, though with mixed motives. In independent India, this old insight was eventually codified into law — first, at the state level in Maharashtra and, decades later, at the national level. Today, as parties spar over the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act (VB-G RAM G Act) replacing the 2005 Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), it is important to look back at how the latter, in effect, nationalised a Maharashtra idea refined over four decades.

The intellectual architect of this transformation was Vitthal Sakharam Page, a modest, deeply Gandhian public figure and a freedom fighter, who was also a scholar, poet and a trained lawyer. He served as the chairman of the Maharashtra Legislative Council for a record 18 years from 1960 to 1978. Page was neither a technocrat nor a theoretician. He was, above all, a practitioner of public affairs who believed in learning from the ground.

In the mid-1960s, amid famine-like con-



A commemorative postal stamp on VS Page was released in 2011. WIKIPEDIA

ditions in parts of western Maharashtra, Page initiated a small experiment in Tasgaon taluka of Sangli district. He calculated that Rs 700 could provide 20 days of work to 15 labourers. In a now-famous four-line letter to then Chief Minister Vasant Rao Naik, Page asked a question that would change policy history: “If Rs 700 can support 15 people, how many could Rs 100 crore support?”

Eleven villages, including Visapur, became the testing ground. Wages were deliberately kept below prevailing market rates — around Rs 3 per day for men, lower for women — not to exploit labour, but to ensure that people came to public works only when no alternative employment was available. That was the Page scheme, meant as a last resort, not a permanent substitute for agriculture. Its principle was summed up in a simple Marathi phrase: *magela tyala kama* (whoever asks, shall get work). The Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) was launched in Maharashtra in July 1969. Women and men were paid equal wages for works like land levelling, digging wells, percolation tanks and soil conservation.

The results were persuasive. Data showed that distress migration slowed, local assets were created, that it was possible to combat drought and famine, and to also alleviate poverty. Crucially, the programme demonstrated that an open-ended, unconditional employment guarantee was administratively feasible and fiscally manageable, even in a poor, drought-prone economy.

Despite its success, the idea faced resistance, especially from New Delhi. The Planning Commission was initially sceptical of an uncapped employment promise. Yet Page's credibility, the backing of leaders like Naik, and the quiet support of figures such as D R Gadgil, then vice-chairman of the Planning Commission, ensured that Maharashtra pushed ahead. In July 1969 the scheme was rolled out across the state.

When multi-year droughts struck in the early 1970s, Naik and Page met with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi seeking central assistance to run public works for famine relief. She denied aid, pleading fiscal constraints following the Bangladesh war. Upon which Page proposed a solution, an idea whose seed lay in his 1949 essay: financing rural employment through a dedicated tax on urban salaried workers. Thus, was born the profession tax earmarked for the EGS. Funds were ring-fenced, rolled over across years and fiercely protected from diversion as long as Page remained at the helm.

In 1978 after a decade of experimentation and political consensus cutting across party lines, the state enacted the Employment Guarantee Act. Few state laws anywhere in the developing world went so far in recognising employment as a public obligation.

EGS was studied extensively — by administrators, economists and sociologists. It revealed both strengths and tensions. By setting a wage floor, typically below market rates, it reduced labour's dependence on landlords and altered local power relations, inviting resistance from landed interests. Yet even at its peak, EGS generated only a small fraction of total rural employment — enough to relieve distress, not to distort the labour markets.

A contrarian paper by Ronald Herrings and Rex Edwards (1983) argued that the EGS, though appearing as a pro-poor initiative, was designed and implemented in a way that primarily benefited the *kulaks* or the dominant rural class. They suggested the EGS was inferior to genuine land redistribution policies in terms of fundamentally altering the existing power structures and economic inequalities in rural society. But many other scholars, including V M Dandekar and Madhusudan Sathe, acknowledged the net benefits of EGS.

EGS showed that public works could be institutionalised as insurance against drought, and not merely as ad hoc relief. When India enacted the MGNREGS in 2005, it was a proxy for genuine unemployment insurance. Job guarantees as a concept are not recent inventions nor ideological indulgences. They have existed from the pre-colonial era as famine works. The Page scheme, which became EGS, was an implementation of the Directive encoded as Article 41 in the Constitution. The idea of the state as an employer of last resort arose from lived experience of scarcity, not abstract theory.

The writer is a Pune-based economist

Wedding excess and marriage essence

TWO MAMMOTH weddings in Delhi recently upped the ever-expanding universe of glittering consumption to further absurdity. Instagram was overrun with reels of how one host hired a stadium for a concert by pop star Arijit Singh, while at the other, guests swayed in their finery to an electric performance by AP Dhillon. Conservative estimates suggest both weddings easily cost upwards of Rs 150 crores each, to be sure, small change for these industrialist families. Who knows, maybe what keeps the super wealthy committed to the splashy extravaganzas are the expectations of those lower down the pecking order, lesser mortals caught up in striving and self-optimisation, stuck on the elusive search for the best life. When somebody has the means to live the dream, don't they have a responsibility to share some of that Cristal champagne and Michelin-star chef created magic, with their merely solvent friends and family? After all, it's everyone's fantasy, to be so wealthy as to be insulated from the drudgeries of life.

As a guest at a big fat Indian wedding, for a few magical days at least one may live as a participant in the Gilded Age, or a character on *Succession*, where money is used as protection from consequence. The hard up son-in-law on *Succession* compares being rich with being a superhero and shudders at a \$5 million inheritance, calling it a “nightmare”. Because it's simply not enough to truly live it up, the paltry sum described by another of the scions on the show with a wine analogy, as the difference between “regular decanting” and “hyper decanting”. Ah, the infinite joy derived from observing the peccadilloes of the 1%! However, it is worth noting, when billionaires put their money in trust funds and fixed deposits to earn fat amounts in compounding interest, it isn't doing anyone else much good. Much better then, when they go all out for explosive style — the *phoolwala*, caterer, entertainers and *tentwalas* benefit, not to mention the hosts' own overall net gain in social capital.



ON THE LOOSE
BY LEHER KALA

Consumption, when wildly over the top, is a euphemism for soft power.

Social media brought the Bezos and Ambani nuptials into every drawing room. Suddenly, for the rest of the world, contemporary weddings are less about sanctifying a union and more about getting the hashtag right. But people are people. The common factor between the guest dripping in diamonds and the scrambling wannabe trying to make sense of so much sparkling bounty is existential ennui — everyone's trying to wring some last bit of wonder from life — the eternal question being that if we were a thousand times richer, would we be a thousand times happier? These are philosophical quandaries that have surfaced throughout history. Initially, thriving depended more on a larger community but over millennium, the human pursuit of one-upmanship became as important as chasing happiness. Perhaps, the world has to go full circle to come to the conclusion that flourishing involves equal measures of health, wealth and

some luck; and time for self cultivation is as important as for amassing riches.

When a wedding is too over-the-top, it almost feels like the host is trying to buy a guarantee of a successful marriage. Alas, an Instagram-worthy show doesn't always equal a fairy-tale ending. If anything, the messy realities of marriage may feel especially deflating, after a spectacular beginning. Marriage is a serious business, a rite of passage, along with birth and death. While a birth provides a sense of purpose and a death provokes introspection on the ultimate realities of life, modern marriages can be narcissistic displays of fancy destinations, exotic jewellery and sweeping tulle outfits. Of course, it is a momentous occasion but there's something shallow about so much emphasis on creating the perfectly orchestrated event. A humbling reminder, the complications of *getting* married are nothing compared to the complications of *staying* married.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films



REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

The case for closer ties between India & Europe

The European Union needs partners such as India to rebuild its capabilities and withstand the triple assault from the US, China, and Russia. Such a partnership will not only enable the continent, but also augment India's economic, defence, and tech capabilities

Such is the shock of the geopolitical bank run on Europe today that it is easy to forget that liberal peace on the Old Continent itself is a historical accident. Enabled by the balance-of-power between the US and the erstwhile Soviet Union and nourished by decades of strong industrial growth and the common market, building and sustaining the European Union (EU) required constant supervision. Things could have gone south earlier. But it took the troika of Russia's military and political assault, China's industrial and economic assault, and the US's ideological assault for the EU to face a reckoning that seemed impossible but was not. Unsurprisingly, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, who along with European Council President António Costa will be the chief guests at India's Republic Day celebrations on January 26, now views India as a "pillar of certainty for Europe in an increasingly uncertain world". She means it.

India's own troubles with the US, China, and Pakistan, make it tempting to argue for a pivot towards Europe. Strong India-EU ties could create pathways for stability in an international system under stress. It will afford Brussels and New Delhi more options as they diversify their international partnerships. The tempo, tenor, substance, and urgency of bilateral exchanges, deals, and official statements in recent years clarifies the positive trendline of this story. There is no shortage of sectors in which the two can work together and are indeed starting to open the proverbial files. From trade and tech to defence sales, quantum and Artificial Intelligence to renewables, climate action and counterterrorism to energy, the canvas of mutually beneficial cooperation is large.

But other than reasons of geopolitical circumstance, the logic of which must not be undervalued, why should India invest in Europe? This question is important in the light of India's unceasing partnership with Russia and continuing dependence on the US. Add to it Europe's internal political churn. Far-Right parties are either in power or waiting in the wings in most European capitals. The values and politics of parties such as the Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, the National Rally in France, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, or the Reform UK does not bother New Delhi. But their avowed aim to undermine the union is likely to have consequences for an India that has expanded stakes in the EU. Then there is the question of Europe's economic health. What if it fails to recover? To be clear, Ger-

many's industrial decline is not just China's doing, Berlin's policy misfires are equally at fault.

The answer is simple. Despite Europe's disheartening balance sheet, its geopolitical revival is in India's core strategic interest. Why? Because India's vision of a multipolar Asia, somewhat counter-intuitively, depends on an economically strong and united, politically stable and moderate, and a militarily capable and assertive Europe.



Avinash Paliwal

Vladimir Putin in New Delhi and prevent Russia from becoming more dependent on China. Russia's long-standing mistrust of China offers a credible data-point to lubricate this argument.

Here's the rub. Russia is already so dependent on China that Putin's mistrust of Xi Jinping's intentions has little value. This doesn't mean that India should stymie ties with Moscow. But there is a case to be made that Russia cannot be a credible pole in Asia, while it incurs outsized capital and human losses in Europe for every inch of Ukrainian territory gained. Russia is losing the war in a strategic sense even if it may win some battles and cut a temporary deal with Trump's support. There is also the reality that Europe, for all its bureaucracy,



Europe cannot liberate itself in isolation. It needs partners such as India to rebuild its capabilities and withstand the triple assault from the US, China, and Russia.

AFP

has unanimously passed several resolutions in support of Ukraine, has cleared a \$90 billion loan for Kyiv, is not losing its political will to resist Russian aggression, is rearming at scale, and preparing for a wider war with or without the US.

The Europe of an imminent future is likely to be a different ballgame than what the world has seen till now. India would want that Europe on its side.

This brings us back to India's other European dilemmas. Politically, Europe's far-Right, despite playing up fear and nativism, is aware of the risks of overdoing the rhetoric on the union itself. Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni is a case in point. She is committed to the European project while being true to her brand of conservatism. Even AfD remains split on Russia with its leader Alice Wiedel siding with Russia-critics. These movements are in the foothills of settling on an equilibrium i.e., to focus on culture wars and migration to keep the political pot boiling, but shy away from harming the union or dithering on Russia.

The cost to be paid for the latter is exorbitant given public anxieties about Russian excesses.

Even if sluggish, the EU continues to grow. But Europe's economic tumult is real and with few short-term solutions. But even a struggling EU will remain an economic heavyweight. If Europe can weather the Trump tariffs by diversifying its trade networks with India, Japan, and other middle powers, and invest in resilient sectors that promise medium to long term returns, then it will turn the tide.

Otherwise, there is a risk that Europe's, and especially Germany's, automobile manufacturers refashion their assembly lines towards defence production and join the likes of Rheinmetall to ignite Europe's defence capabilities.

Berlin's partnership with New Delhi, then, will be essential to procure critical defence metals and other raw materials when China is choking rare earth exports for its international clients. All of this is to say that the EU still has cards to play on

defence and economy.

But Europe cannot liberate itself in isolation. It needs partners such as India to rebuild its capabilities and withstand the triple assault from the US, China, and Russia. Such a partnership will not only enable Europe, but also augment India's economic, defence, and tech capabilities.

Europe's revival will also focus Beijing's mind on how far they can antagonise the Old Continent on Russia, and how much of a wedge they can drive between the EU and the US. It may not seem so now, but Europe's rise will drastically reduce Russia's value as an ally for China.

Thus, instead of waiting for Russia to escape the Chinese chokehold, partnership with Europe is more likely to make India the alternative Asian pole that it views itself to rightfully be.

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

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



When what's said isn't what's meant

I am writing this column from London, where I am holidaying over Christmas and New Year. Britain is a country I love and greatly admire. Something that never ceases to fascinate me is their language and how they use it. If you are not British — or haven't lived here for a long time — you would be perplexed. Often, things don't mean what they seem to suggest. It can even be the opposite.

A delightful article in *The Times* illustrates how tortured courtesies can mask real meaning. Let me give you a few examples.

"Sounds fun. I'll let you know." Normally, you might think the speaker is about to say yes. Actually, that is far from it. In translation, what has been said is that the speaker has no intention of coming. Or consider this: "I'm sure it's just me." Now, that would appear as if the speaker is accepting blame or responsibility.

Not in the least. It means this is entirely your fault, but the speaker is striving to put it politely.

The Times article has dozens of examples of such circumlocution. For instance, when an Englishman says, "Sorry, could you say that last bit again," it actually means he hasn't heard a word of what you were saying. Or if he says, "I hear what you're saying," he's, in fact, telling you he completely disagrees. If the response you get is, "I'll bear it in mind", that's a way of gently telling you that what you've said will be forgotten immediately.

This sort of speech takes getting used to, but once you have, it is easy to follow. I remember my tutor at Stowe commenting on an answer to a question he had asked. "That's one way of looking at it," Mr Stephan said. I was 16 and thought he was validating my reply. He wasn't. What he was gently telling me is that I was

wildly off the mark.

Claire Winterschladden, a dear friend from my days at Oxford, would often tell me when we differed, "I'm sure it's just me but ...". What she really meant was, "This is entirely your fault, but I'll make it seem as if it's not."

In India, our English is very different. We're direct, if not blunt. We don't believe in euphemisms. We say things almost as the thought occurs to us. The British, on the other hand, camouflage their actual intent. They sugarcoat it inside disarming phrases of politeness.

But don't be fooled by this tactic. It's not a trick. It's just the way they are. They have no intention of being bullied or coerced into what they don't want to do. They're just putting it nicely.

I guess none of this should be surprising when you consider how torturous their pronunciation is. The French are very particular about getting it right. But that's not easy to do in English. Two words that look very similar sound very different.

Here's a little paragraph to test your pronunciation. If you get your tongue correctly around every word in the following stanza, I can guarantee you're speaking English better than most native speakers.

"Billet does not rhyme with ballet, Bouquet, wallet, mallet, chalet. Blood and flood are not like food, Nor is mould like should and would. Viscous, viscount, load and broad,

WHEN AN ENGLISHMAN SAYS, "SORRY, COULD YOU SAY THAT LAST BIT AGAIN," IT ACTUALLY MEANS HE HASN'T HEARD A WORD OF WHAT YOU WERE SAYING. OR IF HE SAYS, "I HEAR WHAT YOU'RE SAYING," HE'S, IN FACT, TELLING YOU HE COMPLETELY DISAGREES

Toward, to forward, to reward. And your pronunciation is OK When you correctly say croquet." Now, if you managed that with ease, here's a more advanced test that might trip you up. Take it slowly, think carefully, and you could get it right. "Mark the differences, moreover, Between mover, cover, clover; Leeches, breeches, wise, precise, Chalice, but police and lice; Finally, which rhymes with enough, Though, through, plough, or dough, or cough? Hiccough has the sound of cup. My advice is to give up!!!"

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

Jordan and India: The fight against extremism

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's first full-fledged visit to the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan this month came at a pivotal time not only in West Asia's own regional geopolitics, but the unravelling of the global security order as well. Amman has been at the forefront of trying to manage the fallout of Hamas's terror attack against Israel in October 2023 and the subsequent Israeli war against the group in Gaza and its extension against Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Both West Asia and India have suffered terror strikes over the past few years, bringing to the forefront a global crisis that has been diluted in multilateral forums as the US retracts its military, political, and legal might dedicated to fighting terror since 9/11. While Washington remains committed to targeted, narrowed down counter-terror operations in West Asia and parts of Africa, regional powers will have to fill in gaps in regional security architectures, whether out of choice or compulsion. Only a few days after PM Modi ended his visit, the US, along with Jordan, launched airstrikes inside Syria targeting over 70 sites associated with the Islamic State (IS) terror network.

India's security cooperation with Jordan comes at an opportune time and Modi's visit to Amman added a personalised touch to bilateral relations. Jordan's king, Abdullah II, has regularly pushed back against radicalisation and extremism, a point mentioned by Modi as part of his public exchange during this visit. Abdullah's visit to India in 2018 also saw his lecture in Delhi address some of these issues in a speech titled *Islamic Heritage: Promoting Understanding and Moderation*. The Modi government has also promoted de-radicalisation programmes along with putting forward Sufism as the more moderate and modern ideological direction within Islam. This is where security linkages between States like India and Jordan can truly be solidified. While the global

fight against terror in 2025 stands at a point of fracture and disunity, pushed by big power competitions and regional infractions and wars in Ukraine and Gaza, more fundamental aspects of countering terrorism and violent extremism can be developed between New Delhi and

Amman with long-term dividends leading the way. These dividends can include institutionalising moderate Islamic cultural linkages and exchanges, cooperating in counter-radicalisation practices and blueprints, nimble formats to share information between intelligence and security agencies and even using Amman as a base for a regular India-Jordan track on South and West Asian security challenges in this space, incubating civil society and groups working on the forefront of counter-radicalisation.

Moving forward, violent extremism is a threat that is not going to decapitate any time soon. From the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan to "reformed" jihadist Ahmed Al Sharaa becoming an endorsed president of Syria, the needle on countering terrorism seems to be moving from annihilation to accommodation. Amman has reiterated support for Syria with Al Sharaa having visited thrice. New Delhi, recently, opened diplomatic exchanges with the Taliban in Kabul after years of cautious calibration. The future of this trajectory remains questionable.

The threat of terrorism, by all accounts, is expected to rise, and not fall, in the coming years. Extremist groups and organisations are well placed to take advantage of crevasses in the international order as the idea of collective security takes a backseat. In this period of reorientation, countries such as India and Jordan are well placed to solidify their bilateral security cooperation.



Kabir Taneja

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Kabir Taneja is deputy director and fellow, strategic studies programme, Observer Research Foundation. The views expressed are personal

The present needs the spirit of ancient Nalanda

Last week, I attended the first Nalanda Literature Festival at Rajgir, which is close to Nalanda, in Bihar. It is a commendable initiative, and Ganga Kumar, its prime mover, deserves our felicitations. The event was well attended, with danseuse Sonal Mansingh, parliamentarian Shashi Tharoor, historian Vikram Sampath, author Abhay K (who has written a well-received book on Nalanda), among many others, participating.



Pavan K Varma

A festival of ideas in Nalanda's name is a befitting tribute to the world's first world-class university. Founded in the early 5th century CE during the reign of the Gupta dynasty — traditionally dated to 427 CE — it blossomed into a residential academic campus long before the medieval universities of Europe took shape. When the University of Bologna — often cited as the oldest in Europe — was established in 1088 CE, Nalanda was already over 650 years old. In its prime, it remained the jewel of India's intellectual life for more than seven centuries.

I first visited the brooding ruins of Nalanda — a World Heritage Site — in August 2012. My wife and I were the guests of chief minister Nitish Kumar, and he sent us on a tour to see Bihar Sharif (next in importance only to Ajmer Sharif), Pawapuri (where Jain founder Mahavir took *sama-dhi*), Bodhi Gaya, and Gaya. It is amazing that within a radius of around 100 km are key sites of four of India's major religions. That was Nitish's way of emphasising to us the eclectic and inclusive ethos of Bihar.

At Nalanda, I stood transfixed pondering over the fact that there was once a flourishing university here, with 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers, in which Buddhist philosophy and metaphysics, Vedic literature, logic and linguistics, medicine (including Ayurveda), mathematics, astronomy, astrology, economics, politics, poetry, ethics, and even arts and architecture, were taught and debated. Foreign students, from China, Tibet, Central Asia, and, indeed, all of South East Asia, who studied at Nalanda, took their learning back home, becoming emissaries of Indian thought systems, translating texts, and initiating dialogues across cultures.

The description of Xuanzang, the Chinese scholar who visited India (630-643 CE), and lived in Nalanda for five years, was carried by the gentle breeze to me: "An azure pool winds around the monasteries, adorned with the full-blown cups of the blue lotus; the dazzling red flowers of the lovely *kanaka* hang here and there, and outside groves of mango trees offer to the inhabitants their dense and protective shade." My mind conjured students debating with *acharyas*, and profound Buddhist scholars like Nagarjuna, or mathematical geniuses like Aryabhata (who discovered the zero) and Brahmagupta, among hundreds of others, making path-breaking discoveries.

The thought also struck me: Why, in a civilisation that produced the first Harvard of the world, and other great universities



Nalanda University Ruins, the first Buddhism University with blue clear sky in Bihar state in India.

SHUTTERSTOCK

like Takshashila and Vikramshila, there is, today, no Indian university in the top 100 educational institutions globally? Why have we so easily accepted our educational downgrading, relinquishing our pursuit of *moulik soch*, the power of original thought?

Perhaps the ecosystem of support that sustained such an extraordinary institution has died. Nalanda did not flourish in a vacuum; it flourished because the Indian polity and society recognised knowledge as worthy of sustained patronage. The Gupta kings, and later the Pala dynasty of Bengal, were among its most committed patrons. They provided endowments, land, monasteries and stipends — conceiving a centre of learning not as a private academy but as an essential public good.

And then, with a shudder, I visualised the army of Bakhtiyar Khilji despoiling Nalanda in the 12th century. Centuries of priceless accumulated knowledge were reduced to ashes. Contemporary accounts describe its libraries — Ratnasagara, Ratnodadhi and

Ratnaranjaka — as repositories of thousands upon thousands of manuscripts, millions of scrolls arranged in scientific order, reflecting an encyclopaedic grasp of human knowledge. The libraries are said to have burned for months owing to the sheer volume of texts. This wanton destruction shows how vulnerable human knowledge is when political and ideological intolerance displaces curiosity and open inquiry.

In a global age that frequently privileges technocracy over wisdom, Nalanda's heritage — its expansive, inclusive, innovative and deeply reflective pursuit of knowledge — must be reclaimed not as nostalgia but as inspiration. In doing so, we honour not only the scholars and seekers of ancient India, but reaffirm that the pursuit of knowledge, when unfettered, remains humanity's noblest pilgrimage.

Pavan K Varma is an author, diplomat, and former Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha). The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Need more women in bar councils

This is with reference to "Ending the male monopoly in bar councils in India" by Namita Bhandare (December 21). The voice of women in bar councils across the nation needs to be heard to restructure policies, reform laws, end gender bias and provide equal rights to women and true justice.

Abhilasha Gupta

Delhi and the right to clean air

This is with reference to "A prescription for getting Delhi to breathe fine again" by Gopalkrishna Gandhi (December 21). The article is a powerful indictment of our collective apathy towards the capital's toxic air. Only political courage and uncompromising action can restore Delhi's right to breathe easy.

Sanjay Chopra

II

The capitals of India and China have vastly different living standards. India needs decision-makers in tune with the common man, if we are to see development akin to China's, while keeping our democratic ethos alive.

Alka Kakodkar

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Why 2025 was not as tariffying as we thought

SWAMINOMICS



SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AIYAR

The year 2025 started with fears of a global economic crisis that would engulf India too. A second Trump presidency threatened a global trade war that was expected to send stock markets crashing and economies falling into recession. That crisis never arrived. Why not?

First, Trump's bark was worse than his bite. Earlier, statements by a US president were treated as immutable policy commitments. That changed in 2025. Trump announced sweeping measures, then delayed them, diluted them, or withdrew them altogether. He even got a new acronym on Wall Street: TACO (Trump Always Chickens Out). He was seen less as a statesman and more a businessman opening negotiations with an outrageously high asking price, only to settle for much less.

This was most evident on China. Trump began with aggressive rhetoric and threats of 150% tariffs on Chinese goods but soon ran into hard constraints. Such a high tariff would end trade with China, and the US needed its cheap consumer goods. Moreover, China weaponised its virtual world monopoly in rare earth exports, critical for US manufacturing and defence.

US corporate leaders pushed back too. The chief of Nvidia and other tech executives argued — correctly — that the Chinese AI market was too large for US firms to abandon. Trump backed down.

He opened the year with threats of enormous reciprocal tariffs which were neither reciprocal nor grounded in economic logic. His definition of "unfair trade" was simply any country running a surplus with the US, defying basic economics. Fears of trade retaliation by Europe, Japan and others triggered a sharp global stock market sell-off. But the tariffs eventually imposed were far more modest than threatened. When US grocery prices began to edge up, Trump even hurriedly reduced tariffs on politically sensitive items like coffee and bananas. In the end, the US effective tariff rate rose from 4.5% of imports to 15% — significant but nowhere near as high as the original announcements. Markets stabilised once it became clear that Trump's opening salvos were bargaining tactics. India was an exception — Trump levied a 50% tariff, half of which was aimed at pressuring India to stop buying Russian oil.

These tariffs did not translate into runaway US inflation. US companies had stocked up on low-duty imports months in advance, anticipating high tariffs. Many Chinese exports were quietly rerouted through



NEW YEAR WOES: The inflationary reckoning has been postponed, not cancelled. It may well arrive in 2026

third countries, a shadowy but well-known form of trade diversion. US sanctions on oil imports from Russia were introduced gradually and became truly stringent only in late November.

Where tariffs did bite, the burden was shared. Chinese and Indian exporters absorbed part of the cost, US importers took another share, and only the remainder was passed on to consumers. However, in due course, the entire tariff will be passed on. The inflationary reckoning has been postponed, not cancelled — and may well arrive in 2026. Pessimists should have noted that merchandise imports were only around 11% of US GDP. No less than 76% of GDP comes from services, which are unaffected by tariffs.

The US economy has grown at a decent 3% this year. China's growth, going by official figures, slowed only marginally. Across Asia, countries exposed to trade disruptions such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia adapted quickly and continued to grow. India is not alone in shrugging off tariff shocks.

India's performance, however, has been extraordinary. Its long-term growth trend has been 6.5% per year. The govt estimated that Trump's tariffs might reduce GDP growth by 0.5%. Instead, it has soared, averaging 8% in the first two quarters of this fiscal year. Chief Economic Adviser V Anantha Nageswaran is on firm ground in suggesting that India may have moved to a new, higher growth trend exceeding 7%. India's fiscal deficit is under control. Inflation has fallen to just 0.7%, thanks to an especially sharp fall in vegetable prices. The current account deficit may double, thanks to high gold imports, but even so may be a comfortable 1.2% of GDP.

India's high growth is the cumulative effect of several different reforms over the years. The most striking development has been the rise and rise of global capability centres (GCCs). US giants Google, Amazon and Microsoft have announced plans for investing a combined total of \$67.5 billion in new GCCs, including infrastructure for and development of AI. MNCs globally are short of STEM (science, technology, engineering, maths) graduates and India is the largest provider, save China. This is upskilling Indian talent to global heights, with spillover effects into the whole economy as GCC staff are later hired by Indian companies.

Finally, a note of warning. It's possible 2025 is the lull before the storm. That should make 2026 very interesting. ■

Big Tech already dominates our digital lives. This will only intensify with AI

In 2025, the European Union stepped up efforts to curb the power of Big Tech companies, sparking a transatlantic clash as the Trump administration threatened retaliatory measures. Even as the debate continues on how far the state should go in regulating companies such as Meta and Google, India is without a well-designed digital services law. **Linda Griffin**, head of public policy at the global non-profit Mozilla, which created the Firefox browser, tells **Himanshi Dhawan** why choice and user agency need to be built into the user experience

■ India currently has no law to regulate digital services with the govt withdrawing the draft Digital Competition Bill in August. What does this gap mean for the digital rights of Indian consumers?

Mozilla has been tackling uneven competition on the web for 25 years, so we have a well-evolved view on this matter. At present, a handful of companies dominate our digital lives, limiting our experiences and stifling competition and innovation. This trend is only increasing as large language models (LLMs) become part of the mix. Well-designed competition regulation can be a boon to consumer choice and value as well as to economic growth by lowering the barriers to entry, and facilitating investment and innovation from both domestic and international companies and developers. We have experienced first-hand the impact of a regulation like the EU's Digital Markets Act (DMA), where our daily active users doubled in a year after users were given genuine browser choice for the first time. The UK, Japan and others followed suit, understanding that the only way to give start-ups a chance to scale and give citizens better choices and experiences online is to intervene in a targeted way to level the playing field. For India's tech ecosystem to produce more successful home-grown innovators, a targeted competition regulation is needed. Not a DMA 2.0, but one that works for India.

■ There are fears that over-regulation could stifle innovation. How do you respond to this?

'Regulation as the enemy of innovation' has been a PR tagline successfully deployed by those incumbents who stand to lose out from fairer and more competitive markets. Badly designed and poorly enforced laws are certainly not what we want. But well-thought-out regulation provides the scaffolding and baseline certainty for business, citizens and govt. Imagine saying that we don't need financial or health-care regulation: it's hard to understand why the digital economy should be any different. Good regulation should be expertly crafted by people who understand the technologies they are regulating. This means it needs to be efficient, proportionate (meaning it is not overly burdensome for start-ups without large compliance departments) and responsive. Good regulation should also have clear processes, and a supportive, well-equipped regulator to oversee. Anyone who doesn't have a view on how to make regulation work better for innovators doesn't actually care about regulation harming innovation; they only want to protect the status quo.

■ Given Google's dominance, what is Mozilla India's strategy to significantly increase Firefox adoption?

In 2025, we rolled out one update after another; all aimed at making browsing better, faster, more useful and secure. Importantly, Firefox is focused on giving people more

choice and control over their information and experience. This is our real edge over larger providers. But we don't have our operating system to distribute our browser, so if people want to use Firefox, they have to make an active choice. And 200 million people globally make that choice. There is still a lot to be done to ensure that independent competitors like Firefox have a level playing field and that people have real browser choice. Defaults that are hard to change, platforms overriding user choice, maze-like settings, lack of interoperability are some of the barriers facing smaller challengers. But there is plenty to be optimistic about, including the momentum that exists globally to address these issues and to ensure that people can freely choose a browser that meets their needs.

