

Cockroaches of the world have united



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

COCKROACH IS not a bad word or an abuse. A search in Wikipedia will reveal that cockroaches have retained their basic body structure for roughly 200 million years — that is 199,700,000 years earlier than *Homo sapiens* first emerged in Africa about 300,000 years ago. Cockroaches have a prior claim over humans to the right to exist in this world.

Science Encyclopedia tells us that cockroaches do not bite or attack people, unlike people who attack cockroaches. Of course, cockroaches carry bacteria, transmit diseases and trigger allergies. Humans also carry bacteria, transmit diseases and trigger allergies (especially among members of rival groups). Some humans consider cockroaches as 'creepy', but unlike some humans who consider other humans as 'creepy'.

Stirred and shaken

Some days ago, a high dignitary stirred the cockroaches from their slumber. Bless him, he clarified promptly that he was refer-

ring to fake lawyers with fake degrees roaming around the courts. Such fake lawyers deserve to be called bad names but, I submit respectfully, not a cockroach. Once stirred, the cockroaches remain stirred (like 'once a mortgage, always a mortgage'). A few stirred cockroaches have founded a political party, started an X handle, created a website and opened an Instagram handle. By last count, the handle had over 22 million followers.

The stirred cockroaches retaliated. The consequence was the humans were stirred and shaken. I suspect the humans are shaking in their *Kolhapuri* chappals. If not, why would the highest executive authority of India with Armed Forces that have 1.45 million active personnel in uniform, 4,200 main battle tanks, 580 fighter aircraft, 270 naval vessels, 2 aircraft carriers and hundreds of nuclear weapons, and a Rs 2,86,588 crore bonanza from RBI in its kitty, fear a mere X handle opened by a 30-year-old Abhijeet Dipke who is the flag-bearer of the digital-only Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), and ask X to close the handle?

Mr Dipke is in a far away land pursuing a Masters degree in, *phew*, 'public relations' (not the dangerous AI) under the care of our frenemy, Mr Donald Trump. The website set out CJP's goals: "we own the identity of the cockroach — if that is what it takes for young people to be heard." With its tagline as 'Voice of the lazy and unemployed', the CJP claims to represent the people "the system forgot to count". He wants the unemployed, lazy, chronically online and who can rant professionally to join his party. He is inspired by

Mobility is the life-spring of cockroaches. The high fuel prices limit the mobility of cockroaches. The price of petrol in Delhi is Rs 102.12 and the price of diesel is Rs 95.20

Gandhi, Ambedkar and Nehru. CJP's manifesto makes one laugh and think; the usual political party's manifesto makes one sleep.

"It is the cause..."

I think CJP is counting on the widespread disappointment, distress and frustration among people, especially among the youth including young women. The causes are: **UNEMPLOYMENT:** The unemployment rate is 5.2%; youth unemployment rate is 16-17%. The Work Force is 64.3 crore and the Labour Force Participation Rate is, at best, 60%. The remaining 40% or about 25 crore are, pardon me, cockroaches. If the CJP gets all the cockroach votes, it will form the government. (In the 2024 LS elections, BJP got 23.6 crore votes and the Congress 13.7 crore votes).

PETROL & DIESEL: Mobility is the life-spring of cockroaches. The high fuel prices limit the mobility of cockroaches. The price of petrol in Delhi is Rs 102.12 and the price of diesel is Rs 95.20. For voting for the BJP, residents of Kolkata have been rewarded with prices of Rs 113.51 and Rs 99.82, respectively. **JOBS IN FACTORIES:** Cockroaches are, by definition, lazy. Since they do not get up early every morning to attend the neighbourhood *shakha*, they will never be employed by the government. The next best is a factory job. According to MoSPI, there are 260,061 registered factories in India. The estimate of the number of jobs in factories is 1.95 crore. Many jobs will be redundant because of AI, and the 25 crore cockroaches will never get a factory job. Hence, the frustration.

Parliament has become a private club



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

WHAT INTRIGUED me about the government's decision to sound the death knell of the Delhi Gymkhana Club was the timing. Why now? Could it be to distract attention from the economic problems caused by the war on Iran? In these times of social media, it is stories that everyone has an opinion about that take precedence over grim news like the price of fuel rising and foreign investors fleeing our shores. Whatever the reason, I am delighted that the club was given marching orders.

Not because I think it is a good idea to demolish this charming relic of our colonial past but because the decision could start a movement to end the privileges of our politicians and high officials. It is a movement that is much needed. Among the heated debates that happened last week on television and social media the one thing everyone agreed on was that this private club was a symbol of the entitlement and privilege that makes the word 'lootyns' an insult. Somehow nobody has noticed yet that the most entitled and privileged private club in Lutyens' Delhi is not the Gymkhana but the Lok Sabha. Just over 30% of its members come from political families which means one in three of our elected representatives is a nepo baby. Nepotism is less evident in the Rajya Sabha but 20% of its members also come from political families.

So, if we object to people inheriting their membership at the Gymkhana Club, then we must first acknowledge that this is not half as disquieting as politicians inheriting parliamentary constituencies. A desire for public service is not something that comes down in the genes so every time some nepo baby inherits a constituency, it is denied to a person with a genuine desire for public service. Yet we never protest when our political parties hand out tickets at election time to candidates from political families. The sad truth is that other than the communists, all our opposition parties are today family businesses. Nepo babies can be spotted in the BJP as well, but the party itself has not yet become some political heirloom.

In the debates we heard last week about the cancellation of the lease of the Gymkhana Club's 27 acres, those who said this was a good thing argued that public land needs to be better used. True. And this is why this columnist has argued for many years that it is time to throw politicians and bureaucrats out of their colonial bungalows in Lutyens Delhi. This is public land that can be much better used for creating affordable rental housing for the millions of people in Delhi who live in shamefully squalid shanties. An estimated 30-50 lakh Delhi citizens live in horrible conditions in shanty towns that sometimes exist on the edge of garbage dumps in which children compete with stray animals in their search for food. Is it acceptable that the men responsible for building low-cost housing themselves live like princes?

Most democratic countries do not ask taxpayers to pay for housing public servants. But since we have spoiled ours so badly for so many decades, I would like to offer a humble suggestion. Since 'national security' was given as a reason to get rid of the Gymkhana Club, would it not be a good idea to move the Prime Minister into a permanent residence like Teen Murti House? Or instead of wasting money on a new residence for the Prime Minister, why not move him into Hyderabad House or one of those other fine palaces that exist around India Gate?

Another question we need to start asking is why Rashtrapati Bhawan needs to sit in an estate that is slightly more than 300 acres? Surely a 20-acre garden would suffice for the President of India, and the rest of that public land could be used to house ministers and high officials? This would reduce what we spend on security, and we might save some money on their travel since they would then be close enough to their offices to walk. There are countries in the 'viksit' western world where prime ministers, presidents and princes all use public transport. Our politicians and officials believe that there is a constant threat to their lives so that cannot happen, but a healthy walk accompanied by two security men would do wonders for their health.

If the Gymkhana Club refuses to pay market rent, then it must go. But this should be the first step in a bigger readjustment of Lutyens Delhi. Or it will be clear that the real reason why this club has been targeted is because it is considered the last bastion of that 'English-speaking ruling class' that the new rulers of India so despise. At this point I must clarify that although I am a proud member of that old ruling class (AKA Khan Market gang), I am in fact not a member of the Gymkhana Club.

Like a lot of other people, I have been trying to change my dependent member card to a full membership for more than thirty years. I also need to clarify that in the past thirty years I have been to the Gymkhana Club no more than five or six times. Usually for someone else's party or for someone's wedding. It is here that the indigent 'elite' come because they cannot afford five-star hotels.

FAMILY SUPPORT: Cockroaches are supported by families, especially mothers, in return for the 5 kg of free grain that they bring to the family every month. Since the household debt is 42% of GDP and household savings are only 5-6% of GDP, cockroaches receive little cash support from families, and are desperately cashless.

VIKSIT BHARAT BILLIONAIRE: Cockroaches hoped to become billionaires in *Viksit Bharat*. However, despite 12 years of BJP rule, the number of billionaires is rising at a painfully slow pace. The latest count is 205, and there are 25 crore cockroaches in the line waiting to become billionaires. They are also waiting for the Rs 15 lakh of *achhe din aayenge* promised in 2014.

C-EA dashes hopes

The cockroaches turned to the Cockroaches Economic Adviser. The C-EA's advice was sombre: "The trade deficit will widen significantly in FY27, as will the current account deficit. Inflation risks are tilted to the upside. A below-normal monsoon adds an agricultural dimension to a complex supply shock. The task of attracting stable long-term capital — through credible tax policy, regulatory predictability, and reduced friction for investors — intensifies in these conditions" (*The Indian Express*, May 23, 2026).

Catastrophe is foretold. The cockroaches may decide that the only way to prevent the catastrophe is to seek a peaceful transfer of power, with the aid of CEC, from humans to cockroaches.

A farewell night to remember at Delhi's Gymkhana Club



INSIDE TRACK | BY COOMI KAPOOR

RULERS RULE CLUB CLASS

The Capital's drawing rooms are heatedly discussing the government's eviction threat to the hallowed Delhi Gymkhana Club. Some members, who apprehend that they could be robbed of their lifelong watering hole, now trace the origins of the dispute to the arrogant and rigid attitude of the earlier managing committees to admitting the all-powerful members of the ruling political class. For instance, Natwar Singh as club president in the mid 1970s recommended that R K Dhawan, then Indira Gandhi's personal assistant, jump the long membership waiting list, but was overruled. L K Advani was rather grudgingly admitted. And the managing committee quibbled about granting a five-year extension to former Haryana CM Bhupinder Hooda, an accomplished tennis player who has even played against Boris Becker. The club's admission policy in its eminent person's category is unabashedly transactional, limited to a person's tenure in office! In contrast, the Delhi Golf Club liberally enrolled members recommended by the Urban Development Ministry, which periodically extends the lease terms for its 180 acres. Kamal Nath, who was minister in charge when the lease last came up for renewal, in fact, demanded unofficial, out-of-turn membership quota for his nominees for the next 20 years. During Modi's regime, several of these memberships were cancelled and BJP nominees, including a former RSS pracharak, were enrolled in their place!

Mumbai's Western India Turf Club, the Willingdon Club and the Bombay Gymkhana have all opened their doors to officialdom, through a compromise of give and take.

REPORT CARD GLOOM

Prime Minister Modi's mood and body language at the 4.5-hour-long Cabinet meeting at Seva Teerth this month was stern and somber, reflecting the gloomy economic outlook and looming global instability. It was not the ministers alone who were tense but also secretaries to the GoI, since the performance ratings of a dozen ministries was publicly appraised. Besides, ranking of ministries in terms of the top five and bottom five were announced for several criteria, including speed of clearance of files, redressal of public grievances and extent of execution of government policy. Many apprehend that the meeting was a prelude to a Cabinet reorganisation. The buzz is that the PM is waiting for the inauspicious month of *Purushottam Maas* (which extends from May 17 to June 15 in the Hindu calendar) to pass. But the delay has heightened public restiveness over issues, from examination fiascoes and fuel shortages to a falling rupee and breakdown of essential services in cities in this summer's record-breaking heat.

STATEWIDE ANXIETY

The party leadership is reportedly unhappy with some BJP CMs from heartland states. The blame, however, cannot be attributed to the CMs alone — they were catapulted to top positions without having the necessary political heft or administrative experience. The fact that a senior Cabinet minister has recently delegated some of his important duties to his minister of state has added grist to the rumour mill.

Yogi Adityanath, a seasoned CM who faces an election next year, is, however, almost certain to continue. Adityanath has successfully guarded his turf from outside interference. An example of his ability to neutralise attempts to rein him in is his posting in Lucknow in 2022 of a well-regarded IAS officer who previously worked in the Capital in many key positions, including the PMO for two decades. The surmise was that the bureaucrat, who sought voluntary retirement before entering politics and joining Yogi's cabinet, would take over a prestigious portfolio, such as Home. But the CM assigned him instead to Energy and Urban Development. With the heat wave, power shortages have spiked with complaints even from BJP MLAs.

POLITICS THROUGH MATRIMONIAL ALLIANCE

Veteran Maharashtra politician and the man for all seasons, Sharad Pawar, recently surprised his INDIA allies by chiding Opposition leaders for criticising PM Modi's frequent foreign trips. Pawar felt that whatever their political differences, these views should not be aired while Modi was out of the country as it detracted from the Prime Minister's efforts to project India's image abroad. Around the same time, weathercock pollster Prashant Kishor called on Pawar. Some spot a link between Pawar's remarks defending Modi and the fact that earlier this year, his granddaughter Revati, daughter of NCP MP Supriya Sule, was engaged to Sarang Lakhani, son of businessman Arun Lakhani, Managing Director of the Vishvaraj Group, a company specialising in infrastructure and environmental solutions. The Nagpur-based businessman is close to the RSS and it is said that the BJP's Nagpur politicians, Nitin Gadkari and Devendra Fadnis, played a role as matchmakers.



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY VIVEK SHUKLA

IT WAS the evening of August 6, 1947. Though it was hot in Delhi, the air carried a certain chill. The mood was sombre, somewhat sedate.

At the beautiful Delhi Gymkhana Club, the green lawns and grand ballroom were softly lit. Women turned up in colourful saris, officers in khaki uniforms. Brigadier Kodandera Madappa Cariappa (who later became India's first Field Marshal) was the host that evening. But this was no ordinary party. Partition had been announced. The Army was also being divided. Cariappa had organised it as a farewell party for fellow officers of the British Indian Army who were now going to join the new Pakistan Army.

Cards by the "Officers of the Armed Forces of the Dominion of India" invited guests to the party to bid farewell to "Old Comrades Reception in Honour of the Officers of the Armed Forces of the Dominion of Pakistan".

The book *Freedom at Midnight*, by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapiere, referred to this party as "the most emotional farewell".

The club building, designed by Robert Tor Russell, was specially decorated that evening. Tents were put up on the lawns with tables full of whisky, gin, and Indian food. A band played in the ballroom. Officers hugged each other and recalled old memories.

Collins and Lapiere write about the conversations and the camaraderie at the party in great detail.

"Do you remember how we fought together on the Burma front in 1942?" a Muslim officer asked his Hindu friend.

"Yes, and that night when we faced the Japanese attack? You saved my life," the other replied, with tears in his eyes.

The host of the evening, Brigadier Cariappa, was the first Indian commander of the Rajput Regiment. He was tall, had a strong face, but a soft heart. As the evening



The Gymkhana Club, founded in 1913, now faces eviction. GAJENDRA YADAV

grew darker, he climbed onto the raised platform in the ballroom and asked everyone to be quiet.

All eyes turned to him. "My dear comrades," he said in a deep voice, "we have shared a common destiny for so long that our story cannot be separated. We were brothers. We will always remain brothers. And we will never forget the great years we spent together."

The hall fell completely silent. Then, the clapping started. Many officers had tears in their eyes. A Major who was going to Pakistan stepped forward and hugged Cariappa tightly. "Sir, this is very painful," he said. Cariappa smiled and replied, "It is painful because our bond was deep. But even in this new beginning, we must keep this friendship alive."

The party continued late into the night. Officers kept sharing old stories from the Second World War and their cantonment days. Women sat in a corner, talking. Some wondered what tomorrow would bring. The journey from Delhi to Lahore and Rawalpindi would now mean crossing the border of enmity.

A young Captain who was going to Pakistan told his Indian friend, "My belongings are still in Delhi. I thought I would come back and take them once things become normal."

His friend patted his shoulder and said, "Yes, definitely come. We will wait for you."

But history had something else in store. Just a few months later, war broke out in

Kashmir. The same officers who had left their belongings behind were now fighting on the enemy side.

The writers of *Freedom at Midnight* describe the atmosphere at the club that evening as one of "great sadness". The Gymkhana Club, which was once only for the British elite, had become a witness to the emotions of Indian and Pakistani officers.

That evening, a Muslim officer going to Pakistan, Brigadier Aga Raza, was given a special gift by his junior officers. According to the book, "Raza plucked the protective cloth from the trophy and held it up to the crowd. Fashioned by a silversmith in old Delhi, it represented two sepoy, one Hindu, one Moslem, standing side by side, rifles at their shoulders trained upon some common foe."

But it didn't take long for that evening of friendship to turn into nights of hostility.

Cariappa went on to become the first Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army. But he remained a professional soldier all his life. He always spoke of friendship with Pakistan. Even when his own son was a prisoner of war in Pakistan, he put the nation first.

The memory of that evening lives on at the Gymkhana Club. The club faces new challenges today, but that farewell party of 1947 remains a proud part of its history.

The writer is Ex-Advisor (History), Indira Gandhi Centre for Arts and Culture

The End of Nine-to-Five

POPE LEO'S ode to human greatness, the magnificently titled document, "Magnifica Humanitas", raises the most profoundly rattling question on everyone's minds: in an optimisation-oriented society, what happens when we are inferior to the technologies we have created? Work, stresses the Pope, is not just about income. It is a "requirement of the human condition, a normal path toward maturity, development and personal fulfillment". Dwelling on the future of work is depressing as we read daily that AI is diminishing opportunities not just in entry-level jobs, but altering careers in investment banking and law. And, the final scope of AI's displacement is anybody's guess.

Like the Pope, we have all been raised to believe diligence and perseverance is a virtue. The traditional beaten road to a successful life has been scoring well in school, college, a specialisation if you're lucky, then a stable career for the next several decades.