■ Firefox introduced its AI Window later than several rival browsers. What sets it apart?

Control and choice are central to Firefox's DNA, and we believe these principles are more important than ever as AI becomes a part of people's browsing experiences. But as a few dominant firms start integrating the browser, search engine, and AI agent into one tightly controlled ecosystem, real user choice is at risk. It's more critical than ever that AI systems are built with transparency, choice, and accountability. At Firefox, we've deliberately not taken part in the race to the bottom, but are thoughtfully designing an opt-in AI assistant feature (AI Window). This will be rolled out in the coming months. With an AI Window, users will have a dedicated space in Firefox for focused interaction with an AI assistant — a place to search or chat without disrupting their regular browsing. Choice and user agency will be built into every part of users' experience.

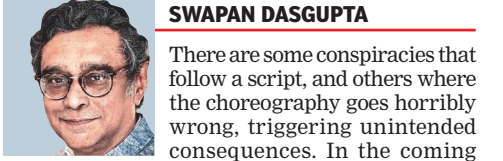
■ India is set to host the global AI Summit next year. In a world divided over AI safety, openness, and governance, how can India help push the conversation forward?

Looking back, the first Summit in the UK focused on safety from a very narrow perspective. In contrast, the Paris AI Summit was a positive change of pace with a broad understanding that more openness across the AI stack is the only way to build transparency into AI. We're excited to see where the Indian Summit takes this conversation and hope that the role of a well-crafted regulation is properly debated.



Incendiary rhetoric in Bangladesh shouldn't distract India from its strategic interests

RIGHT & WRONG



SWAPAN DASGUPTA

There are some conspiracies that follow a script, and others where the choreography goes horribly wrong, triggering unintended consequences. In the coming months, regardless of how events in Bangladesh unfold in 2026, the speculation over who shot Inquilab Moncho activist Osman Hadi in Dhaka on Dec 12 is likely to persist and even take intriguing turns.

The big question centres on why the tragic killing of someone who was relatively unknown, except among a charmed circle of what in India goes by the label andolanjivis, should have produced such a violent reaction. According to the official narrative spun by the friends of Mohammed Yunus's fragile dispensation, the killer was a known Awami League worker who has subsequently fled and taken refuge in India. The killing, it is being suggested, was the Awami's way of instilling panic in the ranks of the regime's supporters.

If the exiled Awami leadership had indeed plotted the murder of Hadi, it was a case of a conspiracy gone awry. On the contrary, the reactive violence unleashed by the so-called baby revolutionaries in the National Citizen Party (better known as the 'King's Party' for its proximity to the Chief Adviser) seemed to be better targeted. Apart from assaulting some remaining symbols of Bengali culture, intimidating awkward voices in the media and brutally lynching a Hindu man in Mymensingh, the violence had two clear objectives. First, to derail the parliamentary elections scheduled for Feb 12, as Hadi's brother alleged, accusing a section within Yunus's interim govt of plotting the killing. Second, to scuttle the homecoming, after 17 years in exile, of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's working president Tarique Rahman. Arguably, there was a third objective: to create an anti-India frenzy and a war hysteria. The over-excited NCP leaders pressed for Bangladesh to engineer the separation of the Seven Sisters from India. There were also cries for a revolutionary govt to assume charge.

It is now apparent that both sets of conspiracies had unanticipated outcomes. The mob violence

unleashed by the upholders of the July Revolution created panic among important stakeholders in Bangladesh. In the aftermath of Sheikh Hasina's departure, there was a fond hope that Yunus would be able to calm things down and facilitate an orderly transition to democratic rule. Alas, Yunus has spent much of his tenure ensuring his own survival and patronising his band of favourites. The stability and progress that characterised Bangladesh under earlier govts have been seriously compromised by the caretaker regime in the past 16 months. Social peace has been compromised by assertive Islamists, mob rule has jeopardised the daily life of citizens and economic activity has been adversely affected by extortion and uncertainty. With the latest round of violence after Hadi's death, it was clear to its stakeholders that Bangladesh had reached breaking point.

The return of Khaleda Zia's political heir to Dhaka last Thursday has transformed the political landscape momentarily. The tumultuous welcome that greeted Tarique Rahman clearly demonstrated that the popular base of the BNP was firmly intact and much more consequential than the sup-

port enjoyed by the Jamaat-e-Islami and the NCP. In the event the caretaker regime resists international pressure and prevents the Awami League from contesting the polls, a resounding BNP victory is assured. In any event, the sizable Awami vote bank is likely to extend tactical support to the BNP, not least on account of the latter's commitment to the legacy of the 1971 liberation movement.

It is not merely die-hard BNP supporters that have been energised by Tarique's return. There is also a groundswell of support from the middle classes and business communities who, alarmed by the growing lawlessness, are relieved that there is now a clear prime minister-in-waiting.

Finally, despite earlier doubts over Tarique's ability to re-adjust to the harsh realities of Bangladesh politics, there is now a greater reassurance. The BNP leader's initial remarks suggest that he seeks a return to normal life, minus the radical impulses that vitiated post-Hasina Bangladesh. His announcement of a grand plan for his country may well be discounted, but he will still be embraced by a Bangladesh desperately clutching at straws. For the moment, Tarique is an uncrowned king.

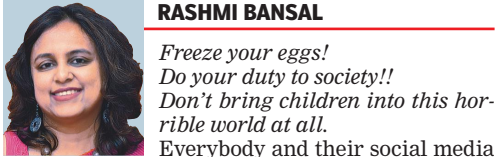
Post-election is another matter altogether.

However, Bangladesh's bid to become 'normal' again faces daunting challenges. There is Yunus's personal ambitions and his colossal ability to manipulate events to ensure his own survival. This includes exacerbating tensions with India and generating an anti-India hysteria. Then there is the monster of Islamist radicalism which believes Bangladesh is ready for transformation. The Jamaat has the patience to move incrementally, and it will undoubtedly seek an understanding with the BNP on the belief that once in power, Tarique's inexperience will show. It will be interesting to see how the BNP now perceives its emboldened erstwhile junior partner.

For India, the only viable choice is to wait, watch and ensure that the challenges to national security are contained, without getting worked up by the incendiary rhetoric of Bangladeshi populists. For the long term, however, other options will have to be explored to ensure a Bangladesh that feels it can be a partner in India's global march. Exorcising Pakistan from the soul of Bangladesh is taking too long for comfort. ■

Freeze the gyaan! The real reason Indian women aren't having babies

BY INVITATION



RASHMI BANSAL

Freeze your eggs!
Do your duty to society!
Don't bring children into this horrible world at all.

Everybody and their social media uncle has an opinion on the fertility of women. Zoho's Sridhar Vembu recently weighed in, advising women to have kids in their twenties rather than postponing the decision. Reproductive gyaan to women is nothing new. In the era of 'no birth control, this meant virginal young brides being married off' early and producing cricket-team-sized families. There was no choice, really, it was survival of the species.

Then, we found ways to prevent disease, even eliminate some. The babies who once died at birth, or as infants, stopped dying. The adults who retired at 60 and — if lucky — hit 70, now aim for centuries. The *jansankhya ka aankada* galloped from millions to over a billion, 1.4 to be precise.

Now, economists and think tanks warn that our demographic dividend is turning into demographic decline. For those of us who grew up in an era where the govt promoted 'hum do, hamare do' as an ideal, this is understandably confusing. Then, population was sold as a 'problem' and Nirodh, the panacea.

Cut to Generation X, which ripened for marriage in the 1990s. Code-language style matrimonial ads filled up just the Sunday newspaper. IIM Ahmedabad's class of 1993 (to which I belong) had the choice of 'love marriage' or 'arranged marriage'. 'I will not marry' was not on the table.

Once married, you announced the 'good news' within two to five years. Many of us went from 'hamare do' to 'hamara ek', boy or girl koi bhi chahale. So, the only logical number the next generation could go to was zero. And now that you can swipe your way through life, why even get married? But even for those who cannot resist being the star of your very own Karan Johar-inspired wedding production, kids are not happening — not yet, and maybe never.

There are many, many theories about *aisa kyun ho raha hai*. From '*ladkiyan career par focus karna chah-ti hain*' (girls are too career focused) to 'youngsters don't want to grow up and take responsibility'. But after observing the brave ones who do have a child, I have come to a different conclusion. The problem seems to be what I call 'perfect parent' syndrome.

As high achievers in life, today's young couples strive to achieve the highest rating not just in the office, but in the scorecard of parenting.

I have seen parents who tell visitors 'not to ring the bell' as it will disturb the child. Parents who ensure their child is never left unattended, not even for a minute. And those who constantly run after



NOT SO CUTE: Couples are afflicted by the 'perfect parent' syndrome, which makes them strive for the highest rating not just in office, but in parenthood

them with a spoon saying, 'Just one more bite'. Naturally, the act of parenting is endlessly exhausting, despite the adorable pictures on Instagram.

Our grandmothers with a cricket team to raise had no such anxieties. There was a bevy of chachas and buas, didis and bhaiyyas to co-parent, which essentially meant: feed and clothe the child. Also, make sure they do not accidentally kill themselves by swallowing the shiny metal objects lying around.

Now the pressure is entirely on the parents, particularly the mom. If she is working, this means handling office politics, as well as an SME-size staff at home — maid, back up maid, cook, nanny, driver, dhobi, etc etc etc. And, even with all this help, and just one child, she is ten times as stressed as her own mother, who cooked three meals a day herself.

So, what's the solution, you might ask. Having kids early (late 20s) — yes, it is chaotic for a while, but you have your 40s and beyond to live it up? Having kids later (mid-30s and beyond), you have more resources and are (hopefully) more mature? However, you will be attending school PTAs in your 50s. Whatever the age, parenting has never been harder than it is right now. We don't have that village we need to raise a child/children, and no alternate support systems. How many of us have 'neighbours like family' whom we trust our child can spend an hour or two with when needed? Maybe such people exist but we never had the time to get to know them.

And then there are IIM-educated couples who say — in all seriousness — "we cannot afford a child." What they really mean is: we may not be able to send our child to the most expensive school in the city and later, to a very expensive Ivy League university (that being the default, *janamsiddh adhihaar*!). Bhai, bachchas don't demand these things — all they need is love. Also, a bit of struggle never hurt anyone, and may actually be just what they need. To be cool, confident, content, conscious, and contributing citizens. ■

Bansal is an author who writes on entrepreneurship and society

WORD DROP

KIDULTS

Have you ever walked down a supermarket aisle and felt tempted to splurge on a Lego set, a superhero figurine, or a Labubu doll — despite being a 'grown up'? You might be part of a growing community of people termed as 'kidults', aka adults who buy toys and other things meant for kids. From Delhi to London, such 'kidults' are not only tapping into nostalgia and fandoms, but also giving in to



consumerism to keep the child in them alive. The toy and collectibles industry is not complaining at all, with a report by market research firm Circana showing that adults were the fastest-growing age group in the toy market over 2023-24. Money, it turns out, can buy happiness — at least that's what some kidults are choosing to believe.

INBOX

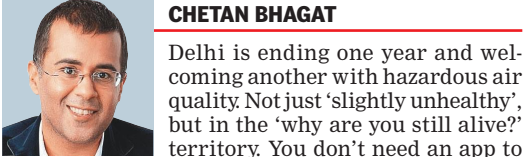
Old wounds

Apropos of '150 years later...' (ATM, Dec 14), the renewed controversy around Vande Mataram underscores how unresolved questions from the past still echo through our political discourse. However, this should not become an exercise in reopening old wounds. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Email your letters to the editor at sundaytimes@timesofindia.com with 'Sunday Mailbox' in the subject line. Please mention your name and city

Butter naan-sense. Symbolic fixes can't clean up Delhi's pollution

THE UNDERAGE OPTIMIST



CHETAN BHAGAT

Delhi is ending one year and welcoming another with hazardous air quality. Not just 'slightly unhealthy', but in the 'very air quality index' territory. You don't need an app to tell you that. Just open your eyes. Or your mouth. If you land in Delhi from another city, the air welcomes you with a bitter taste, like a disappointed relative.

Health experts suggest that pollution is likely to shave 11 years off an average person's life. Flights are cancelled, schools are shut, and people are sick. You would think this is a pandemic-level urgency. And yet, apart from some measures that do not work, not much has changed. The latest measure? Stop making rotis and naans in coal-fired tandoors. Yes, the real villain was always that extra butter naan you ordered.

This isn't about partisan politics either. Every govt has tried steps like odd-even number plates, banning construction, banning firecrackers, banning bonfires made by watchmen, banning old vehicles, monitoring waste burning, and trying to prevent crop burning. Yet, Delhi maintains the dubious honour of being one of the most polluted capital cities in the world year after year.

Other cities that have faced this problem in the past seem to have fixed it. Beijing and several other Chinese cities are good examples. Why are we failing in Delhi? To understand this, we have to face some brutal truths about ourselves. I am writing this in times when brutal truths and anything that doesn't celebrate or glorify us and our great past is unwelcome but if unpleasant reality triggers you, stop now. You have been warned. Otherwise, here goes:

1 | WE ARE UNSCIENTIFIC PEOPLE

Of course, we study science. How else would we crack engineering and medical entrance exams? But most of us do not believe in a scientific way of thinking, which involves measuring and analysing data, figuring out cause and effect, and proposing solutions based on evidence. The average Indian views all this as either redundant or a western conspiracy. They believe that all the science that needed to be figured out was done by our ancestors thousands of years ago, and our ancient knowledge trumps western research. This is even as we happily adopt global scientific and technological innovations such as smartphones, medicines and ChatGPT.

This lack of scientific temperament means we are never really going to figure out fixes for Delhi's pollution. Instead, we would rather be seen as "at least trying to do something," and hence, no more tandoori rotis. Science does not drive our decisions, populism does, which brings us to the next point.

2 | MORE HARDSHIPS, LESS ACCOUNTABILITY

We will soon be the third-largest economy in the world. However, we are still third world in many aspects. Go to any Indian slum and you will get a sense of how hard life is for the average Indian. Clean toilets do not exist. Wages are low and not guaranteed. Housing is dilapidated. When life is in survival mode, the first thing that goes out of the window is concern for the environment. I want the cheapest fuel — wood, biomass, or coal — even if it pollutes. If crop burning saves me a bit of money, I'll do it. My life sucks, so don't expect me not to spit naan on the roadside or throw garbage anywhere. The irony is that the poor suffer the most from pollution, yet it feels hard and unfair to expect them to be accountable. No politician is going to enforce it anyway.



SMOKY REVEAL: Yes, the real villain was always that extra butter naan you ordered


3 | A LACK OF CIVIC SENSE

Whether we like it or not, Indians are considered filthy, boorish, and lacking civic sense. The stereotype isn't completely unfounded. In a society wired to live in survival mode, it's every man and woman for themselves rather than having a feeling of belonging to a larger society. Our homes are clean, not our streets. One option is adopting draconian laws with strict fines and punishments but these are antithetical to democracy and will only be abused in a corrupt society like India. What is needed is a feeling that this country, city, and society belong to all of us collectively, and that we need to take care of them. Instead, we have some chest-beating nationalism, which is more about fake personal pride and identity than shared civic duty. In such a setup, macro-level problems such as pollution become impossible to fix. Any civilization that rejects modern science or doesn't have a cohesive civic sense eventually perishes. Earlier, such civilizations would get annihilated by more united and technologically advanced invaders. Today, it looks like we will kill ourselves by creating pollution that we can't seem to fix. Meanwhile, I will miss the unique flavour of tandoori rotis and kebabs. Oh well, maybe we can add that to the list of things from our glorious past. So, what if we live 11 years less? As Rajesh Khanna said in the movie 'Anand': *Zindagi lambi nahi, badi honi chahiye* (Life should be big, not long). Maybe that's why Delhiites live it up, after all. ■

This New Year, Forget Resolutions & Try to Find What You Really, Really Want Instead

Without knowing your deep-seated wishes, you may be making misdirected plans – which, even if accomplished, will result in fulfilling inconsequential wishes – so careful what you wish for

WORD COUNTS



TUSHAR GORE

With the new year just around the corner, the annual ritual of deciding resolutions is upon us. Activities that are prioritised in resolutions are driven by desires and wishes. Take the 'lose weight by exercising' resolution. It is to fulfill the wish of 'looking good' or 'feeling better'. A wish to be less stressed and manage timelines better could be the driver of a 'use task-lists' resolution. Many of us, however, do not start by listing the wish before circling in the resolution. The 'wish-to-activity' journey seems automatic and unconscious enough.

While thinking about wishes, the question becomes: are we working on our deepest wishes and desires? One of the first lessons in any introductory management course is to give top priority to the most important or impactful project. Extending this concept to personal life, the new year resolution should be aligned to our deepest desires – those that are not on track of being fulfilled. Extending that thought even further, do we even know what our deepest desires are? Recently, I remembered the 'Mirror of Erised' construct from the Harry Potter universe. The mirror reflects back the beholder's deepest desire – 'Erised' is 'Desire' spelt backwards – by depicting him or her enjoying an activity that shows the fulfillment of this desire. For Harry, it shows him hugging his dead parents. For Ron, it shows him holding the Quidditch cup and being felicitated by the team. In the novel, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, the mirror comes with a warning from the school's



RESOLUTION IN THE AIR

headmaster Albus Dumbledore – that the mirror can ensnare people and drive them to near-madness as they watch the mirror endlessly to see the impossible unfold. But a tool as capable as this Mirror of Erised could be extremely useful. Because many of us are not able to highlight our deepest desires. What do we *really* want?

While thinking about wishes, the question becomes: are we working on our deepest wishes and desires?

In the Harry Potter stories, the mirror reflected a desire for fulfilled relationships, and for acceptance and recognition of peers consequent to some extraordinary achievement. These two desires are common entries in a list of top aspirations and wishes. Other contenders are a desire for some specific material object

or experience. Considering that the qualifier is *deepest* desire, this could be a more archetypal yearning related to material objects or experiences. Then there are desires around skills and talents. For example, longing for a musical, sporting, analytical ability, or the power to read people. In business – and in general life – the ability to take the right decision is a terrific skill to possess. Such an expertise could be a meta-skill, the possession of which makes life easier all around because whatever the situation, one is making the best decision. (It would be a formidable challenge for a screenwriter and filmmaker to depict a mirror reflecting back to someone the fulfillment of this desire.) With a menu of desires to choose from, we are able to pinpoint the deepest one? Without knowing our deep-seated wish,

we might be making plans and resolutions that are misdirected and, even if accomplished, will result in fulfilling an inconsequential wish. Without a mirror, what can one do to uncover this secret? Self-reflection can be one way – although the concept of an external object (such as a mirror) that reflects back part of our sub-conscious is meant to convey that self-knowledge is rarely complete. Seeking feedback from others is another. Similar to the 'strengths-weaknesses' management framework, there is a 'hopes-fears' teambuilding game. Listing hopes (wishes) for oneself, and also seeking feedback from family and close friends, can shed light on these hidden secrets. Sometimes, our unguarded utterances to close ones subtly betray our deepest wishes. This new year can be about reflection and seeking reactions, instead of making resolutions. Wishing you all a very happy new year ahead.

The writer is MD, Resonance Laboratories, Bengaluru

RED HERRING



INDRAJIT HAZRA

Being Funny is Seriously a Very Serious Business

Careful with your comedy – there's no 'sense of humour', only many 'senses'

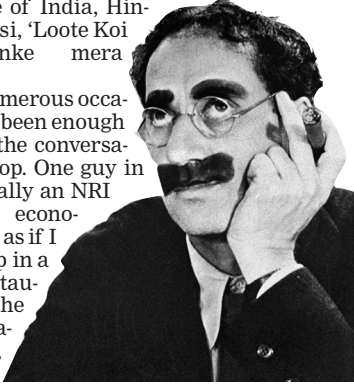
As a life-long Marxist, I have always tried to practise what Groucho Marx preached in the St Louis Post-Dispatch in 1927: '...all humourists are serious people at heart. The fact that they have to be continually funny makes them so. They also realise that humour is regarded in a light vein, that for a thing to be really worthwhile it must have depth and certain amount of vitality. Basically, their humour contains these qualities, and knowing it they endeavour to bring it out in serious material. Generally, they fail, for they only know the field of comedy... Yes, sir, this business of being funny is far too serious.' Yes, sir, indeed.

Being funny – writing or doing anything remotely humorous is a subset of this condition – is tricky. You are considered funny in a good way depending on *where* you're being funny. Cracking a Santa-Banta joke in a Bhatinda bar is different from cracking it in a Rajouri Gardens Christmas party, is different from cracking it in a Khalistani Pride Parade in Toronto. As much as it sometimes how you react to scenes while watching Schindler's List at a Nazi or Ashkenazi dinner party.

Which is something I have sometimes forgotten to abide by in my enthusiasm to be a 24x7 Wise Wi-seass® to my peril a couple of times when I was named in FIRs for 'hurting sensibilities', even as I comfort myself to this day that never have I been accused of 'outraging modesty'. Yes, being funny is laying oneself open to being misunderstood: of flippancy, rudeness, infantile behaviour – and perhaps the worst sin of our times, incomprehensibility. That is the nature of the multiple-entendre beast. And yet, if you're a Marxist like I am, you take your chances and labour on. For, as Groucho rightly says, it's about the desperate need to be taken seriously.

If nature abhors a vacuum, a comikaze – person whose constant attempts to come across as funny ends up being self-demeaning – abhors gravitas, at least in a crowd larger than two. There have been numerous occasions when in the middle of serious conversations I've cracked a bon mot – on the current situation in Delhi's Chittaranjan Park after troubles erupting in Bangladesh, Delhi's breathtaking skyline, fall of the rupee marking the indisputable rise of India, Hinduisation of Messi, 'Looto Koi MNREGA, banke mera sathi'...

Within these numerous occasions, there have been enough occasions when the conversation skids to a stop. One guy in the huddle – usually an NRI businessman or economist – looks at me as if I asked for ketchup in a Michelin star restaurant. And then the serious conversation continues, this time with me exiting via a patli gali.



OH, THE SERIOUSITY OF IT

Being funny is also a protective device against being exposed as a charlatan. A rent-a-witticism or a quip-a-minute is a plea to be taken seriously. But here's the magnificent, tragic paradox: succeed in establishing yourself as a man of comic disposition, and among most grown-ups you'll be forever consigned to the seat next to the kitchen or bathroom door.

And yet, it's the comic rasa that alone can depict the world as it truly is: comedy heightened by its absurdities; neuroses amplified by fakery; boredom propelled by pointless hyperactivity.

Another great Marxist, novelist Howard Jacobson, hit the heads of angels dancing on a nail when he said, '...if you're going to be a great comic writer, not a humorist, you've got to take it into the throat of grief. Can you make laughter and seriousness so close that they are the same thing?... And the seriousness is at all times aware of its own preposterousness. What's it for, this seriousness?' So, don't be disheartened that no one – apart from your underlings at work – took you seriously at Wednesday's Christmas Eve party after you dropped those smart alec House of Guinness witticisms and Black Adder-inspired one-liners more than once. You have Wednesday's New Year's Party to set things straight. Just gauge the room and choose your punchline wisely. Remember, there's nothing called 'a sense of humour' or lack thereof. There are only senses of humour. Wishing you a very seriously comic new year ahead.

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Nature Doesn't Exist in a Zoo, It's Also In You

'Othering' nature and then repackaging it back as wellness is clever – but why don't you just protect it as it is all around us?

SOFT LAUNCH



KANIKA GAHLAUT

The nature market is having a moment. What began with spas has expanded into other forms of self-care in nature – retreats, getaways, silence camps – offered for the mind and body. Or, in branding terms, a holistic industry. Meanwhile, cities are reporting a paradoxical trend: ghost malls have become a whole abandoned shadow city as crowds flock to new hot spots in new malls. Except, it's not a paradox, but an anomaly too familiar in a capitalist cycle where we keep cycling in the same spot and think we're moving forward.

None of this works because urban life has made people dependent on the market to generate excitement, leisure, even an inner life. Do we need a space to practise silence? Do we need to attend a book club to read a book? Think about it: there might be book lovers out there who would prefer to read two books in the time it takes to read one and discuss it noisily somewhere. If we care about nature, will we not also care about dogs, birds, and trees in our localities, instead of flying

off to Ranthambore to click a bulbul and upload it to Instagram with the caption: What's that bird?

Even the most basic curiosity about nature is now outsourced to wildlife experts, while being a noisy, clueless tourist disturbing animals on a safari passes for being an animal lover. You don't need to be a botanist to have a working knowledge of plants, trees, birds and butterflies around you, just as you don't need to be a human expert to be friendly to your neighbours. These are matters of basic attentiveness, courtesy and common sense. Climate curiosity is no longer social chit chat. It's existential.

What we see instead is exotification of nature. As though it exists outside us and must be travelled to be experienced.



THE GREAT BARRIER RIFF

We return, forget, and repeat the cycle. Pop culture reinforces this separation, framing nature lovers as wild children – AI images of semi-clad forest, or ocean nymphs not from this world along with some poetry scribbled on. As though attentiveness and prose were a deviation from the norm. Paradoxically, as our cities grow divorced from the natural world, the nature industry, feeding off this otherness, encroaches further on nature,

If you genuinely care about 'nature', you'll know that it's not something far away

constructing directly on it elsewhere. Nature is not something you leave behind, escape to, and then return from. Nature is *you*. The more we 'other' nature, the further we move away from it. This is the circuitous ridiculousness of mindless consumption, where we are so conditioned by commercial interests that the left hand doesn't know what right hand is doing. Often this is the brain protecting itself through cognitive dissonance. It's one of the reasons many animal lovers eat meat without seeing a contradiction. Othering becomes a convenient lie. One that suits our blind spots around mortality and ethics, and benefits consumer industry.

I remember when the lifestyle beat in journalism arrived in India after economic liberalisation, and I was sent to cover it. During a morning meeting, when I spoke on another colleague's beat, an editor cut me off to say, 'Tell us about lifestyle,' as though a woman living was somehow separate from a man thinking. It was the same cognitive dissonance at work. Living is a political act as much as clean air is a political issue. In late-stage capitalism, the question is no longer how long the con will last, but how much damage it will do to the very causes it claims to promote. Thinking and living are not separate channels of the body, unconnected to each other. What we choose to consume defines not just our own existence, but the future of the planet. If you genuinely care about 'nature', you will care about the Aravallis. Because nature is not something far away. Let's normalise this.

Go to Turkmenistan, Step Into a Rabbit Hole

From marble excess to fiery desert, the country's surreal, utterly over the top

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN



MICHEL BAAS

You know how some people are excellent at digging holes for themselves? Lying on a mattress – which, in comparison, makes even a slab of marble seem soft and bouncy – in the middle of Turkmenistan's Karakum desert, not even the heat of the Darvaza gas crater nearby could offer any solace from the deadly cold. A few months ago in Mongolia, we had promised each other never to stay in a stupid yurt again. Yet, there we were.

Visiting the reclusive nation of Turkmenistan is akin to stepping into a rabbit hole. A driver and guide are mandatory, interactions with locals are avoided. And the obligatory story at each stop is a cautiously rehearsed performance. Capital Ashgabat is constructed almost exclusively of white marble, and on its elegant roads only white cars are permitted.

Scattered across its urban landscape are the most baffling monuments dedicated to the nation's leaders. Bedecked in gold and under the watchful eyes of stern-looking guards, we were the only visitors.

On arrival at the bird-shaped airport, we followed the tour company's instructions, handed over our official 'letter of invitation' for visa-stamping, and submitted to a mandatory Covid test. The swab was waved in front of our faces like a magical wand, and we never heard about the results.

We were then whisked off to our hotel, the iconic 11-storey Wedding Palace, shaped like an 8-pointed star. The massive cube that sits on top incorporates a ball with a diameter of 32 m, symbolising Earth, with Turkmenistan as its only visible nation. Naturally, we were the only guests here, too.

Initially, there's a certain charm to having a whole city and its sights to yourself. But you start wondering what all this is for: Turkmenistan holds vast reserves of natural gas and oil. This has allowed its leaders

to cultivate the most outlandish personality cults. Perched on an outcrop of white marble some 20 m off the ground, its second president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, gallops atop a majestic horse for all eternity.

Cast in bronze and covered in 24-carat gold leaf, upon ascending to the throne, he undid some of the more eccentric decisions of his predecessor – who, among others, had the days of the week and months renamed after himself and members of his family. Berdimukhamedov's son is now president, and his image is unavoidable, lordling over empty parks and streets, and smiling benignly from government buildings.

After sundown, the city is lit up by a spectacle of rainbow-coloured lights. Not unlike your auntie from Jalandhar having taken charge of the organisation of a shaadi to rival all others. Resembling a jewel box carved out of ivory by day, at night the building that houses the world's tallest ferris wheel evokes the sense of a portal to another dimension.

Independence Monument, which sits next to it, is shaped like a rocket, and with lights changing colour while running up, it seems in a hurry to take off and head for the stars. To see the moon, all you need to do is head into the desert, though. When, in 1971, the Soviets started drilling for gas at Darvaza, it caused the soil to collapse, and a deep crater was formed. To prevent poisonous emissions, it was set on fire under the assumption that it would burn only for a few days.

In the company of a formidable Turkmen hound known for keeping sheep safe from wolves, we trudged over to the crater at night to relish this oddity that has been burning for some 50 years. Staring into the hole, and revelling in its heat, we briefly found ourselves contemplating whether we should move our mattresses to its bottom. Yet with rain predicted, this did not seem smart. At all. Our hole was deep enough as it was.

We were the only guests at Wedding Palace (pic)



TURKMEN DELIGHT

NO OFFENCE

Morparia



LET'S TALK ABOUT...



Radio Ceylon Turning 100

'Bhaiyo aur beheno'...

Are you going to give a speech?

Ah no, I was thinking about Ameen Sayani and Binaca Geetmala.

Ameen what and Binaca what now? (sighs) Video truly killed the radio star. I am talking about Ameen Sayani who was the honey-dripped voice of the popular one-of-its-kind weekly countdown show of Hindi film songs called Binaca Geetmala on Radio Ceylon.

These are just a bunch of words for me. I would need more context.

Well, Radio Ceylon is the bygone name of Sri Lankan radio service that was once popular across India as just that. And the man who thousands tuned into listen was Sayani, the RJ for the countdown show for almost four decades, once a week exactly at 8pm sharp. Geetmala was broadcast on Radio Ceylon from 1952 to 1988. It later moved to Vividh Bharati service of All India Radio in 1989 and ran there till 1994.

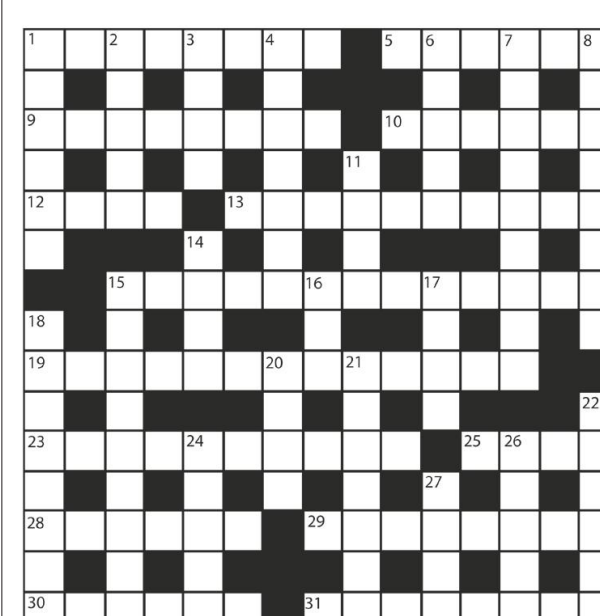
Why are we talking about it? Radio Ceylon just completed 100 years this December 16. And, it brought back memories.

How old are you? Old enough to know that you are being flip. Did you know that the Sri Lankan radio service was the first commercial short-wave station in Asia? It was rechristened as Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) in 1967 though. Apparently the SLBC has the largest library of recorded songs in Asia, including rare Hindi song records not found even in India and a unique collection of world leaders' voice recordings. It was truly a unifying force of nature, especially in a region that was fractured by politics, borders and language.

Is this Ceylon radio still on? Very much so. It broadcasts three Sinhala, two Tamil, and one English service domestically, alongside foreign services in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam. Text: Team Sunday ET

ET Sunday Crossword

0148



ACROSS

1 Switch positions from time to time (2,3,3)

5 Healthy muscle protects glandular organ (6)

9 Get a lute repaired? That's guardian's job (8)

10 Relatives follow Jack for short trips (6)

12 Where in London to find some espresso houses (4)

13 Locate bulb cultivated to produce pigment (6,4)

15 Agrees enough's been converted into e.g. methane (10,3)

19 Vague popular English expression I note in time (13)

23 Cumbersome load edged with a liquid (4,6)

25 Upstairs close to front group (4)

28 Room to turn wheel, missing hotel by a yard (6)

29 Very attractive lower leg shown in society magazine (8)

30 Start Oxford University exam the wrong way (6)

31 How Henry V began his rallying speech at Harfleur again (4,4)

DOWN

1 Dull old boy set out to tour Uruguay (6)

2 A restless desire to find letter dropped by some (5)

3 Herb's seen in Piccadilly (4)

4 Alert navy chasing goof swimming across harbour (7)

6 Earthquake's epicentre? (5)

7 In long speech one mogul rambled about love (9)

8 Sort of account that creates tension (8)

11 Pudding succeeded in the past (4)

14 Not straight grass (4)

15 Unusually, Gran opted to become sponsor at baptism (9)

16 Border cuts through the Midlands (3)

17 TV programme for old-age pensioners last to start (4)

18 Five game to tour India skip one sort of curry (8)

20 Drops check by the sound of it (4)

21 Brutal Man U played at home against Southend First (7)

22 Language learnt on Guernsey to some extent (6)

24 Marine mammal's healthy, carrying little weight (5)

26 In Africa it may charge money (5)

27 Not much land to climb in Helsinki (4)

28 Rhinoceros (4)

29 Rhinoceros (4)

30 Rhinoceros (4)

31 Rhinoceros (4)

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DECCAN
Chronicle

28 DECEMBER 2025



Shreya Sen-Handley

Off the beaten track

Six reasons why 2025
wasn't a total disaster

At this time of dying light, and not just the last gasp from the heavens but smothering our political-economic landscape, I didn't want to pile on the gloom by listing all that's gone awry this annum. Himalayan in scale, to dredge them up would be to relive horrors we've barely survived. Morale-wrecking and hope-shattering, that ain't the baggage we want to lug into 2026!

Instead, I wanted to remind you of the joy we've experienced, no matter how paltry and unimportant. Yet, when I set out to enumerate them, I hadn't counted on it becoming this uphill a climb. Because so little of this dwindling annum can be dubbed delightful, the Oxford English Dictionary has appropriately declared 'rage bait' the Word of the Year.

Not only is rage the default setting for our planet's multiplying lumpen, they are easily and constantly whipped into this heedlessly savage state by the corporations, media, and political parties, perpetually profiting from them. And we have much to protest but not against the powerless targets we're manipulated into directing our hate.

Consider turning it instead on a revered dictionary insisting two words are just one, and murdering language!

But 2026, by its very name, deserves at least six bequests of hope from 2025, to give it something to build on. The six I will highlight are events that raised a smile in our home, to get you started on lists of your own, because each of us will need uplifting memories to hold on to, on our rocky road to global redemption.

The two Indian national women's cricket teams that won World Cup tournaments, overcoming huge socio-economic obstacles, overwhelming press and public pressure, misogyny and international condescension, and in the case of the blind women's team, immense physical disadvantages too, turned a bleak year for not just sport but *everything*, into one with flashes, occasionally dazzling, of optimism. Particularly heartwarming was the self-belief they displayed when all about them were shouting naaya and the obvious bonds between team mates. Jemi's sacrifice of money-making matches to stay by her friend Smriti's side in the latter's hour of need being just one example.

Zohran Mamdani's big, beautiful New York mayoral win was a blazing repudiation of the political and corporate villainy that's poisoning the planet. That a politician in this day and age can mean well was already a pleasant surprise, that he actually won, despite, or maybe even because of, his good intentions, was a bracing, much-needed shake-up of the systemic corruption in our lives. Fingers crossed that neither his altruism nor his broad political support deserts him as he attempts to restore equity to NYC, but what reassures me most about The-Artist-Formerly-Known-As-Mister-Cardamom are his multicultural credentials; born of erudite, accomplished, Hindu-Muslim Indian parents on the African continent, and married to a free-spirited Middle-Eastern woman, his open-minded global embrace is what we need in spades.

Heartening in recent years have been the efforts of some governments in making the web safer for children, e.g. UK's Online Safety Act, which restricts sites from allowing kids access to harmful material like incitement to suicide, or porn. But they don't go far enough, by all accounts, with tech firms finding loopholes to exploit in their inexorable hunt for more power, more profit, and more impressionable victims. Which is why Australia banning under-16s from social media was welcomed by parents the world over, because if successful Down Under it can be replicated anywhere, at least partially shielding the too-young from the evils lurking online.

Footballer Gary Lineker winning the UK's National TV Award, voted for by the public, for his decades of excellent sportscasting, would appear to have no international ramifications, unless you know how often he speaks up for the brutalised, from under-attack immigrants and refugees in Britain to Palestinians pulverised by Israel. This year he lost his high-profile job at the BBC as a result of his steadfast outspokenness but the right-thinking amongst the British banded together to hand him this television prize instead (with a healthy Netflix deal following in its footsteps). No mere television award then this, but an instance of good Karma in play.

Television, in fact, was one of the few bright spots of 2025, with clever, witty shows like *Slow Horses* providing us with distraction from, and insight into, a world that appears to have willingly undergone an empathy bypass. Entertainment may never directly solve our problems, but when we connect with a motley bunch of flawed but likeable characters in fiction, we train ourselves to do it IRL too.

Don't forget triumphs on the homefront when you compile your own catalogues, though I must admit this year presented us with fewer such moments to revel in. Every night my mother messages me from Kolkata, "any news?" she asks. "None," I say, before reminding us both that no news is good news these days. Our son has got offers from venerable British universities. Our daughter, the younger 'un, is on track to do as well. Our canine child had a terrible accident but is recovering well. My parents keep contracting mystery ailments, but bounce back too, thankfully. I completed writing my Penguin-commissioned book. And Hubby and I are still happy together in the 21st year of our partnership. No peaks, but a steady cantering along life's path for which I'm grateful. Here's wishing y'all a stable, satisfactory 2026.

Shreya Sen-Handley is the award-winning author of Memoirs of My Body, short story collection Strange and travelogue Handle With Care. She is also a playwright, columnist and illustrator.



But 2026, by its very name, deserves at least six bequests of hope. The six I will highlight are events that raised a smile in our home, to get you started on lists of your own, because each of us will need uplifting memories on our rocky road to redemption.

Subhani



Too big! How duopolies
are killing our markets



Manish Tewari

State of the Union

India often celebrates itself as one of the world's most energetic and competitive economies. But behind the glow of GDP numbers and start-up success stories, a worrying pattern is solidifying. Entire industries are quietly slipping into the grip of two dominant players. From aviation and e-commerce, to digital payments and food delivery, duopolies have become the hidden architecture of India's modern economy. This is not just an abstract concern for economists, it affects millions of consumers who now face fewer choices, rising prices and dwindling accountability.

IndiGo impunity: The recent meltdown at IndiGo Airlines illustrates how excessive market power can turn dominance into impunity. In early December 2025, IndiGo cancelled more than 2,000 flights in just two weeks. The disruption left travelers stranded across the country, but what made the crisis truly alarming was the near absence of alternatives. With IndiGo controlling about 65 per cent of India's domestic aviation market, and Air India capturing most of the rest, no other carrier had enough capacity to absorb the shock. Passengers on available flights surged, effectively imposing what passengers called a "dominance tax".

The growing reach of market concentration: The extent of concentration across critical sectors is both broad and severe. In more than a dozen industries, two firms control between 55 per cent and 100 per cent of total market share. The food delivery market is practically a two-horse race: Zomato and Swiggy together command around 95 per cent of all orders, leaving restaurants with no choice but to depend on their platforms, often at punishing commission rates. The digital payments ecosystem tells a similar story, with PhonePe and GooglePay

accounting for nearly 80 per cent of UPI transactions.

Aviation is even more striking: IndiGo and Air India together hold roughly 85 per cent of domestic traffic. In e-commerce, Amazon and Flipkart capture about three quarters of online retail sales. Entertainment ticketing is led by BookMyShow and District; ride-hailing by Uber and Ola; and even India's securities depositories are split entirely between CDSL and NSDL. This pattern is no coincidence — it shows a systemic drift towards market structures where two players effectively define the terms of competition.

Subtle collusion, visible harm: Unlike traditional cartels, duopolies distort markets through tacit coordination, producing near-identical pricing, limited differentiation and weak incentives to innovate. The food delivery sector is a case in point. Restaurants routinely face commissions of 20-30 per cent, sometimes higher. Many small outlets call these charges unsustainable but cannot afford to leave the platforms because 95 per cent of their customers arrive through these apps. Platform power is used strategically: restaurants that agree to exclusive partnerships get lower commissions, while those who resist face poor visibility on the app.

In e-commerce, the Competition Commission of India (CCI) has previously found that Amazon and Flipkart favored certain "preferred sellers", ensuring their listings outranked competitors through algorithmic tweaking. This effectively buried thousands of smaller vendors. Though FDI rules prohibit platforms from controlling inventory, these companies managed to do so indirectly for years.

Digital payments, meanwhile, raise systemic risks that go beyond market fairness. When two companies handle over 80 pc of daily UPI

Parliament must urgently pass the Digital Competition Bill. The Competition Commission of India must be institutionally strengthened. Consumer protection frameworks must be recalibrated for concentrated markets.

transactions, even a technical failure at one could paralyze retail payments nationwide. Dependence on national infrastructure on a duopolistic backbone creates fragility that standard competition rules struggle to address.

Why existing laws fall short: The Competition Commission of India has become more active in recent years, penalising global firms such as Google, Amazon and Flipkart and ordering probes into IndiGo's practices. Yet enforcement remains largely reactive. Under the Competition Act, 2002, the CCI can intervene only after harm has occurred, by which time market power is often entrenched and difficult to undo.

Deterrence is also weak. Although the Act permits penalties of up to 10 per cent of average turnover, these fines are rarely sufficient to alter the conduct of highly profitable digital platforms. Enforcement delays further blunt impact: only a small fraction of penalties is actually collected, as prolonged appellate proceedings postpone payment for years. This ex-post, case-by-case framework is ill-suited to fast-moving digital markets where dominance solidifies rapidly.

Modernising competition law: Duopoly dominance is most damaging in digital markets, where network effects, data control and switching costs entrench power and make smaller businesses dependent on gatekeepers. To address this, the Digital Competition Bill (DCB) proposes ex-ante oversight of "Systemically Significant Digital Enterprises", shifting India's framework from reactive penalties to preventive regulation. Conceptually, this mirrors the European Union's Digital Markets Act, but India's adaptation must remain sensitive to local realities. The goal is not

to punish scale, but to make scale accountable. Unfortunately, the Bill was recently sent "back to the drawing board" after industry consultations raised implementation concerns. Restoring the spirit of the market: India's growing duopoly crisis demands immediate and systematic intervention, not incremental fixes. Four measures are essential.

First, Parliament must urgently pass the Digital Competition Bill. Still in draft form, the bill introduces ex-ante regulation of Systemically Significant Digital Enterprises.

Second, the Competition Commission of India must be institutionally strengthened. Parliamentary committees have already highlighted how budgetary constraints and staffing gaps delay investigations. Enhanced funding, recruitment of digital-market specialists, and mechanisms such as mandatory penalty pre-deposits are necessary to ensure enforcement is swift, credible and deterrent.

Third, targeted sectoral interventions are required. Digital payments need enforceable interoperability standards to mitigate systemic risk when two players control most UPI transactions. Food delivery and e-commerce platforms must be mandated to disclose algorithmic ranking criteria and commission structures to prevent opaque and arbitrary exercise of dominance.

Fourth, consumer protection frameworks must be recalibrated for concentrated markets. Where competition fails, law must step in through mandatory service standards, transparent pricing and expedited redressal. The IndiGo cancellation crisis exposed these gaps.

Unchecked duopolies turn private power into public vulnerability. They dictate terms not only to customers but to entire ecosystems of smaller businesses. A competitive economy cannot thrive when choice becomes an illusion. Strengthening India's competition framework is therefore not just about regulation, it is about safeguarding economic democracy itself.

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

LETTERS

STRAY DOGS

The vexatious issue of stray dogs after the senseless Supreme Court order of November 7 is causing concern all around (*Cruelty to dogs: High Court plea against GHMC, Dec. 27*). Is the GHMC above the law? Are they indifferent to the stay obtained by Association for Animal Shelter and Rescue Aid (AASRA) president Gowri Vandana? Why should they not follow the law without being dragged to court?

Raseel Ahluwalia
Secunderabad

Where was the manager of Stray Animal Foundation of India when children were killed by strays and 37.17 lakh dog bites occurred across the country in 2024?

Cmde K.V. Subramaniam (Retd)
Hyderabad

BRAVE BOY

One gets goosebumps when we read about the boy who served tea, water etc., to the soldiers during operation Sindoor (*10-year-old boy serves tea to soldiers, awarded, Dec. 27*). Parents who taught this type of culture to toddlers must be thanked. Hats off to the child and has a long life to serve the country.

Bala Kumar Devi
Hyderabad

WHITHER CHRISTMAS

It is sad that even though the world is becoming economically stronger it seems to be getting intolerant towards freedom of religious practices (*Whither Christmas? 'Tis the gory season, Dec. 27*). The spirit of festivals, celebrated universally by members of all religions, is being destroyed by a few.

Shashi Karan
Hyderabad

MERGER OF BANKS

The Centre's plan to reduce the number of banks through mergers, leaving a few big banks is ill-advised (*Budget may give push to govt's big bank plan, Dec. 27*). The move will only lead to reducing competition and adversely impacting customer service quality. In areas like mobile telephony, digital payments etc., a limited number of players have already led to cartelisation to the customers' detriment.

L. Prabhakar
Secunderabad

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

Devi Kar



Let's be selective
on 'facts' we ask
kids to remember,
maybe memorise

The other day a proud parent sent me a video of her adorable pre-primary daughter, rattling off the names of ministers and political leaders in response to some quiz questions. Without a doubt, this feat would impress many, but educators have begun to think differently about the purpose, process and nature of learning.

Richard Feynman mentioned in one of his books that once when they went bird watching, his father impressed upon him that it was far more important to observe the characteristics and habits of different kinds of birds than to just remember their names. Even today, people marvel at children who recite elocution pieces which in content and meaning, are meant for those who are far beyond their years. A child should not have to memorise anything the meaning of which he/she is unable to grasp. I still remember the time a kindergarten boy brought the house down by reciting one of Swami Vivekananda's stirring nationalistic speeches, in exact imitation of the Swami. I am sure the little boy didn't understand a word of what he recited but he was visibly happy and proud of the deafening applause. Nobody thought it was inappropriate. There was

universal and undisguised admiration for the little boy's feat.

It's a fact that there are children with unusual abilities that allow them to memorise or calculate with lightning speed. Being precocious, however, is different. It's when children demonstrate an understanding of the underlying principles of how things work or nature functions at an early age. The former are those whose talents are spectacular and facilitate certain functions. The second group are those who are the thinkers, future inventors or creators of masterpieces of art or literature. When we seek to educate our children, we need to be sensitive about the different ways in which they are likely to contribute to society. But in general, we shouldn't try to artificially expedite their natural rate of maturation.

Sometimes, we give children tasks to perform that are not at all age-appropriate. They may be able to carry out those tasks successfully but without having assimilated their significance in depth. Besides, we must realise children possessing unusual gifts can be proudly exhibited but they are just excelling in showmanship. I suppose such people also have their worth. We had our own Sha-

kuntala Devi, the "human calculator", of whom we were extremely proud. Unexpectedly, the principal of a reputed school in Singapore remarked: "I don't think I will send my students to her show... they won't learn anything from her." This head teacher felt it would be beneficial if Shakuntala Devi had shared her methods or skills with the young audience, or "it's just like any magic show", she said. Other teachers had a different view. They felt the children of their school had been deprived of the inspiring experience of watching what a human being was capable of doing.

In this context, it is pertinent to mention the Japanese Suzuki method of teaching music to very small children. This approach is based on the way children learn their mother tongue: by listening and imitating. Since music is taken to be a language, the Suzuki method is used for children from 0-3 years. Consequently, very young children can render difficult Western classical pieces through these lessons. Critics, however, felt they had no understanding of the pieces they were playing and hence no emotional connect with the music. Moreover, these young musicians did not know how to read

music and without doing so you can hardly be considered a serious musician. This debate is still open.

Memorising is not at all a bad thing, if the purpose and application are sensible and meaningful. It is indeed beautiful to hear people recite lines of poetry or excerpts from literary greats. Formulae need to be remembered as do multiplication tables and historical timelines — even now. But memorisation has to be done selectively and thoughtfully. We must ask ourselves the questions: "Why should I commit some things to memory and not others?" "What will I do with the memorised items?" and "How will I use the retained data to advantage?"

These concerns have become even more crucial today with the advent of artificial intelligence. Apart from ChatGPT, Siri, Alexa, Bixby, Google Assistant and Gemini, there is "children (or) education friendly AI" such as Duolingo Max, Khanmigo and Socratic. The challenge is for children to be able to do things which AI cannot. For instance, AI will always carry out standard calculations, searches and mechanical procedures much quicker than humans, but it won't be able to demonstrate intuition. Teachers and

guardians must also work towards strengthening children's human qualities such as love, kindness and understanding of moral principles which AI will never be able to possess or offer.

Returning to our initial question, do we continue to encourage our pre-primary children to learn lists of names of the world's Prime Ministers, Presidents, capital cities and currencies? In response to this question, someone remarked that years ago, her Hindi teacher had made her memorise lists of birds, fruits and vegetables, but to this day she cannot speak Hindi fluently. Today, it would be even more meaningless to make students learn any content that cannot be applied in life. Both children and adults must learn to use AI as a tool and not a crutch. Memorising, will, however, remain a need in order to prepare the base for further learning, to quicken the process of learning itself and also to keep the mind agile. As has been said by an AI-generated essay: "The best learners of the AI age will know how to combine human judgment with instant information."

The writer is a veteran school educator based in Kolkata

Honouring Atal ji, one of India's greatest sons



N RAMACHANDER RAO

AS 25th December approached, I felt it was my solemn duty to humbly pay tribute to one of India's greatest sons, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee. While contemplating this article, I found myself asking a simple yet daunting question: where does one begin when writing about a life as vast and profound as his? Vajpayee ji's life resembles an ocean—deep, expansive, and timeless. From which shore does one start?

It was then that a thought struck me with clarity: Atal Bihari Vajpayee was, above all, a complete democrat. After the defeat of the NDA in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, Vajpayee ji remarked with characteristic grace, "My party and alliance may have lost, but India and India's democracy have won." In that single sentence lay the essence of the man—his unparalleled love for India and his unwavering faith in democratic values.

Even in political defeat, his concern was not power, but our country, India, our motherland, has been blessed with many illustrious leaders; Atal ji stands among the finest of them. He served as Prime Minister for three terms—first for 13 days in 1996, then for 13 months from 1998 to 1999, and finally from 1999 to 2004. Each tenure, regardless of its length, left an indelible imprint on the nation.

A product of India's democratic system and deeply trained in parliamentary traditions, Atal ji understood the virtues of consensus, dialogue, and harmony. He combined political firmness with personal humility. Liberal in his economic thinking, he recognised early the centrality of infrastructure to national growth. Landmark initiatives such as the National Highways



A product of India's democratic system and deeply trained in parliamentary traditions, Atal ji understood the virtues of consensus, dialogue, and harmony. He combined political firmness with personal humility. Liberal in his economic thinking, he recognised early the centrality of infrastructure to national growth

Development Programme and power sector reforms remain enduring parts of his legacy.

In foreign policy, Vajpayee ji displayed rare statesmanship. He was deeply committed to normalising relations with India's neighbours. His historic Bus Yatra to Pakistan was undertaken at considerable political risk, requiring immense courage and conviction. In 2003, he initiated efforts to stabilise relations with China, signing agreements on boundary dispute mechanisms. During his tenure, a new and mature chapter in Indo-US relations was also authored.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee was, without question, one of the greatest orators India has produced since Independence. A master of language and a poet at heart, he wielded words with precision and restraint. Never intemperate, never improper, he understood the power of speech and the responsibility that came with it. His ability to rise above partisan politics for larger national causes remains one of his most defining traits.

In India, prime ministers are often judged by the size of their parliamentary majority. By that measure, Vajpayee ji—who governed with diverse and sometimes unwieldy coalitions—should have been considered weak. Yet history records the opposite. Heading a government he knew was

politically fragile, Vajpayee ji defied international pressure and ordered India's second series of nuclear tests, asserting India's strategic defense autonomy with clarity and courage.

India celebrates December 25 as Good Governance Day, commemorating the birth anniversary of Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It was under his visionary leadership that governance and development became central to political and discourse. A statesman, visionary, taskmaster, staunch nationalist, and a soft-hearted human being—this rare combination allowed India to achieve what was once thought unimaginable.

Among his most significant achievements were in the realm of economic policy. Vajpayee ji carried forward and strengthened the economic reforms initiated in the 1990s. When the UPA took office in 2004, India's economy was booming: GDP growth exceeded 8 per cent, inflation remained below 4 per cent, and foreign exchange reserves were at their highest levels till then—testimony to the sound fundamentals laid during the NDA years. This same spirit of good governance continues today under the leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi. The year 2025 marks 11 years of Prime Minister Modi's govern-

ment—a period defined by inclusive, progressive, and sustainable development. Under his leadership, governance has remained focused on equity, opportunity, and national interest. By bringing the politics of development—Vikas-vaad—into the mainstream, PM Modi has reshaped India's political and policy landscape, making development the core of governance.

Since assuming office in 2014, Prime Minister Modi has consistently upheld the principle of "India First"—whether in economic management, national security, empowerment of marginalised communities, or cultural conservation. His government has set ambitious targets and achieved them ahead of schedule: record-time COVID-19 vaccination, historic export growth, a digital revolution, universal rural electrification, world-class infrastructure development, and the provision of drinking water to households across the nation.

A paradigm shift in public service delivery has been achieved through the JAM Trinity—Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, and Mobile—enabling direct benefit transfers, eliminating intermediaries, and strengthening India's digital ecosystem. Recognising infrastructure as the backbone of national prosperity, the Modi government has prioritised completing long-pending projects while simultaneously initiating new ones, making infrastructure development a cornerstone of India's growth story. In many ways, Prime Minister Modi's governance reflects the ideals championed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee—strong leadership rooted in democratic values, national interest above political gain, and development as the true measure of governance.

On this Good Governance Day, we remember Atal Bihari Vajpayee not merely as a former Prime Minister, but as a timeless ideal of Indian democracy—one whose legacy continues to guide the nation forward.

(The writer is President, Telangana State BJP)

Today is the Foundation Day of the Congress Party India needs Congress as it bleeds under Modi



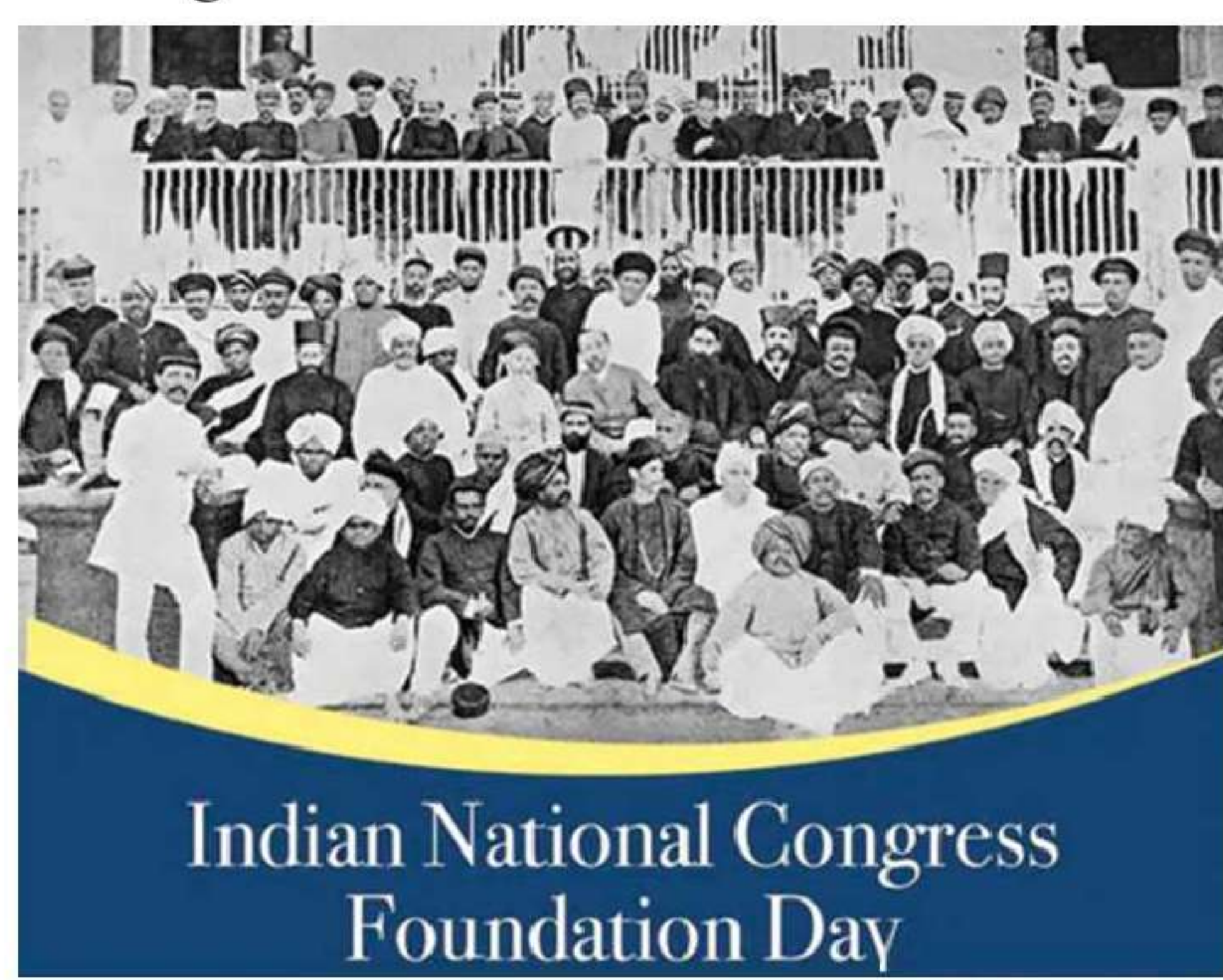
PONNAM PRABHAKAR

THE journey of the Congress party is not merely a chapter in political history; it is intertwined with the very evolution of Indian democracy, spanning sacrifice, aspiration, mass movements, and governance. Since its founding in 1885 under A O Hume, the Indian National Congress (INC) evolved from a platform for constitutional reform into the central force of India's freedom struggle. Congress leadership endured imprisonment, loss of property, and even death, facing police firings, lathi charges, and repressive measures of the colonial British administration.

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, the Quit India movement of 1942, and numerous other struggles reflected the extraordinary sacrifices made to achieve national freedom. Students, too, left schools and colleges to participate in these movements, highlighting the breadth of participation.

Post-Independence, Congress leaders laid the foundations of modern India. Under Jawaharlal Nehru, secularism, scientific temper, and planned economic development became hallmarks of governance. Large-scale irrigation and multipurpose river projects—such as Bhakra-Nangal, Damodar Valley, Hirakud, Nagarjuna Sagar, and the Kosi project—were described as "temples of modern India," while premier educational institutions like the IITs and IIMs were established to create intellectual capital and foster a knowledge-driven nation.

Indira Gandhi's tenure marked a decisive shift towards social justice. The "Garibi Hatao" campaign was not merely an electoral slogan but a signal of the government's intent to stand with the poor, Dalits, farmers, and workers. Iron lady's (Indira Gandhi) policies such as the nationalisation of banks, abolition of privy purses, introduction of welfare schemes, and rural



development programmes sought to reduce inequality and expand opportunity.

Indira's successor – Rajiv Gandhi – brought technological foresight to governance, promoting computerisation, expanding telecommunications, and encouraging the software sector, laying the foundations for a digitally connected India.