There's the thought deeply rooted in history that a person who doesn't work full time may be morally suspect. (An idle mind is the devil's workshop.) Even the Bible warned, "He who does not work, neither shall he eat." Throughout the ages but especially in the last hundred years, our self-worth is inextricably tied up with productivity and success. The first question anyone asks at a party is, what do you do? The right answer raises one's stature. But we're entering an era of the very real possibility that people will wake up in the morning and have nowhere to go and nothing to do. Will how we view work change? Perhaps, at social gatherings, the initial question will be asking about peoples' hobbies instead.

For too long, we have all fallen for the righteous view that one must have some kind of vocation to justify a right to existence. People who have enough don't necessarily have to "earn a living". They shouldn't be sneered at for going back to learning or en-



ON THE LOOSE
BY LEHER KALA

gaging in community service. It should strike anyone as odd that volunteering in India is seen as a euphemism for being incapable of finding something real. Governments have their own sobering motivations to keep inventing employment schemes — like India's MNREGA — a large population with too much free time poses a danger to the social order. The Pope is right when he says that people feel a need to contribute meaningfully to the world but it's easy to forget that of the three billion working people on this planet, most wake up and head to unskilled, labour-intensive employment. They're sanguine about the drudgery involved because they need the money. Work is rarely worship. For most, it's a means of survival.

For the well qualified, if AI hogs all the boring job options humanity relies on for a paycheck, dare we hope that after the initial shake up, people will pivot back and pursue whatever genuinely brings them joy? It's a widespread reality that most people hate

their jobs. Often, circumstances dictate careers and ambition requires making cold blooded choices. If there's no security in anything, one is free to choose whatever one enjoys.

Work will, in fact, become a perpetual hustle. Till quite recently, people went about careers knowing it's a slow and patient climb up a corporate ladder but there are regular increments and better designations along the way. It's not that this kind of quiet toiling didn't have its frustrations but there's comfort in knowing that one could join an organisation and not worry about getting sacked. Sure, there's freedom in carving out one's own (tentative) path but it comes with a lot of stressful uncertainty. One must have some sympathy for the 20-somethings entering the workplace who have no idea how a new technological age will reshape their lives.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

RECENT HIKE IN FUEL PRICES MAY ACTIVATE BOTH DIRECT AND INDIRECT TRANSMISSION CHANNELS

Must be vigilant on inflation, may face demand headwinds: Fin Min

The comments come days before the RBI's rate setting panel announces its interest rate decision on June 5

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, May 30

CONSUMPTION DEMAND in India may face headwinds in the coming months with economic conditions beginning to show the impact of the conflict in West Asia, the Ministry of Finance said on Saturday.

It cautioned that while the near-term outlook is one of "cautious resilience", policy will need to "remain agile across monetary, fiscal, and structural dimensions" to tackle the ongoing uncertainty and that inflation developments warrant "vigilance".

"For India, these external pressures are beginning to transmit, selectively but perceptibly, into domestic economic conditions," the finance ministry said in its Monthly Economic Review report for May, adding that the moderation in core sector growth and fuel consumption "signals that global headwinds are gradually finding their way into select segments of domestic activity."

"With forecasts pointing to a below-normal monsoon and a likely moderation in economic activity, overall consumption demand may face headwinds in the coming months," it further said.

It separately said a signifi-

cant rainfall deficit along with the current geopolitical conditions could translate into food inflation, weakening rural demand and aggregate growth.

According to data released on May 20, growth of India's eight core industries — namely coal, crude oil, natural gas, refinery products, fertilisers, steel, cement, and electricity — fell to 1.2% in March and 1.7% in April.

Meanwhile, the India Meteorological Department on Friday cut its monsoon forecast to 90% of the Long Period Average from 92% projected in April. The latest forecast is the lowest by IMD in the last 20 years. The comments by the finance ministry that policy will need to be "agile" and the inflation outlook warrants vigilance come days before the Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee announces its interest rate decision on June 5.

After having cut the policy repo rate by 125 basis points (bps) to 5.25% in 2025, the MPC has left it unchanged so far in 2026 amid sharply higher global energy prices due to the war in West Asia, which has led to foreign investors pulling money out from Indian financial markets to the tune of \$24.2 billion since the conflict began in late February.



The finance ministry released its Monthly Economic Review report for May on Saturday. REUTERS

This has exerted tremendous pressure on the Indian rupee's exchange rate, pushing it down to multiple all-time lows. Earlier this month, it nearly breached the 97-per-dollar mark, before it was propped up by sustained RBI intervention in the foreign exchange market.

On Friday, the rupee ended at 95. It has fallen 4.2% since the war started.

While the rupee has recovered some ground in recent days, economists warn that the MPC may have to increase interest rates as early as next week. According to Standard Chartered Bank economists, the RBI may raise the repo rate by 50 bps over its June and August meetings. And they see a risk of additional 25-50 bps of hikes in 2026-27 if inflation turns out to be higher than ex-

pected due to continued pressure from commodity prices and a weak rupee.

In its report on Saturday, the finance ministry took note of the divergence between India's retail and wholesale inflation in April — which stood at 3.48% and 8.3%, respectively. This wedge, it said, is a sign that upstream cost pressures are building and the pass-through to consumers may not be far behind. "The recent hike in petrol and diesel prices may activate both direct and indirect transmission channels, and any further escalation in energy prices could narrow the existing cushion more quickly than anticipated. A deficient monsoon could add food price pressures on top of energy-driven ones. However, second-round effects and their persistence must be evident in the

• CHALLENGES AHEAD

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IT SEPARATELY said a significant rainfall deficit along with the current geopolitical conditions could translate into food inflation, weakening rural demand and aggregate growth

data for policy responses to be triggered," the finance ministry said. After holding retail fuel prices at for over two-and-a-half months amid the surge in global rates due to the West Asia crisis, public sector oil marketing companies have raised pump prices of petrol and diesel by over Rs 7 per litre in less than two weeks.

The RBI, in early April, forecast that headline retail inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) may average 4.6% in 2026-27, up from less than 2% in 2025-26. However, economists from outside the central bank see CPI inflation averaging more than 5%. Central banks in Asia have already begun raising interest rates, including Indonesia by 50 bps and Sri Lanka by 100 bps — both in one go — in the last 10 days.

Govt waives import duty on cotton till October 30

Ravi Dutta Mishra
New Delhi, May 30

THE GOVERNMENT on Saturday announced removal of the 11% duty on cotton starting June 1 till October 30 to boost cotton availability for India's textile industry amid the ongoing West Asia crisis.

This is the second time in the last 12 months that the duty has been removed.

A similar relief measure was extended to the industry last year after the US imposed steep tariffs on Indian exports.

The Ministry of Textiles said that the temporary duty exemption is expected to reduce input costs across the textile and apparel sector, thereby providing a targeted relief to manufacturers and consumers, while also keeping the interests of domestic farmers in mind.

"Overall, the measure is anticipated to have a positive impact on the performance of the domestic textile industry, especially the small and medium enterprises, ensuring better availability of cotton in the market," the ministry said.

The government move comes after industry executives highlighted that the price of cotton has surged nearly 10-15% during the last month alone due to hoarding, as cotton demand picked up in line with other input materials, particularly polyester.

Apparel Export Promotion Council (AEP) Chairman A Sakthivel had earlier this

month asked the government to eliminate the duty due to high cotton prices and rising input costs.

In a presentation made to the Finance, Commerce and Industry and Textile Ministry, AEP said that India has recently entered into several Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), but competing countries have lower input costs.

Mithleshwar Thakur, Secretary General AEP said, "The temporary exemption of Customs duty and Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess on Cotton imports from June 1, 2026 to October 30, 2026 will lead to reduction of input costs across the textile and apparel sector besides improving the availability of cotton, thereby providing much-needed relief to the downstream industry, which have been facing challenges due to the sharp increase in cotton and yarn prices."

Confederation of Indian Textile Industry (CITI) said import duty was resulting in costs going up across the value chain and having a detrimental impact on scaling India's textile and apparel exports. India's textile exports are dominated by a cotton. India is the second-largest cotton producer after China, but relies on imports for about 15% of its raw cotton and about 20% of its yarn to meet demand.

India's cotton production has been declining, with experts blaming it on a range of

policy failures. They said that cotton production has stagnated for years largely due to a lack of new seeds, modern irrigation facilities, and frequent pest attacks and diseases.

Unlike several other competitors, such as Bangladesh and Vietnam, India is one of the largest producers of cotton and farmers' interests weigh on the duty-related decision.

Apparel manufacturers have said that some investments that had begun going out of the country due to tariffs have started to come back.

An industry executive, who did not wish to be named, said the sector is also seeing European investments coming into India as they are trying to diversify away from Bangladesh.

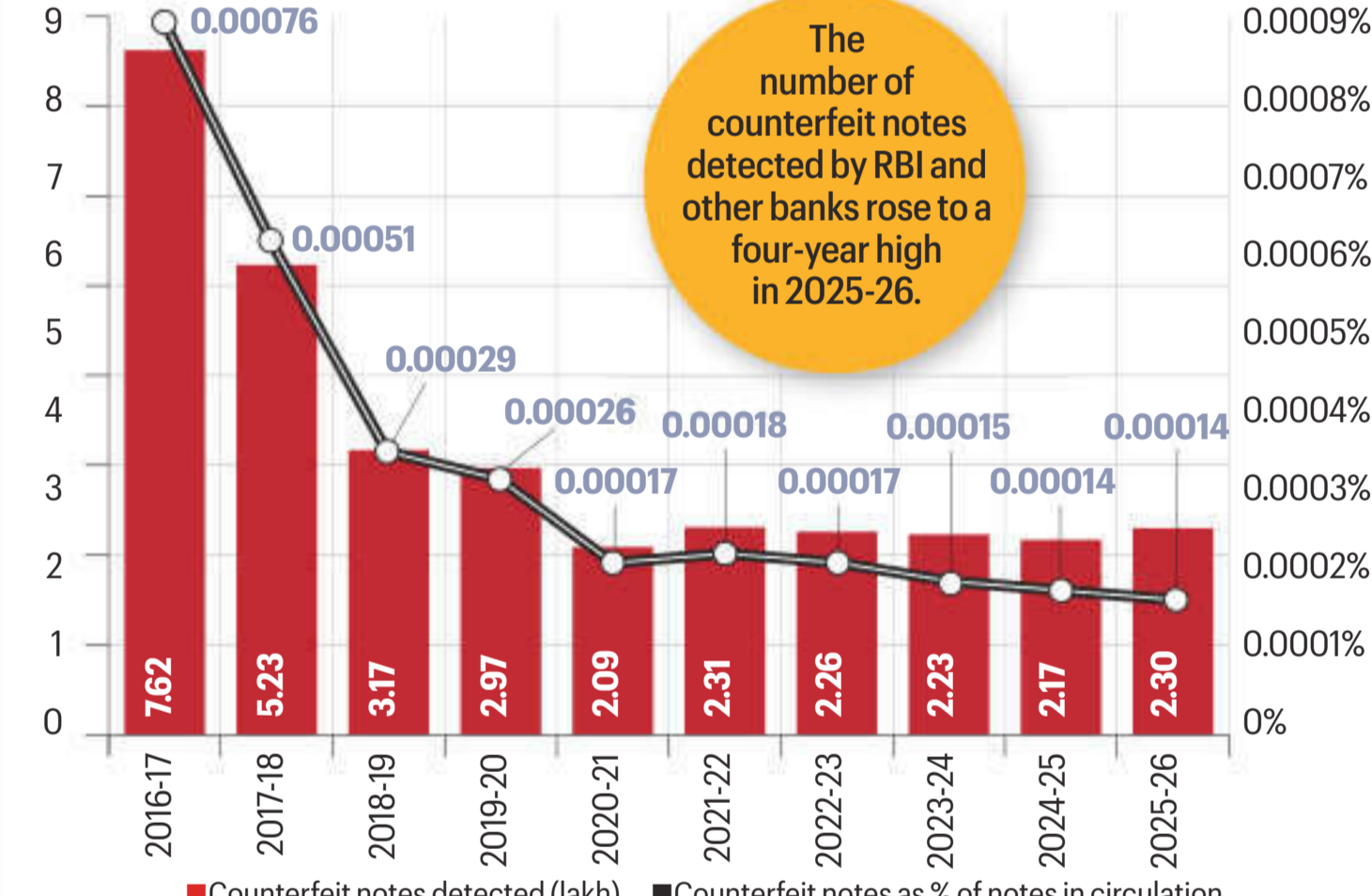
"Bangladesh has signed an FTA with the US and is also seeking a deal with the EU, as India's duty disadvantage will be eliminated soon when the deal comes into effect," the executive said.

AEP said that the textile industry's cotton requirement for the current year is projected at around 337 lakh bales, while cotton arrivals for the 2025-26 season are estimated at only 292.15 lakh bales, resulting in a supply-demand gap of nearly 45 lakh bales.

The shortfall is expected to increase pressure on spinning mills and downstream textile industries due to rising input costs and limited availability of quality raw material, the Export Promotion Council said.

• RBI, banks detected 2.3 lakh counterfeit notes in FY26

According to the Reserve Bank of India's annual report, published on Friday, the number of fake notes in the last financial year rose to 2.30 lakh from 2.17 lakh in 2024-25. However, as a percentage of all banknotes in circulation, the number of fake notes detected remains minuscule: 0.00013%. In fact, this percentage figure has now fallen for four years in a row, having stood more than five times higher at 0.00076% in 2016-17.



Govt withdraws draft Sugarcane (Control) Order amid opposition

New Delhi: The Centre has withdrawn the draft Sugarcane (Control) Order, 2026, saying it needs to be revisited in the light of objections received from state governments and other stakeholders.

The Food Ministry had circulated the draft for public comments, with a May 20 deadline. "Based on the suggestions/comments received from state governments and other stakeholders, it is considered necessary to revisit the draft Sugarcane (Control) Order, 2026," the ministry said in an office memorandum.

The draft sought to replace the 60-year-old Sugarcane (Control) Order, 1966, with a new regulatory framework that proposed, among other things, bringing the ethanol and khandasari sectors under government regulation.

The move drew opposition from khandasari units and farmers. The draft had proposed redefining a khandasari unit as one with more than 10 workers and a crushing capacity of over 500 tonnes per day.

Currently a khandasari unit is defined as one with 20 or more workers, with no capacity limit. Sources said the proposed definition would have brought a large number of small-scale, labour-intensive units under the regulatory ambit. PTI

India's MSCI weight declines as investors chase the AI boom in Taiwan & Korea

Akash Mandal
Mumbai, May 30

MSCI'S QUARTERLY rebalancing of its global benchmark indices has long attracted the interest of global investors, triggering inflows and outflows across markets. For example, its latest rejig — which came into effect on Friday — triggered a sharp sell-off in the Indian stock markets late in the session, with benchmark indices ending 1.5% down from Thursday.

"Indian Equity Market has witnessed massive activity from the FPIs on the day of MSCI rebalancing," Nitesh Shah, Managing Director at Kotak Mahindra Asset Management Co, posted on X on Friday, adding that Foreign Portfolio Investors accounted for around 69% of the total turnover of Rs 2.87 lakh crore on National Stock Exchange.

The indices provided by New York-based MSCI are keenly eyed by investors across the world because they dictate the flow of capital, especially passive funds that closely track the weights assigned to regions, countries, and companies. Friday's rebalancing saw India's weight in the Global Standard index edge down to 12.3% from 12.4%. Announced earlier in the month on May 13, while the rebalancing saw the number of Indian companies in the index remain unchanged at 165, four

• THE AIR RUSH

INDIA'S WEIGHT in the Emerging Markets index has been on a downward trend since peaking around 21% in September 2024

IT NOW stands at 11.94%, behind the likes of Taiwan (24.84%), China (23.05%), and South Korea (18.69%)

THESE RANKINGS do a good job of telling the entire India story: it has no AI play, while its Asian rivals are leading the world on the

were removed (Hyundai Motor India, Jubilant Foodworks, Kalyan Jewellers, and Rail Vikas Nigam) and four others were added in their place: Federal Bank, Multi Commodity Exchange of India, National Aluminium, and Indian Bank.

Meanwhile, India's weight in the Emerging Markets (EM) index has been on a downward trend since peaking around 21% in September 2024 and now stands at 11.94%, behind the likes of Taiwan (24.84%), China (23.05%), and South Korea (18.69%). And these rankings do a good job of telling the entire India story: it has no AI play, while its Asian rivals are leading the world on the back of eye-popping increases in key company's share prices. In fact, only



back of eye-popping increases in key company's share prices.

a few days ago, Taiwan overtook India and became the fifth most valuable stock market in the world in terms of market capitalisation. "The catalyst? AI. Specifically, the scale of AI-driven demand for semiconductors," MSCI noted on Wednesday. "Taiwan's semiconductor industry accounts for 16.2% of the index on its own, contributing to IT's surge to nearly 37% of EM, up from 31.8% just one month earlier. For

investors, broad EM exposure today is structurally different than a year ago, with more technology, more semiconductors and a more direct stake in the global AI build-out," it added.

Leading the charge for Taiwan has been Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co, the

world's largest chipmaker, whose share price has more than doubled in the last year. Just how dominant is TSMC? One of only two non-US entities in the world's top-10 most valuable companies — the other being Saudi Aramco — TSMC makes up more than 40% of Taiwan's benchmark Taieix index.

At 14.21%, TSMC on its own has a greater weight in MSCI's EM index than India.

It's not just Taiwan that has benefitted from the AI boom. A day after Taiwan overtook India in the world's largest stock markets, South Korean semiconductor manufacturer SK Hynix saw its market capitalisation top \$1 trillion. This was just a few days after fellow Korean firm Samsung also crossed the \$1 trillion mark. Together, the market cap of Samsung and SK Hynix is almost half of the Kospi index. These two companies are also the second and third biggest constituents of the MSCI EM index, accounting for 10.08% of it. The Indian companies with the highest weight are HDFC Bank and Reliance Industries, both at 0.79%.