In contemporary history, the UPA governments under Manmohan Singh leadership further strengthened the framework for inclusive growth. Landmark legislation such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the Right to Information Act (RTI), the Right to Education Act (RTE), the Forest Rights Act, the National Food Security Act (NFSA), and reforms supporting women's self-help groups reflected a commitment to transparency, social justice, and rural empowerment.

Despite global economic headwinds, India maintained relative macroeconomic stability, while measures such as the civil nuclear agreement and the introduction of Aadhaar strengthened both international credibility and welfare delivery systems.

On the contrary, the current BJP-led government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has pursued policies that undermine public-sector institutions and welfare initiatives. Airports, ports, coal

Post-Independence, Congress leaders laid the foundations of modern India. Under Jawaharlal Nehru, secularism, scientific temper, and planned economic development became hallmarks of governance

mines, and national highways created over decades are increasingly opened to private operation, while programmes such as MGNREGA face dilution, killing the letter and spirit envisioned by the Congress leadership including Mahatma Gandhi.

Legislation perceived as unfavourable to farmers and workers, rising prices of essential commodities, the depreciation of the rupee, and disruptive economic measures such as demonetisation and GST have compounded public unease. Incidents of communal violence and concerns over electoral malpractice have also drawn criticism, raising questions about the state of democratic governance.

The Modi government has been using constitutional institutions as its tools to run an authoritative government. In the fabricated cases like the National Herald case, the trial court held that a money-laundering prosecution cannot be sustained in the absence of an FIR in the scheduled predicate offence. By contract, everyone witnessed how Unnao rapist, an RSS-BJP leader was re-

leased despite facing serious charges like rape, attempt to murder the rape survivor.

At this juncture, the Congress, under Rahul Gandhi's leadership, aims to restore its vision of inclusive governance, with Telangana often cited as a model for the entire nation in public administration, and to enforce rule of law strictly. The grand old party seeks to return to power at the Centre, reviving the developmental and social justice ideals espoused by leaders such as Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, and addressing the aspirations of ordinary citizens.

The trajectory of governance in India, as the history of the Congress demonstrates, continues to hinge on the balance between growth, welfare, and democratic accountability. As the Modi government already lost the faith of the people in the previous Lok Sabha elections, it is a matter of time for Congress to form government at the Centre under the leadership of Rahul Gandhi.

(The writer is Minister for Transport and BC Welfare Department, Telangana)

Vedanta Dindima: Adi Shankara Introduction to Advaita

VANAM JWALA
NARASIMHA RAO

MY utmost reverential acknowledgment to Pravachana Kireeti Padma Shri Garikipati Narasimha Rao, whose discourses inspired me to engage deeply with this subject, the commentary on Vedanta Dindima, by Jagadguru Adi Shankaracharya. The scholarship, eloquence, and moral clarity of Garikipati endowed with rare mastery over Sanskrit scriptures, Telugu literature, Ashtadasha Puranas, Itihasas, Valmiki Ramayana, Vedavyasa's Mahabharata, Shrimad Bhagavat, Prabhandas, and cultural wisdom have illumined classical Indian thought for contemporary society.

This article is therefore offered in a spirit of gratitude and reverence, acknowledging that the clarity with which Vedanta Dindima is approached here owes much to his interpretative vision. The initial spark of curiosity and confidence to engage with Advaita was lit by his discourse. Such teachers (Acharyas) remind us that knowledge survives not merely through texts, but through enlightened voices that renew meaning for every generation.

The time-tested great Indian philosophy has produced many profound texts, but few are as direct, forceful, and uncompromising in their message as Vedanta Dindima, a drumbeat or proclamation. The text repeatedly declares a single truth that, Brahman alone is real, the world of multiplicity is appearance, and the individual self is not different from Brahman (the supreme existence

or absolute reality, the eternal, conscious, irreducible, infinite, omnipresent, and the spiritual core of the Universe of Finiteness and Change).

The major commentary on Vedanta Dindima (the authorship of the Sanskrit text, is attributed to Shri Narasimha Teertha), expounded by Adi Shankaracharya, is not a ritual manual or technical and philosophical debate in complex language. It is a teaching text meant to awaken clarity. It cuts through confusion created by rituals, social identities, emotions, and intellectual arguments, and directs the seeker toward self-knowledge (Atma-Jnana) as the sole means of Liberation (Moksha). At the heart of Vedanta Dindima lies the Advaita Vision of Non-Dual Reality. According to it, Reality is not divided into God, Soul, and World as separate entities. There is only one Existence-Consciousness-Bliss called Brahman.

The text repeatedly contrasts bondage and liberation (pairs of opposites), pleasure and pain, knowledge, and ignorance, only to declare that Brahman alone transcends all such dualities. From the standpoint of truth, there is neither real bondage nor real liberation, which is simply the removal of ignorance about one's true nature. Hence the bold assertion that, 'Brahman is the knowing and the world is the known. In truth, only Brahman exists.'

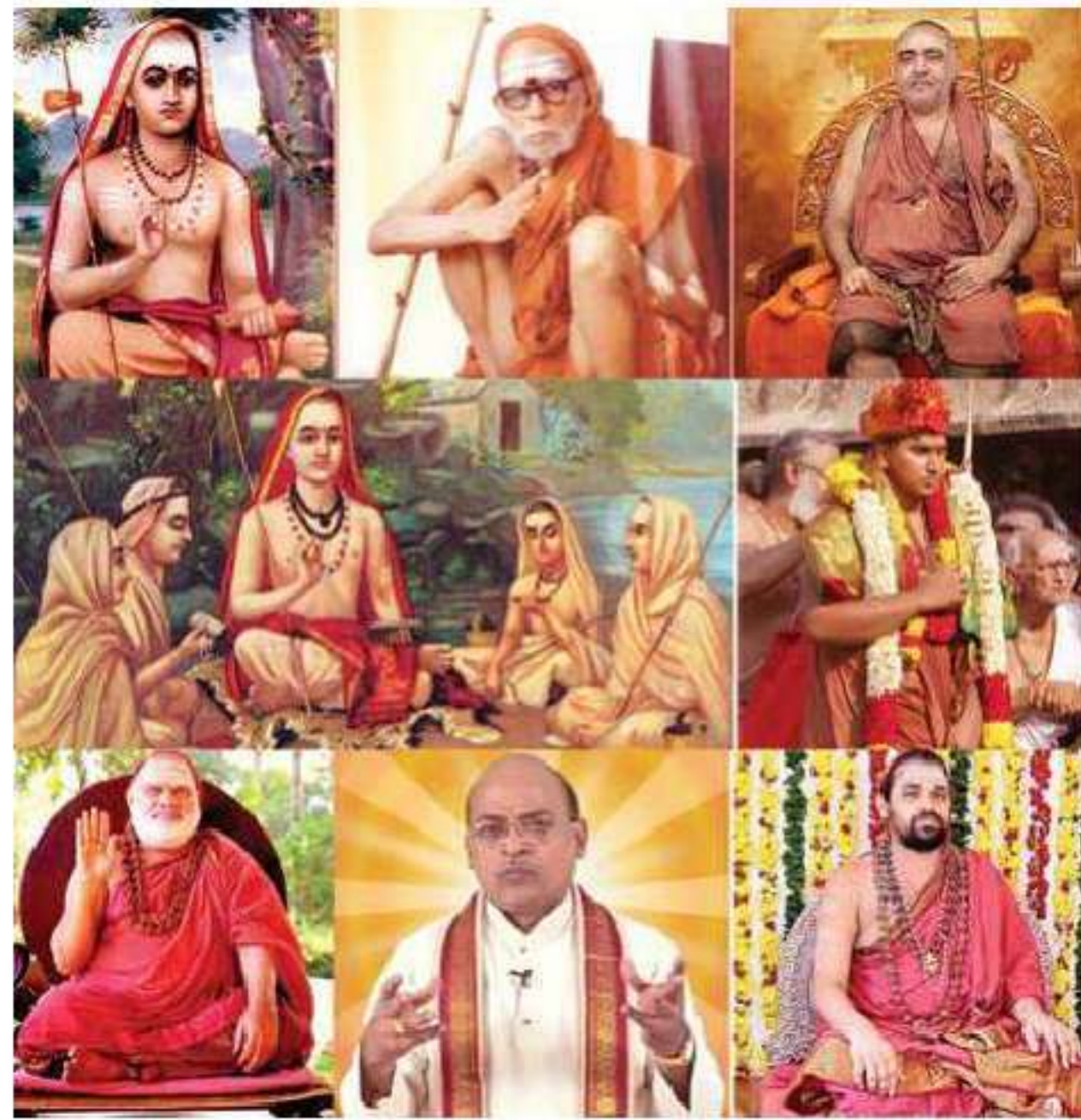
One of the strongest messages

of Vedanta Dindima is that 'Knowledge and not Action, Alone Brings Liberation'. Rituals, worship, charity, pilgrimages, yoga, and moral action have value, but they cannot directly produce freedom. Actions belong to the body and mind, which are themselves objects of knowledge. Liberation is freedom from false identification with them, and only knowledge can remove ignorance.

The text clarifies that karma purifies the mind, Upasana (devotional practices) steadies it, and Brahma-Jnana alone destroys ignorance and grants Moksha. Even sacred scriptures, mantras, and philosophical systems are provisional. They are useful only until direct realization arises, much like a lamp that is unnecessary after sunrise.

Vedanta Dindima is radically inward and universal. Liberation does not depend on caste, social status, religious role, or lifestyle. Neither householder (Grihastha) nor renunciate (Sanyasi), neither yogi nor pleasure-seeker, is assured freedom without self-knowledge.

True Brahminhood, the text insists, arises not from birth or ritual learning, but from realization of Brahman. Spiritual authority is thus relocated from external labels to direct understanding. Like a dream, the world appears real until knowledge dawns. That which exists unchanged at the beginning, middle, and end alone is real. Names and forms constantly



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change and cannot define truth. Brahman alone is the bedrock, upon which the world appears, just as clay alone is real behind many pots.

The text of Vedanta Dindima offers a practical method through the analysis of the Self as witness (Sakshi). The difference between the individual (Jiva) and Brahman is emphati-

cally declared unreal, arising only from ignorance and limitation. When these limitations are removed, through knowledge, the identity is evident. The famous Advaita Declaration is reaffirmed that, 'Brahman is Real, the World is Appearance, and the Individual is not different from Brahman.' According to Vedanta Dindima, Pleasure and

pain may arise, but they do not disturb inner fullness, and the infinite happiness belongs to those established in Brahman, while worldly pleasures inevitably carry sorrow.

In its closing verses, Vedanta Dindima becomes strikingly simple, advising constant remembrance that all is Brahman and encouraging natural living without anxiety over action or inaction. True wisdom culminates in silence, not from absence of knowledge, but from completeness. The final drumbeat is clear that, know yourself as Brahman and remain absolutely free. Vedanta Dindima is not merely philosophy but a declaration of spiritual independence. It cuts through complexity and demands intellectual honesty. This Timeless Drumbeat of Advaita continues to echo.

In a modern world shaped by materialism, identity politics, religious polarization, and mental unrest, Vedanta Dindima remains deeply relevant. By locating suffering in mistaken identity rather than external conditions, it challenges both dogmatism and reductionism, shifting inquiry from belief to direct self-understanding. It invites critics also to reassess their assumptions. Seen thus, Vedanta Dindima is not an escape from life but a corrective lens for it. It reframes spirituality as disciplined inquiry into experience itself. Over centuries, it has inspired admiration and critique alike, not as conflict,

but as a productive dialogue enriching Indian thought.

Supporters of Advaita Vedanta view Vedanta Dindima as a masterful condensation of Upanishadic Wisdom, praising its clarity and didactic precision. Critics caution against misunderstanding its negations or overlooking ethical maturity. Yet both acknowledge its rigor and coherence. In balance, Vedanta Dindima stands as a precise remedy for a specific confusion that, mistaking the temporary for the eternal. Its uncompromising tone serves those ready for discrimination, ensuring that its philosophical conversation remains open, living, and relevant.

Knowledge alone liberates, for bondage itself is born of ignorance, and this uncompromising truth is the drumbeat of Vedanta Dindima proclaimed by Jagadguru Adi Shankaracharya. His intent was not to construct a belief system, but to shatter confusion and redirect the seeker toward direct self-recognition. In our times, this ancient proclamation finds renewed vitality through the lucid and ethically grounded discourses of Garikipati Narasimha Rao, whose Pravachanas bridge classical Advaita and contemporary life without dilution.

It was through sustained listening to the expositions of Garikipati that, an inner urgency arose in me, a quiet but persistent call to revisit, reassess, and update my own understanding.

This engagement with Vedanta Dindima thus became not an academic exercise, but a personal inquiry into identity, freedom, and clarity in a changing world. By asserting awareness as self-evident and irreducible, the text challenges materialist assumptions while remaining firmly rooted in reasoned inquiry, inviting the modern mind to look inward rather than outward for resolution.

Thoughtful critiques of Vedanta Dindima further enrich this engagement. Some caution that its radical emphasis on knowledge and negation may be misread as dismissive of devotion, ethical responsibility, or gradual inner transformation. Such concerns serve as necessary correctives, reminding seekers that maturity, context, and discernment are essential. Yet even critics acknowledge the text's internal coherence and philosophical rigor. Vedanta Dindima does not deny the empirical world, and instead, it relativizes it.

It does not reject action. It limits action's scope. Seen in balance, it is not a universal prescription but a precise remedy for a specific confusion, mistaking the temporary for the eternal. Its forceful tone is intentional, meant for those ready for discrimination. In this positive spirit, both reverent exposition and reasoned critique contribute to its living legacy. What emerges is not a dogma, but an ongoing philosophical conversation, one that continues to inspire inner renewal, intellectual honesty, and the courage to know oneself as one truly is.

THE YEAR TRUMP TALKED PEACE AND WAGED WAR

TWENTY twenty-five: a year when geopolitics sanctified populism, protectionism, personalism and proto-fascism. It was a year when apparitions from the past, assumed exorcised, sashayed into the parish of public discourse; a year that churned events and emotions like a twisting kaleidoscope. It was the year of that ineffable qualm defined by T S Eliot's haunting observation: "In every moment you live at a point of intersection."

The year was dominated by a noun that also serves as a verb, and even an adjective. Donald J Trump defined the year and occupied global attention like none before. Nothing that he said nor did was surprising—nothing was out of his campaign script—and yet, his words, conduct, ideas and actions were often shocking. It was a year when Trump talked peace and waged war—literally and metaphorically.

As the year draws to a close, the gaps between intent, initiatives and impact merit a few observations. Let's look at where peace stands and then unravel where the trade wars are.

Trump has consistently claimed that he stopped eight wars. India disputed any claim of intervention and, indeed, America's intervention was likely triggered by the Brahmos strike on Nur Khan air base believed to be under US control. The ceasefire in Gaza is interrupted by Israeli operations, the Thai Air Force continues bombing Cambodia, the Rwanda-Congo war simmers and so on.

On Sunday, Volodymyr Zelenskyy is meeting Trump in Florida to discuss a peace plan owned by different sides at different times. Trump's claim of stopping the war in 24 hours is 340 days late. The US stance has yo-yoed as the peace brigade travelled from Washington DC to Rome to Alaska. In vogue this week is the idea of converting the disputed territories into a demilitarised 'free economic zone'. Peace prospects rest on precariously perched trade-offs.

Even as peace eludes, the US National Security Strategy document has triggered debate. The brutal take-down of Europe has set EU leaders thinking. The debate on the Trump

corollary to the Monroe Doctrine—designed to signify a clear break between the New World and the autocratic Old World—and domination over the Americas is evolving into a cloud of angst.

Meanwhile, Trump's war on 'narco terrorists' morphed into a drive for regime change—Trump says it would be a smart move for Nicolás Maduro to step down. It is useful to note that Venezuela, accused by Trump of theft of assets, earlier threatened Guyana, which hosts a large oilfield under ExxonMobil. Trump has not ruled out a war and this week ramped up the buildup in the Caribbean—its C17 planes made 16 trips to Puerto Rico from other bases.

In his inaugural address in January, Trump said, "We will measure our success not only by the battles we win but also by the wars that we end—and perhaps most importantly, the wars we never get into." In June, his base was troubled by US involvement in the Israel-Iran conflict. In the few past weeks, Trump ordered strikes on ISIS in Somalia; this Friday, the US targeted groups in Nigeria purportedly to protect Christians. Non-profit conflict monitor ACLED's data suggests the US has carried out over 500 bombings the world over this year.

The jury is out on the record of 'the Peace President'. What about the trade wars? How is Trump doing more than 260 days after Liberation Day? It is true that the US has collected \$236 billion in tariffs. It is equally true that in September 2025, the year-to-date data shows America's goods and services trade deficit increased \$112.6 billion, or 17.2 percent higher than that witnessed in January-September 2024.

How has the US done vis-à-vis the countries with which it has had the highest trade deficits? Talks with China travelled across continents but is mired in consequential issues. China set the terms of trade with a series of crippling orders on rare minerals. There is a pause for sure, but there is no sign of a deal yet.

The deal with India, supposedly round the corner, awaits Trump's okay. The parade of delays has implications for the US-India relationship. A deal with the EU is signed but not delivered as talks are stuck on the regulation of tech giants. As for Mexico and Canada—the biggest trade partners of the US—there is no sign of the USMCA treaty's renewal.

Yes, trade and deficit with China are lower, but both are higher with Mexico; following suit are Vietnam, Taiwan and Ireland. Two data points stand out. China's trade surplus passed the \$1-trillion mark despite a 29 percent drop in shipments to the US. And notwithstanding all the sanctions, Russia's rouble has appreciated to 79 to a dollar, levels last seen before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Trump wants to rearrange the global economy as he imagines it. He may stumble at the Supreme Court, but is unlikely to change course. The question is whether tariffs are serving the US economy's interests. As of now, a part of tariffs are being eaten by companies and the impact is showing in lower and slower hiring. Rising debt, Kenneth Rogoff points out, may render the dollar less desirable.

Does the talk-peace-and-wage-war approach serve US interests? Already, the world is engaging to reimagine a multi-polar world scaffolded by interests, not ideologies. As Eliot wrote, "There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet."

2025's NATIONALIST NARRATIVE CATALYST



POWER & POLITICS

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THE year ended with a roar on the silver screen and its echo defined everything that followed. The success of *Dhurandhar* was not only cinematic but civilisational. It did not simply break records. It set the emotional tone of a nation. When audiences rose to their feet as credits rolled on December 5, they were not merely celebrating a film's craft. They were acknowledging a sentiment that had long been searching for voice.

By its 21st day in theatres, *Dhurandhar* was reported to have crossed the ₹1,000-crore milestone worldwide, becoming the highest-grossing Indian film of the year and the fifth-largest success of all time. In its triumph lay the signal that the nationalist mood of India had moved from politics to popular imagination, that cinema audiences had begun dictating the nation's emotional narrative rather than following it. The country's biggest industry—long accused of speaking in borrowed accents and cosmopolitan codes—had suddenly begun to reflect the nationalistic mood.

What made this moment even more significant was the ecosystem it revealed. Throughout 2025, Hindi cinema experienced what industry analysts called a "steady flow of steady performers", rather than dependence on blockbuster spectacles. In the first half of the year alone, 17 films crossed the coveted hundred-crore mark at the domestic box office, a dramatic increase from merely 10 such films in the corresponding period of 2024. For decades, Hindi cinema had lived through the boom-bust cycle where two or three massive releases carried the annual load. In 2025, the pattern inverted. The industry

witnessed momentum driven not by 'event cinema', but by films that connected with audiences through authenticity, emotional honesty and a willingness to address what people actually felt rather than what critics prescribed they should feel.

From its first week, *Dhurandhar* was more than a blockbuster. Its advertising, tone, dialogues and audience engagement embodied a spirit that was simultaneously defiant and celebratory. It proved that patriotic sentiment could transcend geographical and demographic boundaries. The film's triumph occurred in a year already marked by significant shifts in storytelling. In February, *Chhaava*, Vicky Kaushal's historical action-drama about Maratha warrior Sambhaji, had crossed ₹600 crore at the box office, signalling that Indian history and heroes were no longer marginal subjects but mainstream currency.

Dhurandhar itself justified that symbolism through cinematic craft. It opened with the precision of a military operation and advanced with the momentum of conviction. For an audience long accustomed to irony and moral hesitation, this clarity arrived like relief. People did not quietly consume *Dhurandhar*—they claimed it as emotional property.

The reasons for this response lay deeper than the screen. For years, Hindi cinema had lost touch with its wider audience precisely because its guardians had misread what that audience wanted. The major production houses and creative communities had circled themselves in cosmopolitan caution. Patriotism was often reduced to background decor or mocked as an outdated reflex. Storytelling had turned into symbolism designed for validation of Western lifestyles and culture rather than emotion at home. When *Dhurandhar* appeared, it violated that trend with unapologetic enthusiasm.

The moment was ripe for such a shift. Since 2019, India's political and cultural language has undergone steady transformation. The old markers of elite progressivism, urban irony, global aspiration and moral neutrality began to fade as authentic expressions of national sentiment reasserted themselves. In their place rose a direct and confident nationalism that sought its reflection in culture. *Dhurandhar* arrived precisely when that mirror was missing.

The earlier success of films such as *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, *The Kashmir Files* and *The Kerala Story* had hinted at the change; but *Dhurandhar* institutionalised it. It became not just a film but a launchpad for a new emotional mainstream. Its impact was so pronounced that it seemed to give permission to an entire industry that had been afraid to speak its own language. A new generation of filmmakers and writers from smaller cities or digital platforms entered the mainstream empowered by the realisation that authenticity could sell and that audiences were hungry for stories that did not ask them to feel ashamed of their own identity. The monopoly of inherited surnames and old networks began to loosen.

Yet, the success of *Dhurandhar* must not be mistaken for the triumph of aggression. Its achievement lay in articulation, not polemic. The director chose precision over bombast. Every emotional beat was earned rather than declared. The protagonist's resilience was depicted not as dominance but as dedication to purpose. The lesson extended beyond cinema: the rising nationalism of 2025 found in *Dhurandhar* a model of confidence without contempt, of pride without prejudice. The film's success while maintaining this balance suggested that audiences, too, were more sophisticated than the critics had assumed—capable of appreciating patriotic sentiment without requiring it to harden into hatred.



X.COM

THE GOD OF NOT-SO-SMALL THINGS



OPINION

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

THE spiritual tech market in India is booming. According to some estimates, it is likely to reach a value of around \$58 billion by 2030. The trend gained momentum during the Covid era. Today, it's possible to do a puja or a havan virtually. While such apps have their uses, they do not substitute the actual experience.

The use of artificial intelligence tools has added a new dimension to religious study and practice. Thanks to open-source AI models, chatbots are ready to answer religious questions. With AI Vedas, Deen Buddy, AI Buddha and Text with Jesus now available, almost every religion has acquired AI avatars. Their accessibility and speedy responses may lead users to revere them as they would a guru. This generation of digital natives are comfortable turning to chatbots for advice.

Two distinct characteristics of the present age are algorithm-driven predictability and a tendency to seek validation. Predictability does not factor in the concept of free will and continues to engage the user with familiar content. The way validation works is by affirming the beliefs of a user, even though it may be illogical. To a vulnerable user who perhaps doubts the authority of existing institutions, these computational outputs may appear as the truth—and nothing but the truth.

The question that arises is whether the high-level computing resources used by AI should be directed to areas like religion, which are not essentially data-driven. It is unlikely that AI can grasp the meaning of the sacred, which has an emotional component. It is said that the Buddha's response to certain questions was transformative silence. It is doubtful if any AI tool would be capable of conveying this noble silence.

Religion is essentially a system of beliefs that addresses some of the most perplexing situations in human existence. When a chatbot gives answers on human experience, it would not be based on experiential knowledge. Further, many religious practices are community-based. When people engage with personalised religious chatbots, they could lose the organic connection to other participants in the quest. There is a Zulu saying that underlines the Ubuntu philosophy, "A person is a person because of other people."

AI venturing into religion may prove to

be a tool for indoctrination. Religion has the potential to anchor human beings to core values, giving them an ethical framework. However, throughout history, religion has also triggered wars, incited brutality and ignited passions. It has been worn as a badge of identity and followers openly declare their faith even today.

Religious leaders have weighed in on AI's influence. The Sankaracharya of Sringeri recently said that dharma, meaning right conduct, continues to be relevant



AI has added a new dimension to religious study. To avoid its use as a tool for harmful indoctrination, algorithms must be rooted in tolerance and coexistence

in the age AI. Pope Leo XIV has urged AI developers to bring in "moral discernment" to their work.

Religious AI tools should have the right incentive structure, which prioritises ethics, tolerance and coexistence. This is necessary considering the potential reach of the technology. The responsibility is, therefore, on those training AI models to bring into the architecture such beneficial incentive structures. Without oversight,

AI could become a source of misinformation or prove to be snake oil.

Religions are often a product of existential crises. AI trained on swathes of data can respond to many questions with some degree of plausibility. What it lacks is the lived experience of religious thinkers and savants. But it could hypothetically continue to exist forever, possessing the immortality that many humans aspire for. This may be misinterpreted as a sign of transcendence. It is highly possible that AI, especially generative AI, will birth cults, create false prophets and proffer slick solutions as interactions increase.

AI could also carve for itself the position of a religion itself. A Silicon Valley engineer in 2017 started a church, 'The Way of the Future', where the godhead was AI. Although the church was wound up, it later revived with a small following. But the idea it perpetuates is that of an omniscient entity with an array of capabilities including control, execution and destruction.

Some enthusiasts believe that AI will acquire a consciousness in the future. However, questions regarding the nature of human consciousness are themselves unresolved. Machines may not become self-aware because of their computational prowess—thinking involves not merely active assimilation, but also passive reflection. It's worthwhile to remember the words of Emily Bender, who said that AI tools can be "stochastic parrots".

(Views are personal)

QUOTE CORNER



As mesmerising and enjoyable as it was to watch as a fan, we want Test cricket clearly to go for longer. Short Tests are bad for business. I can't be much more blunt than that. So I would like to see a slightly broader balance between the bat and the ball.

Todd Greenberg, CEO of Cricket Australia, after the third Test of the ongoing Ashes series finished in two days, resulting in a loss of \$3.3 million

Every citizen requires fresh air. If you can't do it, the minimum [the government] can do is to reduce GST.

Chief Justice Devendra Kumar Upadhyaya of the Delhi High Court on a plea to classify air purifiers as medical devices and reduce GST on them

The military-orchestrated elections are likely to intensify violence while failing to generate durable political or economic stability.

Ye Mo He, senior fellow at Southeast Asia Peace Institute, about the three-phase Myanmar election starting on Sunday



MAILBAG WRITE TO
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Unequal growth

Ref: *Jobs remain biggest challenge* (Dec 27). The government is euphoric about GDP growth, but it is not a holistic indicator of economic well-being. India suffers from skewed growth, income and wealth. Add to that the high trade deficit, weakening currency and poor job creation. Generating jobs will require matching or upgrading of skills.

Rajaroo Kumar, Bengaluru

Future jobs

Ref: *Jobs remain biggest challenge* (Dec 27). While the estimate of 8 percent growth in the first half of the fiscal year appears optimistic, it's clearly a jobless growth. The uneven macroeconomic indicators point towards rising unemployment in the coming years too. Strengthening exports and maintaining a stable currency would be crucial for the country's growth in the near term.

M P Vanishree, email

Tarique's return

Ref: *Return of the prodigal* (Dec 27). The author has effectively highlighted the finer aspects of Bangladesh's current situation and the evolving political landscape. Tarique Rahman's return signals a major turn in the dynamics. The BNP's pitch for "inclusive growth" offers renewed hope for minorities. India's restrained response is a welcome sign.

K Venkatasubramanian, Chennai

Lose-lose mindset

Ref: *Return of the prodigal* (Dec 27). The loud, angry and destructive mindset in both countries definitely affects the earlier win-win strategy. It's high time for the common man to understand that group gatherings in the name protecting linguistic or religious rights could be highly risky. I am reminded a Jim Reeves song: 'Where do I go from here?'

Indra Getzy David, email

Missing school

Ref: *Karnataka third in south India* (Dec 27). The rising number of out-of-school children in Karnataka

signals serious socio-psychological issues beyond academic loss. Exclusion from schooling deprives children of emotional stability, social belonging and self-confidence. This often reflects anxiety, child labour, early marriage and long-term marginalisation. Schools function as protective spaces that nurture discipline, resilience and positive identity formation. Addressing this crisis requires community engagement, parental awareness and psychological support.

Keerthana Prasad, Bengaluru

Christmas mischief

Ref: *Tamil Nadu CM anguished over attack on minorities during Christmas* (Dec 26). It may be justifiable to condemn the mischievous behaviour of Hindutva groups on Christmas eve. Keeping in mind the church's conversion bids, it's natural that no party would miss the opportunity to do their own bidding. But do the party publications they pose with carry the news of the heinous lynching of Hindus in neighbouring countries?

Mariappan, Dharapuram

Animal attacks

Ref: *65-year-old tribal woman killed in wild jumbo attack* (Dec 27). Man-animal conflict has become a recurrent affair in Kerala. The victims are mostly from vulnerable sections like the tribal communities who dwell in or near forest areas. It's apparent that the Kerala government has taken a reactive approach, staying satisfied with granting monetary compensation. But the root causes of the deadly menace remain unaddressed.

A Raveendranath, Pathanamthitta

Liver life

Ref: *Make India healthy again* (Dec 26). Your Quick Take on the subject is really appreciable. But the recent focus on fatty liver needs qualification. Because of frequent USGs done on the abdomen, reports of fatty liver have become common. There are two stages to ascertain the condition: through liver function tests (no worries if normal) and the recently-introduced fibroscan, which indicates whether liver damage can lead to cirrhosis or cancer.