The absence of an AI play in India was earlier viewed as a contrarian strategy. Now, it's a glaring weakness. And, in conjunction with the rupee's fall, it's showing up in how FPIs are behaving.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

• THERE IS A SHARP MISMATCH BETWEEN THE COUNTRY'S RELATIVELY LIMITED DOMESTIC CELL MANUFACTURING CAPACITY AND ITS MUCH LARGER SOLAR MODULE MANUFACTURING BASE

Domestic solar cell mandate: How new rules may squeeze smaller manufacturers

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, May 30

A NEW domestic sourcing requirement for solar cells, set to come into force from June 1, is likely to disproportionately impact smaller solar module manufacturers compared to larger companies with integrated cell and module manufacturing facilities.

While the move is expected to help reduce India's dependence on imports and strengthen the domestic solar manufacturing ecosystem, industry insiders have raised concerns over potential market consolidation risks in this sector. The apprehension stems from the sharp mismatch between the country's relatively limited do-

mestic cell manufacturing capacity and its much larger solar module manufacturing base, a gap that could tighten supplies and favour vertically integrated players.

While the country's solar module manufacturing capacity has surged to nearly 200 gigawatts (GW) per annum, domestic solar cell manufacturing remains far lower at around 30 GW, creating a significant gap.

Under the new mandate, all 'net-metering' and 'Open Access' solar projects commissioned after June 1 will have to use domestically manufactured solar cells. Net-metering projects largely include rooftop solar installations — such as those under the PM Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana — where consumers



India's solar module manufacturing capacity has surged to nearly 200GW per annum, but domestic solar cell manufacturing remains far lower at around 30 GW. REUTERS

can offset electricity bills by supplying surplus power back to the grid, while Open Access projects mainly cater to commercial and industrial consumers pro-

curing renewable energy directly from developers.

The new mandate has sparked concerns among module manufacturers, particularly

non-integrated players — those without internal cell manufacturing facilities. Industry executives cautioned such companies could face significant supply risks, as they would now be forced to procure domestically manufactured cells from larger competitors that also operate in the module market, potentially creating an uneven playing field.

According to industry insiders, the timing of the transition has added to the stress. India's solar module manufacturers are currently grappling with overcapacity and weakening export opportunities amid steep US tariff barriers. Against solar capacity installations of around 45 GW in 2025-

26, India's annual solar module production is estimated at nearly 60-65 GW, highlighting the growing oversupply concerns in the sector.

Industry sources said capacity utilisation levels at several module assembly plants are currently hovering around 30-40%.

"The prices of domestically manufactured cells are expected to rise after the mandate comes into force. As a result, companies with integrated manufacturing facilities may prioritise cell production, given the stronger margins and assured demand," an industry insider said, adding that some degree of market consolidation now appears inevitable during the transition

phase. Alpesh Dave, vice president at Surat-based Goldi Solar, told *The Indian Express* that while standalone module manufacturers are facing significant pressure on revenues, companies with integrated cell and module manufacturing facilities are in a much stronger position.

"Cell manufacturers in India are currently commanding very high margins because of the limited domestic supply and lack of sufficient competition. They are charging margins of at least 20-30%," Dave said.

Nitin Aggarwal, CEO of Rajasthan Solar Association which represents solar equipment manufacturers from the state, said that barring a handful of large integrated players, the new mandate could pose a serious

survival challenge for a significant section of the industry.

However, a divergent view is also emerging within the industry, with several manufacturers viewing the new mandate as a relief of sorts and offering a strong policy push for the investments being made in India's domestic solar manufacturing ecosystem. They maintain that concerns over limited domestic cell manufacturing capacity are overstated, especially because large utility-scale solar projects bid out before August 31, 2025 have been exempted from the domestic sourcing requirement for solar cells. According to them, this significantly reduces immediate pressure on domestic cell supplies.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Destiny: It's a Choice

Featuring essays by retired civil servants who served in the state, The Kerala Club combines administrative experience with literary flair to chart Kerala's achievements in terms of human well-being

AJ Philip

THERE IS something uniquely Malayali about retired civil servants forming a WhatsApp group and eventually producing an anthology on Kerala's past, present and future. It combines nostalgia with intellectual restlessness, administrative experience with literary flair, and above all an abiding concern for the destiny of the State they served. *The Kerala Club: Keepers of the Flame*, edited by KM Chandrasekhar and TP Sreenivasan, is the impressive outcome of that collective enterprise.

Published by Bloomsbury, the volume brings together 29 essays that examine the Kerala model critically and suggest ways to preserve and strengthen what has made the State exceptional. Kerala itself is a fascinating paradox. The very word Kerala is believed to derive from Kera, or coconut, though the coconut was not even endemic to the region. Formed by the merger of Travancore, Kochi and Malabar, Kerala is less a monolith than a mosaic of religions, customs, cuisines and cultural practices held together by the Malayalam language, now recognised as a *Shrestha Bhasha* by the Centre.

Once among the poorest regions in India, Kerala has become a State virtually free of extreme poverty. Economists and sociologists frequently celebrate the "Kerala Model" but this book refuses to indulge in self-congratulation. Beneath the gleaming malls and lavish houses lining Kerala's highways, the writers detect structural weaknesses that cannot be ignored indefinitely. S Subbiah points out one such weakness: the absence of any reliable mechanism to verify if government programmes actually reach the last beneficiary. Equally revealing is Sreenivasan's account of his difficult post-retirement experience in Kerala's higher education sector. His reformist suggestions were fiercely resisted and he himself was manhandled. Financial imprudence is another recurring concern in the writings of T Nandakumar and N Ramachandran.

Several essays stand out for their practical wisdom. KB Valsala Kumari sees the success of the Kudumbashree programme as proof that genuine gender equity is possible only when women are entrusted with leadership. Dr K Ellangovan makes a persuasive case for empowering nurses to handle minor procedures and emergencies, especially in rural areas where doctors are scarce. Environmental anxieties too run through the book. Brandon Corrie's essay on forests is among the most evocative. Beginning with the observation that "forests have neither voice nor votes", he appeals that humans must speak for them because only through people can forests be heard. Former IAS officer and Union Minister KJ Alphons sounds an alarm over the Mullaperiyar dam, calling it a "ticking bomb". His proposal that Kerala offer free water and electricity to Tamil Nadu in exchange for constructing a new downstream dam reflects the seriousness of the issue.

Throughout the volume, the intellectual shadow of Amartya Sen looms large. His "capability approach" to development finds repeated mention because Kerala's achievements are ultimately measured less in terms of wealth and more in terms of human well-being. Joy Vazhayil hopes Kerala can restrain the growing influence of pressure groups with narrow agenda and evolve into an egalitarian society marked by a high happiness index. Urbanisation, entrepreneurship and decentralisation are examined with similar candour. P Joy Oommen sees opportunity in Kerala becoming one continuous urban corridor from the north-end to the south-end. T Balakrishnan worries about mounting debt but finds hope in a younger generation willing to embrace entrepreneurship.

The personal narratives lend the anthology warmth and readability. Vinod Rai recounts how, though originally allotted Nagaland, he eventually joined the Kerala cadre. Rajan Medhekar offers perhaps the volume's most delightful anecdote: a science student topping Ancient Indian History in the civil services examination after devouring *Amar Chitra Katha* comics.

Though written largely by former bureaucrats, the essays rarely lapse into officialese. They write with humour, erudition and emotional investment in the State's future, making it both a serious reflection on the Kerala model and a collection of memories.

Philip is the president of Kerala Club

Amitabh Kant

TUSHAR MEHTA'S new books, *The Bench, the Bar and the Bizarre: The Unfamiliar, the Curious and the Extraordinary in Law* and *The Lawful and the Awful: Quirky Tales from the World of Law*, are unusual and welcome additions to contemporary legal writing. They arrive when most conversations around the justice system are centred on reform, pendency, digitisation, access and institutional capacity. These are necessary conversations but the books remind us that the law is not only a system of rules, procedures and precedents. It is also a human institution, shaped by temperament, humour, language, habit and experience. And occasionally, it is willing to loosen its collar a little.

This candid, self-aware view of the law has a long lineage. Fali Sam Nariman, one of the great stylists of the Indian Bar, famously remarked that "lawyers in India never retire; they simply drop dead," a line that captures both the stamina and the self-deprecation of the profession. His witticisms sit alongside a wider tradition of legal humour and satire, ranging from courtroom anecdotes to RK Laxman's cartoons that gently sent up bureaucrats, politicians and, at times, the legal system itself, show that institutions can be both dignified and capable of laughing at their own excesses. Mehta's books belong squarely in that tradition of looking at the Bench and the Bar with affection, irony and an eye for the quietly absurd.

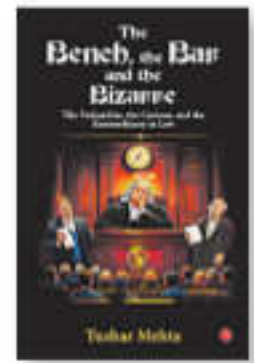
The courtroom is usually imagined as a place of solemnity. It has its own rituals, hierarchy, vocabulary and traditions. The robes, arguments, citations and judgments reinforce the sense that the law is serious, ordered and exacting. But anyone who has spent time in and around courts knows that the legal world is also full of surprise, wit, eccentricity and contradiction. Even grave proceedings can produce moments that are odd, revealing or unexpectedly amusing.

These books capture that world with affection and restraint. They do not make light of the law. Rather, they make the law more accessible. They show that the dignity of the legal system is not weakened by acknowledging its quirks. If anything, institutions become more credible when they can look at themselves honestly, and with some humour. The law deals with human behaviour in all its complexity. It is natural that the world of law should also contain wit, vanity, brilliance, confusion, vulnerability and occasional absurdity.

The Bench, the Bar and the Bizarre covers a wide canvas, including judges beyond borders, judicial eccentricities, courtroom

HUMANE FACE OF THE LAW

Solicitor General of India Tushar Mehta's books show the legal world in full colour: serious but not humourless, disciplined but not mechanical, majestic but not infallible



THE BENCH, THE BAR AND THE BIZARRE: THE UNFAMILIAR, THE CURIOUS, AND THE EXTRAORDINARY IN LAW

TUSHAR MEHTA
Rupa
328 pages
₹995

ORDER, ORDER
Outside the Supreme Court in New Delhi

are not built only by statutes and judgments. They are also built by conventions, temperament, conduct and memory. The best institutions combine authority with humility, discipline with openness, and seriousness with a capacity for self-reflection. These books show the Bench and the Bar not as distant abstractions but as communities of people engaged in interpreting law, resolving conflict and maintaining public trust.

The timing of these books is also relevant.

India's justice system is at an important stage in its evolution. As the economy grows, formalises and digitises, more citizens and businesses will enter formal legal and economic systems. There will be more contracts, transactions, enterprises, platforms and, inevitably, more disputes. That is part of the life of a growing society. But it also places greater pressure on the legal system to be faster, more predictable, more accessible and more citizen-focused.

This is where conversations around mediation, online dispute resolution, e-courts, technology-enabled case management and improved court administration become significant. India cannot realise its full economic and social potential unless dispute resolution becomes more efficient and affordable. Delay in justice affects not only individual litigants but also enterprise, investment, innovation and public trust.

But technology is not a substitute for justice. It is only an enabler. It can reduce delay, lower costs, improve access and bring greater transparency. But it cannot replace fairness, reason, restraint, integrity and compassion. These books, in a lighter and more anecdotal way, reinforce that law cannot be reduced to

process alone. It is ultimately about judgment, trust and institutional character.

As AI enters legal research, drafting, education and even adjudicatory support, it will bring opportunity and risk. Legal research must remain reliable. Citations honest and arguments disciplined.

For lawyers, these books will bring recognition and amusement. For students, they will make the law feel less intimidating. For general readers,

THE LAWFUL AND THE AWFUL: QUIRKY TALES FROM THE WORLD OF LAW

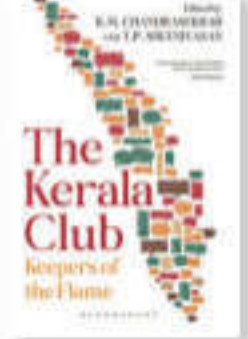
TUSHAR MEHTA
Rupa
336 pages
₹995

they open a world that often appears distant and inaccessible. For those interested in reform, they offer a useful reminder that systems are improved not only through rules, infrastructure and technology but also through a better understanding of culture, incentives, habits and human behaviour.

It is perhaps fitting that at the book launch at Bharat Mandapam, the addresses by Home Minister Amit Shah, Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Attorney General R Venkataramani were extremely candid, funny and showed incredible wit, echoing the spirit of the books themselves.

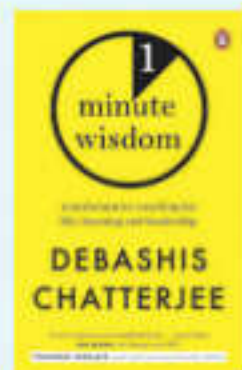
India's legal system must become faster, more modern, more transparent and more accessible. But it must also remain humane. These books show the legal world in full colour: serious but not humourless, disciplined but not mechanical, majestic but not infallible. Their quiet achievement is that they bring the Bench and the Bar closer to the people they ultimately serve.

Kant is Chancellor, NIT University; Chairman, Fairfax Centre for Free Enterprise; former G20 Sherpa, India, and former CEO, NITI Aayog



THE KERALA CLUB: KEEPERS OF THE FLAME

K.M. CHANDRASEKHAR AND T.P. SREENIVASAN
Bloomsbury
320 pages
₹799



ONE MINUTE WISDOM

DEBASHIS CHATTERJEE
Penguin
268 pages
₹499

SHELF LIFE

Follow the Tail

A MENAGERIE of *Panchatantra* animals — a talkative turtle, greedy crocodile, loyal mongoose and jealous fox — paired with a sprinkling of parables and excerpts from scriptures have, for generations, introduced children to the treacherous world. But where are the pithy stories for those navigating office politics, leadership quagmires and the general conundrum of being an adult?

Debashis Chatterjee's *One-Minute*

Wisdom — an eclectic collection of slice-of-life micro-essays that offer "core insights and transformative coaching techniques" — is the answer, tailored for the harried professional, who neither has the time to read nor philosophise the long queues, a half-finished statue propped up with a rod, the transit lounge at the airport or even wabi-sabi.

Chatterjee, who was the longest-serving director of Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode, and has spent three decades in leadership, education and personal development, certainly has the credentials to guide young professionals through his musings, both serene and experiential.

The book contains 158 vignettes parsed into three categories: life, learning and leadership. Much like the "talkative tortoise" of the *Panchatantra*, his first piece of advice to reach one's peak po-

tential is to "keep quiet," not just one's mouth trap, which he also recommends, but the mind, as "a restless mind becomes a liability."

In one of the micro-essays, he compares competitive life to kickboxing but advises taking up collaborative dancing instead; in another, he calls altruism the antidote to the algorithm; in the next, he compares an entrepreneur to a monk; and in still another, he compares information flow to the top of an iceberg. Each snippet is rich in imagery and metaphor.

There are some aphorisms one can pocket too, such as "there are two kinds of bosses in this world: windows and walls"; "life is at best one per cent competition and 99 per cent cooperation" and, my favourite, "there is one Buddha and billions of buddhus."

At one point, he observes that the

average lifespan of a CEO in the corporate jungle is 18 months, which is less than the warranty card on the office computer. He also weighs in on the pressing questions of our times: Can one have friends at work? Do barking bosses bite? Am I or AI? and, last but not least, Karma for professionals.

Much like the fables of yore, chimpanzees, horses, elephants, honey bees and cobras make an appearance, imparting wisdom of the ages, as do the lessons taught by blackberries and watermelons.

Feminine leadership and MeToo also get a mention. My grouse is that while Chatterjee asks us to beware of the Queen Bee Syndrome, he does not dedicate a snippet to what he, in passing, refers to as the 'King Cobras,' which feels unfair. After all, the creatures are venomous and partial to the corner (office) to boot.

AISHWARYA KHOSLA

'It's hard to stop me from writing'

Ruskin Bond on turning 92, his new book of friendship stories and why he simply can't stop writing

Devyani Onial

A BOY with an extra thumb who excels in spin bowling and a beauty contest of birds with an owl for a judge and a tiny redstart for a winner. These are just two of the half-a-dozen stories that Ruskin Bond has conjured up, propped in his bed in a spacious room in a leafy villa in Dehradun's tony Dalanwala as he recovers from a spinal surgery he underwent a few months ago. "Lying here, my imagination works overtime," he smiles. "I can't walk up the steep stairs of my house in Mussoorie but I don't mind being here. After all, I grew up here. My grandfather settled here in the 1900s, he was here from the time that the

CONFINED MAINLY TO THE HOUSE, BOND FINDS HIMSELF RETURNING TO THE PAST FOR MEMORIES AND STORYLINES

first train came in," says the author of *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* (1991), who turned 92 on May 19.