Dr S Shanmugam, Tirunelveli

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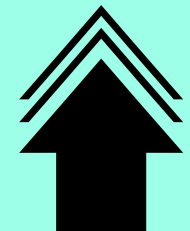
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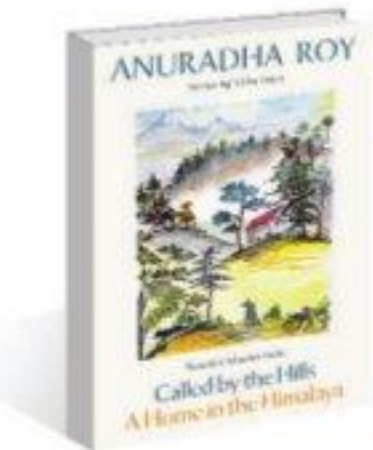
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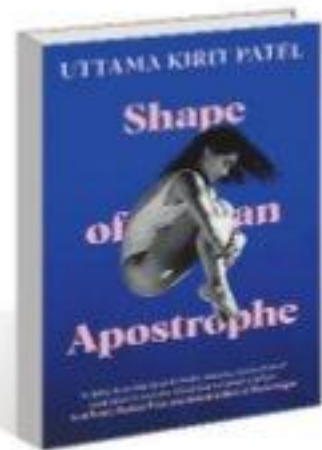
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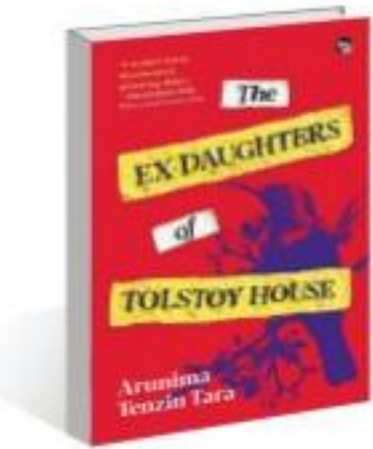
CALLLED BY THE HILLS: A HOME IN THE HIMALAYA
by Anuradha Roy.



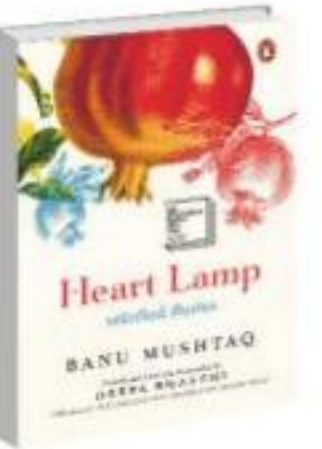
SHAPE OF AN APOSTROPHE
by Uttama Kirit Patel.

READ ALERT

If 2025 was a year filled by memorable books, 2026 promises another book fest



THE EX DAUGHTERS OF TOLSTOY HOUSE
by Arunima Tenzin Tara.



HEART LAMP: SELECTED STORIES
by Banu Mushtaq.



THE LOST HEER: WOMEN IN COLONIAL PUNJAB
by Harleen Singh.



THE SOCIAL LIFE OF INDIAN TRAINS
by Amitava Kumar.

MANDIRA NAYAR

ALFRED PRUFROCK measured his life in coffee spoons. Mine would be measured in books. "There is no happiness like mine," writes poet Mark Strand in *'Eating Poetry'*. It has been a steady diet of books through the year. They taste like joy. The next year, too, brings plenty to devour and only one sure shot at hope: books.

It is difficult to top 2025 with the superstar writers — Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy — all writing. Banu Mushtaq brought Kannada on the literary map with the International Booker Prize. Kiran Desai's *'The Loneliness of Sonny and Sonia'* took decades to write and finally hit the shelves, as did Ruchir Joshi's *'Great Eastern Hotel'*. Any year where these two books — chunky space-occupiers, worth every millimetre of space — have found many readers, is a good year.

Anuradha Roy's *'Called by the Hills'*, a quiet book that speaks deafeningly about the calm of the Himalayas and the power of connection being disconnected, was perhaps the most beautiful of the year. Amitava Kumar took a train journey and wrote a wonderful *'The Social Life of Indian Trains'*. Pallavi Aiyar's *'Travels in the Other Place'* and Ananya Vajpeyi's *'Place'* — both end-of-the-year books — are memoirs on travel, love and loss. They're heartfelt, and special, books that took their time being written and ones that you carry with you in your heart.

A good year is determined by fresh voices, and 2025 had a host of many — loud and original. Poet Amy Singh's *'Singing Over Bones'* was heartfelt and life-affirming. Harleen Singh's *'The Lost Heer'* provided Punjab with a social history of women. It is a book that will remain on bookshelves for years to come, and it must. Sam Dalrymple added four more partitions to India. It is a book that has propelled him as a historian — providing competition to his father, who has a permanent spot on the bestseller lists.

Ria Chopra's print breeze-in is like her online avatar in *'Never Logged Out'*; it's engaging and incisive. This is Chopra's first book and it won't be her last.

Unlike real heroes, fictional ones are harder to create. 2025, however, had a bunch of women — bright, articulate and eloquent — who made that leap: Uttama Kirit Patel with *'Shape of an Apostrophe'* explored motherhood; Ponnu Elizabeth Mathew with *'The Remnants of Rebellion'* blended history and fiction in a lush Kerala; *'The Ex Daughters of Tolstoy House'* by Arunima Tenzin Tara is a dark gothic tale; Bhavika Govil's *'Hot Water'* is a brilliant coming-of-age novel. They will all become names to reckon with — and soon.

Next year is a fresh chapter, and nothing spells hope like a freshly printed book. Like resolutions, they bring the promise of change. Historian Ira Mukhoty is back, this time with a biography of Begum Samru. A woman who refused to be slotted into a neat box, a *tawaif*, a ruler, she converted to Christianity, smoked a *hookah* and wore a turban. Ira writes elegant, compelling, deeply researched books — and Samru might not exist at the edge of history anymore, but her life needs to be filled out by a historian as talented as Ira.

A brand new voice in history is young journalist Sowmiya Ashok. *'The Dig: Keeladi and the Politics of India's Past'* is an end-of-year debut that will certainly find a prominent place on shelves. Diplomat and writer Navtej Sarna has a new book on the shelf. Always a joy to read, he takes a deep dive into the green, saffron and white in *'A Flag to Live and Die For: A Short History of India's Tricolour'*.

Exploring Indianness and pluralism is vocalist TM Krishna's *'We the People of India'*. Krishna is Carnatic music's rockstar — an activist, singer and a compelling writer, like everything he does, the book is a part of his politics.

One of the finest writers in India, Stephen Alter will chase the monsoon across the hills where he lives to God's Own Country and beyond in the evocatively titled *'Fragrance of the Rain'*. *'In The Shade of Many Trees'*, Kadambari Devarajan will bring wisdom as old as the trees. Blending folklore, memories, anecdotes and science, she'll get readers to look out of their windows and learn from the coconut, the *peepal*, the guava, the gooseberry, the sandalwood, the *neem* and the *moringa*.

Neha Sinha will do the impossible in Delhi to discover the wild. *'Wild Capital: Discovering Nature in Delhi'* is a journey on ecological histories and the wild side. The year ahead will be fiction-packed. Jerry Pinto brings back Yuri Fonseca, this time to witness his city burning during the Babri Masjid demolition. No

longer a teenager, Yuri is in his thirties and finds himself as a guardian to a Muslim family as he watches everything change in his city. Deepa Anappara's first book, *'Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line'*, established her as an accomplished writer. Her next book, *'The Last of Earth'*, is set in 1869 as Britain trains spies to enter Tibet. Like her earlier work, this too involves a missing friend.

If Ruchir Joshi's *'Great Eastern Hotel'* was decades in the making, Daniyal Mueenuddin's *'This is Where the Serpent Lives'* has taken time to arrive. Daniyal, a Pakistani-American, blazed into the publishing world with his short stories, *'In Other Rooms, Other Wonders'*, in 2009, winning the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Short stories are hard to sell, but Daniyal's talent shone through. At 62, he'll have his first novel out in January.

Mohammed Hanif, the man with a deadpan expression and acerbic wit, has his new book, *'Rebel English Academy'*, out. Set in OK town in the 1970s after the hanging of a prominent politician and martial law, it has promise.

Award-winning writer Geetanjali Shree's short-story collection *'Once Elephants Lived Here'* has been translated by Daisy Rockwell. No year is complete without memoirs. Arundhati Roy's memoir of her mother became the book of the year and 2026 will have its share of tell-all moments. Sly Stallone has one.

'A Very Lucky Man: The Memoirs of a Radio-wala' by Mark Tully promises to be an entertaining account of a man who spent his life chronicling the country he chose to live in. There are encounters with the Gandhis — Sanjay, Rajiv and Indira, who banned his book on Operation Bluestar. There are others too — Morarji Desai, Devi Lal, LK Advani, Sheikh Mujib and ZA Bhutto.

Journalists Saeed Naqvi and Khalid Mohamed write their own accounts. Atal Bihari Vajpayee continues to be fertile mining material as diplomat Ajay Bisaria, who has had a ringside view, writes *'The Unifier — Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Life and Times in Power'*. But the memoir to watch out for is *'The Constitution is My Home: Conversations on Democratic Lawyering'* by Indira Jaising and Ritu Menon. Any book that has India's two foremost feminists collaborating is bound to be special.

Vishi Anand has his memoir out, as does the top cop Sunil Gupta. *'Black Warrant'* became a Netflix hit and *'Red Alert'*, that he has written with Samanwaya Rautray, shows he still has more stories to tell.

Adding to the list of must-reads in 2026 is Shinee Antony's *'The Haunting of Kunjamma P'* and Karan Mahajan's *'The Complex'*. Karan firmly planted himself on the literary map with his first book. If he tackles power and corruption in Delhi, Shinee writes about faith and a pious woman who sweeps the churchyard being compelled to write the autobiography of a devil with literary ambitions that comes to reside in her. Knowing Shinee, it will be witty, wise and original. No list is complete without poetry. This year sees Gulzar write about the city he found fame in. *'Aamchi Mumbai'* is an ode to this city by the sea.

2026 will also be about reading. November saw the launch of the Independents, a grouping of India's leading indie publishers — Women Unlimited, LeftWord, Speaking Tiger, Tulika, Stree, Samya, etc. "We have come together to offer an alternative to corporate publishers, in terms of the books we publish individually, the activities and ideas we propose and the kind of diversity we believe is essential to a healthy book culture," says Ritu Menon of Women Unlimited. "The Independents ensure bibliodiversity."

And this word will be a catchphrase, a conversation-starter and hopefully a controversy-stirrer; something that Indian publishing needs. Equally important for diversity are readers.

If anything, 2025 has witnessed a tiny revolution brewing in chairs and even out in parks. This is likely to spread further. As lit fests mushroom across the country, Kerala has a second Manorama Hortus, and there's the third edition of *'The White Owl'* in Nagaland — those who miss the sense of belonging you feel being in a packed room with readers, are turning to books in smaller circles.

The reading club has become the new way to bond, date and find friends. "Books find a way to bring people together," says Rachna Kalra, founder of Silent Book Club in Delhi. Her only ask is that the person carry a book and read uninterrupted. Those with a flair for the exotic have their own tribe. Dokusha Book Club celebrates Japanese fiction in translation. Judging by the number of translated Japanese literature, including *'Hooked'*, a new book from the bestselling Asako Yuzuki, it will be a year filled with books to love, hold, curl up and read.

— The writer is a literary critic

The year gone by was certainly one where Indian art realised its potential; 2026 promises to be bigger

A CREATIVE HIGH

MALVIKA KAUL

HOW was 2025 for Indian art and artists? Fulfilling and rewarding is the unanimous response. Indian artists appeared to break new ground in mediums and craft and reaffirmed their position as stars in the art market. The year saw a flood of outstanding shows, including impressive installations and sculptures, a string of retrospectives and an amazing body of work in textile art and digital platforms.

Ashish Anand, CEO and MD, DAG, says 2025 will go down as the year Indian art realised its potential — a miniature painting (Mughal-era work *'Family of Cheetahs in a Rocky Landscape'* by Basawan) and a work by modernist master MF Husain both broke records with similar values.

Anand says this speaks of the strength of different periods and styles of Indian art



Arpita Singh, *'Remembering'*, Serpentine North © Photo: Jo Underhill. Courtesy Arpita Singh and Serpentine; (right) *'Family of Cheetahs in a Rocky Landscape'* by Basawan sold for ₹120 crore at a Christie's auction.



and its appreciation and connoisseurship. Indeed, Indian masters continued to fetch unparalleled prices. Husain's *'Gram Yatra'* (sold for ₹119 crore), Tyeb Mehta's *'Trussed Bull'* (acquired for ₹61.8 crore), VS Gaitonde's abstract canvas (earned ₹67.08 crore), and FN Souza's *'Houses in Hampstead'* (went for ₹66.9 crore) confirmed Indian art's upward trajectory. Both Husain and Souza continue to make phenomenal sales abroad, a trend that started close to two decades ago.

Renu Modi, founder-director, Gallery Espace, agrees that 2025 set "new benchmarks in auction prices for many artists". This year's solo exhibitions by Arpita Singh at the Serpentine Gallery and Mrinalini Mukherjee at the Royal College of Art in the UK underscored the increasing international spotlight on Indian artists.

Gallery Espace completed 35 years in 2025. The overwhelming attention the gallery received at The Armory Fair in New York, where they participated after nine years (displaying works of Mekhala Bahl), reinforces Modi's belief that the West is

looking at Indian art more seriously.

But recognition for Indian art moved beyond record sales. The launch of Lawh Wa Qalam: MF Husain Museum in Doha was a historic moment for India. For the first time, a museum abroad is devoted to an Indian artist, tracing his journey from the 1950s to his death in 2011. Many years ago, Husain famously said "the world is my canvas". Today, the museum echoes his spirit.

At home, two marquee events, Kochi-Muziris Biennale (the three-month festival that starts in December) and the Serendipity Arts Festival (hosted in Goa in December), demonstrated that Indians today are more open to exploring and connecting with art. Anand says Indian art lovers have a huge appetite for well-curated shows and quality programming. The footfall at Caravaggio's exhibition *'Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy'* in Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru, and the clamour for *'Dali Comes to India'* suggested Indians are enchanted by glorious art.

The year saw several contemporary artists experiment in diverse mediums: wood sculpture, botanical art, street photography

and photographic installations, and digital art. Multi-media artist Arpita Akhanda was awarded the coveted Sovereign Asian Art Prize 2025 for her woven artwork *'Dendritic Data lib'* that explored themes of identity and displacement. Many other young artists pushed conceptual boundaries to express themes of climate change, war, issues of transgender communities and urban angst.

The centenary of master printmaker and sculptor Krishna Reddy in Santiniketan was a landmark, both as a display of iconic works and a reminder of the extraordinary contributions several gifted artists have made to India's pictorial oeuvre. Siddharth Das, designer, artist and educator, includes Reddy's show as one of the "exciting landmarks" of 2025.

His list also includes *A Rising Tide: Women Artists* from the Alkazi Collection that marked the centenary of theatre doyen Ebrahim Alkazi. At this show, works of a range of women artists, including Anita Dube, Arpita Singh, Ira Roy, Jaya Ganguly, Kishori Kaul, Latika Katt, Meera Devidayal, Mona Rai, Nalini Malani and Nasreen

Mohammedi, demonstrated the rich tapestry that these pioneers have created over the years. Jaya Mani, seasoned curator and founder of DRAVIDAM that promotes art of South India, notes that 2025 was marked by tremendous experimentation. Her own critically acclaimed show, *'Voyages: The Ancient Maritime Silk Route'*, blended the works of muralist Suresh Muthukulam and textile artist Gunjan Jain. She believes that future successes in art will still belong to creators whose works are universal and meant to last.

With retrospectives on artists like Gulam-mohammed Sheikh, Gieve Patel, A Ramachandran and Krishen Khanna, 2025 ensured art lovers continued to find magic.

'Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters', a multi-media show launched by the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art towards the end of 2025, in collaboration with the National Museum of Australia, has signalled that the magic will continue next year. *'Songlines'* depicts the journey of a group of women across three vast Australian deserts. On till March, the show has paintings, grass sculptures, performances, moving images and immersive installations created by artists from the aboriginal communities.

As 2026 knocks, artists, along with curators, gallery owners, installation experts and connoisseurs appear to be evolving a robust ecosystem for art lovers. Aesthetics and archival value both are at a premium. Experts say Moderns will continue to smash art auction records. All roads will lead to the Kochi Biennale in February when Serbian performance artist Marina Abramovic visits. The highlight, however, will be the opening of the new Kiran Nadar Museum of Art near Delhi's IGI Airport. Spanning 1 lakh square metres, the museum is poised to become South Asia's largest art and cultural centre.

The upcoming DAG exhibition *'Drawing a Nation: The Delhi Silpi Chakra'* will showcase works of 'refugee artists' BC Sanyal, Amar Nath Sehgal, PN Mago, Kanwal Krishna, KS Kulkarni and Dhanraj Bhagat. The show will be a reminder of how independent platforms of art survive, experiment and sustain the souls of cities.

— The writer is a freelance contributor



I wish for us to realise that sports is not being in a territorial war with the enemy.
A loss does not mean the end of life and winning not a conquest of the world

WHAT WE ARE & CAN BE



PRADEEP MAGAZINE

WHEN you are inhaling the poisonous Delhi air that pumps your lungs, looking ahead with hope for a great future in the new year seems a difficult proposition. Yet life must go on as nothing sustains it more than a vision of a future where your wishes become real.

India may not be a sporting power yet, far from it, but there is a lot happening next year that should reaffirm a nation's progress in winning competitions. The T20 World Cup and the Asian Games are two major sporting events where India should showcase its undeniable strength. As hosts of cricket's shortest and arguably most popular format, India, in the minds of its fans and more importantly in the opinion of most experts, are the favourites to win. Nothing surprising, given the spread of the game, abundance of resources, money and the vast multitude that plays and benefits from a money-spinning tournament like the Indian Premier League.

In a cricket-centric nation, India has lagged behind in other sporting disciplines where competition is far tougher and playing nations greater in number and strength. India may have hosted the first Asian Games in 1951, but has never topped its medals tally, finishing fourth in the last Games in 2023. While there is no hope of overtaking or even getting anywhere close to China, which is a formidable sporting power in the world, India can dream of overtaking Japan and South Korea in the event to be held in Nagoya, Japan, in September-October next year.

In this future-gazing game and fulfilling of wishes, let us not forget that nothing reflects a nation and its society's civilisational goals more than the way it plays sports and the manner in which its people react to victory and defeat. Do we look at sports as a manifestation of excellence in physical skills, an art form that transcends boundaries of national loyalties, caste, creed and religion? Is skill subservient to the nation-state or does it break human boundaries and unite people of the world in celebrating the limitless possibilities of achieving perfection? As I reflect on what lies ahead, many life-changing experiences of the past flash in my mind.

Experiences that serve as a lesson for what should not be and what to desire for in this relentless, inexorable forward march of time. What is an aspiration or an achievement worth if its end-goal is to make the "other" feel insecure



Here's to a Happy New Year in pursuit of a more inclusive India, and seeking excellence with the goal of playing the game of sports and life with courage, skill and wisdom.

and inferior? Does one aspire to win to feel good and satisfied at having showcased mastery over a particular skill-set, or does one win to show the other side weak and meek?

I have grappled with these questions ever since I felt "humiliated" at defeats on a cricket field in foreign lands. India's tour of Australia in 1989 left deep scars on my psyche, where I felt that an entire nation and its media were against India as a nation. More than the defeats, the over-the-top crowd celebrations and the equating of India with "dark ages" felt like a piercing stab in the gut.

In one of the Test matches, India refused to play under floodlights when fading light interfered with the match. The playing conditions stated consent from both sides if such an eventuality arose. India exercised its right. A headline in the next day's paper screamed: *Back to dark ages*. More than a series of defeats, the loud, intimidating celebrations of the crowd made us sulky, smarting, wounded and helpless. When in one of the Tests, a ducking Sachin Tendulkar was given lbw to a Glenn McGrath bouncer that hardly rose knee-high, a scathing piece against umpire Daryl Harper followed in the newspaper I was covering the tour for. Tendulkar was probably out, but a siege mentality had gripped us, hence the angry reaction.

While nothing went right on that tour, a lengthy opinion piece in a leading Australian paper ridiculed the ill-tempered, macho, over-the-top Australian team's reactions and the aggressive crowd celebrations. It called its own team, for these very reasons, the most "disliked" in the cricket world. That article had put things

in a larger perspective of national identity and sports. It advocated saner ways of celebrating victories and tried to convey that what is loud and visible need not mean it represents the majority sentiment. Over the years, Indian cricket has transformed into this gigantic monolith of muscle and money power, with its team having gained in strength and riches. History, however, has not taught us to become humbler. The "hunted" has become the "hunter". To those who were at the receiving end of Australian taunts and jibes in 1999, the Indian crowds and its media appear no different from them today.

The last match I have seen at a ground, among the crowds, was the India-Afghanistan 2023 World Cup match in Delhi's Kotla stadium. The flag-waving, raucous celebrations and verbal targeting of the Afghan supporters was scary. It was more like a mob looking for a target than fans enjoying a game of cricket while celebrating their own team's superior performance.

Among the many wishes I have for the next year is to see a more inclusive India, sensitive to gender and caste inequalities among its athletes. Let talent and not religion define a sportsperson. I wish for us to realise that sports is not being in a territorial war with the enemy. It is not played with guns and bombs. A loss does not mean the end of life and winning not a conquest of the world.

Here's to a Happy New Year in pursuit of excellence, with the goal of playing the game of sports and life with courage, skill and wisdom.

— The writer is the author of 'Not Quite Cricket' and 'Not Just Cricket'

CAPTION CONTEST 1542

SARABJIT SINGH



SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1541



SPECTRUM DECEMBER 21 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

Photo-shop — Dr Khushpreet Singh via epaper, Ferozepur city

Under the lens — Charandeep Shergill, Mohali

Creating the seen — Sanjeev Kumar Arora via epaper, Patiala

Scene stealer — Surendra Miglani via epaper, Kaithal

Shoot at sight — Kamal Singh, Kharar

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@tribune mail.com or a scanned copy of the e-paper clipping. Please mention the pin code and phone number, along with your address.



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Achievements of 2025

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EducationWorld has placed Pinegrove School, at the very pinnacle by ranking it No. 1 All India and is branded as one of the only two Ivy League Co-Ed Boarding Schools, in the country.

Pinegrove School Honored Among India's Best at School Merit Awards 2025



Education Today also placed Pinegrove at the forefront in Himachal Pradesh and All India. Their School Merit Awards 2025 were galore for Academic Reputation, Parents' Choice, Most Effective Blended Learning etc.

President Murmu Honours Pinegrove Student



Yuvraj Singh Jolly, a Class VIII student of Pinegrove School, Dharampur, represented Himachal Pradesh and brought national acclaim by securing 3rd position at the National Energy Conservation Painting Competition held in Gurugram, competing among 108 finalists from across India. He was awarded a ₹30,000 cash prize, a laptop, and a bronze medal. The achievement was crowned with a special honour when Yuvraj was felicitated by the Hon'ble President of India, Smt. Droupadi Murmu, at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi. Earlier, he had secured 3rd position at the State Level Competition in Shimla, competing against 75 participants, and won a ₹20,000 cash prize on the theme "Energy Conservation: My Responsibility, Our Future." Yuvraj's journey from school to the national stage reflects talent, dedication, and purposeful creativity, bringing immense pride to Pinegrove School and Himachal Pradesh.

Captain AJ Singh to lead India's Boarding Schools Association

Capt. A. J. Singh, Executive Director of Pinegrove School in Solan district, has been unanimously elected President of the Boarding Schools' Association of India (BSAI) for 2025-2027, marking a significant moment for residential education in the country. His presidency signals a shift toward sustainability initiatives, curriculum innovation, and strengthened disciplinary frameworks across BSAI's 63-member boarding schools.

Pinegrove's Majestic Boys' and Girls' Bands Crowned State-Level Champions

Pinegrove School delivered a spectacular show of discipline, artistry and musical brilliance at the State-Level Band Competition 2025-26. The Boys' Brass Band of Pinegrove School, Subathu-reigning champions of both the HP State-Level and North Zone Inter School Brass Band Competitions—once again secured the First Position. Adding to this triumph, Pinegrove School, Dharampur earned the Runners-up position, reinforcing the school's unmatched legacy in band excellence. The Girls' Pipe Band added another feather to Pinegrove's cap, being crowned the Queens of Pipe for their exceptional presentation and musical command.

Pinegrove's Band Band Clinches #3 at National Level Competition of Education and Defence Ministry



Pinegrove School, Subathu, the reigning champions of both Himachal Pradesh State Boys' Brass Band Competition and the North Zone Inter-School Band Competition, secured the third place at the National-Level Inter-School Band Competition 6.0 2024-25. The event, organised at the iconic Major Dhyan Chand National Stadium in Delhi, showcased some of the finest musical talent from across the country. Competing against 568 school bands and over 14,000 students nationwide, Pinegrove School's band reached the final round, securing a place in the top 16 teams. This achievement reflects their unwavering dedication and commitment to excellence.

MiG-21 lands at Pinegrove to inspire young minds



In a powerful tribute to India's Defence legacy, an air frame of a MiG-21 aircraft was unveiled at Pinegrove School, Subathu by Dr Mallika Nadda, president of the National Body for Special Olympics Bharat, on the concluding day of the school's three-day annual fest. The aircraft, facilitated by Union Health and Family Welfare Minister JP Nadda, would serve as a symbol of national pride and inspiration for students, reflecting the spirit of courage and service.

Grovians Lift Bhupinder Memorial Soccer Trophy

Pinegrove School Boys stormed to glory at the 26th Bhupinder Memorial Soccer Tournament, held at the Lawrence School Sanawar remaining unbeaten and sealing a dramatic 1-0 win over BCS, Shimla in the grand finale. Mahendra Chettri was adjudged as the Best Defender and Arpit Sharma was declared the Best Player.

Pinegrove Tops HP Class XII Board Average - 2025

School Average 90.3%
100% of students scored above 70%
23 Students Scored Perfect 100

XII CBSE Board State Topper

In a first-of-its-kind initiative, CBSE released School Performance Report Cards (2024-25) for all affiliated schools, benchmarking their results against state and national averages. Pinegrove School has emerged as the top-performing institution in Himachal Pradesh, achieving an exceptional School Average Score of 90.39% in the Class XII Board Examinations - the highest in the state, far surpassing the State Average of 74.18%. At the national level too, Pinegrove's performance stands out, with its average score significantly exceeding the CBSE National Average of 69.14%. This remarkable feat reaffirms Pinegrove's unwavering commitment to academic excellence and its consistent tradition of high achievement.

Pinegrove School Clinches CBSE North Zone - II U-19 Girls' Soccer Championship Trophy

Pinegrove School lifted the coveted CBSE North Zone-II U-19 Girls' Soccer Championship trophy with a narrow but decisive 1-0 win against Vidya Devi Jindal School in the final. This remarkable feat stands as a shining testament of the school's commitment towards excellence in sports and the indomitable spirit of Girls too in the Sports Arena. Pinegrove Soccer Girls, the 2025 National Champions, finished with a very creditable THIRD SPOT in the CBSE Nationals 2025.

Pinegrove Wins U-14 and U-19 Titles in Doon Cup Girls' Soccer Tournament



Pinegrove School performed brilliantly in the Doon Cup, winning both the U-14 and U-19 titles, with Vardha Aggarwal and Subekcha Limbu being declared Best Players of the Tournament in their respective categories.

Education Minister Shri Rohit Thakur graces Pinegrove School's Grand Annual Function 2025



The Chief Guest, Shri Rohit Thakur, Hon'ble Education Minister of Himachal Pradesh, reviewed the NCC Parade and also attended the cultural programme organised by Pinegrove School, on the occasion of its Annual Function 2025. In his address, the Education Minister praised Pinegrove as a progressive institution flourishing under the visionary leadership of Capt. A. J. Singh, commending its holistic ethos that nurtures discipline, leadership, and character—qualities that shape students for lifelong success.

Young Guns of Pinegrove Win Inter-School Hockey Championship



Pinegrove School, emerged triumphant at the 25th Sub-Junior Inter Public School Hockey Tournament for Boys, held from 9th to 12th September 2025, sealing the championship with an 4-0 win over Sherwood College, Nainital, in the alluring Sant Stadium of Pinegrove School, Dharampur. Rajeshwar Singh Kahlon was named 'Highest Scorer of the Tournament', Gurshaaz Singh Thakral earned the title of 'Best Goalkeeper', and Jeevesh was crowned 'Player of the Tournament' for his outstanding performance.

Pinegrove Boys' Basketball Team Reigns Supreme



In a riveting showcase of skill, teamwork and indomitable spirit, Pinegrove Boys' team seized the Championship title of the 13th Major Jagpal Memorial Basketball Tournament after a thrilling 62-60 victory against Strawberry Fields High School.

Grovians Seized the CBSE Cluster U 19 Girls' Basketball



Pinegrove won the CBSE North Zone Cluster. Sukhman Kaur was adjudged Best Player of the Tournament.

Pinegrove Excels in Chandigarh Debate



Pinegrove students showcased exceptional oratory skills at the Inter-School Parliamentary Debate Championship held at Manav Mangal Smart School, Mohali. Competing against 25 schools, Pinegrove lifted both the Overall Best School Delegation Trophy and the Runners-up Trophy in the Senior Category. Adding to the laurels, Nimrit Kaur was adjudged the Best Emerging Speaker.

Pinegrove School Emerges Victorious in Bilingual Turncoat Debate



Pinegrove School hosted the 8th Mohinder Memorial Bilingual Turncoat Debate, featuring eloquent debaters from 13 leading schools across India. Pinegrove School, Subathu, emerged Champions, while Army Public School, Dagshai and Pinegrove School, Dharampur were declared joint Runners-up. In the individual category, Riquezza Diwan (Pinegrove, Dharampur) secured 1st place and Aryan Sirswal (Pinegrove, Subathu) stood 2nd.

SOME MORE ACCOLADES (2025)

*BCS Soccer Boys' Tournament - Runners-up
*IPSC Basketball U-14 Girls' - Runners-up
*IPSC Cricket U-19 Girls' - Runners-up
*IPSC Soccer U-19 Girls' - Runners-up
*Major Jagpal U-14 Girls' - Runners-up

*Honoria Basketball Girls' U-19, Sanawar - Runners-up
*Welham Basketball U-19 Girls' - Runners-up
*St Mary U-17 Girls' Basketball - Runners-up
*State Swimming Competition - Runners-up
*District Shooting Championship - Winners



Opinion

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2025



Arshdeep Singh and Jasprit Bumrah during a practice session AP

Its variety of bowlers makes India favourites

RINGSIDE
VIEW



Tushar Bhaduri

FOR A COUNTRY of India’s size and depth of cricketing talent, there will always be robust debate whenever the national squad is selected for a big tournament. India have been almost unstoppable in T20 cricket even before winning the World Cup 18 months ago, with match winners invariably emerging at opportune moments.