The surgery may have confined him mainly to a room, but his mind has been free to roam around everywhere. "It's hard to stop me from writing. Even though now I can't see well enough to write by hand as I used to, I dictate my stories to my granddaughter," says Bond, speaking on the sidelines of The Ruskin Bond Literature Festival held in Dehradun, presided by StoneX Global and The Ruskin Bond Foundation. One of India's most prolific writers, his recent book, *All-Time Favourite Friendship Stories* (Penguin), a collection of stories, some new, some old,



A FRIEND INDEED
Ruskin Bond

explores the theme of friendship. Friends have been a constant in many of Bond's works — some have been fictional while others have been real figures. "Somi was very real," says Bond, of one of the key characters in his first book, the semi-autobiographical, *The Room on the Roof* (1956), written when he was just 17. "It was in 1951 and I had just finished my schooling and

came to Dehradun, trying to write. Somi was from a Sikh family who came here as refugees during the Partition," says Bond of the younger brother of Everester Major HPS Ahluwalia. "He is settled in America but seven or eight years ago, he came to see me after nearly 70 years. He had grey hair and I had grey hair but we were the same," he laughs.

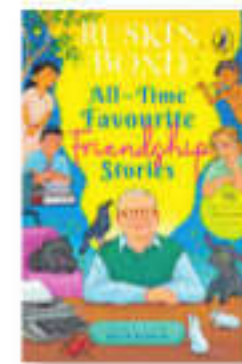
While some bonds endured, others got lost in the passage of time and history. Omar from the story, *The Playing Fields of Simla*, was one such friend. "He was actually Azhar. Up to 1947, one-third of the boys in our school (Bishop Cotton School) were Muslims, from Lahore, from as far as Peshawar. When Partition came, they had to be evacuated overnight in trucks under military escort. We lost one-third of our school and many friends," he says. As he writes in the story, he heard of Omar some 17 or 18 years later when India and Pakistan were at war. "...In a bombing raid over Ambala, not far from Simla, a Pakistani plane was shot down. Its crew died later in the crash. One of them, I learnt later, was Omar...Did he, I wonder, get a glimpse of the playing fields we knew so well as boys?" he writes.

Making friends is no longer so easy though. "To begin with, I was a shy boy till I was 15 or 16. Then I started making friends more easily. Now I am going back to my childhood days, I am finding it difficult to make friends again. There has to be a meeting ground. There is so much materialism now. In our time, money didn't come to our mind when making friends," he says.

Confined mainly to the house, Bond finds himself going back often in time. The past also resurfaced recently in his book *The Ghosts of Indian Small Towns: A Journey Through Time* (Aleph, 2026).

"I know fewer people to write about so one writes about the past which, for me, is very vivid. I have a very good memory. I used to be a film buff. I can tell you the cast of almost all the films made in the 1940s and early 50s," he says.

It's the past that he continues to turn to for memories and storylines. "But I am not writing a novel or anything long. I may not be able to finish it because after all, I cannot live forever. I am just flitting ahead, week by week, month by month and that's nice in a way because you don't have to make too many plans," laughs Bond.



ALL-TIME FAVOURITE FRIENDSHIP STORIES

RUSKIN BOND
Penguin
₹399

Broken Trust

India's examination system is facing a crisis that goes far beyond marksheets, answer scripts or software glitches. What is now unfolding across major national examinations is a deeper collapse of institutional credibility at a moment when academic competition has become central to middle-class aspiration and social mobility. The controversy surrounding the digital evaluation of the CBSE examinations may appear, at first glance, to be a technical problem. Students have alleged mismatched answer sheets, incorrect uploads, missing pages and irregular evaluation patterns after the introduction of a new on-screen marking system. Separately, claims of cyber vulnerabilities have raised questions about whether sensitive academic data was adequately protected. Authorities insist safeguards exist and that complaints are being reviewed.

But the damage lies less in the individual errors than in the growing public perception that the system itself cannot be trusted. That perception has acquired sharper political and emotional force because it follows closely on the heels of the NEET examination controversy. The alleged paper leak in one of India's most consequential entrance tests had already triggered public anger, litigation and widespread anxiety among students and parents. Together, these episodes create the impression of an examination ecosystem under strain - technologically ambitious, administratively overstretched and increasingly vulnerable to failure. For millions of Indian families, examinations are not routine assessments. They are life-defining filters that determine access to higher education, jobs, scholarships and status. In a country where economic mobility remains uneven and opportunities scarce, public faith in the fairness of examinations is as important as the examinations themselves. Once that faith weakens, every result becomes suspect and every procedural error acquires explosive significance. India's education bureaucracy has long relied on scale as proof of competence. Conducting examinations for millions of students across states and languages is undoubtedly a formidable administrative exercise. But technological expansion without corresponding institutional preparedness can worsen rather than solve existing problems. Digitisation is not merely the replacement of paper with screens.

It demands cybersecurity architecture, reliable audit trails, trained evaluators, transparent grievance systems and rapid public communication. Without these, technology simply shifts human error into digital opacity. The larger danger is psychological. A generation already shaped by hyper-competition, coaching pressure and employment insecurity now confronts uncertainty over whether even the evaluation system is dependable. That erosion of confidence can have lasting social consequences. Students who believe institutions are arbitrary or compromised eventually stop believing effort alone guarantees fairness. The answer cannot be temporary firefighting or selective damage control after controversies erupt online.

India requires a far more rigorous examination governance framework, including independent technological audits, transparent review mechanisms and accountability standards that apply equally to public testing agencies and private vendors. Examinations will always produce disappointment and disputes. But a democracy cannot afford a situation where its young citizens begin to doubt the integrity of the ladder meant to reward merit. When trust collapses in the examination hall, the consequences do not remain confined to education. They spill into the wider legitimacy of public institutions themselves.

Controlled Fire

The renewed exchange of strikes between the United States and Iran exposes the uncomfortable truth behind the language of ceasefires and diplomacy in West Asia: the war has paused, but the confrontation has not ended. What now exists is not peace, but a carefully managed instability in which military pressure and negotiations proceed simultaneously. Washington's latest attacks on Iranian targets near Bandar Abbas, coupled with Tehran's retaliatory claims against American bases in the Gulf, demonstrate that both sides are still willing to use force even while publicly discussing a settlement. Yet neither appears eager to trigger a direct, unrestricted war. That contradiction explains the peculiar nature of the present crisis. The battlefield has become an extension of the negotiating table.

At the centre of this confrontation lies the Strait of Hormuz, through which a substantial share of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas passes. Control over this narrow maritime corridor has transformed the conflict from a regional military contest into a global economic threat. The disruption of tanker traffic and rising fuel prices are reminders that the consequences extend far beyond Tehran, Tel Aviv or Washington. Europe, India, China and the wider Asian economy all have a stake in the stability of Gulf shipping lanes. The Trump administration's approach reflects a doctrine of coercive diplomacy. Military strikes are being presented as "defensive" actions designed to protect shipping and American forces, while negotiations continue in parallel. President Donald Trump's remarks that Iran is "negotiating on fumes" reveal a belief in Washington that sustained economic sanctions, regional isolation and military pressure have weakened Tehran sufficiently to force concessions.

Iran, however, is attempting its own balancing act. By retaliating selectively while still signalling interest in a negotiated settlement, Tehran is trying to preserve deterrence without inviting overwhelming escalation. Its insistence on asserting authority over shipping routes is as much about strategic relevance as national pride. For the Iranian leadership, appearing weak before domestic audiences and regional rivals carries its own risks. The broader danger is that both sides may overestimate their ability to calibrate escalation. History offers repeated examples of conflicts that slipped beyond intended limits because each actor believed it could control the next step. The Gulf is crowded with American assets, Iranian proxies, commercial vessels and nervous regional governments. In such an environment, a single miscalculation can quickly widen the conflict. What is emerging, therefore, is neither a decisive war nor a durable peace. Instead, the region is entering a prolonged phase of armed negotiation in which missiles, sanctions and diplomacy operate together. The real objective for both Washington and Tehran is not reconciliation, but leverage. That may prevent an immediate regional explosion, even as Israel continues to target Lebanon. But it also ensures that West Asia remains trapped in a cycle where ceasefires become temporary pauses between confrontations rather than pathways to stability.

Travails of traditional culture

Pluralism is a unique feature of Indian society and culture. India became the meeting place of various cultures, such as the Saka, Huna, Greek, Muslim, and British, which were incorporated into the expanding civilisation of India. Each culture contains its own tradition of dissent and protest, and each challenges the conventional order in its own way. The Hindus protested and raised their voice time and again when others were eating into the vitality of Hinduism

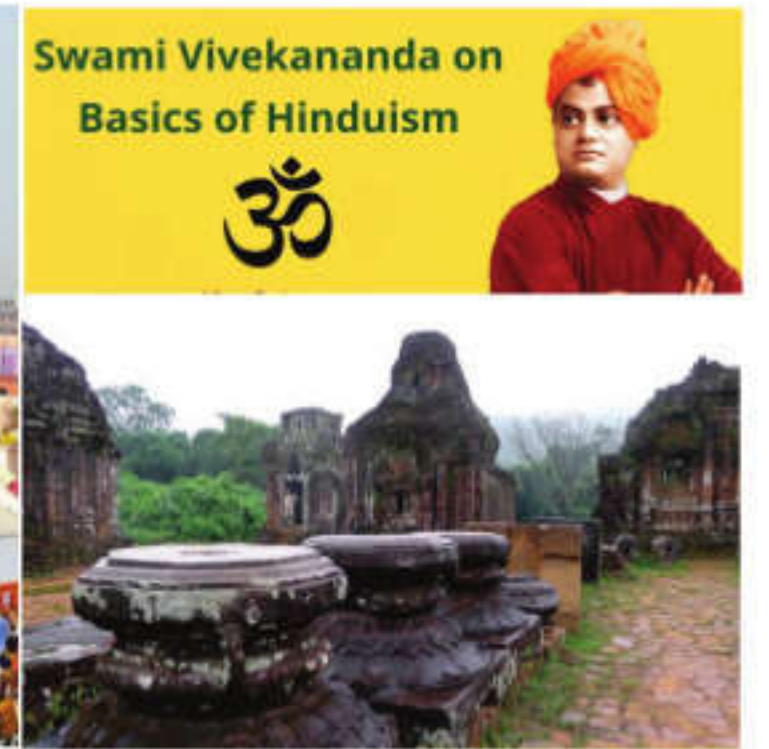
Indian culture has a long tradition and heritage, and its waves are still visible. The Indian knowledge system is widely acclaimed across the world. Hinduism and Buddhism spread in Southeast Asia and the Far East. Indian culture reached Southeast Asia in many waves over the centuries as it was spontaneously welcomed and accepted by the region's people. The syncretic character of Indian culture is said to have been successful in striking roots in Southeast Asia. Hinduism deeply influenced kingdoms like Champa, Srivijaya, Sailendra, and Mataram.

Hinduism is the essence of Indian traditional culture. It is not a religion, but is identified with the culture of a particular geographical area. It is the Sanatani cultural tradition of Bharatvarsha. The word 'Hindu' was first used by the ancient Persians to refer to the people living beyond the Indus River, and later used by Arab and Greek travelers. The sixth-century BCE inscriptions from Darius I refer to 'Hindu' as a Persian variation of the Sanskrit word 'Sindhu', used as a geographical term, not a religious one. It does not appear in ancient Indian texts. It evolved into a religious identifier much later, particularly during the medieval and colonial periods, to distinguish local traditions from Islam.

Hinduism contains the spirit of humanism, liberalism and religious tolerance. Besides the theology enshrined in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the great Hindu philosophies - the Vedanta, the Samkhya and the Yoga - have a strong influence on Hindu culture and civilisation. Hinduism continued to play a significant cultural role in the lives of diverse sections of Indian society.

Pluralism is a unique feature of Indian society and culture. India became the meeting place of various cultures, such as the Saka, Huna, Greek, Muslim, and British, which were incorporated into the expanding civilisation of India.

Each culture contains its own tradition of dissent and protest, and each challenges the conventional order in its own way. The Hindus protested and raised their voice time and again when others were eating into the vitality of Hinduism.



The spirit of Hinduism is the disinterested pursuit of truth, which was lost by some evil excesses. Unarguably, conservative ideas and evil practices were ingrained in Hinduism, but the reformers attempted to purify and protect it time and again. Ramananda, Chaitanya, Rammohan, Dayananda, Ramakrishna, and Vivekananda sought to preserve the heritage of Hinduism through their reformative ideas.

In Bengal, the intellectual mood had been changing under a variety of influences from the 1870s. A great change was noticed in the Hindu spirit. Religiously, the change manifested itself in a disposition to proclaim Hinduism one of the greatest religions. Defence of Hindu traditions became more respectable. Hindu intellectuals started re-examining the hidden significance of Hinduism; subsequently, Hinduism received greater attention and wider acceptance.

The nineteenth-century reform movements greatly stirred the Hindus. A small but influential group headed in the 1880s and 90s by Jogendra Chandra Ghosh attempted to project India's traditional image. Bankimchandra represented the sophisticated and intellectualised movement, interpreting Krishna as an ideal man, cultural hero and nation-builder. At a more obscurantist level, this trend was represented by Sasadhar Trakachudamani and Krishnaprasanna Sen, who claimed shastric precedents for all the discoveries of modern Western science.

This reawakening of Hinduism has been considered by many as 'revivalism', though the bhakti movement of the sixth-seventh century AD did not get such appreciation. The debate is still on about this term because of the implied meaning. Hinduism was never found to be weak in the pre-modern period, not even in nineteenth-century India. No Hindu sects voluntarily rejected Hinduism and embraced another religion. The Christian missionaries did not achieve great success in proselytising Hindus.

Sri Aurobindo said that the main work of the people of India was 'the resurrection of Hinduism'. By Hinduism, he meant the Sanatan Dharma or 'eternal religion', which could serve as the framework of a new world outlook, a religion that embraces science and faith, transcending all sectarian definitions. He said, "Other religions are preponderantly

religions of faith and profession, but the Sanatan Dharma is life itself ... It is to give this religion that India is rising ... India has always existed for humanity and not for herself and it is for humanity and not for herself that she must be great." This is the fundamental truth of Hinduism, and the Hindus must understand it.

Vivekananda raised the prestige of India and Hinduism very high through the Parliament of Religions in America. One major effect of his work was to increase people's faith in Vedantic philosophy. He had combined the passionate evocation of the glories of the Aryan tradition and Hinduism, particularly before Western audiences, with bitter attacks on contemporary degeneration. He stressed unflinching faith in the Hindu religion but did not take it in a limited sense.

It is in the context of 'revivalism' that the revival of Hindu society or community must be considered. There was discord in Hindu society; differences among the Hindus existed on many issues, including varna and caste. A generally accepted definition of 'Hindutva' seemed to have been required for the unity of the Hindu society. The context reminds us of what V D Savarkar wrote in 1923 under the title 'Who is a Hindu'. To him, a Hindu is a "person who regards the land of Bharatvarsha from the Indus to the seas as his Fatherland, as well as his Holy land that is the cradle of religion".

Hindu organisations such as Hindu Mela, Arya Samaj, Abhinava Bharat, and Hindu Mahasabha emerged. These were dominated mainly by the upper-caste educated Hindus. Of these, the Hindu Mahasabha is known as a political organisation. For a political movement in the interests of the Hindus, a distinct Hindu theory was seemingly necessary. Savarkar seemed to have propagated this kind of theory, i.e. the theory of Hindutva.

At a conference of the Hindu Mahasabha (Varanasi, 1923), Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and other Hindu leaders advocated for Hindu unity, seeking to erase differences between the high and low castes. Unfortunately, the reactionary leaders could not come out

of their orthodox boundaries. Differences prevailed between the liberals and conservatives in almost all the Hindu organisations. The only commonality among them was that no Hindu leader supported the Muslims' attempt to attain autonomy.

Thus circumstanced, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was established (1925) by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, a physician by profession, who initially became a member of the Anushilan Samiti in Calcutta. Though a follower of Gandhiji, he was deeply influenced by Savarkar's theory of Hindutva, and subsequently distanced himself from Gandhiji. Gandhiji dubbed RSS as a communal body with a totalitarian outlook, but Shyama Prasad Mookherjee, a leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, appreciated it as 'the one silver lining in the cloudy sky of India'.

Repeated attacks on Hinduism during British rule seemed to have made the conscious and educated Hindus aware of the status of their religion. They felt Hindu awakening was essential to keep India's glory alive. Their struggle against British imperialism made them understand that they could acquire political power only through a political fight. For this purpose, the Jan Sangh was launched as a political party (1951) under the leadership of Shyama Prasad Mookherjee. The Jan Sangh, over time, supported a mixed economy, zamindari abolition, land ceilings and land to the tiller, and declared itself to be non-communal and secular, focusing on national unity by 'nationalising all non-Hindus by inculcating in them the ideal of Bharatiya Culture'. But these are said to be formal declarations, and the party leaders are blamed for spreading communal distrust and hatred.

Though conservatism persists in Hinduism, Bengal's Hindu society hardly supports communalism. There is hardly any space for religious intolerance in Hinduism in the real sense of the term. India is the land of Buddha, Shankaracharya, Chaitanya, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Gandhi and Tagore, who spread the message across the world that the main objective of humanity should be to alleviate the sufferings of the populace through moral and spiritual remedies. It implies that the community's moral and spiritual health should be improved. When humanity and humility disappear, knowledge becomes narrow, and unrighteousness prevails, cultural decline begins.

The Daily Star

Who will defend our forests?

We talked about this for years. We saw how, before the 2024 political transition, influential groups and even government officials encroached upon the Chhunati Wildlife Sanctuary in Chattogram. But it's saddening that this trend continues even today, according to a recent report by this daily.

The original Chhunati forest area covered 37,182 acres, and in 1986, the then government declared around 19,200 acres between Chattogram and Cox's Bazar as the Chhunati Wildlife Sanctuary.

But due to unabated encroachment and extraction over the decades, at least 1,870 acres have been converted into settlements and agricultural land.