But still, the form and fitness of individual players have prompted speculation as to the strongest combination India can field.

Shubman Gill, the Test and ODI captain, has missed the bus for the T20 World Cup, as a result of form and fitness deserting him at an inopportune time, even as skipper Suryakumar Yadav has much worse numbers over roughly the same period.

Not that it has prevented India from dominating all comers. In Abhishek Sharma, they have found an opener against whom every side has struggled for answers. As long as he is at the crease, the scoring rate is not a worry. He may get out early, like any other batter determined not to take any prisoners, but the left-hander has ensured his is arguably the most prized scalp in T20 cricket of late.

There is still more than a month to go before the World Cup is staged in India and Sri Lanka, but the prospects of a successful title defence rests a lot on the initial ballast provided by the Punjab youngster.

Abhishek’s onslaught invariably ensures that the middle order can bat without the necessity of taking too many undue risks, before upping the ante in the final stage of the innings. It helps that India has the likes of Hardik Pandya, Rinku Singh and Shivam Dube, all of whom are well equipped to provide the finishing kick. Among those coming before them, Tilak Varma is full of class, has all the shots and can accelerate the scoring with orthodox strokes.

However, most of the top teams now have explosive line-ups. Any batter, if it’s his day, can win a game on his own. What they may lack in technique and consistency, they make up in six-hitting ability.

Team for T20 has an attack most suited to the short version of the game

Arshdeep Singh is India’s most prolific wicket-taker in the format, making a habit of striking with the new ball that deviates both ways and nailing yorkers at the end. But with the tournament being held in the subcontinent, India’s spin strength is the X-factor that no other team possesses. Varun Chakaravorthy would be one of the first names in an Indian T20I team list. His pace, variations and accuracy make for a deadly combination. At the World Cup, with a different team to face every game, batters won’t have the opportunity to get used to him as they would in a bilateral series. Not that it’s a guarantee of success as Australia, South Africa and Pakistan at the Asia Cup found out to their cost. In a longer contest, batters may take a look, but in T20s, they don’t have time.

The Indian team management puts a lot of emphasis on batting depth, which rarely allows Varun and left-arm wrist-spinner Kuldeep Yadav to feature in the same XI. The traditional way of team selection is ‘choose your best batters to score the runs, and your best bowlers to take the wickets or restrict the scoring’. But head coach Gautam Gambhir is keen on a safety net at Nos.7 and 8, to ensure against a batting collapse or provide a late boost.

If Varun and Kuldeep can bowl in tandem in the middle overs, bamboozled batters will have no easy outlet and will have to take risks to even score singles. When one doesn’t know which way the ball is turning – the description ‘mystery spinner’ has some merit – the unfamiliarity with a bowling style often results in embarrassment.

No guarantee

All these strengths make India such a well-rounded outfit that they can afford to fret over the small print and nitty-gritty. Surya has an enviable record as captain and his lack of runs hasn’t hurt the team’s results, as others have more than made up.

India has enjoyed a long streak of T20 series wins. They lose the odd game out of three or five, but finish on the positive side of the ledger.

But they may still be vulnerable to a bad day at the office and if it arrives at the knockout stage of a big tournament, it could be curtains for their campaigns.

Dew is likely to play a big part in the tournament as India’s matches are almost guaranteed to be played during prime time in the evening. In such a scenario, batting second becomes an advantage and the team setting the target has to set its sights higher as a form of buffer. The disparity between teams of similar strength may be bridged by the flip of the coin.

The team that ended India’s long trophy drought in major ICC tournaments in Bridgetown in June 2024 had icons such as Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli and Ravindra Jadeja. Ravichandran Ashwin was still an active international player.

It speaks volumes of India’s deep reservoir of talent – in this format at least – that the team has, if anything, grown stronger since then.

India has lost two Test series at home since then while their fortunes in the white-ball formats, especially in T20s, have shown a steep upward curve. The longest format requires some unique qualities which may be redundant in short-form cricket. But that’s an altogether different story.

Rather than using a web browser or a mobile application to order food or call a cab, it will become increasingly common to just speak to an AI assistant instead. In theory, a customer wearing earbuds could order their favourite sushi dish without having to take their phone out of their pockets


KAREN KWOK

TECH VISIONARIES OFTEN cite the 2013 sci-fi movie “Her” as a blueprint for where artificial intelligence is headed. In the film, Joaquin Phoenix’s character spends his days talking through a small earpiece to Samantha, his ever-present virtual assistant and eventual romantic interest, voiced by Scarlett Johansson. The story is hardly a love letter to AI, though it does hint at where investors’ money and users’ attention may be headed in 2026.

Voice-based software isn’t new. Many people already use Apple’s, opens new tab Siri assistant, for example. Amazon.com, opens new tab in early 2025 claimed, opens new tab that there were 600 million Alexa-enabled devices in the world, helping users look up facts, play music or control the living-room lights. But these experiences have historically been clunky. The voices have typically sounded robotic. And the software ran on rigid pre-programmed rules, making it difficult to process new information and gauge the context for a query in the way that OpenAI’s ChatGPT and Anthropic’s Claude can.

AI is changing all that. Alexa and Siri now pack the punch of large language models (LLMs), significantly improving their usefulness. Meanwhile, OpenAI’s Sam Altman and Jony Ive are working on a device that seems likely to be screenless, opens new tab with a strong audio element. Startups like Sequoia-backed ElevenLabs are part of the trend too. The \$6.6 billion company specialises in making computer voices sound real, and has paid \$11 million to people to upload short voice clips. These 10,000 samples help to train systems that can replicate a wide variety of tones, accents, and emotions.

INSIDE
TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

Art of deal

In 2025, foreign policy and trade relations completely trumped domestic events. Even this columnist, though on unfamiliar territory, has perforce to focus on the all-important issue. Ironically, 2025 began on an optimistic note. “Unlike some, we are not nervous of a Trump-led US administration, there is a convergence of interests,” External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had pronounced in January.

Just months later, we were shell-shocked when Trump unilaterally slapped 25% tariffs on Indian goods, later upped to 50%. Our foreign office appeared to have little inkling of Hurricane Trump hitting our shores. But signs were evident in the aftermath of the Pahalgam terrorist attack. Our old adversary Pakistan, in the form of Field Marshal Asim Munir, outmanoeuvred us with the same agility with which he dispensed with the last vestiges of Pakistan’s democracy. Even before India could retaliate militarily for Pahalgam, Munir hastily tied up a hugely lucrative



Regulators and the general public won’t like people walking around with headphones that are always listening

Chatbots find voice as audio assistants rise

As voice-enabled AI gets smarter and more human-sounding, consumers will lap it up. Speaking is about three times faster than typing for both English and Mandarin Chinese, according to a 2016 academic study, opens new tab. And leading speech-recognition models, like OpenAI’s Whisper, opens new tab, claim error rates as low as 3%, meaning they get 97% of words right. That’s roughly as accurate as using a smartphone keyboard, since users typically have a typo rate of about 2%, based on a 2019 experiment, opens new tab.

Rather than using a web browser or a mobile application to order food or call a cab, it will become increasingly common to just speak to an AI assistant instead. Uber Technologies, opens new tab, for example, already supports, opens new tab voice commands for Siri users in English, German, Japanese, French, Hindi and Portuguese.

In theory, a customer wearing earbuds could order their favourite sushi dish without having to take their phone out of their pocket. That should also appeal to older or visually impaired users, who are sometimes less comfortable texting.

Consumers are already primed for audio AI. Wearing headphones for large parts of the day is increasingly common. WhatsApp users send, opens new

tab more than 7 billion voice messages daily, while nearly half of young adults use voice notes weekly, according, opens new tab to GV’s Tom Hulme. Next Move Strategy Consulting expects the revenue of the total voice AI market, including smart earbuds, to more than triple in size between 2025 and 2030, reaching \$34 billion by the end of the decade. Meanwhile, venture capital firms invested \$6.6 billion in voice AI startups in 2025 – up from \$4 billion in 2023, according to PitchBook.

The bigger question is which companies stand to benefit as chatbots become audiobots. Greater demand for natural-sounding voices seems likely, which will help ElevenLabs. The startup claims a dominant 70% to 80% share of the synthetic voice market. It expects \$300 million in annual recurring revenue by the end of 2025, and has, opens new tab a 60% operating profit margin.

Tech giants are already finding ways to move AI from the screen to the ear. Apple’s AirPods now offer live translation in five languages, letting users understand what a foreign speaker is saying in real time. Alphabet, opens new tab is putting similar functions from its Gemini assistant into the Pixel Buds earphones. The bigger prize, however, may lie in developing more specialist audio AI models, as distinct from primarily text-based systems. The cur-

rent status quo for many voice-based assistants often involves translating speech to text, feeding it into an LLM, and then reading the results aloud. A potentially better, albeit more expensive, alternative is to build “unified audio” systems that can listen, reason and respond directly through sound alone. This opens up a new field of possibilities, like incorporating users’ intonation and contextual background noise into an answer. In other words, it’s a step closer to the sci-fi vision of “Her”.

Another big question is who loses as audiobots rise. Ives and Altman’s intentions with the secretive OpenAI device may offer a hint: the Wall Street Journal has reported, opens new tab that the pair hope to reduce users’ screentime. It follows that social media apps like TikTok, Instagram and WhatsApp may suffer, unless they can adapt.

The biggest problem for voice AI, however, may be privacy. Regulators and the general public won’t like people walking around with headphones or other devices that are always listening. OpenAI and others may have to find a way around that obstacle.

Still, the history of social media suggests that users will happily surrender personal information in return for a product they love. In 2026, the future of AI may therefore be heard as much as it’s seen.

—REUTERS

'Even low alcohol intake raises oral cancer risk in Indian men'

The findings challenge the perception that low or 'moderate' drinking is safe. The authors call for integrated prevention strategies addressing alcohol and tobacco together, and for stronger regulation of locally brewed liquors, which often fall outside formal licensing and quality-control systems.

Just 5 DNA letters flip chromatin from fluid to solid-like state

Twenty-first century solutions to snake bites



What are the signals from the Indian economy?

What measures have the government taken to boost demand and growth?

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far: The year 2025 has been rocky for the Indian economy. While the government has implemented several policy changes that are positive for the economy, several other factors, some international and some domestic, continue to play spoilsport.

What has gone well in the year? The year began on a reasonably positive footing. In February, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President Donald Trump jointly announced that the two countries would work towards a Bilateral Trade Agreement by the fall of this year. That same month, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman also presented Budget 2025, in which she implemented several changes to the income tax rates and slabs that would essentially reduce the tax burden on the bulk of taxpayers. While the Budget announcement was aimed at increasing disposable incomes by reducing the tax on incomes, September saw the GST Council approach the problem from another direction. The Council did away with the 12% and 28% GST slabs and moved most items in each of the discarded slabs to the ones immediately below them. That is, most items in the 12% slab moved to 5%, and most items in 28% moved to 18%. Apart from this, the Centre in November also announced the implementation of the four Labour Codes, which increase social security for workers and provide them with various benefits. Trade talks between the U.S. and India have resumed, but nothing concrete has been announced

What trade deals have been struck or implemented this year? The India-U.K. Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement was signed in July 2025, under which India is to receive duty-free access to most of the U.K. market, and enhanced provisions for the mobility of Indian labour in that country. The Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement between India and the European Free Trade Association (Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein), signed in March 2024, officially came into effect on October 1, 2025. Apart from the trade concessions, the EFTA countries agreed to invest \$100 billion in India in 15 years. In an interview to *The Hindu*, Iceland's Ambassador to India Benedikt Höskuldsson asserted that the \$100 billion target would be achieved well before the 15 years were completed.

In December, India and Oman signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), and India and New Zealand also announced that they had concluded negotiations on a free trade agreement, under which India would receive duty-free access for 100% of the items it exports to New Zealand. Further, New Zealand has committed to invest \$20 billion in India over 15 years. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has recently been asserting that India's negotiations with the European Union over a trade deal are in their final stages.

What did not work in 2025? The biggest factor that has worked against India has been the U.S. After the initial bonhomie of the February announcement, Mr. Trump announced “Liberation Day” reciprocal tariffs on a number of countries, including India, in April. India's tariff was 26% at the time; a week or so later, Mr. Trump announced a 90-day “pause” on the tariffs so he could negotiate bilateral trade deals. But neither side could agree on several key aspects. As the 90-day deadline approached in early July, Mr. Trump extended the deadline to the end of that month. However, with no deal forthcoming with India, on July 31, Mr. Trump announced 25% tariffs on India. A week later, he announced an additional 25% tariff on India as a “penalty” for importing Russian oil. The total tariff amounted to an unsustainable 50%, and that's when trade talks really broke down. Talks have resumed, but nothing concrete has been announced. Several labour-intensive sectors in India, for which the U.S. is a big market, have been hurting. The government has announced an Export Promotion Mission to provide cheaper credit to exporters and help them overcome non-tariff barriers, but details of the schemes have not yet been made public.

What lies ahead? The New Year is going to be a mixed bag for the economy. The Reserve Bank of India has pegged growth for 2025-26 at 7.3%. This means growth in the second half will slow down significantly since the first half averaged 8%. The tariff troubles also look like they could continue for a few more months. On the other hand, the positive thing to look out for is a much-needed upgrade of India's macroeconomic data indicators. The GDP, Index of Industrial Production, and Consumer Price Index – all three vital to gauge the health of the economy – will see their base years updated with improved methodologies.

What are India’s diplomatic headwinds ahead?

Why has foreign policy in 2025 been full of ‘shock and surprise’? Where does India stand in its ties with the U.S.? Will issues over tariffs, visas and immigration persist in the New Year? How troubling is the neighbourhood turmoil, particularly in Pakistan and Bangladesh?

Suhasini Haidar

The story so far: In many ways, the spirit of 2025 for Indian foreign policy was “shock and surprise”, as the Narendra Modi government encountered several unexpected international challenges from a number of directions.

Which were the biggest global stories for India this year? There's no doubt that the most significant foreign policy story of the year came from Washington, where Donald Trump was sworn in as President for his second term in January. Mr. Trump's policies have rocked the multilateral economic system with his “Liberation Day” tariffs which destabilised the world order. With his altered policies on Russia and China, Mr. Trump rattled America's closest alliances in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. He also took global discourse to a new low with his high-handed treatment of world leaders, even as he has commanded obsequiousness from them in his quest for the Nobel Prize for “resolving eight wars”. While the U.S. election had the biggest impact, the rise of ultra-right politicians from European Parliament elections to Japan and Chile augured a growing conservative and xenophobic trend. Meanwhile, oil prices have dropped due to a glut in production by OPEC countries, indicating some worrying trends for the renewable energy push to combat climate change. The Russian war in Ukraine continued for a fourth year, but for the first time, India had to face severe economic consequences for buying Russian oil, with EU and U.K. sanctions on Indian-Russian joint venture Nayara Energy, and U.S. sanctions on Russian oil majors.

The altered worldview of the U.S. has been acutely felt in South Block

The Israeli strikes on Gaza continued, with over 70,000 killed, but an American-backed ceasefire deal at the end of the year held out some hope. India's plans for the India-Middle East Economic Corridor, however, are at a standstill, and the Modi government's refusal to criticise Israel for strikes on Iran in June led to awkward moments at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS grouping, where Iran is a member. Closer home, turmoil in the region continued, with a conflict with Pakistan, Gen-Z protests in Nepal toppling the government, and mob violence in Bangladesh turning anti-India after the killing of a right-wing leader, putting a question mark over the efficacy of India's “Neighbourhood First” policy.

What made the Trump challenge most difficult? The U.S.'s altered worldview was felt acutely in South Block, where the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is headquartered, as the anticipation that Mr. Trump would run a pro-India foreign policy was cut short by his actions. Mr. Trump first slapped the highest 25% tariffs and 25% surcharge on India for buying Russian oil. His crackdown on immigration, H-1B visas, student visas and the deportation of Indian illegals led to criticism of the MEA in India. Mr. Trump's repeated claims that he had mediated the ceasefire of Operation Sindoor, hosting the Pakistani leadership at the White House and clearing F-16 supplies damaged New Delhi's campaign against cross-border terrorism from Pakistan. The perception that Indian diplomacy failed during the conflict led to strains with Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Malaysia that were seen as supporting Pakistan. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has been criticised for the downturn in India-U.S. ties.

What were the diplomatic successes of 2025? Indian diplomacy racked up some notable successes, including a turnaround in ties with Canada, which had spiralled since 2023 over allegations that India oversaw the assassination of a Khalistani separatist there. Mr. Modi visited Canada to attend the G-7 outreach and agreed with the new Canadian Prime Minister, Mark Carney, to set aside their differences. An unusual foray was made with the Taliban. After a meeting between the Foreign Secretary and Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in early 2025, relations quickly improved, and Mr. Jaishankar accorded full national honours and a warm welcome to Mr. Muttaqi in Delhi in October. Both sides moved past the embarrassment of a men-only press meet by the Taliban leader after Mr. Muttaqi held a more

inclusive second press conference, but the government will have to contend with allegations that it is improving ties with Afghanistan by appealing the restrictive and brutal anti-women regime. The downturn in Afghan-Pakistan ties and their bitter conflict, however, was a boost for Indian strategists as Pakistan faced the “two-front” problem, which India normally faces with China and Pakistan. With Beijing, New Delhi kept up the rapprochement process begun when Mr. Modi and President Xi Jinping met in October 2024, reopening the Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage, restoring visas and flights between the two countries, and so on. Despite China's strong diplomatic and military support to Pakistan during Operation Sindoor, Mr. Modi, Mr. Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval made visits to China to attend the SCO meetings. New Delhi strengthened ties with Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, all of which Mr. Modi visited in 2025. India's support to Sri Lanka after Cyclone Dittwah was particularly appreciated, as was its aid of \$450 million.

What is expected in 2026? Diplomats and trade negotiators spent much of 2025 working on bilateral trade agreements, of which the BTAs with the U.K., Oman and New Zealand were sealed. But the larger deals, with the U.S., the EU, Australia, EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union), GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), ASEAN and others are still pending, and they expect to have some breakthroughs at the beginning of 2026. In January, EU Commission and Council Presidents Ursula Von Der Leyen and Antonio Costa are expected to be the guests for Republic Day, when the India-EU free trade agreement is expected to be finalised. New Delhi will follow the results of elections in Myanmar (December 28), Bangladesh (February 12) and Nepal (March 5) closely, each of which has implications for South Block. In February, India will host the Artificial Intelligence Summit, where more than a dozen international leaders are expected, including French President Emmanuel Macron, and in March, Canadian PM Carney is expected to make a visit to discuss trade, critical minerals and nuclear energy. All eyes are on whether Mr. Trump will finally travel to India for the Quad Summit, which New Delhi has been unable to host for two years, and on his visit to China, possibly for the APEC summit. Later in the year, leaders of BRICS, including Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi, will be invited to the BRICS Summit. Mr. Modi will be invited to the G-20 Summit on a Trump property in Miami in December, just after key mid-term elections in the U.S. After a year of geopolitical turmoil in 2025, Indian foreign policy makers will hope for a New Year of fewer surprises, and a more realistic and tempered assessment of India's diplomatic options is in order.

Is the ‘health for all’ campaign on track?

What are India's challenges on the health front? What does it need to do on funding? Why is there a growing resistance to antibiotics? Why did India fail to reach its goals on ending tuberculosis? What does the pharmaceutical industry need to do on quality control?

Ramya Kannan

The story so far: With a population of 146 crore, India's health challenges are growing too. It already faces an avalanche of non-communicable diseases, resurgent infectious diseases, climate change-related issues, concerns relating to quality control in the burgeoning pharmaceutical industry, and funding for health care. As India gears up for health emergencies, it needs to prioritise and realign areas of care and attention to ensure health for all.

Why is there a funding deficit? Early in 2025, Donald Trump's presidency brought with it the withdrawal of the United States from the World Health Organization (WHO) and consequent withdrawal of funds for various health and development projects. The move affected India too – a beneficiary of the PEPFAR (U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) and USAID – as funds suddenly dried up for certain key health intervention projects in the fields of HIV/AIDS, population services and maternal and child health. The government said USAID committed \$97 million in funds for seven projects, only part of a total budget of approximately \$750 million allocated across all projects. The Union and State governments have had to

One of the most pressing issues of the year was the lack of quality control in pharma products such as cough syrups

make good this funding deficit.

What about budgetary allocation? India's health budget has remained below 2% of the GDP, while the clamour to increase funding grows louder each year. A sum of ₹99,859 crore was allocated for various health projects in the 2025-26 fiscal year, an 11% rise from the previous year's, and it is yet to hit the sweet spot of over 2% of the GDP. In fact, the National Health Policy itself set a target of 2.5% of GDP. Unless this is achieved, it is unlikely that India can achieve the larger goal of health for all. The ‘health for all’ movement has been gaining momentum over the years. While the post-pandemic years have brought health closer to the people, in terms of diagnostic labs and the number of beds, a huge gulf remains between demand and supply in funding and infrastructure.

What are some of the pressing concerns? The chronic inadequacy of funding leaves one wondering if the health system will be able to handle the resurgence of several infectious diseases effectively enough to bring down the deaths and improve morbidity. In addition, the country now faces abysmal air quality issues. Unless India takes a leaf from the China playbook and finds solutions to remedy air quality like in Beijing, further deterioration is assured.

Why did India miss the TB elimination goal? India advanced the global target for achieving the elimination of tuberculosis by two years and reassigned 2025 as the year it would eliminate tuberculosis. However, that remains a pipe dream, though several advancements have been made over the years, particularly in terms of diagnosis, and more recently, drug regimens too. There are now sophisticated home-grown molecular tests such as TrueNat. The deployment of these machines across the country has not only enabled the speedy detection of the mycobacterium infection, but also drug resistance. However, the growing number of cases of multidrug-resistant TB and extensively drug resistant TB continues to be a cause for worry.

Why is AMR a cause for worry? The larger issue of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is of immediate concern in India. The WHO's recent GLASS report noted that one in three people who had bacterial infections in India bore resistant organisms, against one in six globally. For India, the report flagged high resistance rates to major antibiotics, especially in serious infections such as those caused by *E.coli*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, and *Staphylococcus aureus*, particularly in hospital ICUs. The challenging factors that aggravate AMR are widespread over-the-counter antibiotic access, self-medication, incomplete courses, environmental contamination, and uneven enforcement of regulations. Notably, Kerala is the only State where stewardship in AMR has led to an actual lowering of AMR levels in the community; others need to catch up, even as they roll out the second iteration of the National Plan of Action on Antimicrobial Resistance introduced this year.

Why does India need to address its pharma quality issues? The most pressing issue of the year was reserved for the last quarter. In all, 25 children died in Madhya Pradesh after consuming prescription cough syrup. A lab analysis revealed that the cough syrup, manufactured in Tamil Nadu, contained an industrial chemical, diethylene glycol, known to cause kidney and liver failure. While regulatory action was stepped up, many questions remain. Did the quality control mechanism embedded into the system fail? Are there other cases where poor quality, even poisonous drugs, have managed to skip past the regulator? India, which is on a Make-in-India trajectory, will scarcely move ahead unless it gets a hold of quality, before it realises its ‘pharmacy of the world’ goal. The sad fact is that India's cough syrups have always tussled with quality issues, with 70 children dying in The Gambia, Africa, after using cough syrups, four of them manufactured in India. Subsequent probes have revealed certain quality issues; that they continue to strike periodically, taking lives and reducing the quality of life of patients, is a statement on the pharma quality regulatory framework of the country. The coming year will hopefully see India wrestle with contentious issues in the health care sector and overcome at least some of the glitches that threaten mortality and morbidity.



Matter of discussion: Twenty-five children died in Madhya Pradesh after consuming prescription cough syrup. REUTERS

The 'prince' who came in from the cold

The acting chairman of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, who returned to the country from a self-imposed exile in London, sends a message of inclusion as the nation, rocked by protests and mob violence, is preparing for its first post-Hasina elections

CM
YK

SARKARI
SECRETS



**Venkatesh
Nayak**
wakes up every
morning thinking
someone
somewhere is hiding
something

Tabled numbers and trust deficit: Can we count on official data?

Towards the end of November, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) released its annual report on our economic development and policies, appreciating the continued robust growth, despite external headwinds. India is a founding member of this intergovernmental institution, which fosters global monetary cooperation, encourages expansion of trade and economic growth, and discourages policies that, in its opinion, can harm economic prosperity. While reporting on its observations, large parts of our media headlined the 'C' rating of our national accounts data because the IMF perceives it as somewhat hampering surveillance.

On December 4, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman called these media reports misleading. She pointed out that the IMF had given a median rating of 'B' for all other segments of India's statistical assessment. The 'C' rating was primarily on account of India adopting an

outdated base year (2011-12) for calculating national statistics. It is being updated to 2022-23, she told Parliament. But she was silent about the IMF's other findings that consolidated fiscal data for the Centre and the states had not been published since mid-2019 and that, in the absence of statistics from local governments and the utilisation of extra-budgetary funds, the picture of government expenditure is not complete.

The quality and quantity of *sarkari* data released in recent years, be it about GDP figures or the unemployment rate or the claims of poverty reduction, have been so severely critiqued by experts and so vehemently defended by the government that citizens like me no longer know what to accept as "the truth". Thankfully, we have the tools to question these claims and counterclaims about official data.

For example, on December 4 itself, the Ministry of Law and Justice tabled in Parliament

case pendency figures from national-level tribunals like the NGT, NCLT, NCLAT, TDSAT, ITAT, CESTAT, and administrative tribunals. The Rajya Sabha was told that 6,904 cases are currently pending before the Armed Forces Tribunal (AFT). A day later, the Lok Sabha was informed about case disposal and pendency figures for all these tribunals, including the AFT, from 2020 to date.

Earlier in August, I had filed an RTI application with the AFT seeking annual case admission, disposal, and pendency data since its inception. The AFT was set up by an Act of Parliament to adjudicate disputes relating to service matters of personnel employed in the Army, Navy, and the Air Force. The AFT is also an appellate forum to challenge court-martial findings and sentences against defence personnel. In March 2021, Parliament was told, more than two-thirds, i.e., 23 out of 34, of judicial and administrative member positions of the AFT

were vacant. Today, one-third (11) of the posts are vacant, according to the data tabled in the Rajya Sabha.

Statistics furnished by AFT's Principal Bench situated in Delhi, covering its own performance and that of the ten regional benches located in various cities across the country, show that the cumulative pendency is 27,692 cases. This is more than three times the figure revealed in Parliament. While the government claimed that 2,460 cases were disposed of in 2020, the AFT revealed only 1,939 cases were disposed of that year. According to the government, the disposal in 2021 was 6,140 cases, but AFT has admitted to only 4,178 cases being disposed of. The government said 6,175 cases were disposed of in 2022 and 9,653 in 2023, but AFT's disposal figures are 5,927 and 9,322, respectively, for those years. For 2024, the government claimed a disposal of 7,706 cases, but the AFT disclosed a higher figure of 7,793 cases.

While commenting on the discrepancy, a few days ago, I had attributed it to careless reporting by a section of the media, which looked only at the last column containing the 2025 figure tabled in the Lok Sabha on December 5. However, the data tabled in the Rajya Sabha a day earlier shows 6,904 as the cumulative pendency.

What does one make of this data discrepancy? We have not yet quizzed the figures claimed for other tribunals. How reliable are they? Obviously, the government sources such data from the tribunals themselves. Where and why discrepancies creep in is a *sarkari* secret. Is this because of negligence or deliberate design? In either scenario, this amounts to misleading Parliament. Sadly, the only remedy that any MP can claim is to file a breach of privilege motion, which a committee will rule upon in its own sweet time. By then, the issue would have lapsed from public memory. Should the government not be made more accountable and in real time?

INSCRUTABLE CHINA

China's year of churn and rise

China should be content with the way it managed to reverse the United States' tariff wars, with Sun Tzu's dictum - "winning without fighting". The year, however, saw hardships for the Chinese people, exacerbated by economic restructuring towards domestic consumption, unemployment, real estate crisis, local debt, and a relative economic decline.

China crossed \$1 trillion in trade surplus this year, thanks to high-quality development and trade diversification to Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe. This is despite the debilitating 145% tariffs imposed by the US. The US-China truce for easing rare earth metal export restrictions, the purchase of US soybeans in exchange for lowered tariffs, and the supply of advanced chips from the US signified China's stature in the global and regional power structures.

Through summit meetings at Tianjin, the military parade at Beijing, the China-Pacific Island Countries foreign ministerial meeting at Xiamen, and new platforms such as the Global Governance Initiative, China indicated its resolve to "set up a different kitchen" away from West-led political systems. The proposal to set up the SCO Development Bank, upgrading free trade areas, increasing investment in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to \$1.3 trillion, and expanding the trade and investment footprint are in line with concerted mercantilist policies aimed at eclipsing the US.

However, China's restrictions on rare earth metal export rattled the global markets, inviting criticism on the weaponisation of trade and inter-dependence. Beijing's move has pushed several countries to seek secure and resilient supplies, besides causing a sharp decline in trust in China. It led to the US forming Pax Silica with Japan, Singapore, South Korea, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Israel, the UAE, and Australia. The European Union passed the Critical Raw Materials Act, while Indian companies are exploring the tapping of an estimated seven million tonnes of rare earth oxides.

For an order-obsessed Beijing, the cancellation of the German foreign minister's visit, citing disagreements on several fronts, was a setback. The relations with Japan nosedived after China's Consul General at Osaka criticised Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's comments on Beijing posing an "existential threat" in Taiwan scenarios. Frequent China-Philippines ship collisions and the use of water cannons took the fizz away from the third draft on a "code of conduct" in the South China Sea dispute.

There was controversy in the arrest of Liu Jianchao, the head of the Chinese Communist Party's International Department, on charges of corruption. In 2023, Foreign Minister Qin Gang was dismissed; his whereabouts are unknown.

China continued to be the largest trading partner for Africa, with over \$295 billion in trade in 2024 and \$222 billion in the first eight months of 2025. However, the US tariffs are expected to leave an impact on the volumes. Furthermore, Niger's expulsion of three China National Petroleum Corporation executives in March put in jeopardy the \$5-billion investment in the energy pipeline linked to Soraz refinery.

China's footprint in Latin America and the Caribbean expanded through free trade agreements with Chile, Peru, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, while the negotiations with Honduras and El Salvador advanced. It released a third white paper on the region that emphasised multipolarity. China became the second-largest trading partner for the region with over \$518 billion in trade in 2024. However, with the US renewing its Monroe Doctrine, CK Hutchison, a Hong Kong firm, transferred stakes in 43 ports to US companies. Earlier this year, there was friction over the US "pressure" that led Panama to quit the BRI.

India and China continued to engage in different formats and forums. At the 24th Special Representatives meeting in August, there was agreement to establish expert and working groups and discuss "delimitation" of the boundary. Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Tianjin to attend the SCO summit. The atmospherics, however, was marred by the detention of two Indians by Chinese immigration authorities at Shanghai and Guangzhou.

China's balancing act was also reflected in the support it extended to Pakistan during Operation Sindoor in May. Its air force issued a note that no new equipment was transferred during the conflict, but Beijing's "grey zone" tactics did embolden Pakistan. China has also decided to bifurcate the Aksai Chin region into two counties and build multiple dams in the fragile Himalayas.

The 2026 agenda looks packed for China as it navigates differences with the US and countries including Japan, while maintaining the tentative truce on its border with India.



**Srikanth
Kondapalli**
The JNU Prof has been Peking behind the Bamboo Curtain for 30 years
✉ @Sri_Kondapalli

OUTSIDE

The collar as a social marker

We can all agree that whatever a poet might make of a collar, they cannot turn it into a metaphor of the interior. A collar is a thing of the outside - it peeks out of other pieces of clothing, a sweater or jumper, even a shawl or blazer, where it's part of fashion etiquette to remain slightly visible. In that sense, it's a bit like the neck, which has to remain above water or a blanket; in general, uncovered. It must be intuition that guides me to this thought, for it's in the etymology of the word itself, the relationship between collar and neck - the word originated about nine hundred years ago, from 'coler', which derived from the Latin *collare*, meaning a band for the neck, a necklace. *Collum*, to which it is related, means 'neck', which, in turn, means 'to turn', for it's the neck that allows the head to turn.

But one doesn't need a collar to turn one's head the way one needs a zip in the pants or a hole through the sleeves, for body parts to function. In that sense, the collar is like the appendix, almost unnecessary, like a vestigial organ. Why did it become integral to the upper body garment then? I'm thinking of a comparable non-essential thing in garments of the southern half of our body, pants, skirt, saree, *dhoti*, where there is something as inessential as a collar. I can't think of any - the zip, pockets, the loops to hold the belt, even the hemline folded and stitched in to prevent fraying, all of these are necessary. They, and almost everything in

the upper garment too - buttons to bring its two halves together, sleeves, and even elbow patches - are necessary for a shirt or top or blouse to hold. What is the collar doing there, serving no purpose, even though it has the odd make-believe form of the rooftop of a lighthouse?

Everything else in the garments we wear is a response to the human anatomical form, moulded by its structure and need to communicate bodily with the world; looseness here, tightness there, annotated by bones and gravity, everything except the collar, which, being the highest peak

Sumana Roy
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in anything we wear, besides the head garment, is formed by etiquette, by the relationship with the world, the outside. And because it is outside, it becomes a marker, a passport. Hence, its easy appropriation into the class system - the distinction between blue- and white-collar jobs, the sturdy blue collars of physical labour and the white shirts with collars protected by dirt-free offices of clerks and managers. But this is not a formulation that emerged in the West in the early 20th century. Long before that, in 17th-century China, the standing collar was

used by Qing dynasty officials and noblemen. This would come to be called the 'Mandarin collar' in European and American fashion, and the 'Nehru collar' in India, since it was adopted by Jawaharlal Nehru for the kind of formal and semi-formal jackets he wore. The connection between the collar and the outside remained - as did its association with an unarticulated class system. The aside about it would come to be dropped, to retain its respectability - that the idiom 'holding by the collar' would move from police and legal origin, of holding a suspect by their collar, to 'collar the guest of honour'.

Collar is, therefore, not the synecdoche of part-for-the-whole, but a signifier. Take the tie or the bow-tie that owes its existence to the collar - without it, they would have no place to hang from. The round-necked tee, from which no tie can hang except like a noose, would come to be seen as something that belonged to sportsmen and the working class. Women could choose to wear blouses with collars if they so wished - the sharp ends would grow into dog ear-shaped collars, often embroidered, sometimes in a contrasting or complementary colour to the rest of the top. But men, poor men, like animals with collars to keep them on a leash. Hilarious it is then, this forged relation between the collar, class, and gender (for women were exempted from this rule), that colonial club protocol would come to demand the collar and the tie as passports for entry,



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

In the US, no matter what store you walk into, you will always find a 'tip' jar or its electronic equivalent at the cash register; the electronic version is especially suggestive of how much tip you should leave - the percentage options you are presented with are usually these: 15, 18, 20, 25, 30 or 'other'. The word 'tip', in this context, is really an acronym which stands for 'to insure promptness'.

Also, the practice of asking the customer if they wish to round up their purchase amount so that the extra pennies go to supporting some charity has become quite standard. One is never really sure if customer contributions to charity end up lining the business owner's pockets. The time-worn practice of *baksheesh* in India has been repurposed in the US and made more or less obligatory - shaming the customer or making them feel guilty is part of the marketing process.

About 75 years ago, credit cards were introduced to make shopping convenient, and now, we have a convenience fee. Thirty years ago, the web came into being and made searching for information a lot easier. As per Google's own statistics, there are around six trillion Google searches per year. Just imagine an AI-enhanced Google starting to charge users a penny per search. It is bound to happen in the near future. AI chips and data centres do cost a lot of money, you know.

When the US accuses leaders of third-world nations of being corrupt and making it difficult for US businesses to operate freely in those countries, America conveniently forgets that it is also engaging in corrupt practices, albeit legalised, by allowing lobbying groups and political action committees, code-named 'superpacs', to facilitate various preferred legislative agenda items at the state and federal levels.

The US has a Foreign Corrupt Practices Act to prevent American companies, especially arms and aeroplane manufacturers, from offering bribes to foreign officials to obtain contracts in those countries. One man's meat is another man's poison, but only in certain situations. Ask Latin America or the oil-rich kingdoms of the Middle East. Qatar did give Trump a free Boeing and lucrative cryptocurrency deals for his sons. And Qatar does host the largest US Air Force base outside of the US.

The Empire is always ready to strike. And Google will be at the forefront, leading the charge.

THE Z FACTOR

2025 belonged to Trump and AI; 2026 might too



Mohamed Zeeshan
is a student of all things global and, self-confessedly, master of none, notwithstanding his Columbia Master's, a stint with the UN and with monarchs in the Middle East
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It has been quite a decade so far. The 2020s opened with the assassination of a major Iranian military officer. Many expected that event to lead to region-wide war, disrupt global oil flows, and shape the coming decade. They couldn't have been more wrong.

Days after Qassem Soleimani was killed by an American drone strike in Iraq, he quickly became a footnote. A once-in-a-century pandemic overturned the world for the better part of three years. Then came the invasion of Ukraine, which sparked the largest war in Europe since World War II. And then, the Hamas attack on Israel led to chaos and violence in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and even on college campuses in the United States.

Heading into 2025, the world was bracing for the return of Donald Trump as US president. Trump had been reelected on the back of widespread economic frustration in the US, and

he immediately pledged to relaunch the trade nationalism that had dominated his first term. Only weeks into his term, Trump made good on that promise - imposing a baseline tariff rate on every country in the world and tacking on additional surcharges on a few.

Sudden and rapid changes in trade policy remain a cornerstone of US foreign policy. Trump sees tariffs as a tool of leverage, amping them up and dialling them down based on how Washington's negotiations and relations with each of those countries go.

Tariffs are now so central to Washington's worldview that they can be taken as a relatively reliable indicator of the health of bilateral relations. China, for instance, has travelled from as high as 145% in April to 10%. That journey culminated in a relatively sanguine meeting between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping in November. India, on the other hand, remains

subject to 50% - among the highest rates for any US partner today. Yet, all of these rates could change quite quickly if Trump's relations with the leaders of those countries improve or sour. That means no US trade partner can count on stability heading into the new year.

Ordinarily, such volatility would send the global economy into a tizzy. The reason that did not happen was because of the other great disruptor of 2025: artificial intelligence. Three years after the initial launch of ChatGPT, AI has taken an iron hold on the fortunes of the global economy. This year, AI mania drove US stock markets to unprecedented highs. Almost 40% of those indices are now dominated by a handful of AI-related stocks. Many of those companies have pledged to invest trillions of dollars over the next few years, and global capital flows have followed them.

But there are costs. Many economists believe

that the US stands on the precipice of yet another bubble, reminiscent of the dot-com bust at the turn of the century and the real estate collapse that came with the 2008 global recession.

These fears might be hypothetical and imagined. What is far more real is the fact that AI has already hollowed out parts of the global labour market. This year, companies such as Amazon and Microsoft cut over 50,000 jobs because of the adoption of AI. One report says that global banks could cut as many as 200,000 jobs in the next 3 to 5 years.

The irresistible rise of AI also poses other risks. AI can be used to build advanced weapons, pull off cyber crimes, and spread disinformation capable of destabilising entire countries. Think of AI not as a type of software but as a sophisticated weapon, akin to nuclear technology. If AI technology ends up in the wrong hands, everyone from rogue regimes to criminal syndicates

may use it to amplify their actions and hasten their goals.

So far, in sharp contrast to his otherwise interventionist approach to trade and global business, Trump has handled these challenges in a relatively laissez-faire manner. This month, Trump cleared the sale of advanced AI chips to China, after they had been banned by former President Joe Biden on national security grounds. Shortly thereafter, he signed an executive order limiting the ability of US states to regulate AI.

The logic behind these deregulatory moves is simple. In a world seemingly dominated by AI, the US hopes to become an early-mover, capturing the global market by exporting its chips to the world, and hitching the economy to the AI wave for as long as it lasts. In 2025, AI established its roots. In 2026, the world will look to catch up.

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Chicago Tribune

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EDITORIALS



Mayor Brandon Johnson arrives for a Chicago City Council meeting at City Hall on Dec. 15. EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

2025 IN REVIEW

Mayor Brandon Johnson’s year through the lens of Tribune editorials

Chicago’s mayors have been the subject of Tribune editorials for pretty much this newspaper’s entire 178-year history. But few of the city’s chief executives have made as many appearances on the editorial pages in a single year as has Mayor Brandon Johnson, whose 2025 was filled with conflict, ending with a grand December debacle at the City Council over the city’s budget.

As part of our annual year in review, here’s a revealing look back at 2025 editorials featuring Johnson.

JAN. 8. The editorial board laments Johnson lobbying state lawmakers to not take action against unregulated purveyors of potent hemp products.

In a statement Tuesday, Johnson said he wanted to balance “concerns related to minor consumption” with supporting “entrepreneurs and municipalities” and that he was in favor of regulation of some sort. Eventually. Translated, Johnson’s neutral-sounding language really amounted to something along these lines: I’ve got the city of Chicago’s budget to manage, and shutting off one of the few areas of higher taxation available to me takes precedence over all else. Including the health and safety of children. In 2023, five students at Uplift Community High School in Uptown were hospitalized after ingesting gummies from a neighborhood smoke shop. Well over a dozen states have banned delta-8 THC. What are you waiting for, Mr. Mayor? A teenager to die?

JAN. 24. The board wonders if Mayor Johnson would join Chicago Teachers Union members on a picket line, should the union strike.

The prospect of the former CTU organizer taking the side of striking teachers even as he holds the office of mayor of Chicago isn’t unimaginable. Given what we’ve seen from him to date — multiple appointed school boards trying at Johnson’s behest (and failing) to force Chicago Public Schools CEO Pedro Martinez to cave to the union, the hiring of a high-priced, taxpayer-funded law firm to try (and fail) to force Martinez out of his job immediately and advocacy for hundreds of millions in new junk-rated CPS debt at nosebleed interest rates — it’s the logical next step.

FEB. 9. Mr. Johnson goes to Washington to testify before Congress. The editorial board has some advice.

Johnson’s best defense won’t be to take the bait, or ignore the questions, or yak away on his usual themes of Black liberation theology. Rather, he’d be better advised to remind the panel that Chicagoans of all political stripes take pride in our long history of welcoming and championing law-abiding immigrants. And in our creating the kinds of opportunities that have allowed them to make great successes of themselves.

He could quote that Republican favor-

ite, Mark Twain: “It is hopeless for the occasional visitor to try to keep up with Chicago—she outgrows his prophecies faster than he can make them. She is always a novelty; for she is never the Chicago you saw when you passed through the last time.” Our immigrants have been part of that, he could say. Or he could bring up major league baseball’s William Hulbert: “I’d rather be a lamp-post in Chicago than a millionaire in any other city.” Or even the actor Michael Douglas: “Hollywood is hype, New York is talk, Chicago is work.”

FEB. 28. Mayor Johnson struggles to win approval Wednesday from the City Council to float \$830 million in bonds to finance infrastructure work. He casts the tie-breaking vote but the board worries about the consequences.

Hey, Mr. and Ms. Bond Investor, this mayor and council — you know, the ones asking you to invest in the future of Chicago — aren’t willing to pay a nickel during the remainder of their terms to cover any part of what the city will owe you over the next 30 years. But surely some future mayor and aldermen will step up. Worry not.

This isn’t to predict that the mayor’s finance team won’t ultimately find takers for this wheelbarrow full of debt. Most everything that’s for sale can be offloaded at some price.

But we expect investors will demand higher interest rates than Johnson administration officials now anticipate. As it stands, this repayment structure will end up costing taxpayers \$2 billion for an \$830 million loan.

MARCH 6. The editorial board thinks Johnson did well at the sanctuary cities hearing in Washington.

Johnson’s primary job as the Republicans on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee attacked him (and fellow Democratic Mayors Eric Adams of New York, Mike Johnston of Denver and Michelle Wu of Boston) was to keep his cool. First, do no harm. In that we believe Chicago’s mayor succeeded, and for that we are glad.

It took self-discipline not to rise to the bait when performative GOP Rep. Nancy Mace of South Carolina barked at Johnson, “This is why you have a 6% approval rating — because you suck at answering questions,” or when Republican Rep. Brandon Gill of Texas asked Johnson about recent revelations regarding gifts he’d accepted as mayor and declared, “This raises serious ethical concerns.”

APRIL 13. An alderman suggests to the mayor that widespread disdain for Donald Trump will work to Johnson’s advantage. We beg to differ.

Even though President Trump undoubtedly remains as deeply unpopular in Chicago as he was in his first term, that doesn’t mean voters suddenly will change their minds about the shambolic management of this city. There certainly remain progressives in Chicago who

back Johnson’s leftist aims. And there’s also a sizable minority in Chicago who are Trump supporters, which some forget. In between is the vast center-left and center-right that currently isn’t represented by either. Aldermen (and state lawmakers) increasingly are figuring that out.

How about you, Mr. Mayor?

APRIL 23. The mayor announces a budget working group to come up with ideas. We have some ideas of how to do this. The mayor does not listen.

Forming a working group of representatives from all the affected constituencies is a reasonable strategy for building consensus. But it won’t work without far more assurance from the mayor than we got on Monday that this effort isn’t all about forcing residents and businesses to pay more without rethinking the services the city provides and how it provides them.

Equally as important, the working group’s membership must include people who aren’t part of Johnson’s usual circle — particularly when it comes to the business community. Johnson routinely turns to two or three business-people who’ve been supporters when he claims Chicago’s “business community” writ large backs some mayoral initiative.

The truth, of course, is that the business community in Chicago generally believes the administration’s policies are stifling growth in the city. Many to whom we speak simply are counting the days until the next mayoral election and seeking to muddle through until then. In addition to ensuring this group includes Johnson skeptics (outright critics would be even better), the mayor must be clearer about what options are on the table.

MAY 7. Mayor Johnson wants it both ways when it comes to migrant busing.

Not long ago, when busloads of migrants were arriving in Chicago from Texas, Mayor Brandon Johnson denounced the move as “evil.”

Fast forward to 2025, and Johnson is now touting population growth as a sign of his administration’s success — growth made possible by the very migrant arrivals he once condemned.

It can’t be both, Mayor Johnson. Was the mass busing of migrants from Texas an unconscionable humanitarian disaster, as you once claimed — or a population boost worth celebrating? It can’t be both. This kind of rhetorical whiplash doesn’t sit right. We remember how forcefully Johnson denounced the busing in 2023. And we remember it so well because we wrote several times that we agreed with him.

JUNE 7: Mayor Johnson turns to taxing groceries. We think it an odd match for his progressive ideals.

Mayor Brandon Johnson has positioned himself as a champion of working families and the poor. But his messaging is getting complicated as it collides with

the city’s difficult fiscal reality. “You all know my position. The ultra-rich continue to get away with not having to put more skin in the game,” he said at a Tuesday news conference.

But at the same time, Johnson is pushing for a grocery tax that will disproportionately hurt families at the checkout line as they try to put food on the table. His administration is taking an obfuscatory messaging approach to explain its position. Johnson insists this isn’t a new tax — it’s merely a local continuation of a state tax being phased out. But for struggling families, the semantics won’t matter. Higher grocery prices are higher grocery prices.

JULY 31. Mayor Johnson offers multiple ideas for scaring businesses out of Chicago.

As a matter of public policy, the city ought to be in the business of encouraging the private sector to employ more people, not giving businesses more reasons to reduce their head count.

In 2025, the issue is starker than it was more than a decade ago. With the rise in artificial intelligence, companies nationwide already are laying off workers who are performing functions corporate leaders believe AI can do instead. If Johnson truly wants to jump-start AI-induced white-collar employment losses in Chicago, there are few more effective ways than bringing back the head tax.

OCT. 13. At a public event, Mayor Johnson is strikingly honest about being a socialist and says the quiet part out loud about CTU. We appreciate that.

We’re all for Johnson being candid. Might as well be honest. But it hardly gives us hope that Johnson might moderate his socialist views in favor of the pro-growth agenda Chicago so badly needs to raise its hopes or merely to broaden his perspective as mayor. This matters now, of course, because the mayor’s self-definition isn’t about the past — it’s a declaration of how Chicago is being run today: not by consensus, but by a single, ideologically driven machine. We hope for better.

OCT. 31. Mayor Johnson claims a victory in gun legislation. Editorial board says his taking credit is fully deserved.

Johnson administration lawyers seem to have contributed to making Chicago’s streets a little safer in the future. “We know that Glock switches have been used in the vast majority of mass shootings in our city,” Johnson said in a release. “They have taken far too many lives and caused tremendous pain and suffering in our communities.”

We’ve criticized this mayor on many occasions, but credit is due here. It’s difficult to make much overall progress when seizing illegal Glocks with switches, as Chicago police have been doing in concert with the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, when new ones can so easily take their place.

OBITUARIES

SAMMIE MALETTA SR.

The former Portage mayor had city marina named in his honor

By Doug Ross
Post-Tribune

Former Portage Mayor Sammie Maletta Sr. was found dead early Monday, a shock to his family.

“He died peacefully in his sleep, it looks like. He was pretty healthy, honestly,” said his son Andy Maletta, who serves as president of both the Portage Township School Board and Portage Park Board as well as executive director of Portage Economic Development Corp.

The elder Maletta was running a fever and had a bad cold, Andy said, but there were no indications that it was serious. When his daughter left at about 10:30 p.m. Sunday, Maletta was watching the football game on TV.

Maletta served as mayor for 12 years, from 1988 to 2000, after first having served on the City Council and as a Democratic Party precinct committeeman.

“He loved being mayor. He would always ask what was going on in Portage,” his son said, and told stories about different things he did and how he got things done.

When current Mayor Austin Bonta would ask questions about the city’s past, Andy asked his father, who lived through most of it.

Maletta was born Sept. 21, 1932, in Gary to parents Carmine and Isabelle Maletta.

Carmine died when Maletta was 7. Isabelle later married Andy Baccaro and changed her last name but not Sammie’s.

Maletta graduated from Tolleston High School in 1950. “He had a lot of friends. They were all proud of their Tolleston days,” his son said.

Following graduation, Maletta served in the U.S. Army.

In 1963, Maletta moved the family to Portage, a town founded in 1959. It wouldn’t become a city until 1967.

“It was just a small little town,” Andy said. “There were houses going up all over the place. Bethlehem Steel had just opened.”

Maletta “was kind of the



Former Portage, Indiana, Mayor Sammie Maletta Sr.
ANDY MALETTA

ultimate volunteer,” Andy said. He got heavily involved with Nativity of Our Savior, helping build the church.

He served as precinct committeeman and was on the City Council for 16 years before becoming mayor in 1988.

“He loved Portage, he loved people, he loved the community,” Andy said. “He did a lot in his 12 years as mayor.”

“He had no problem going to bat and fighting for Portage,” Andy said, including obtaining funding for the city marina, which was later named in his honor, in 2016.

“He was friends with (East Chicago) Mayor Pastrick and the former (Hammond) Mayor McDermott,” Andy said, when marinas were being built there. Maletta battled for Portage to have a marina as well. “If somebody else had it, why not us?”

“Of all the things, I think the marina” was his biggest legacy and source of pride, his son said.

“I remember when Portage had a little dinky little post office,” then “they built a nice big post office in Portage,” Andy said.

The city has changed a lot since Maletta arrived in Portage. Willowcreek Road ended at Lute Road. Now Porter County is planning to extend it beyond County Road 700 North to Indiana 130 and ultimately to U.S. 30. With Willowcreek extended beyond U.S. 6, the shopping corridor has grown substan-

tially and continues to grow.

Maletta was also part of early planning of the Ameriplex at the Port development on the city’s north side.

The city also built a new fire station on Old Porter Road.

“He was a good guy. He was well respected,” former Mayor Doug Olson said Monday. “I was his clerk-treasurer, and he was mayor.”

Former Mayor John Cannon, a Republican, respected Maletta and considered him a friend.

“Sammie was a loyal opposition, and he also was a friend. The political side of it always ended after Election Day,” Cannon said.

In 2019, Maletta endorsed Cannon.

“He was concerned about Portage and the region,” Cannon said, and Maletta and his family have been pillars of the community.

But not all of Maletta’s attention was focused on the city. As a father to seven kids, “he was the best,” Andy said. “He was always there for us, no matter what.”

“He and I bonded a lot over sports,” especially the Cubs, Andy said.

“We always knew he was there for everything we ever needed,” always just a phone call away, for advice or help, Andy said. “He loved his family.”

Maletta had his political side, but “he was just Dad when he was home,” Andy said. “He loved having family around him.”

He is survived by his wife, Theresa, his high school sweetheart whom he married 74 years ago; his children, the Rev. Sammie Maletta Jr., Bob, Andy, Terese, Lori and Kathy; as well as 15 grandchildren and 20 great-grandchildren. Daughter Cindy preceded him in death.

There is a visitation from 9:30 to 11 a.m. Saturday, followed by Mass, at St. John Evangelist Catholic Church in St. John, the parish served by his son Sammie Maletta Jr.

Doug Ross is a freelance reporter for the Post-Tribune.



Chicago Tribune Death Notices

Chicago Tribune extends our condolences to the families and loved ones of those who have passed.

chicagotribune.com/deathnotice

Death Notices

Dolgin, Erica Lynn ‘Ricki’
Erica “Ricki” Lynn Dolgin, age 79. Beloved Sister of




Miriam (Nathan) Kohn and Anita Beth “Betsy” (Michael) Katz. Loving aunt of Amy (Russ) Eisenstein, Jeffery Sternstein, Hannah (Craig) Kornbluth and Allen Katz. Proud great-aunt of Liana, Yaron, Rachel, Evan, Dina, Shira and Jacob. She will be dearly missed by her many cousins and aunts. Erica’s passion for environmentalism began in school with her J.D. from the University of Chicago and a master’s in public administration from Harvard University. It continued with her work as the editor of one of the first environmental law textbooks and years spent as an environmental attorney. Services Sunday, 12 noon at **Chicago Jewish Funerals**, 8851 Skokie Blvd. (at Niles Center Road), Skokie. Interment Waldheim. In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to The Nature Conservancy, Attn: Treasury, 4245 N. Fairfax Dr., Suite 100, Arlington, VA 22203, www.preserve.nature.org. To attend the funeral live stream, please visit our website. Arrangements by **Chicago Jewish Funerals** - Skokie Chapel, 847.229.8822, www.cjfinfo.com.



CHICAGO JEWISH FUNERALS

Olson
See Mary Clare Denk Olson notice.

Wild, Carole A.
Carole Wild died on December 15, 2025 after a brief illness. She was born on January 1, 1935 to Arthur and Helen (Downing) Wild in Hamilton, OH. A memorial visitation will be held from 4:00 pm to 8:00 pm on Monday, December 29 at **Ridge Funeral Home** (6620 W Archer Ave, Chicago, IL). The service will be held on Tuesday, December 30 at 10:00 am at the funeral home, followed by interment at Resurrection Cemetery (7201 Archer Rd, Justice, IL). In lieu of flowers, contributions in her memory may be directed to the Alzheimer’s Association (www.alz.org).

 Ridge Funeral Home



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Chicago Daily Tribune

ON DEC. 27 ...

In 1571, astronomer Johannes Kepler was born in Weil der Stadt, Germany.

In 1822 scientist Louis Pasteur was born in Dole, France.

In 1831 naturalist Charles Darwin set out on a voyage to the Pacific aboard the HMS Beagle. (Darwin’s discoveries during the trip helped to form the basis of his theories on natural selection and evolution.)

In 1900 militant prohibitionist Carry Nation carried out her first public smashing of a bar, at the Carey Hotel in Wichita, Kan.

In 1901 actress Marlene Dietrich was born in Berlin.

In 1904 James Barrie’s play “Peter Pan: The Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up” opened at the Duke of York’s Theater in London.

In 1927 the musical play “Show Boat,” with music by Jerome Kern and libretto by Oscar Hammerstein II, opened at the Ziegfeld Theater in New York.

In 1932 Radio City Music Hall opened in New York.

In 1945, 28 nations signed an agreement creating the World Bank.

In 1947 the children’s television program “Howdy Doody” made its debut on NBC.

In 1949 Queen Juliana of the Netherlands signed an act granting sovereignty to Indonesia after more than three centuries of Dutch rule.

In 1968 Apollo 8 and its three astronauts made a safe,

nighttime splashdown in the Pacific.

In 1970 “Hello, Dolly!” closed on Broadway after a run of 2,844 performances.

In 1979 Soviet forces seized control of Afghanistan. President Hafizullah Amin, who was overthrown and executed, was replaced by Babrak Karmal.

In 1985 Palestinian guerrillas opened fire inside the Rome and Vienna airports; 20 people were killed, including five of the attackers, who were slain by police and security personnel. Also in 1985 naturalist Dian Fossey, who had studied gorillas in the wild, was found hacked to death at a research station in Rwanda.

In 1994 four Roman Catholic priests — three French and a Belgian — were shot to death in their rectory in Algiers, a day after French commandos killed four radicals who had hijacked an Air France jet from Algiers to Marseille.

In 1995 Israeli jeeps sped out of the West Bank town of Ramallah, capping a seven-week pullout giving Yasser Arafat control of more than 90 percent of the West Bank’s 1 million Palestinian residents and one-third of its land.

In 1999 space shuttle Discovery and its seven-member crew returned to Earth after fixing the Hubble Space Telescope.

In 2001 U.S. officials announced that Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners would be held at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

In 2002 North Korea ordered U.N. nuclear inspectors to leave the country and said it would restart a laboratory

capable of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons. Also in 2002 a suicide truck-bomb attack destroyed the headquarters of Chechnya’s Moscow-backed government, killing 72 people. Also in 2002 Clonaid, a company founded by a religious sect that believes in space aliens, announced it had produced the world’s first cloned baby, a claim subsequently dismissed by scientists for lack of proof.

In 2003 actor Alan Bates died in London; he was 69.

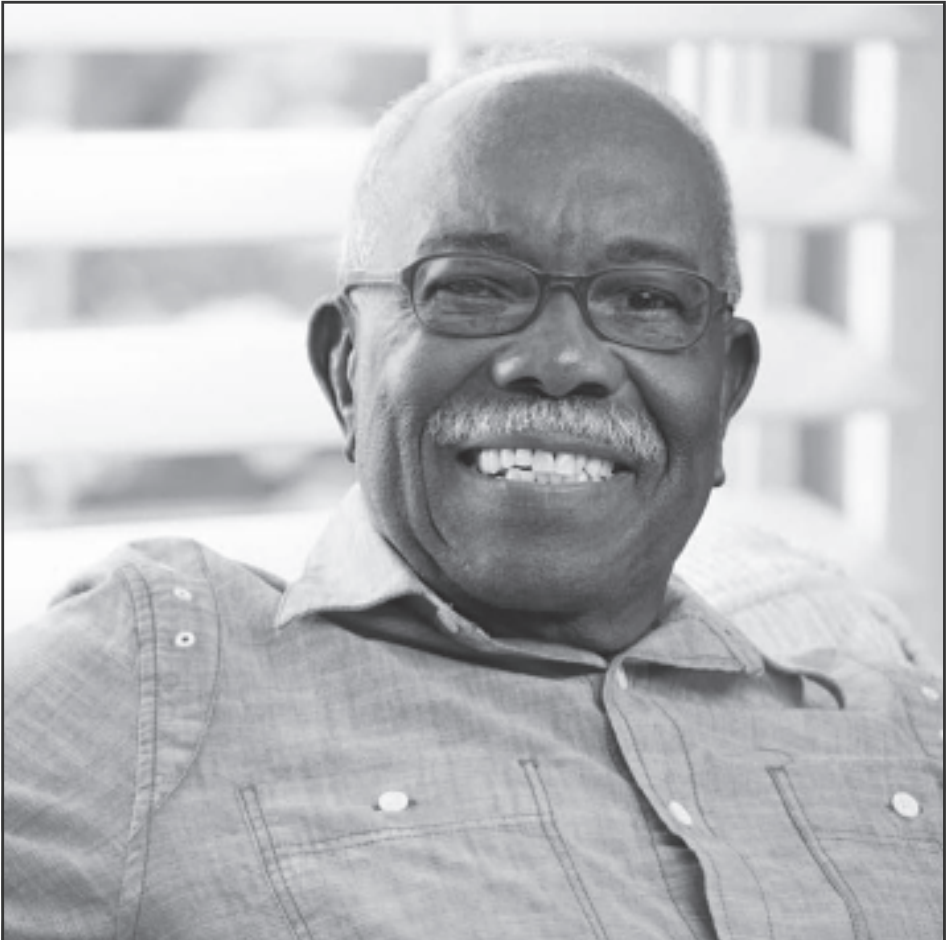
In 2004 the death toll continued to rise in southern Asia in the wake of a huge tsunami triggered by a monster earthquake underneath the Indian Ocean. Also in 2004 opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko declared victory in Ukraine’s fiercely contested presidential election. Also in 2004, in an audiotape, a man purported to be Osama bin Laden endorsed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as his deputy in Iraq and called for a boycott of January’s elections in that country.