According to the Forest Department, 6,991 houses have been built within the

boundaries of the forest so far; there are also 18,899 betel leaf gardens, 23 fish farms, and 1,550 acres for paddy cultivation.

Against this despicable reality, one thing that gives us pause is that most of those who have built structures illegally within the forest are climate refugees.

While the role played by influential locals in facilitating such encroachment and settlement is undeniable, and punishable, the plight of many residents, having been displaced by coastal erosion, also deserves consideration.

Inevitably, however, this growing human presence has severely affected the wildlife that once thrived here - for whose benefit,

let us not forget, the sanctuary was originally established. Once a lush haven for Asian elephants, the safety and welfare of these animals have been compromised over time due to declining forest density and frequent human-elephant conflict.

Government-led development projects have also added to the erosion of the forest's biodiversity.

According to data from the Wildlife Division, 207 acres of forest land were de-reserved in 2018, while around 240,000 trees were felled and several hills levelled to accommodate the Chattogram-Cox's Bazar railway line.

Since its operations began in late 2023, not only has the railway disrupted wildlife behaviour in the area, but an elephant was also killed by a train in

October 2024. Additionally, the proposed expansion of the Chattogram-Cox's Bazar highway threatens elephant crossing points in and around the sanctuary.

We urge the BNP government to prioritise the preservation of the biodiversity and wildlife of the Chhunati Wildlife Sanctuary, along with finding humane alternatives for those displaced by climate crises.

The authorities must identify major encroachers and bring them to justice so that they cannot evade accountability. Chhunati is nationally and internationally significant, given its status as the only Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) site in Bangladesh.

Fragmented efforts to prevent further deforestation or recover lost land are no longer enough; we need a coordinated approach.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Human face

Sir, Immediately on taking over charge of the state after ending TMC's 15-year rule, the BJP government has been in action mode by taking a slew of steps - transfer of land for fencing borders, lowering the decibel level during azan, stopping crowds on public roads, restrictions on cattle slaughter, stopping stipends for imams and purohits, addressing the menace of unauthorised constructions, clearing Howrah and Sealdah stations of hawkers in a move to restore railway properties, crackdown on the tolabaz army of the TMC regime, implementing the Annapurna scheme, unemployment assistance, Kisan Samman Nidhi, etc. For a state which suffered irreparably due to tyranny of 50 years and freed at last on 4 May 2026, the

beginning is definitely very inspiring. However, the government must adopt a pragmatic approach in evicting hawkers through proper rehabilitation plans for them. There must be a human face to such drives.

Yours, etc., Vidyeshwar Prasad, Kolkata, 27 May.

IAF for NEET?

Sir, The Indian Air Force (IAF) may be roped in to transport NEET-UG 2026 re-exam question papers on June 21. This unprecedented move comes after the May 3 exam was cancelled due to a major paper leak. Does it mean or imply that honest Indians in civies just do not exist? Has self-respect, honesty and dignity disappeared from our civil society? In plain and simple terms, one can't trust

Indians (civilians) to keep question papers of a national exam a secret.

The unusual decision must come as a moment of introspection for all Indians - particularly those who 'leak' such papers, those who buy them and last but not the least, those who do not take responsibility for such serious 'leaks'. Our Air Force is primarily the guardian of our skies. Its use for transporting question papers is a clear indication that our national character has reached its nadir.

Yours, etc., Avinash Godbole, Dewas, 29 May.

Political pawns

Sir, The report 'Brigade Parade Ground serves as Eid prayer site this year' published today, upholds the truth that if the administration is strict about implementing

the law rising above politics, citizens of the country will happily comply.

Doing politics over the minority community, some political parties of our country have put the Muslim community's integrity in doubt.

As a result, the minority Muslim class has always been treated as a pawn of politics. Political parties have used them for political purposes rather than aiding their progress. The Sachar Commission report and the last 15 years of TMC rule in Bengal uphold this truth vividly.

If the Muslim community does not succumb to the appeasement policy of political parties, and seeks real progress through the constitutional norms and values of the country, no one will dare to label them as anti-national.

Yours, etc., Mihir Kanungo, Kolkata, 29 May.

Did Hindu values lead to Gabbard's resignation?

BASAB DASGUPTA

When I heard the name "Tulsi Gabbard" years ago I assumed that she was an Indian American, married to a Mr. Gabbard because Tulsi is a sacred plant to the Hindus. Later I learned that she is Samoan without any Indian roots. However, she is a devout Hindu, following the Vaishnava tradition. She was the first US politician I came across who had a completely different background and embraced our religion.

I was impressed to learn that she took her oath of office in the US Congress by holding the Bhagavat Gita and was named the "First Hindu in the Congress".

Tulsi saw active military duty including a deployment in Iraq during 2004-05 and later served in Kuwait. Taking arms in defence of one's country and risking life is the ultimate proof of one's patriotism in my book. As a member of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) she served in the US House of Representatives from 2013 to 2021, from the second congressional district of Hawaii. She has held the rank of a Lieutenant Colonel in the US army reserve since 2021.

Tulsi grew up in Hawaii. She and her husband, Abraham Williams, also a Hindu of European and Samoan descent, got married in a traditional Hindu ceremony in 2015. She practices yoga and meditation every day.

She is smart, knowledgeable, analytical, articulate, brave, proud of her accomplishments as well as heritage and a patriot. She ran for the US presidency in 2020 as a member of the Democratic National Committee but stepped down from the race in favour of Joe Biden. It gradually became apparent that the DNC machinery was working against Tulsi, starting

with Hillary Clinton labelling her a "Russian asset".

She left the DNC in 2022 and became an independent; she described the DNC as being "under the complete control of an elitist cabal of warmongers driven by cowardly wokeness". It takes a lot of guts to clearly, concisely and bluntly declare a strong opinion like this knowing fully well that a block within the DNC hated her, and could come back to haunt her.

Tulsi became a Republican in 2024. President Donald Trump not only embraced her but also nominated her for the important position of "Director of National Intelligence" (DNI). Her team became busy in the laborious task of digging out past intelligence reports. She declassified hundreds of pages from previously classified reports. On 23 July 2025, she issued what might be the most bombastic report in US politics.

According to her findings, a presidential brief was presented in December 2016 to Barack Obama, who was still the president because Donald Trump had not been sworn in yet. The brief stated that, despite their efforts to interfere with the 2016 US presidential election, Russia had failed. Obama did not make this information public but instructed his team to change the narrative and in effect, manufacture evidence suggesting Russia colluded with Trump to influence the election in Trump's favour.

Questionable unverified reports such as the "Steele Dossier" were used as a basis for the report. Subsequently, this altered report was widely publicized by the media and led to the years-long anti-Trump campaign including the Mueller probe and impeachment efforts.

Tulsi called her released documents proof of the existence of a "treasonous" plot to undermine President Trump and persuade the public about some illegitimacy about his victory in

2016. In addition, it cost the country millions in the Mueller probe alone. Tulsi also revealed that Russia was sitting on the information of Hillary being on "heavy tranquilizers" to deal with "psycho-emotional" problems during the 2016 election; Tulsi's point was that, if Russia really wanted to favour Trump they could have disclosed this information.

I want to put my emphasis on Tulsi's courage in disclosing the truth and not on partisan politics. Obama and Clinton are not only the two most powerful people within the DNC; they are also known to be ruthless when it comes to crushing their critics.

The decline in Tulsi's cozy relationship with Trump started when the US destroyed Iran's nuclear facilities in June 2025. The mainstream media jumped all over Tulsi because of her reported opinion that Iran was not developing a nuclear bomb. She claimed that her comments were taken out of context and agreed with Trump's action.

When the US and Israel jointly attacked Iran, she was similarly grilled by the Democrats with the question if Iran posed an "imminent" threat, as claimed by Trump to justify the conflict. She declared that her job was to document the threats. Only Trump could conclude if they were imminent or not.

Tulsi also showed her objectivity by stating that Pakistan could develop nuclear ICBM possibly reaching the US mainland, at the risk of sounding contradictory to Trump's seemingly pro-Pakistan bias. Her critics immediately attributed it to her Hindu faith and admiration of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Internal disagreement over the Iran war continued to hemorrhage Tulsi's relation with Trump. Two key members of her staff resigned; first it was Joe Kent, the counterterrorism chief, who explicitly



expressed his disagreement with the Trump administration and then Amaryllis Kennedy, the daughter-in-law of Robert Kennedy, Jr. It is widely believed that Ms. Kennedy's resignation was also related to her opposition to the Iran war but she officially cited family priorities as the reason.

Tulsi's exact view of the war is not known but she apparently did not actively dissuade them from leaving. There were even rumours that Trump might fire her.

Finally, Tulsi's own resignation came as a great shock to many people. Although she gave a valid reason, related to a rare form of bone cancer of her husband, it seems that she could have chosen to follow a number of other plans to address her husband's situation; including taking temporary leave of absence or conducting her routine activities remotely.

Her decision is shocking because her resignation effectively means an end to her political career. Now, neither party will view her as a future leader worthy of grooming regardless of what happens to her husband.

Knowing how smart, honest and politically astute Tulsi is I wonder what made her take this decision. It seems that her guiding principles come from her faith in Hinduism such as "Satyameva Jayate" (truth alone triumphs) and "Ekla cholore" (composed by Tagore based on a Vaishnavite kirtan meaning "go alone").

The Vaishnava concept of marriage as two souls in one body puts a high priority on her duties to her husband and of course, there is the key concept of "Ahimsa" (non-violence) which preaches against all forms of conflicts. She not only talks the talk but walks the walk when it comes to Hinduism. Perhaps she justified her earlier combat participation as being a necessary evil.

I will pray for her return, perhaps as an independent. America needs leaders like her. Tulsi is another name of Laxmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. I hope that she justifies that name by taking the US on a path of peace and prosperity in future.

(The writer, a physicist who worked in industry and academia, is a Bengali settled in America and an admirer of Tulsi Gabbard.)

NOW AND AGAIN

LURE OF THE BIG SCREEN

N J RAVI CHANDER

Growing up, Everest Theatre in Bengaluru was the epicentre of my entertainment world. Nestled just a stone's throw from our home in Fraser Town, it became our sanctuary in the pre-television era. At night, when the streets quieted down, we could hear the crisp dialogues and catchy songs wafting through the air. The theatre buzzed with an enchanting energy - soaring ceiling fans whirred furiously and tilting seats added a touch of playful charm.

Sure, it had its quirky residents, like bedbugs and rodents who seemed to rule the place, but that only added to the excitement. And let's not forget the exhilarating suspense of frequent power outages, which had the entire audience on the edge of their seats, waiting for the magic to come back to life. Some moviegoers dashed home to wrap up a chore, and raced back just in time for the electrifying moment the lights flickered back on!

Built in the 1930s by the visionary Maistry Chowriappa, this theatre became an iconic landmark of Fraser Town. In its heyday, buses from the city would stop at its entrance. Maistry Chowriappa wasn't just a notable architect; he played a pivotal role in shaping other renowned city landmarks such as St. Francis Xavier's Cathedral and Gosha Hospital. His remarkable contributions even earned him a gold medal from Her Majesty's Government during the British Raj. Old-timers have vivid memories of him cruising through town in his charming horse carriage.

The theatre was revitalised when Madanlal Kshatriya took the reins in the early 1960s. Fast forward to 2002, and Madanlal's family acquired the land and building from Chowriappa's heirs.

Experiencing a movie at Everest was nothing short of a thrilling adventure. Initially captivated by black-and-white cinema, we later embraced colour films. The memory of coins showering the screen, with applause for each epic fight scene, is something I treasure. During that exhilarating era, the love for our cinematic icons reached a fever pitch.

As I stepped into the vibrant world of college life in Bengaluru, a thrilling new chapter began. With attendance no longer a concern, the cinemas along the bustling Mahatma Gandhi Road, Brigade Road, and Residency Road, that screened English-language movies, became my weekend haunts. Theatres like Plaza, Blue Moon, Blue Diamond, Symphony, Lido, Rex, Imperial, New Opera, BRV, and Galaxy became my go-to spots. Although the old city boasted scores of cinema halls, I seldom explored that part of town.

The giant posters and striking cutouts of our favourite stars outside cinema halls were impossible to ignore. Inside the booking area, a vibrant board filled with stunning pictures from the films fueled our excitement. Many made a livelihood by selling tickets on the black market. Theatres used to come alive with a whirlwind of shows - the morning show, matinee, the first and second shows, and sometimes even a surprise noon show squeezed in between. Those vibrant single-screen cinema theatres, full of character and charm, have now faded into a nostalgic memory.

100 Years Ago

News Items

SIMLA HEALTH SCHOOL

GROWING DEMAND FOR WORKERS

(From Our Correspondent.)

Simla, May.

The new Lady Reading Health School is nearing completion and classes will be started by about October 15 next. The school is the most up-to-date building of its kind in India, and the training for women as health visitors to be given their compares favourably with that given in England. The courses include instruction in hygiene, domestic science, maternity and child welfare work. Elementary economics, etc., as well as practical instruction in the training of daies and in the conduct of child welfare work. The services of Miss Graham and Miss Griffin, who are well known in Delhi, have been secured as superintendents of the school. The need for health visitors is every day becoming more apparent. Interest is being roused all over the country in the work of care of mothers and babies which is carried on by health visitors and the demand for their ser-vices exceeds the supply. Candidates for training are urgently required. There are excellent openings for the right type of worker and the salaries given compare very favourably with those given in other professions. Those applying should be in possession of a midwifery certificate and should preferably have some experience in maternity work. They should have good general education and be able to follow lectures in English. Scholarships are granted to suitable candidates. All inquiries should be addressed to the Secretary, Lady Chelmsford League, Viceregal Estates, Simla.

(The writer is Professor of International Relations, Lancaster University. This article was published on www.theconversation.com)

Few takers likely for Trump's poison pill

SIMON MABON

As negotiations to end the Iran war continued on May 25, Donald Trump made a series of phone calls in which he pressed key leaders from the Middle East to join the Abraham accords. Announced in 2020, these accords established diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab states, beginning with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain.

The US president reiterated his proposal in a social media post later that day: "After all the work done by the United States to try and pull this very complex puzzle together, it should be mandatory that all of these countries, at a minimum, simultaneously, sign the Abraham accords."

Trump's post suggested that Iran could also join the accords. This really would be something, given that one motivation for signing the accords was to push back against Iranian influence in the region. Sadly for Trump, this is wishful thinking at best.

Few Middle Eastern leaders can agree to Trump's proposal. In comments published by Politico

on May 26, one unnamed former US diplomat described Trump's comments as a "poison pill". They added he had created new "conditions for peace that neither Iran nor the states in question will accept".

In advocating this approach, Trump misreads the vitriol held by many across the Middle East - and beyond - about Israel's actions in Gaza and Lebanon. The official death toll in Gaza, where Israel has fought a military campaign since 2023, stands at over 70,000 people. A further 170,000 people have been injured amid what many are calling a "genocide".

In southern Lebanon, Israel has used ground troops and a relentless campaign of air attacks since the beginning of the Iran war in what appears to be an attempt to secure a "buffer zone" against attacks from Hezbollah. More than 3,200 people there have been killed so far, with a further 7,500 injured and millions forced from their homes. This is despite the signing of a ceasefire between Israel and the Lebanese government in April.

The destruction of Gaza angered Bahrain and the UAE, with Manama recalling its ambassador to Israel shortly after the start of the war.

But neither country withdrew from the Abraham accords. Instead, trade and security collaboration continued with both taking the stance that working more closely with Israel would be in the best interests of their states.

Yet Bahrain and the UAE are outliers in the Middle East. Other countries are far less willing, or able, to normalise with Israel. When US officials visited Saudi Arabia in 2024, four years after the signing of the accords, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is said to have told them he feared being killed if the normalised relations with Israel.

Though many have argued the Saudi Kingdom was close to normalising relations with Israel before the war in Gaza, this has been largely rejected by Saudi officials. And since the outbreak of the Gaza war, bin Salman and other Saudi officials have repeatedly stressed that normalisation of diplomatic relations with Israel will not happen without irrevocable steps being taken towards Palestinian statehood.

Meanwhile, tensions between Israel and Turkey have been brewing for some time. In February, the former Israeli prime minister, Naftali Bennett, declared that Turkey was

"the next Iran". More recently, on May 20, Israel's minister of culture and sports, Miki Zohar, declared that Turkey should be treated as "an enemy state".

And in Qatar, state officials remain furious with Israel for launching strikes on Doha in 2025 in an attempt to kill key Hamas figures who were based there. Qatar said it had been hosting Hamas figures as part of broader mediation efforts requested by the US and Israel.

The strikes led to a now infamous photo released by the White House of Trump overseeing the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, while he called Qatari prime minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani to apologise.

The idea of Iran becoming a signatory of the Abraham accords in the immediate aftermath of a devastating war is also fanciful. Tensions between Israel and Iran can be traced back to 1979, when a revolution toppled the Iranian monarchy and led to the establishment of an Islamic republic.

Iran's new leadership immediately provided support to the Palestinian cause and, in later years, to Hezbollah and other militias across the Middle East. In response, Israel has carried

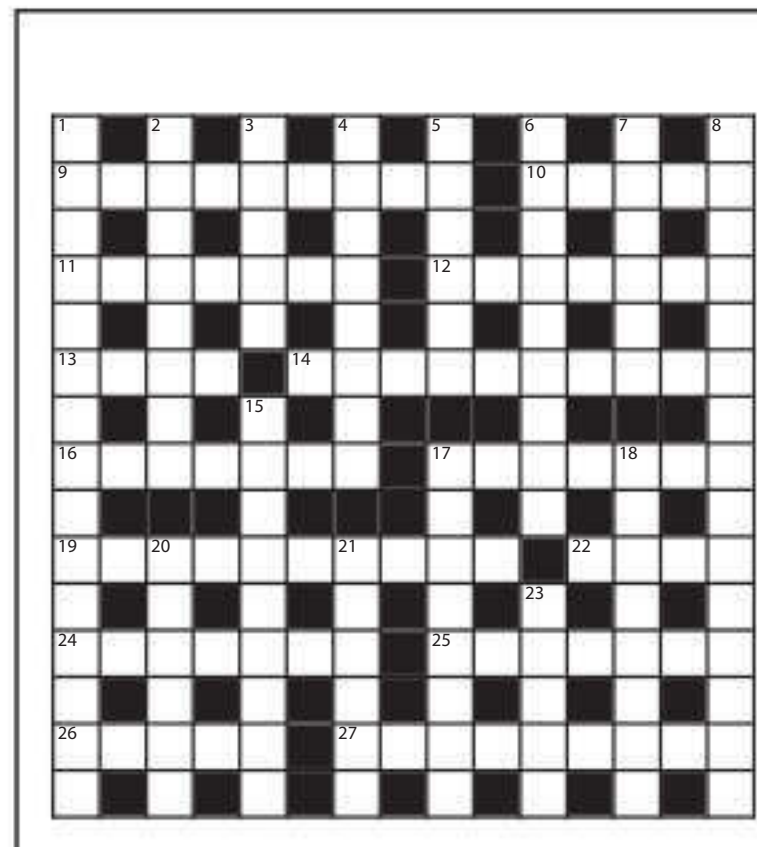
out military strikes on targets across Iran, assassinated key nuclear scientists and more. To suggest disregarding almost half a century of history with little to no efforts at reconciliation is farcical.

Why, then, has Trump suggested such a move? Perhaps it speaks to a need to assuage domestic constituencies within the US, or those in Israel, pushing for wider normalisation between Tel Aviv and the Arab and Muslim worlds.

A second reading is that it is an attempt to prevent diplomatic progress on resolving tensions with Iran by putting an insurmountable obstacle in the way in the form of the demand for normalisation with Israel, perhaps reflecting the plurality of positions on the war found in Washington.

A third view is that this is a move aimed at diminishing the scale of destruction and human suffering that has been wrought on Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon, in the hope that a form of transactional politics - driven by trade and security - will prove sufficient. But, as Trump will find out, this is a longshot.

Crossword | No. 293476



Last Sunday's Solution

AUKS DECAPITATE
FITNMPNNR
FORGONE OCTAGON
IORRSEUI
DUVET STATELITE
AHHOLLS
VENGEANCE TIGHOR
IERREGEU
THORN PRETENDER
LELRUNNI
PROMINENT TRAIT
OGGPESTIA
KRISHNAREINSIN
ESTRPAULI
REMASTERED VEDA

ACROSS

- 9 Hit the X0? (6,3)
- 10 Left in place old Disney character (5)
- 11 Getting back to Coleridge, rating rushed over to tell story (7)
- 12 On the gin, read out letters in swinging bar (7)
- 13 Launder western money initially neglected (4)
- 14 British chatter about stray animal in stories (4,6)

- 16 Ducks missing Chandler's debut in Friends? (7)
- 17 Old pupil a bright one nothing escapes (7)
- 19 Fool about to get at chap almost drunk (3,3,4)
- 22 Put together power ballad? (4)
- 24 So much French spirit causes outburst (7)
- 25 Quintessential Scots girl endlessly seen in cricket club (7)

- 26 You French with craftsmanship entering Estonian city (5)
 - 27 One bearing fruit to relieve poor (5,4)
- DOWN
- 1 Dark horse that may be last in Derby literally? (7,8)
 - 2 More than reasonable fare to Jupiter or Mars? (8)
 - 3 Bark perhaps coming about the

- Spanish hold at sea (5)
- 4 Delicacy is mixed with forage (4,4)
- 5 Entertainer stumped amid derisive hoot (6)
- 6 Soldier dropped in wearing suitable American equipment (9)
- 7 Brill for each coming aboard U-boat (6)
- 8 It prevents rocky ground becoming really stony (7-8)

- 15 Mysterious clues about protagonist with roving eye (9)
- 17 An atmosphere dismissing current style is rebellious (8)
- 18 Transport ship in drama crossing area by Channel island (5,3)
- 20 Medic introduced to swimmer in wasteland (6)
- 21 Brexit insulted loads empty gun with bullets (6)
- 23 Composer wasting time in tourism (5)

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

Air pollution cut India's solar power output by 9.6% in 2023: study

Vasudevan Mukunth

Aerosols in the air reduced the amount of solar power generated in India by 9.6% in 2023, equivalent to around 15 terawatt-hours (TWh), according to a new analysis published in *Nature Sustainability*. The same study reported that the global average loss due to the same cause in 2023 was 5.8%.

Between 2017 and 2023, pollution-related electricity generation losses from

existing installations averaged 74 TWh a year – roughly one third of the electricity generated every year by new solar capacity.

According to the study, India's loss is one of the world's highest, with the most electricity generation potential lost in the country's heavily polluted north.

The researchers assembled what they called the first global facility-level database of solar photovoltaic generation and losses,

totalling 1.4 lakh facilities worldwide. They analysed the numbers together with satellite data, atmospheric data, and machine-learning.

Aerosols are fine particles of sulphates and carbon, among other constituents, and they directly reduce the amount of sunlight reaching solar panels, thus undermining an important source of power meant to replace coal in India.

India's neighbour with

an even bigger appetite for power, China, lost the most power generation potential in 2023, 61.3 TWh, but which was lower than India's as a fraction of the total generation (7.7%). In fact, China both illustrates the scale of the problem and a way through it.

China generated 793.5 TWh of solar electricity in 2023 and accounted for 54.9% of aerosol-related losses worldwide. Many of the country's solar farms lie within 30 km of coal

power plants, increasing the former's exposure to pollution that blocks sunlight.

However, China reduced pollution-related loss of solar power by around 1.4% a year from 2013 to 2023 and at the same time it expanded coal power. It reduced the losses by retrofitting coal plants with high-efficiency filters that curtailed sulphur dioxide and particulate emissions.

A key technology in re-

ducing these emissions is flue-gas desulphurisation (FGD), which removes sulphur dioxide from flue gas vented into the air.

India's aerosol-induced losses in solar power production did not decline from 2013 to 2023, staying flat. In 2025, the Indian government also significantly weakened a target to install FGD units by limiting them to coal plants near major cities and, on a case by case basis, plants in critically polluted areas.

SNAPSHOTS



Elephants' decline portends dung beetle co-extinction

Elephants are keystone species that sustain savannah ecosystems. A long-term study in East Africa has reported that dung beetles depend heavily on elephant dung. Following a 15-year field experiment, researchers concluded that beetle species richness dropped by 23%, and total beetle biomass fell by 51% sans elephant dung. Smaller herbivores, like cattle or zebras, could not fill the gap. The elephants' decline could thus trigger a coextinction cascade that could also reduce seed dispersal.

How WhatsApp and a clot-buster eased rural access to heart care

By combining WhatsApp-based coordination, training for frontline healthcare workers, and the clot-busting injected drug teneceplase, doctors are improving access to timely heart attack care in rural Punjab

Swagata Yadav

At 4:40 am on May 4, a 40-year-old man came to Khanna sub-divisional hospital's emergency department with sweating and chest pain. Within minutes, the staff nurse and emergency medical officer had checked his heart rate, blood pressure, blood sugar, and more importantly had conducted an echocardiogram (ECG).

The ECG result was WhatsApped to the hospital's medicine consultant, who diagnosed it as an ST-elevated myocardial infarction (STEMI) and asked the EMO to administer the drug teneceplase. STEMI is a severe, life-threatening heart attack with significant coronary artery blockage. The injected drug teneceplase is used for thrombolysis, or to dissolve the clot.

The patient received the injection within half an hour of his ECG results and soon felt better. Out of danger, he was referred to the Government Medical College in Patiala for further treatment.

This case was the 100th thrombolysis case at the hospital, the highest recorded by any centre in Punjab. A few years ago, any chest pain patient in secondary health centres like sub-divisional and district hospitals would have been immediately referred to medical colleges for further treatment. The 40-70 minutes that the patient would lose in transport and further diagnosis would mean irreversible damage to the heart muscles and their ability to



Clockwork care

STEMI patients receive 35,000 rupees' worth of treatment free of cost within minutes, saving their lives

■ Mission AMRIT in Punjab has been using a 'hub and spoke' model to rapidly treat heart attacks

■ Local health centres perform thrombolysis to dissolve dangerous blood clots during the critical first hour

■ Staff members use WhatsApp to share ECG data with expert cardiologists for immediate diagnosis and medical guidance

■ Providing early treatment at local centers prevents heart damage

and significantly improves the chances of patient survival

■ The initiative offers expensive cardiac treatments for free, making urgent care accessible to many rural populations

■ Success depends on consistent staff training and effective coordination between various government hospitals and medical colleges

Dr Bishav Mohan pointing to the ECG received in the Mission AMRIT WhatsApp group.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

work in future.

Since July 2025, the Punjab government has implemented Mission AMRIT (short for 'Acute Myocardial Reperfusion in Time'), where sub-divisional hospital and district hospital staff – the spokes – are equipped with drugs, equipment, and training to conduct thrombolysis under the guidance of a cardiologist or a specialist in the medical colleges, which are the hubs. When a person with STEMI reaches the spoke within up to 12 hours of a heart attack and no complications, they are thrombolysed and referred to a hub for further angiography and angioplasty.

Around 34,000 people with chest pain have been registered in the project's spokes in Ludhiana. Of them, 1,900 were diag-

nosed with STEMI and 900 received thrombolysis. The initiative has expanded the work of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) STEMI ACT project from 2020 to 2024.

According to Hitinder Kaur, director of Health Services of the Department of Health and Family Welfare, Punjab, STEMI patients receive Rs 35,000's worth of treatment free of cost within minutes.

The work continued during the 2025 floods and in challenging districts close to the border with Pakistan.

Getting appropriate care at the spokes has also greatly improved patient outcomes in medical colleges.

Amritsar's Government Medical Centre is a hub for six districts around it. In the last 10 months, it has

received 272 patients who were thrombolysed at the spokes, of which 265 underwent angioplasty at the centre, Parminder Singh Manghera, assistant professor of cardiology here, said.

The project's success is due to the efforts of health officials like Ashu Gupta, of the Non-Communicable Diseases Cell of the Department of Health and Family Welfare, and Bishav Mohan, who led the ICMR project at Ludhiana.

Many of the emergency departments deal with infrastructure gaps, staff transfer and shortage, and high patient numbers, so keeping the overwhelmed medical teams motivated requires treating nurses as equal partners, using local languages in training and materials, awarding 'best performers' from the dis-

tricts every month, and organising award ceremonies with the health minister, Dr Mohan said.

After the successful Tamil Nadu STEMI pilot showed a hub and spoke model could reduce mortality, it was implemented in Goa, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and elsewhere. But including only the government hospitals as hubs reduces the model's efficacy, Thomas Alexander, who along with Ajit Mulasari piloted the TN-STEMI model, said. "Patients covered under government insurance schemes should have access to the nearest reperfusion centre – public or private – with safeguards to prevent overuse and overcharging," Dr. Alexander added.

In Punjab, a year after Mission AMRIT was implemented, some other limitations of the model have also become obvious—it relies on individual interest and effort at the spoke level and at present, there is no follow-up as to what happens to patients after they leave the spokes.

That said, thanks to the project, people are more aware and are turning up early: "We are seeing more women from villages above the age of 50 with symptoms turning up in spoke centres because it is close to home and accessible, we would have missed this demographic before," according to Dr Mohan.

(This article is the second of a three-part series by Nivara, a digital public health platform, on the health system's response to emergency cardiac care in India. It is supported by Sunfox Technologies)



Rice paper can be modified to recover e-waste gold

Researchers have found a way to use rice paper to recover gold from electronic waste. They modified the starch-based food material using a chemical process called hydrazination, which created a porous structure on the paper that quickly and selectively pulled gold from complex liquids, including dissolved CPU waste. It works by attracting gold ions and reducing them into solid gold nanoparticles on the paper's surface. Finally, the paper can be burnt to retrieve pure metallic gold.



Sea cucumber tissue lives on for years without decaying

Tissues from the sea cucumber can survive and grow independently for years. When scientists removed specific body parts and placed them in natural seawater, they thrived for more than three years without supplements. They also used immune cells to beat infections and absorbed nutrients from the water. This unique form of natural immortality challenges conventional views on biological decay and offers an ethical model for researchers to study healing.

The ice apple is more than just a seasonal delicacy



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

D. Balasubramanian

Come the summer months, April through August, and the fruit market across India is replete with the fruit ice apple, called 'nungu' in Tamil, 'munjulu' in Telugu, 'tadgola' in Hindi, and 'taal' in Bengali. It is largely found in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and in West Bengal.

Once you peel its outer skin, you find an ice-like fruit that tastes delicious. The tree is a member of the palm trees, commonly called palmyra. It is a tropical tree, and fruit, found in India, Bangladesh, and parts of Southeast Asia. It is the State tree of Tamil

Nadu. Botanists say it is a member of the *Arecaceae* family and its name is *Borassus flabellifer*.

Ancient physicians in these regions used materials from the plant for medicinal purposes. Ancient Tamil literature describes it as a favoured plant with a sweet juice. The locals made jaggery and an alcohol-rich toddy from the plant. Ayurveda practitioners extracted the liquid from the tree's branches and body parts for use in a health-promoting drink called *neera*. The palm tree's leaves were also used as a writing instrument. Even today, the tree's branches are used to make mats, baskets, umbrellas, purses, and other handicraft materials in rural India.

Research on the plant biology of palmyra is ac-



A woman prepares ice apples at a roadside stall to eat. GETTY IMAGES

tively going on in some parts of India, with support from the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare. The Palmyra Research Station in Kasargod, Kerala, is studying how *neera* from the plant can be tapped better and the biological aspects of the tree. Researchers at the Palmyra Research Station at Killikulam in Thoothu-

kudi district in Tamil Nadu are involved in genetic analyses of the plant for better yield, and are also studying the optimal way to make jaggery from the fruit. In Assam, we have tropical rainforests, deciduous forests, and grasslands in the Brahmaputra Valley, and in some of these ecosystems, palmyra trees and their products are being

studied to understand their properties and other uses.

Palmyra trees and their fruits are also found in South and West Africa. A paper by Abe-Inge et al. from the Kwame Nkrumah University in Ghana, published in *American Journal of Food and Nutrition* in 2018 (DOI: 10.12691/ajf-6-5-2), discusses the palmyra palm and its fruits and shows that it is high in phenols and alkali ions with free radical scavenging properties.

Interestingly, the palmyra tree and 'nungu' are also favourites of the people in our island neighbour Sri Lanka as well. Interested readers might want to read an article in *Food Chemistry Advances*, where a group of researchers from Jaffna have explored the nutritional, health, and

economic potential of the palmyra fruit (vol. 6, March 2025, 100880). They have also given a variety of dishes using the outer layer of the tree, and sweets using the fruit.

While the above-mentioned papers from Ghana and Sri Lanka highlight some of the health benefits of ice apple, such as its antioxidant and anti-diabetic effects, some popular nutritionists in India as well as we have discussed many of the fruit's nutritional benefits.

In the same vein, it would be worthwhile for the Palmyra Research Stations to assess the benefits, develop more varieties of the tree and the fruit, identify the molecules which offer the benefit, and even synthesise them.

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Question Corner

Blowing cold and hot

When the temperature climbs to the mid-30s after a cooler weekend, does the heat feel worse?

Yes, and the reason is not just psychological. Researchers know of at least three reasons. First, the human body adjusts surprisingly quickly to temperature. However, this also means that after even one or two cooler days, you may lose a bit of heat adaptation as your blood vessels are less prepared to expand and you may sweat less readily. So then, when the temperature jumps back to the mid-30s, the heat can feel more aggressive. Second, humans perceive changes by comparison. A

35 C day after several 39 C days can seem manageable but after two 29-31 C days, it can seem oppressive. The reason is that your nervous system is assessing the temperature according to the most recent baseline. Finally, you may be sensing changes in temperature as well as humidity. After cooler days, humidity, cloud cover, wind, and the overnight minimum temperature also often change. A still, humid 35 C after pleasant weather can strain your body more than a dry and breezy 37 C after pleasant weather.

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

FAQ

Is India getting hotter?

Are the world's hottest cities mostly in India? How do urban heat islands work? Will the El Niño impact monsoons?

Jacob Koshy

The story so far:

Several cities in India are sweltering under heatwaves or quasi-heatwave-like conditions. The delayed onset of the monsoon and near certainty of an El Niño during the monsoon months of June-September will add to heat-related distress.

Was May 2026 an unusually hot month in India?

Not by daytime temperatures, and not nationally. The India Meteorological Department (IMD)'s outlook for May 2026 expected maximum temperatures to run 'normal' to 'below normal' across much of the country, with above-normal readings limited to the southern peninsula and parts of the north-east and north-west. Normal in most cases refers to a 30-year average temperature at a specific station and varies significantly. Above-normal heatwave days were forecast only for specific regions – the Himalayan foothills, the east-coast States, Gujarat, and Maharashtra – while all-India rainfall for May was projected to exceed 110% of the long-period average. The clearer signal is the long-term one: an IMD study of the Core Heatwave Zone (CHZ) over 1961-2020 found heatwave frequency rising 0.1 days per decade and duration 0.44 days per decade, both statistically significant trends. The study also found that nights warmed faster than days, at roughly 0.21°C per decade. The CHZ includes Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat,

Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Telangana, plus the meteorological subdivisions of Marathwada, Vidarbha, and

Madhya Maharashtra, and coastal Andhra Pradesh. Heatwaves are becoming more frequent and longer over the decades, but May 2026 itself was a wet, regionally uneven month rather than a record-setting one.