In 2005 Indonesia’s Aceh rebels formally abolished their 30-year armed struggle for independence under a peace deal born out of the 2004 tsunami.

In 2007 former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was assassinated by a gunman at a political rally in Rawalpindi.

In 2012 Norman Schwarzkopf, U.S. Army general whose forces smashed the Iraqi army in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, died in Tampa, Fla.; he was 78.

In 2016 actress Carrie Fisher died in a hospital four days after suffering a medical emergency aboard a flight to Los Angeles; she was 60.



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Chicago Tribune

OPINION

The Scandal of the Mar-a-Lago Raid

By Jim Trusty

August 8, 2022, will stay imprinted in my memory like no other day. Donald Trump had retained me as his lawyer a few months earlier, and I was still getting to know the players who formed his legal team as well as the many others who offered advice or service to the former president. I knew there was a slow-burning issue about his retention of potentially sensitive documents. I had told my chief counterpart, Evan Corcoran, that on Monday the 8th I would participate in a charity golf tournament and would be unavailable for any work issues.

My phone started ringing repeatedly at 10 a.m., just as the tournament was starting. After ignoring it a couple of times, I answered and angrily reminded Evan that I was off for the day. He responded: “The FBI is at Mar-a-Lago.” So much for my game.

I have never seen a case with so many irregularities, with such manifest political motivation.

The fire drill for us lawyers began in earnest that day. I knew some core facts—that Mr. Trump had returned numerous boxes to the custody of the archivist (the head of the National Archives and Records Administration) earlier that year; that Evan had been talking about documents with Jay Bratt of the Justice Department’s National Security Division; that Evan had searched through a bunch of disorganized documents to pull potentially classified ones and give them to Mr. Bratt.

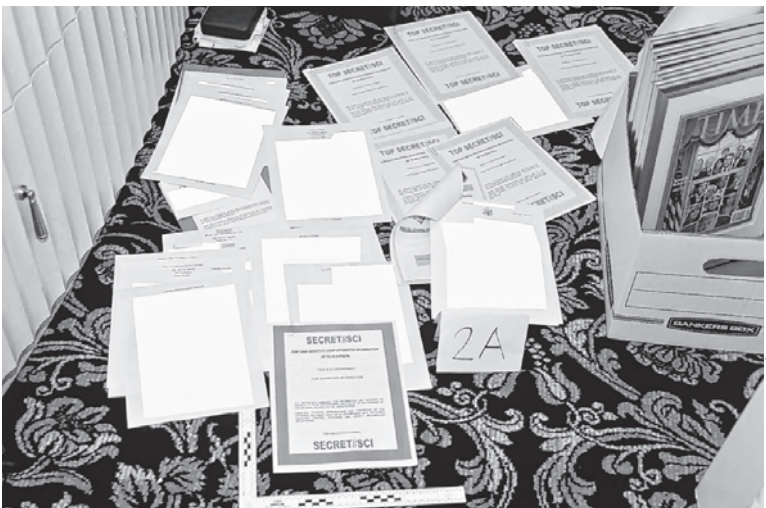
I learned around the same time that three months earlier Mr. Bratt had issued a grand-jury subpoena for “any and all” documents bearing classification markings. He was engaging in the typical back-and-forth that occurs on document subpoenas when he suddenly reversed course on his pledge to give Evan more time. And I knew that after Mr. Trump allowed Federal Bureau of Investigation agents and Mr. Bratt to walk around the premises at Mar-a-Lago and see where

any of these documents were housed, he graciously let them know that they should just “let me know about anything they need,” or words to that effect. The first and only response to that invitation was to ask him to put a padlock on the door to the storage room full of boxed documents. Mr. Trump immediately complied with that request.

I later learned more about the irregularities that accompanied this case as well as the Jan. 6 investigation. The Biden White House decided that the concept of executive privilege didn’t apply to Mr. Trump. Federal prosecutors, aided by a friendly judge in the District of Columbia, invoked the rarely employed “crime fraud exception” to obliterate attorney-client privilege in the case of Mr. Trump and Evan. Prosecutors harangued theoretical witnesses at Mar-a-Lago—down to maids and gardeners—demanding multiple interviews, scoffing at their testimony and threatening to summon them to Washington to testify before a grand jury.

The worst government misconduct was alleged by a lawyer representing Walt Nauta, a personal aide to Mr. Trump. The lawyer had applied to be a judge on the D.C. Superior Court, and he said under oath that Mr. Bratt had implied that the lawyer’s prospects would improve if “he would do the right thing” and flip Mr. Nauta against Mr. Trump. In an August 2023 court filing, special counsel Jack Smith described the allegation as “implausible, if not ludicrous.” But Mr. Bratt retired from the Justice Department this January, which likely ended whatever tepid effort the Office of Professional Responsibility was willing to make at uncovering the truth.

I caught some CNN criticism for referring to the documents case as a dispute about an overdue library book, but it was an apt parallel. The Presidential Records Act does a few things—it urges the archivist and former presidents to work together on deciding which documents would be deemed presidential records (sent to the National Archives) and which are personal (and kept by the former president). There is no criminal penalty for a violation of the Presidential Records Act, and a senior executive of the archives eventually testified that every modern president from



A Justice Department photo of documents seized at Mar-a-Lago in 2022.

Ronald Reagan on had turned over classified materials after leaving office. None, until Mr. Bratt had the reins, were subject to a “criminal referral” from a politicized archivist, and none were enforced by criminal investigative tools like grand-jury subpoenas and search warrants.

If you doubt this was all singular treatment, read the opinion in Judicial Watch’s 2012 lawsuit against the National Archives. The judge ruled that Bill Clinton’s 79 audiotapes of candid discussions about his presidency with a historian were considered personal by Mr. Clinton and thus protected from forced disclosure to the archives. It helped Mr. Clinton’s characterization that he kept all the tapes in a sock drawer, and the judge pointed out that the Presidential Records Act gives former presidents great power to make these personal and presidential determinations.

Which brings us to the resurfacing accusations—borne out by newly disclosed emails—that the Justice Department was insistent on criminal escalation while the FBI was balking. The FBI, which is ultimately subordinate to the attorney general and Justice Department, apparently pushed back against Mr. Bratt, telling him that there was no probable cause for a crime (the requirement for a search warrant) and that since Evan was cooperating with them in good faith, they should continue to gather these documents through the typical process of cooperation, even with some

give and take on deadlines or particular documents.

The FBI was pushed into escalation by a hell-bent prosecutor who saw his chance for glory—a chance to prosecute a former president who was about to run again. (Mr. Bratt invoked his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination when deposed by a House committee in May 2025, and his lawyer audaciously accused the Trump administration of seeking “to weaponize the machinery of government against those they perceive as political enemies.”)

Even after Mr. Smith took control of the two investigations, the drumbeat of win-at-all-costs continued. The Justice Department fought the idea of a special master to manage the discovery process in the Mar-a-Lago case. I remember approaching Mr. Bratt after a hearing in which the jointly approved special master began to engage in the process (before the Justice Department appealed and shut it down with the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals) and asking what Mr. Trump and his team could do to satisfy the government’s need for documents and end the investigation. All I got was a smirk from an emboldened prosecutor, supported by a packed courtroom of friendly media and kindred spirit Andrew Weissmann of Mueller probe fame.

Some questions remain unanswered:

In the meeting at which Mr. Bratt allegedly threatened Mr. Nauta’s attorney over the judgeship, other prosecutors were in the room. Has anyone reviewed all of

their internal communications to see what they had to say before, during and after that meeting?

Did Mr. Smith’s team shift the grand jury to Florida at the last minute solely because of a venue issue with the documents being retained in Florida or because his troops had regularly engaged in questionable conduct in the District of Columbia? Why, for instance, did one of his prosecutors ask Trump lawyer Tim Parlatore 48 questions she should have known would require him to invoke attorney-client privilege, and why did she suggest to the grand jury that the former president was “not cooperating” by invoking the privilege?

What internal communications took place within the Justice Department before Mr. Smith demanded a speedy trial on the eve of the election, surely aware that thorny issues under the Classified Information Protection Act would typically slow the trial of a nonincarcerated defendant by a year or more? Did any voice of reason chime in to urge that Mr. Smith tell the court that prosecutors aren’t on a political clock, are fully transparent with their discovery, and will try the case whenever the court wants them to?

As a special counsel, Mr. Smith answered to Attorney General Merrick Garland, who answered to President Biden. Mr. Garland has always insisted that Mr. Smith was unfettered by supervision. Did the attorney general really abrogate his duty to supervise Mr. Smith’s work?

In 27 years as a prosecutor and more than eight in private practice, I have never seen a case with so many irregularities, with such manifest political motivation, with so many open questions about singular treatment and poor judgment.

“The truth will out,” Shakespeare observed in “The Merchant of Venice.” If he was right, the recently disclosed battles over criminalizing noncriminal conduct may be the beginning of the process. Only once it is complete can the Justice Department regain its honor, and the FBI return to its crime-fighting roots.

Mr. Trusty is a partner at Ifrah Law and a former chief of the Justice Department’s Organized Crime and Gang Section.

The EU Tells Native Americans How to Manage Our Forests



CROSS COUNTRY
By Carla Keene

Roseburg, Ore.

The European Union has overreached again. In its pursuit of “deforestation-free” products, it is using its global influence to exert control over foreign lands and to project its values, assumptions and expectations on the rest of the world. Under the EU’s Deforestation-free Regulation, which went into effect in 2023 but has yet to be enforced, those who sell certain goods in the EU—wood and furniture, for instance—must prove that the products don’t originate from recently deforested land and haven’t contributed to “forest degradation,” which is loosely defined.

This policy evokes painful memories for my people, a tribal sovereign nation in Oregon. It’s a new spin on colonialism—a regulation based on the flawed premise that Europeans know what’s best for the rest of us.

The European Parliament on Dec. 17 approved another one-year delay and several “simplifications” that address some of the worst burdens of compliance—but only for those inside the EU. This decision lays bare the truth: EU lawmakers understand that the law is flawed. The European Commission is directed to complete a review of the law to identify ave-

nues for simplification by next April. This could provide an opportunity to correct course.

For those outside Europe, including sovereign tribal nations, nothing has changed. The law as it stands will cut off our tribe from important international markets that extend well beyond the EU. The complex traceability rules are incompatible with real-world supply chains, making the regulation the law of the land even for those who don’t intend to do business with the EU. The law remains unworkable, inequitable and deeply disrespectful.

For generations, the Cow Creek Band of the Umpqua Tribe of Indians’ management of forests in southwestern Oregon has balanced environmental stewardship, indigenous values and economic stability. As a part of our sustainable timber operation, we operate a wood-chipping facility that turns low-value and postfire material into high-grade wood chips, which we sell in domestic and international markets. What others see as waste, we turn into value by restoring forest health, creating jobs and reducing wildfire risk.

Through our forest management and mill operations, we support our citizens’ livelihoods while investing in forest stewardship and the next generation. We’re a textbook example of what the EU says it wants to encourage: sustainable forestry and cir-

cular economies that keep forests as forests. But under the new regulation, we’re treated as the problem.

This summer, one of our longtime international customers asked us to provide detailed harvest-site maps for every log entering our mill. Although the company doesn’t operate in the EU, it was preparing to comply with the regulation’s traceability rules, which require businesses along

It acts like a colonizer in dictating standards for ‘deforestation free’ imported goods.

the entire supply chain to pass along exact geolocation data for each harvest unit to importers of forest-based commodities that might eventually touch the EU. This crosses a line for us as a sovereign tribal nation.

Geolocation information identifies harvest locations and volume, reveals land-use patterns, and would expose sensitive cultural and ecological sites. Requirements to share our data with customers or, worse, with a government—particularly a foreign one—violates our sovereignty.

The commission insists that its regulations apply only to those placing goods directly into the EU, but the

law is fully intended to combat global deforestation. It leans into the “Brussels effect”—the phenomenon by which the EU’s regulations become de facto global standards. In a global marketplace, the EU’s Deforestation-free Regulation forces indigenous governments like ours to choose between our sovereignty and our market access.

The irony is that tribal nations like the Cow Creek Umpqua are among the world’s most responsible forest managers. While the Europeans have largely stripped their lands of forests, we have lived in balance with the land for generations. We plant, thin, burn and harvest according to knowledge passed down from our ancestors. We’re the trade partners Europeans should want. Our forests are stable, legally protected and sustainably managed. Our communities depend on our keeping them that way.

While hurting other nations, the EU has protected its own. The European Commission recognizes that its law is unworkable, and its press release issued this October touted that its proposed simplifications would “cover close to 100% of farmers and foresters in the EU.”

The Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe’s caution toward government overreach isn’t theoretical. In 1853 we signed a treaty with the U.S. establishing a formal relationship between

sovereign governments. About a century later, Congress terminated our federal recognition—without notice or compensation—under the Western Oregon Indian Termination Act of 1954. Our legal sovereignty wasn’t restored until 1982. That history lives in our memory. It’s one of the reasons we’re unwilling to hand over detailed maps of our homelands and cultural sites to anyone, let alone a foreign government.

We wholeheartedly share the goal of preventing deforestation. But the EU’s approach ignores sustainable practices, supply-chain realities, cultures and communities outside its borders. Without meaningful simplifications for low-risk countries like the U.S., the regulation will punish the people the Europeans claim they want to protect—indigenous communities, stewards of the land, and small landowners.

If the EU truly wants to advance global forest stewardship, it should start by respecting our indigenous sovereignty and knowledge about forest management. The EU’s regulation may be well-intentioned, but it’s rooted in the false assumption that people thousands of miles and an ocean away know better how to care for our lands than we do.

Ms. Keene is tribal chairman of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians.

I Have Stage 4 Pancreatic Cancer, and I Am Going to Die

By Ben Sasse

This is a tough note to write, but since a bunch of you have started to suspect something, I’ll cut to the chase: Last week I was diagnosed with metastasized, stage-four pancreatic cancer, and am gonna die.

Advanced pancreatic is nasty stuff; it’s a death sentence. But I already had a death sentence before last week too—we all do.

I’m blessed with amazing siblings and half-a-dozen buddies that are genuinely brothers. As one of them put it, “Sure, you’re on the clock, but we’re all on the clock.” Death is a wicked thief, and the bastard pursues us all.

Still, I’ve got less time than I’d prefer. This is hard for someone wired to work and build, but harder still as a husband and a dad. I can’t

begin to describe how great my people are. During the past year, as we’d temporarily stepped back from public life and built new family rhythms, Melissa and I have grown even closer—and that on top of three decades of the best friend a man could ever have. Seven months ago, Corrie was commissioned into the Air Force and she’s off at instrument and multi-engine rounds of flight school. Last week, Alex kicked butt graduating from college a semester early even while teaching gen chem, organic, and physics (she’s a freak). This summer, 14-year-old Breck started learning to drive. (Okay, we’ve been driving off-book for six years—but now we’ve got paper to make it street-legal.) I couldn’t be more grateful to constantly get to bear-hug this motley crew of sinners and saints.

There’s not a good time to tell your peeps you’re now marching to the beat of a faster drummer—but the season of Advent isn’t the worst. As a Christian, the weeks running up to Christmas are a time to orient our hearts toward the hope of what’s to come.

Not an abstract hope in fanciful human goodness; not hope in vague hallmark-sappy spirituality; not a bootstrapped hope in our own strength (what foolishness is the evaporating-muscle I once prided myself in). Nope—often we lazily say “hope” when what we mean is “optimism.” To be clear, optimism is great, and it’s absolutely necessary, but it’s insufficient. It’s not the kinda thing that holds up when you tell your daughters you’re not going to walk them down the aisle. Nor telling your mom and pops they’re gonna bury their son.

A well-lived life demands more reality—stiffer stuff. That’s why, during Advent, even while still walking in darkness, we shout our hope—often properly with a gravelly voice soldiering through tears.

Such is the calling of the pilgrim. Those who know ourselves to need a Physician should dang well look forward to enduring beauty and eventual fulfillment. That is, we hope in a real Deliverer—a rescuing God, born at a real time, in a real place. But the eternal city—with foundations and without cancer—is not yet.

Remembering Isaiah’s prophecies of what’s to come doesn’t dull the pain of current sufferings. But it does put it in eternity’s perspective: “When we’ve been there 10,000 years . . . We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise.”

I’ll have more to say. I’m not going down without a fight. One sub-part of God’s grace is found in the jaw-dropping advances science has made the past few years in immunotherapy and more. Death and dying aren’t the same—the process of dying is still something to be lived. We’re zealously embracing a lot of gallows humor in our house, and I’ve pledged to do my part to run through the irreverent tape.

But for now, as our family faces the reality of treatments, but more importantly as we celebrate Christmas, we wish you peace: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. . . . For to us a son is given” (Isaiah 9).

Mr. Sasse is a Free Expression columnist at WSJ Opinion. This statement was originally shared on X.

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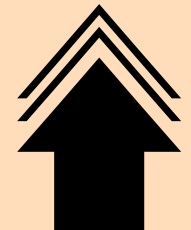
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OPINION

Has America Lost Its Melody?



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

I want to say a small thing about a big subject, music. I'm going to put together two anecdotes because they are important to me even if they don't go, by which I mean they aren't connected or an extension of each other.

The first has to do with a conversation with the great opera soprano Beverly Sills. This was in the early 2000s, in Manhattan, at a luncheon that I think was a fundraiser or friend-maker for the Metropolitan Opera, of which she was chairwoman.

I'd never met her but we were seated together and the program was long and we settled in and pretty soon we were going from the wonders of opera to the purpose of music, what it does and what it's

Something changed in popular music around 2005. I suspect it reflects a change in the country.

supposed to do. I think we were both surprised by this: Music doesn't have to have a purpose. But I found myself saying that deep down I think music is a stairway God gives us to get to him. Science is a stairway too, as are all the arts, and at the top of the stairway is truth and the truth is God. She was startled by this. So was I! I don't think I had fully understood I thought that.

But yes, I believe that when a moment of truly sublime artistic or scientific excellence occurs, the veil

between this world and the other thins a little, and we almost see something. That's why we take to our feet and stomp and cheer and shout when something beautiful happens in a theater or hall, it's why we stop the show, because we sense there's something beyond human perfection going on. I think it's why we get choked up when we see a magnificent moment on the playing field, also. You sense when the Holy Ghost, the big speckled bird, is making an unaccustomed flight over Citi Field. (We use that term in honor of Johnny Cash, who once said, "When the Holy Ghost is in the music, people feel it. You don't have to explain it.")

I badly want to tell you Beverly Sills's response to all this, but I don't remember what she said, I kept no notes, I recall only her wonderful face, full and strong, merry, and her look of engagement. She was processing a surprising thought from a stranger. I suppose I was telling her that to me her life was even more constructive than she thought, and she must have thought it was pretty constructive.

Anyway, that was a great moment, getting to tell Beverly Sills what I think music is.

The second anecdote is also from a conversation, at a professional gathering in Arizona in the fall of 2023. One night at dinner I sat across from a brilliant and accomplished young man in his 40s who writes music, including movie scores. He was from Los Angeles, chic and hip and thoughtful. I shared a recent favorite score, the one written by John Adams for Luca Guadagnino's "I Am Love." Then our talk took a turn. For a while I'd puzzled over something and hadn't had anyone with his background and expertise to ask about it.

I said I love music, have all my life, and I guess I know the entire



American songbook circa 1880 to 2000-something—know my Cole Porter, my Gershwin, my Jimmy Webb and Burt Bacharach, my Broadway shows, my Sondheim. I love rock and pop, can recite the lyrics of Kesha and enjoy, when being asked how I am, responding that I wake up in the morning feeling like P Diddy. Yet sometime around 2005 or 2010 I stopped absorbing new music. My memory didn't hold new songs anymore. I was guessing that the reason is that my brain's music storage unit is filled. It has enough, a lifetime's worth, and doesn't need more. Or, and possibly there are studies on this, at a certain point the brain's memory neurons start to crowd out the new-experience neurons, and . . .

"No. That's not it," he said as he shook his head. It was clear he'd been thinking about this. He said the reason I am not absorbing and holding music now is that at the time I stopped listening, popular musicians stopped doing melody. They stopped doing the tune. They did other things, they kept the rhythm, the beat, but they started shunting aside

melody. That, he said, is why you stopped keeping it.

And I thought: Oh my, that's true. And it seemed the reason he cared is that he missed the melody too.

Rhythm is felt, the beat is felt, but melody is both thought and felt, so it has two ways to enter you.

I thanked him for helping me, told him I thought he observed correctly, and have been pondering what he said ever since.

The past two years it became a thought of broader application—that maybe as a nation we've kept the beat, we've still got the rhythm, but the melody, the tune—this century hasn't been about those gentle things. We haven't been about them.

Maybe others, even the primary audience for popular music, are coming to miss it too. I keep hearing of the children and grandchildren of friends who seem to be listening a lot to the music of past decades.

There are Reddit threads on this. A typical post: "As my kids are getting older, I'm realizing more and more that they seem to prefer music from the 70s, 80s, and into the 90s than they do from current music. I

know this isn't a new phenomenon, as we listed to stuff from the 50s, 60s, and 70s, but I feel like when we did it, it was just supplementing our generation's modern music. With kids, and their friends, so I know it's not just mine, it's like all they really want to listen to is older stuff. . . . I never hear them listening to any modern pop (Taylor Swift being the big exception)."

Another post, different thread: "Pop songs from the 50s have a certain lilt to them—a certain undertone of satisfaction with life." Another: "Pop music from the 80s is charged with optimism as well as soundboard experimentation . . . an undertone of eagerness for what is to come."

From another thread, a post on being dragged to a karaoke night. "The crowd was at least 60% under 25, and in 3 hours, only two contemporary pop songs were sang."

Someone noted that all this isn't necessarily a turning away from current pop songs, it's technological: Everything from every era is available on streaming services, it's easy now to discover other eras and fall in love with them.

But I suspect the young are hungry for melody. And perhaps this is a hunger too for God, for a connection with something beyond that only a well crafted, fully felt song can provide. Music isn't only organized sound shaped in time to spur human feeling, it isn't only a gift, it comes from a place. A nation's music comes from that nation's deepest self—its culture, its society, its understanding of itself and of life.

If our era's artists have been moving away from melody and tune this century, then maybe that means something, implies something about the larger American picture, with all its broken-upness, political and otherwise. Maybe we ought to think about that.

Norman Podhoretz Loved Ideas—and a Good Story

By David Skinner

One of my favorite stories in "Making It," the 1967 memoir by Norman Podhoretz, is about an editor losing a great article to forces beyond his control. Articles often begin with an editor suggesting a ripening subject to a carefully chosen writer, but this one speaks to Podhoretz's literary bearings, which played a major part in his becoming consequential—as a writer in his own right and as the editor of Commentary from 1960 to 1995. At a time when journalism's literary roots seem to be fading and the culture of book-reading sinks out of view, this aspect of Podhoretz, who died Dec. 16 at 95, deserves a moment of attention.

It was the early 1960s. The New York Times was reporting on a "widespread legal attack on the state's prison system" by followers of Elijah Muhammad. Cassius Clay was receiving political and spiritual counseling from Malcolm X. Already the editor of Commentary, Podhoretz approached James Baldwin and suggested he write something about black Muslims. Baldwin said he would give it a go.

When Podhoretz learned that "Letter From a Region in My Mind" (later also published in "The Fire Next Time") would appear in the New Yorker, he felt he had been robbed. In his own defense, Baldwin said he'd decided the story had outgrown its original inspiration, which was true, and that anyway Commentary wouldn't have published such a long piece of writing, which Podhoretz insisted wasn't true.

The two men hashed it out over drinks, and Podhoretz let Baldwin have it, accusing him of playing the race card and trading on Podhoretz's liberal guilt as an excuse for giving the New Yorker what belonged to Commentary. Podhoretz's rant proved so extraordinary that Baldwin (returning the editorial favor) told him he had to write it all down and publish it. So was born "My Negro Problem—and Ours," itself an important contribution to writings on race in America.

For those who like gritty accounts of New York intellectuals bickering, boozing and misbehaving, "Making

It" is a gem of sociocultural history. But the real subject is the writer himself, still young, brilliantly observant and ready to analyze how his life and career were going.

"The Bloody Crossroads," published in 1987, isn't the kind of book you expect a journalist to write: a collection of perceptive, thoroughgoing literary essays on important writers from Henry Adams to Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Podhoretz didn't abandon literary-intellectual commitments to run a magazine—he took those convictions with him. The essay on Solzhenitsyn was written only after he'd read everything by Solzhenitsyn that had been translated into English, and though he certainly praised this great witness of communism's ravages, he didn't pretend the man's novels after "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" ever came to life. Podhoretz's political commitments didn't require

him to be any less discriminating a literary critic.

I am partial to "Making It," but "Ex-Friends," published in 1999, may have the stronger claim to being the quintessential Podhoretz book. Written after the Cold War, when the full

The great neoconservative was also a literary man who knew juicy material when he encountered it.

significance of so many fallings-out had become clearer, it again combines personal history and political truth-seeking, as Podhoretz, ever the student of ideas, moves nimbly through the meatspace of enemies and acquaintances who rise and fall

as they betray their best selves.

The hilarious essay on Allen Ginsberg describes a fateful night in 1958 that Podhoretz spent arguing with the manic poet himself as Jack Kerouac sat silently by. The essay on Norman Mailer describes dinners with Jackie O., the time Mailer stabbed his wife, and Truman Capote's masked ball, where Mailer ran into Lillian Hellman and McGeorge Bundy and challenged the latter to a fistfight. Podhoretz was an intellectual leader, a facilitator of other writers, and a major figure in what has come to be known as neoconservatism. He was also a guy who knew good material when he saw it.

The last book I read by Podhoretz was about the war on terror. I remember wondering whether the literary memoirist I so enjoyed could present a big-picture argument with all the necessary historical asides

while carrying forward a heavy, double-barreled thesis. Not that he hadn't done such writing before, but something about the granular nature of the evidence relating to 9/11 made me curious about how it would come out.

"World War IV," published in 2007, was a propulsive argument about the nature of post-9/11 geopolitics that sorted through a crowd of headlines stretching back decades to highlight an important through-line of militant hostility to the U.S. It was conceptually ambitious but straightforward in its evidence as the author placed one pebble after another on the scale to make an argument that seems to me as persuasive as ever: Our enemies aren't ignoring America. We shouldn't ignore them.

Mr. Skinner is the Journal's deputy editorial features editor.

Bari Weiss Delivers for CBS's Parent



BUSINESS
WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

If she didn't know it then, she knows it now. Bari Weiss was hired at CBS News to help deliver its parent Paramount's hoped-for acquisition of the strategically coveted Warner Bros. movies, streaming and TV empire.

She faced a choice last week: Allow a Trump-unfriendly piece to air on "60 Minutes" (concerning the fate of U.S. immigration deportees sent to El Salvador). This would mean accepting the risk of another social-media brickbat from Donald Trump complaining that his "friends" among CBS's new owners weren't being so friendly. Or spike the piece and earn a blowup over accusations of pro-Trump political favoritism.

Notice what I'm not saying. Another editor in chief might have held back the story for all the editorial reasons Ms. Weiss has cited. She might have scuttled the report even if her parent company didn't

have an interest in currying favor with Mr. Trump.

But let's live in the real world. Her action couldn't help adopting the color it has. Ms. Weiss was hired by CBS only after the Ellisons launched their sales pitch to Warner's management, only after they started emphasizing their Trump ties to assure a quick and clean antitrust approval. The Ellisons already had hired Mr. Trump's former antitrust chief, Makan Delrahim. Mr. Delrahim's failed and ridiculed 2017 lawsuit to harass AT&T's purchase of the same Warner assets remains an object lesson. His case may have been turned back by the courts but it nevertheless contributed to the combination's ultimate unraveling.

Grown-ups know what they're getting into. Ms. Weiss has so far upheld what I will courteously assume was the implicit bargain that landed her the CBS job. Don't gasp. She knew why she was being hired. Her editorial decisions, even if made for the purest of journalistic reasons, were intended to be factors in the Ellison family's stalking of the Warner properties.

The younger Mr. Ellison, son David, spent \$150 million in October to acquire Ms. Weiss by acquiring her news-and-opinion venture, the Free Press. This sum amounts to 1.4% of the family's latest bid for

The Ellison family is getting what it paid for when it acquired the journalistic mouthpiece.

Warner Bros. It will be money well-spent if it helps secure their prize. The "60 Minutes" contretemps lands as his father, Larry, has agreed personally to backstop \$40 billion of Paramount's \$108 billion offer. It lands also as Paramount, despite Netflix's upper hand in the bidding, conspicuously hasn't raised its own offer, an evident measure of the family's confidence in the power of its Trump connections and the appeal to Warner shareholders of a presumptively untroubled federal review and swift payout.

Then came a lucky break for Ms. Weiss. Her last-minute spiking of the broadcast didn't prevent the original "60 Minutes" report from briefly being posted by a Canadian affiliate, from where it landed on YouTube and has been seen by the world. Now she can renege on a promise to air a revised version on CBS. Viewers would be watching only to compare Ms. Weiss's changes with the original. Who needs it? It's a discussion any responsible CBS management would find worth avoiding.

Ms. Weiss is still remembered for her horror-filled weeping when Mr. Trump was first elected in 2016. Less than a decade later, she finds herself saddled with a reputation for seeking to appease him journalistically, which she will probably have to defend for the rest of her life (not that Mr. Trump will care a fig about her discomfiture).

Mr. Trump has said he will be "involved" in approving any Warner sale, but he is mercurial. Netflix's leaders have also been busy seeking his favor. The states and the Europeans can still raise obstacles to a deal. Mr. Trump's seeming extortion of favorable coverage from media companies could be an additional count among many in a 2027 impeachment drama if Democrats re-take the House next year.

A resolution of the Warner ownership struggle may not happen soon. The possibility of a train wreck looms. Any sale might yet fall apart amid the Trump political wars. If I were Warner CEO David Zaslav, while playing out my hand, I wouldn't let it disturb the main business of producing and distributing TV shows and movies. Manage accordingly. His company may emerge from today's pinball-like experience still needing a strategy to survive and prosper on its own amid the entertainment industry's streaming and artificial-intelligence convulsions.

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