A widely shared list claimed all 50 of the world's hottest cities were in India in April. How sound is that?

It should be read with caution. The ranking, compiled by an air-quality website, captured a single day – April 27, 2026 – and presented it as a climate signal. One day cannot establish a trend, as the article itself acknowledges. The list was drawn from the cities the website monitors, overwhelmingly in north and central India. The absence of cities from West Asia, Africa, or Australia reflects the composition of the dataset. Ranking by 24-hour average temperature also favours places with warm nights and penalises desert cities that cool sharply after dark, which is why Rajasthan, home to India's all-time temperature record, appeared near the bottom. The figures also came from the website's own index rather than primary IMD station data, with no published method for the averages.

Was April 2026 hotter than April 2025?

By daytime temperatures, April 2026 was generally cooler. IMD attributed the relatively mild March and April to an unusually active run of western disturbances that brought above-normal rainfall. A year earlier, IMD had forecast above-normal maximum temperatures across most of the country for April 2025. The moderation in 2026, however, was largely a daytime effect: night-time temperatures stayed elevated, running about 2.2°C above normal in Delhi and 2.4°C in Punjab. The national average also masked sharp local extremes.

How do urban heat islands work, and what role does air-conditioning play?

When a city replaces soil and vegetation with concrete and asphalt, those surfaces absorb heat during the day and release it slowly at night. Combined with reduced evaporative cooling, low surface reflectivity, poor ventilation, and waste heat, this can make Indian cities 2-10°C hotter than surrounding rural areas, with the gap largest at night. Air-conditioning compounds it: each unit cools an interior by expelling heat outdoors.

Are urban heat islands a bigger driver of heat than climate change?

The evidence suggests not, in most cities. A 2024 study in *Nature Cities* found Indian cities warming at about 0.53°C per decade, against 0.26°C per decade for the country as a whole. But it attributed only around 38% of that urban warming to urbanisation itself, an enhancement of roughly 60% on top of the regional, climate-driven warming. Urban and background warming were strongly correlated, indicating that regional climate change drives much of the urban signal.

How will the emerging El Niño affect temperatures and the monsoon?

It raises the risk of a hotter, drier season. El Niño tends to weaken the monsoon's moisture-bearing uplift, which can lengthen dry "break" spells and trigger humid heatwaves across the north-west.

Why is CBSE's evaluation system facing flak?

What is the On-Screen Marking system and why is it under scrutiny? What is its history? Has it been successful elsewhere? Why did CBSE introduce it and how did it pan out? How has the Board responded to the crisis?

G. Sampath

The story so far:

Following the release of the Class 12 Board exam results, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has been under fire for discrepancies in the evaluation of answer scripts and malfunctioning of the re-evaluation process. The newly introduced On-Screen Marking (OSM) system is under scrutiny, given the widespread sense among students that the marks they received did not match their expectations. The CBSE's pass percentage has dipped to 85.29% this year from 88.39% last year, with the number of students scoring above 90% also dropping.

Due to the sheer volume of requests for answer book copies, the post-results verification portal crashed. As for students who did manage to obtain scanned copies of their answer books, they got a shock when they discovered blurred or missing pages, and unmarked answers. Many even received answer books of other students. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth, and Sports has summoned senior officials from the Union Education Ministry and CBSE Chairman Rahul Singh for a meeting on June 2 to review the use of OSM and the problems faced by the students.

What is On-Screen Marking?

It is a form of digital evaluation of exam answer sheets. Hand-written answer books are digitally scanned, anonymised, and uploaded online. Instead of checking paper copies with a pen, teachers log into a dedicated platform to access the scanned answer books and correct papers on a computer screen, under video surveillance.

What is the history of OSM in India?

The CBSE tried out OSM on a smaller scale in 2013-14. Due to inadequate digital infrastructure

and limited digital literacy, the experiment was not a big success. Then it proposed testing the OSM in 2024-25 on "small-volume subjects" where there would be fewer candidates. The idea was to sort out glitches before scaling up. In June 2025, members of the CBSE's governing body suggested that OSM "may be implemented in all subjects only after completion of pilot projects in some subjects across various regional offices of the board." But the CBSE ignored the advice of its own governing body. Without adequate pilot testing, it went in for full-scale adoption of OSM across all subjects in 2026.

Amid the ballooning crisis, the CBSE extended the deadline for requesting scanned copies, and also kept revising the fees for these services

Were teachers able to familiarise themselves with OSM before it was rolled out?

The first Class 12 Board exam was on February 17, but teachers were informed of OSM implementation barely 10 days earlier. This was a time when teachers were busy with exams in schools, and many had duties as Booth Level Officers as well. Many did not get enough time to familiarise themselves with the user interface of the portal, and learn how to scroll, how to mark, and how to go back and recheck if they had missed something. As a result, many did not have enough practice by the time they came to the evaluation centres for the OSM.

What was the CBSE's rationale for switching from physical marking to OSM?

In a circular dated February 9, the CBSE listed several benefits of moving to OSM. These included elimination of totalling errors, reduced manual intervention, faster evaluation, elimination of the need for post-result verification of marks, and reduced manpower requirements for verification. But these benefits did not materialise. Class 12 exams were given by 17 lakh students. This meant that 98 lakh answer books, or 40 crore pages, had to be manually scanned in record time. These also had to be checked for legibility before being made available for evaluation. The benefit of reduced manual intervention did not appear to have materialised. Nor is there evidence that OSM reduced totalling errors or accelerated evaluation. Contrary to CBSE's claims, requests for "post-result verification" have shot up compared to previous years.

Has OSM been used successfully elsewhere? If yes, why did CBSE struggle?

Yes, it has been used successfully by exam boards such as Cambridge (U.K.) and International Baccalaureate (IB) and in countries such as Singapore and Australia. But these have far fewer exam centres and students, and more centralised scanning infrastructure, than CBSE. OSM has been known to work well in an ecosystem of well-resourced, digitally ready private schools, such as those under Cambridge and IB. In contrast, CBSE's 33,000 affiliated

schools include government, rural, and semi-urban schools with uneven digital infrastructure and teacher training.

What is the controversy with the firm contracted to deliver OSM for CBSE?

Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi has alleged corruption in CBSE's selection of COEMPT Edudeck as the OSM vendor and demanded a judicial inquiry. In a video statement, he said, "The company that did the OSM for your exams was actually called Globarena. And Globarena has carried out this scam twice in Telengana... [in 2019 and 2023]." He gamed that though this company's track record was known, for "some hidden" reason, the CBSE chose it for the assignment. The CBSE has claimed that COEMPT was chosen "in accordance with the procurement policy" of the government.

What was Sarthak Sidhant's viral blog on CBSE about?

A Class 12 student, Sarthak Sidhant, published an investigative blog post which appeared to show that COEMPT Edudeck was the beneficiary of a rigged tendering process. After poring over CBSE's tenders and multiple Request for Proposals, he claimed to have found that the "CBSE did not just pick a bad software vendor by accident. They lowered financial baselines. They dropped software security certifications. They cut the corrupt practices cooling-off period in half. They removed the physical server isolation requirement. They erased the word 'blacklisting' from their penalty matrix via a last-minute corrigendum, before bidding, and they bypassed their own mandatory CERT-In production audits." They gamed with our data security, our marks, and our mental health."

What were the problems with the re-evaluation portal?

CBSE's portal for obtaining copies of answer sheets went live on May 19. As more than 4 lakh students requested scanned copies of answer sheets, the portal crashed, forcing CBSE to put the site under maintenance.

How did the CBSE respond?

Amid the ballooning crisis, the CBSE extended the deadline for requesting scanned copies, and also kept revising the fees for these services, leading to confusion among parents and students. Following a public uproar, it began responding individually on social media to affected students. It roped in experts from the Indian Institutes of Technology, Madras and Kanpur to resolve the technical challenges, and has announced that the designated portal for verification and re-evaluation will now go live from June 1 to "ensure a transparent and glitch-free process." Meanwhile, it has also launched a public relations campaign by circulating a social media messaging kit to school principals, directing them to post reels defending OSM and CBSE. These included a statement describing CBSE as "highly proactive, empathetic, and communicative regarding these teething issues."



NSUI activists raise slogans during a protest, alleging irregularities in the CBSE's On-Screen Marking evaluation system, in New Delhi. PTI

Why is India pushing for coal gasification?

What is coal gasification and how does it have the potential to substitute imports? What technical challenges does high-ash Indian coal pose for gasification? Where does India stand with respect to coal gasification and related technology?

Saptaparno Ghosh

The story so far:

In a roadshow promoting surface coal gasification, Union Coal and Mines Minister G. Kishan Reddy said the technology, which can also yield a range of downstream products, has the potential to substitute imports worth up to ₹3 lakh crore. To encourage coal gasification, the Union Cabinet approved a ₹37,500-crore incentive package.

What is coal gasification?

Coal gasification entails the conversion of coal into synthetic gas, or syngas, which can be further used to produce downstream products such as urea, methanol, ammonium nitrate, synthetic natural gas (SNG), hydrogen, ether, and dimethyl, among others.

According to government data, India possesses approximately 401 billion tonnes of coal and about 47 billion tonnes of lignite. The rationale behind coal gasification is greater utilisation of these resources besides putting in place a sustainable mining method to produce the downstream products. This, the government believes, will reduce import dependence.



File photo shows coal being loaded onto trucks in Piparwar, about 70 km from Ranchi in Jharkhand. PTI

The high-ash content of Indian coal also differentiates the gasification technology that could be employed in India from that in other countries such as China, Australia, or the U.S.

According to the Union Coal Ministry, India imports one-fifth of its urea requirement, almost its entire ammonia requirement, and approximately 80-90% of its methanol requirement.

The Ministry has set itself a target of gasifying 100 million tonnes of coal by 2030. With the recently announced scheme in place, the government aims to support the gasification of about 75 million tonnes of coal and/or lignite to reach its 2030 target.

Where does India stand with coal gasification at present?

Before the ₹37,500-crore package was announced this year, the government had approved an ₹8,500 crore package in January 2024. Of this, ₹6,233 crore has been disbursed to eight projects owned by private sector and public-sector undertakings. These include projects being executed through separate joint ventures of Coal India with Bharat Heavy Electricals and Gas Authority of India Ltd, and as well as Coal India's own project in Western Coalfields. Private-sector participants include companies such as Jindal Steel and Greta Energy and Metal.

The Talcher Coal-based Ammonia-urea complex is expected to be commissioned in FY2027-28. The others that include conversion of coal to syngas, ammonium nitrate, direct reduced iron, ethanol, and hydrogen are expected to be commissioned in FY2029-30. In April this year, in response to a query from *The Hindu*, the Ministry had stated that "in the coming months, more projects are expected to be sanctioned".

Where does India stand with respect to the technology for coal gasification?

Large-scale commercial deployment of gasification in India hinges on navigating issues such as the high ash content of coal, variability in its gross calorific value, and the presence of complex mineral matter, all of which can

impede the gasification process. This is why fluidised-bed gasification is considered particularly suitable for Indian coal. The technology utilises a gas stream that lifts the coal out of ash, thereafter gasifying it with heat.

The high-ash content of Indian coal also differentiates the gasification technology that could be employed in India from that in other countries such as China, which is the world leader in gasification, Australia, or the U.S.

Another aspect relates to the adequate presence of indigenous technology. By their very nature, coal gasification projects are highly capital-intensive and involve long gestation periods. According to independent research by the Chintan Research Foundation (published March 2026), "Recent techno-economic assessments of circulating fluidised bed gasifiers in the Indian context indicate that capital costs constitute the largest share of syngas production costs, accounting for nearly 30% of the total production costs." Thus, financial viability becomes particularly imperative. It is for this reason that the latest package, which provides financial incentives amounting to one-fifth of plant and machinery costs, is essential.

For perspective, state-owned Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd has developed their pressured fluidised bed gasifier technology tailored specifically to handle the high ash content and variability of Indian coal. Additionally, according to Niti Aayog, its 16 facilities are capable of producing all the critical components required for gasification. In the private sector, Jindal Steel Ltd and Greta Energy and Metal have been able to indigenise about 80-90% of their production. Naveen Ahlawat, Head of Sustainability and Decarbonisation at Jindal Steel, said: "It (indigenising technology) will save costs; your project cost will come down by 30-40%."

At its maturing stages, coal gasification may still require technological imports. It is for this reason that industry has also sought the government's consideration of exemptions from provisions of the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade for acquiring necessary technologies, especially from China. Officials said that the Ministry would support participants in securing clearances for technology imports, though the regulatory requirement will continue.

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PROFILES

The strait where America stalled

Hormuz

The waterway connecting the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea has emerged as the most consequential battleground of the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran, with Tehran effectively taking control of the route and rattling energy markets and the global economy

Stanly Johny

Tehran's Milad Tower, the tallest structure in Iran, stands as a symbol of the revolutionary state's engineering ambitions. Rising 435 metres, including its 120-metre antenna, the tower's octagonal concrete shaft joins a pod with 12 floors housing observation decks, a cafe and a museum. Above it, the antenna pierces Tehran's smoggy skyline. From the deck of the 12th floor, the highest point accessible to visitors, one can take in the vast sprawl of the city, made the capital of the Persian Empire in the late 18th century by Agha Muhammad Khan, founder of the Qajar dynasty. To the north rise the Alborz mountains, the natural barrier separating the Iranian plateau from the Caspian Sea.

Inside the museum, a large 18th-century map of the Gulf drawn by a French cartographer is on display. "You may have heard some countries call the Persian Gulf the Arabian Gulf today," a local travel assistant told this writer during a visit in February 2022. "Look at this map and reach your own conclusions." A young woman, who described herself as "a huge fan" of Amitabh Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai, the assistant pointed to the mouth of the Gulf on the map. "This is the Strait of Hormuz," she said. "This is the gate of the Persian Gulf. And the Iranians hold its key." It is this geographical key that Iran used to effectively shut the strait after coming under attack by the U.S. and Israel on February 28.

The strait is a narrow corridor, 50 km wide at its entrance and exit, connecting the Persian Gulf waters to the Gulf of Oman, which joins the Arabian Sea. At its narrowest point, between Iran in the north and Oman's Musandam Peninsula in the south – an enclave separated from mainland Oman by UAE territory – the waterway is just 33 km wide, which means it falls within the overlapping territorial waters of Iran and Oman.

As the only gateway to the high seas from the Persian Gulf, the Hormuz Strait has remained one of the world's

most important waterways for centuries. In modern times, separate shipping lanes, as wide as 2 nautical miles, have been marked for inbound and outbound vessels. There is a buffer zone of around 2 nautical miles between the shipping lanes. So the tankers carrying fuel and gas typically navigated highly constrained waters even before the war.

In the 1980s, during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, both sides targeted fuel tankers in the Persian Gulf, effectively weaponising the waters. In recent years, Iran had repeatedly warned that it would close the waterway if it came under attack. There are eight major islands in the strait, seven of which are controlled by Iran. Islands such as Qeshm, Hormuz, Larak, and Abu Musa sit closer to the shipping lanes, giving Iran a commanding physical advantage over the route. The ownership of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb islands is contested between Iran and the UAE, but they are de facto controlled and administered by Tehran.

Strategic significance

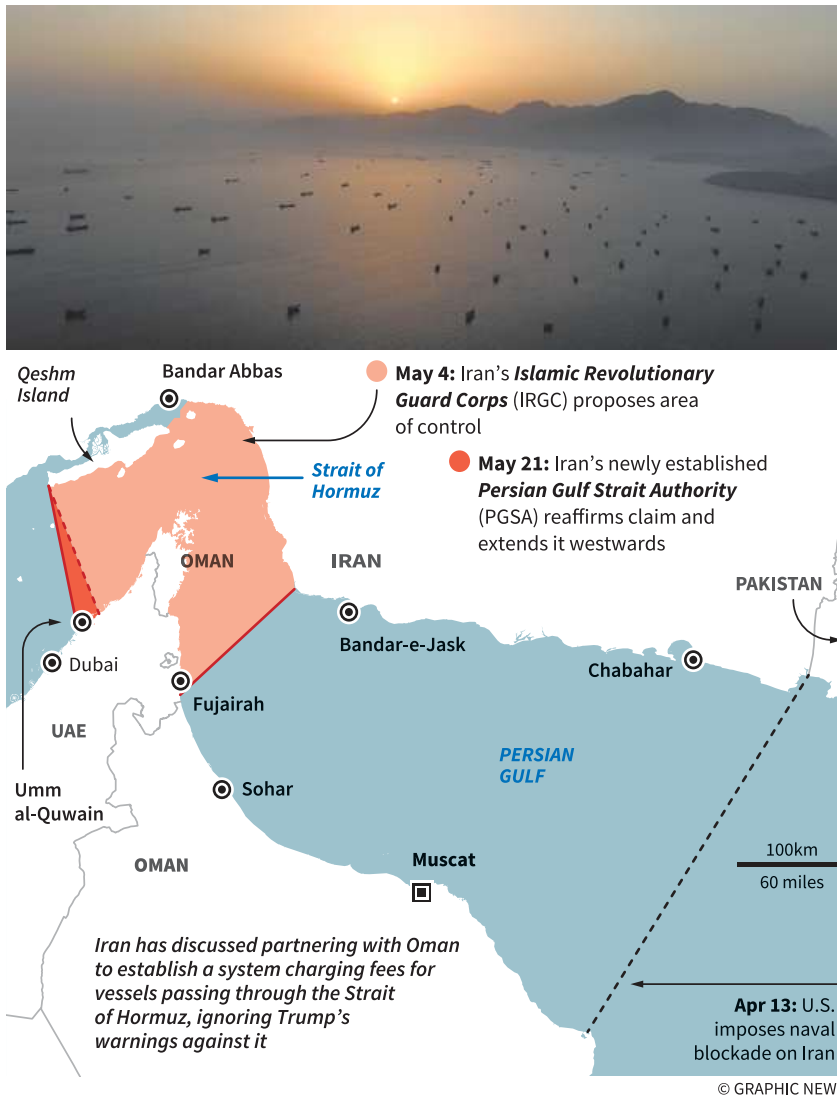
The strait's strategic significance grew after the oil discoveries in the Persian Gulf region in the early 20th century. The post-War oil boom transformed the entire region. All Gulf countries – Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait – have been more or less dependent on the strait to get access to the Arabian Sea.

During 2023-25, 20% of the world's liquefied natural gas (LNG) and 25% of seaborne oil passed through the strait. In 2025 alone, 20 million barrels of oil and oil products passed through this route every day, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. About 3,000 ships sailed through the strait each month before the war. Hormuz is also a key route for exports of fertilizer from the region, and Gulf countries import food, medicines and tech products through this route.

In June 2025, when Israel bombed Iran, Tehran's response was largely limited to striking back at Israel. After the U.S. joined the war and attacked Iran's nuclear facilities, Tehran carried

Iran expands claim

Tehran took control of the strait after the U.S. and Israel launched the war



out a token attack on the American base in Qatar and agreed to a ceasefire. The 12-Day War, as it's known, did not pose any direct threat to traffic through the Strait of Hormuz. But in early 2026, when the U.S. was mobilising forces in the region amid threats of another war, Iran had warned that it would retaliate by striking American bases and shutting down the strait. The U.S. and Israel started the war on February 28 by

assassinating Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and Iran responded by doing what it had vowed to do. It retaliated by attacking Israel and Arab countries in the Gulf. And it took control of the strait. The number of ships passing through the strait daily, which was more than 100 before the war, fell by over 90%.

During the 40 days of bombing, the U.S. and Israel caused immense material damage to Iran. Its aerial and

naval infrastructure has been repeatedly hit. But such attacks weren't enough to force Iran, which used asymmetric warfare to weaponise the waters, to reopen the strait. Iran used cheap, disruptive weapons to impose disproportionate costs on the vessels that ignored its restrictions. Several ships that sought to pass the strait without the IRGC's permission came under attack. Fuel prices started rising. Insurance and shipping costs soared. Energy-import-dependent economies, particularly India, were hit hard.

Contested terms

When U.S. President Donald Trump announced a ceasefire with Iran on April 8, he said Iran would reopen the Strait of Hormuz. The truce came into effect, but both sides differed on its terms. Iran demanded a ceasefire in Lebanon as well, but Israel actually stepped up bombing of Lebanon. Mr. Trump later announced a ceasefire in Lebanon and "prevented" Israel from bombing the country – but the bombing campaign continued. When Iran refused to reopen the strait, Mr. Trump, on April 12, announced a blockade of Iranian ports. In response, Iran cancelled direct negotiations with the U.S., and pushed the nuclear file down its priority list.

Mr. Trump has repeatedly said he was close to reaching a deal with Iran. He wants Iran to reopen the strait in return for the lifting of the U.S. blockade. And Iran should abandon its nuclear programme. Iran, on its side, has established a new body, the Persian Gulf Strait Authority, to manage traffic through and maintain the Hormuz Strait, defying Mr. Trump's demands. The PGSA has introduced a new email-based permit system for vessels and says all ships passing through the strait should coordinate with the agency. Result: a diplomatic logjam.

One of Mr. Trump's key demands for a deal today is that Iran should reopen the Strait of Hormuz, which was fully open before Mr. Trump and his ally Benjamin Netanyahu launched this war on February 28.

THE GIST

The strait is a narrow corridor, 50 km wide at its entrance and exit, connecting the Persian Gulf waters to the Gulf of Oman, which joins the Arabian Sea

At its narrowest point, between Iran in the north and Oman's Musandam Peninsula in the south, the waterway is just 33 km wide

As the only gateway to the high seas from the Persian Gulf, the Hormuz Strait has remained one of the world's most important waterways for centuries

'Rock' of Congress

D.K. Shivakumar

The party's crisis manager, known for his organisational skills and grassroots networks, is set to become Karnataka's Chief Minister

Nagesh Prabhu

Eight-time MLA Doddalhalli Kempegowda Shivakumar, popularly called 'DKShi', has established himself as one of Karnataka's most resourceful Congress leaders. With Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's resignation, the Congress party's principal strategist and trouble-shooter in South India, is set to get the top job in Karnataka.

A firm believer in Hindu cultural identity and religious practices, Mr. Shivakumar is known for frequently saying, "Efforts may fail, but prayers do not." The phrase often served as his cryptic response to persistent speculation over the chief ministerial power tussle in recent months.

The 64-year-old combined political networking in Delhi's power corridors with formidable grassroots control in his home turf – a strategy that helped him establish himself both a politician and businessman. With declared family assets worth hundreds of crores, he is among the wealthiest legislators in India.

Born on May 15, 1962, into a modest agrarian Vokkaliga family in Kanakapura in Bengaluru South district, D.K. Shivakumar entered politics at a young age through student activism and the Youth Congress. Despite lacking a



ILLUSTRATIONS: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

political lineage, he steadily built a grassroots network in the Old Mysore region, particularly among the land-owning Vokkaliga community.

His first major political test came in 1985, when the relatively unknown 23-year-old Congress candidate took on H.D. Deve Gowda in the erstwhile Sathanur constituency and suffered a narrow defeat. The contest earned him recognition within the Congress for his aggressive political style and organisational abilities.

In 1989, he was elected to the Karnataka Legislative Assembly for the first time from Sathanur. Since then, he has remained electorally undefeated. Mr. Shivakumar first became a Minister at the age of 30 in the S. Bangarappa Cabinet, handling the Prisons portfolio.

In 1994, after the Congress denied him a ticket, he contested as an Independent and won.

His rivalry with former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda's family became a

defining feature of his political career. In 1999, he defeated H.D. Kumaraswamy in the Sathanur constituency. He cemented his political stature in 2004 when he played a key role in helping journalist and Congress candidate Tejaswini Gowda defeat Deve Gowda in the Lok Sabha elections from the erstwhile Kanakapura constituency.

National prominence

His national prominence grew significantly during episodes of political instability. In 2017, he hosted Congress MLAs from Gujarat at a Bengaluru resort to safeguard Ahmed Patel's prospects in the Rajya Sabha elections. He had played a similar role in 2002 when Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh faced a no-confidence motion.

In 2019, Mr. Shivakumar was at the centre of efforts to protect Congress and JD (S) MLAs during the political crisis that eventually led to the collapse of the coalition government headed by H.D. Kumaras-

wamy. These episodes strengthened his reputation as the Congress party's chief "crisis manager" but also brought him under intense scrutiny from central investigative agencies. In 2019, he was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate in a money laundering case and spent 50 days in Delhi's Tihar Jail before being granted bail.

Mr. Shivakumar is often referred to in sections of the media as 'Kanakapura Bande' (Rock of Kanakapura), a nickname reflecting both his resilient political persona and his refusal to be intimidated by central investigative agencies.

Despite legal and political challenges, Mr. Shivakumar's stature within the Congress continued to rise. As State Congress president, he played a key role in the party's victory in the 2023 Assembly elections.

That steadfast loyalty has made him indispensable to the Gandhi family and the Congress high command. In an era when political defections have become commonplace, it has also made him something of an exception. His refrain – "I am a born Congressman; I will die as a Congressman" – remains his constant reminder to party workers about the importance of loyalty.

Mr. Shivakumar's longstanding vow to keep his beard until he becomes Chief Minister is finally set to end.

The manager who stood tall

Pep Guardiola

The player-turned-coach is leaving Manchester City after delivering one of the most successful eras in the club's history

Anirudh Velamuri

Having scaled the summits of Spanish and European football with FC Barcelona and imposed his will upon Germany with Bayern Munich, Pep Guardiola arrived at Manchester City in the summer of 2016 carrying an almost mythological reputation. His credentials were beyond dispute. Yet in England, one question followed him everywhere: Could Guardiola do it on a cold, windy Tuesday night in Stoke?

It was the same challenge English football had thrown at every perceived outsider, every revolutionary coach or manager, who dared suggest there was another way to play the game.

Whatever Guardiola achieved elsewhere seemingly counted for little until he proved himself in football's self-proclaimed toughest hunting ground.

By December, the doubters smelt blood. Defending champion Leicester City, drifting uncomfortably close to the relegation zone, tore through Manchester City and triumphed 4-2. To Guardiola's critics, it felt like vindication. Possession football, intricate passing, inverted full-backs and positional play – perhaps these ideas were too delicate for the relentless chaos of English football. If the defeat poured fuel



on the fire of criticism, it also ignited something within Guardiola himself, who commendably doubled down. To say that a decade later, the debate is settled would be an understatement. A silverware haul that resembles a monument bears testimony. Six Premier League titles. Five League Cups. Three FA Cups. A Champions League crown. Add to that a UEFA Super Cup and a FIFA Club World Cup. As he prepares to move on, Guardiola's reign will be defined by his ability to bend opponents to his will through control. As Frank Sinatra once sang, he faced it all, stood tall, and did it his way.

When he walked into La Masia, Barcelona's famed academy, as a 13-year-old, Guardiola stood apart almost immediately. Where others saw congestion, he saw space. He could anticipate patterns before they emerged, his clarity often bordering on obsession.

Under Johan Cruyff, that rare footballing intelligence found its perfect

home. As the cerebral heartbeat of Barcelona's Dream Team, Guardiola dictated tempo and direction with the composure of a conductor leading a symphony. He finished with a decorated resume, including four consecutive La Liga titles and Barcelona's first European Cup.

Bigger debt

But it is to Guardiola, the manager, that history owes a bigger debt. When he first stepped into the bullring, the scepticism was immediate. Too young. Too idealistic to lead Barcelona back to dominance. A maiden treble – La Liga, Copa del Rey, Champions League – was quite the answer. The foundations of what we now know to be a new order were being laid.

Barcelona's football was not only effective but expressive, a demonstration of what collective intelligence could look like when fully realised. The fruit? Fourteen trophies in four years and the evolution of a certain Lionel Messi from prodigy to phenomenon.

And then, Guardiola left, looking for a new challenge. After a year's break, he took over Bayern Munich, which was fresh from a treble under Jupp Heynckes.

After winning seven trophies in three years, another departure followed, and this time, the Premier League waited. Impatiently, and perhaps uneasily. The rest, as they say, is history. Twenty major trophies followed, including the elusive Champions League – three more than the club had won in its 136 years before his arrival.

Beyond the pitch, Guardiola was unapologetically political, speaking about Catalonia's right to self-determination, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the suffering in Gaza caused by Israeli attacks, and humanitarian crises in Sudan, often framing them in moral rather than political terms.

At the same time, his guarded responses on issues involving the UAE, whose ruling family owns Manchester City, fuelled accusations of inconsistency. It is within that space, between expression and restraint, that Guardiola's wider reputation has taken shape. Taken together, it leaves a figure who resists simple classification. A coach who reshaped how the game is played, while also navigating, imperfectly at times, the responsibilities that come with visibility.



REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

In Britain, the widening gap between the PM and people

Keir Starmer has failed to understand that his country feels broken even if it actually isn't. This disconnect has led to a fragmentation of British polity

You don't think the country is fundamentally broken. You don't think the model of the country is broken. You just think it's been let down by a series of bad prime ministers who have effectively managed the situation badly, a frustrated Tom McTague, political editor of the *New Statesman* asked British Prime Minister (PM) Keir Starmer in 2025. The journalist had been shadowing Starmer for months to understand his vision and felt he was getting nowhere. The response he received confirmed McTague's suspicions: "Yeah, you're right," Starmer said. The Labour leader, who, in 2024, led the party to its third-largest parliamentary majority in history, failed to fully grasp his country.

The UK stands a good chance at getting its seventh PM in a decade; and its eighth in the next general elections that may occur any time before or in 2029. Such sustained political tumult cannot be understood simply as a by-product of Brexit, the shock of wars, or a series of poor decision-making by several PMs. The UK is experiencing acute social, economic, and strategic churn. This is best witnessed in the emergence of a five-party system with the far-Right Reform UK led by Nigel Farage and the far-Left Green Party led by Zack Polansky dominating the scene.

Former Cambridge economist Joan Robinson's mid-20th century quip for India

holds truer for the UK today: Whatever you can rightly say about Britain, the opposite is also true.

Starmer is both right and wrong. He's right that British society is not fundamentally broken. For all social media-powered narratives about rising crime and uncontrolled immigration, the facts speak a different story. Homicides and other serious crimes, including knife-crime and burglaries, have gone down. Illegal migration was never as high as political rhetoric suggested: About 193,000 illegal entrants were detected during 2018-25. Even if one contends that the "true" figure is higher, it is likely a truce in comparison to the 3.5-4 million migrants who arrived legally during this period. In fact, in the last 12 months, 693,000 people left the UK, and the country is now experiencing at-scale emigration, not immigration.

Starmer failed to understand that the country still feels broken. Such lack of emotional intelligence and public connect from a PM who never stops extolling his virtue as a family man cost Starmer dearly. Like McTague, most Britons feel they are getting nowhere with Starmer.

Herein lies the story of a simple yet powerful breach between rhetoric and reality. The British police, for example, despite its successes, does not have the capacity to control petty crime such as phone-snatching, street-theft, and cybercrime. For a society, whose average screen-time is four-and-a-half hours per day, this is important. Starmer struggles to grasp such mundane realities, and in doing so allowed Farage, who helped trigger Brexit in the first place, to fill the gap.

Starmer's don't-fix-what's-not-broken assessment of Britain's economic model is

also grounded in a similar paradox. *Prima facie*, the UK economy is slow and resilient. It grew by 0.6% in the first quarter of 2026 and is likely to touch 1% this fiscal. Inflation is down from double digits to about 3%, even if it is struggling to touch the Bank of England's 2% target. But people's quality of life has taken a hit, and unemployment has reached a record 16%. Interest rates remain high, and the sense that "however hard one works, it is never enough to make ends meet" is a feature of urban British life. In small town and countryside Britain, in the Midlands and further north, the situation is worse.

The current reality strikes harder when one looks at the country's debt-to-GDP portfolio. In 2007-08, the UK's national debt was about 35% of its GDP. Today, it stands at 93.8% — a staggering £2.91 trillion. As a point of comparison, India's economy is valued at £3.10 trillion in terms of nominal GDP. The UK could soon have a debt the size of India's economy. No wonder the treasury spends £111 billion every year, or 3.7% of the GDP, on debt servicing. This is more than its allocation towards education and defence.

The only sector the government spends more on is health and social care (£204 billion), and the far-Right wants to spend less on welfare whereas the far-Left promises to spend more. In short, Britain is approaching bankruptcy even as its economy grows, and its politicians are unsure how to salvage the situation. Some are suggesting unsustainable taxes on the rich, and others are advocating to wreck the poor even more.

This is where the contradiction of prime ministerial decision-making, good or bad, is



In normal times, Starmer would have lasted an entire term and delivered a premiership that helped fix Britain. But as it happens, he could be ousted by his own comrades who believe that his disconnect with the electorate is total.

REUTERS

being felt most acutely. Other than appointing Peter Mandelson, a compromised individual who failed his security clearance as UK's ambassador to the US, and not spending enough on defence, Starmer's government has made 16 policy U-turns, on issues ranging from national insurance thresholds to mandatory digital ID. By doing so, it has failed to gain credit for its decisions that have arrested the UK's downward spiral. It is regulating migration better, rewiring national policing, reducing its debt servicing expenditure, re-strengthening ties with Europe, and refusing to join the US and Israel's war against Iran. Labour has also helped build bridges between communities at a moment of polarisation and resurgence of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

In normal times, Starmer would have

lasted an entire term and delivered a premiership that helped fix Britain. But as it happens, he could be ousted by his own comrades who believe that the prime ministerial disconnect with the electorate is so total that Starmer is indeed getting the party somewhere: Headed towards ruin. The situation is so desperate that former PM Tony Blair, a Labour grandee, is calling the party defunct.

But the circumstances of British politics are such that in trying to save the party, Starmer's detractors risk expediting the route to ruin. Andy Burnham, the mayor of Greater Manchester, who is trying to claw his way into Number 10, Downing Street, if he wins the Makerfield by-elections, may make for a better communicator than Starmer and try to take the party in a

Left-ish direction. But he is underestimating the force of the singular message the British electorate has been sending: It desires stability. Barring the 2017 elections when the Conservative Party lost its majority, the voters have consistently voted one party to power.

Constant prime ministerial changes despite such electoral clarity creates trauma for a public struggling to pay its bills. The Tories and the Labour will have no one else to blame if the electorate gives a massive mandate to the far-Right in the next elections, whenever they occur.

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{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



The discreet charm of Gymkhana Club

Amongst the happiest memories of my childhood is devouring fish fingers and chicken sandwiches at the Gymkhana Club. My sister Shobha would take me swimming and this was the bribe to coax me into the pool. Jignu, my cousin, would offer me a coke for every breath I could complete. Even so, I usually failed. As a young child going to the Club was an occasion. Simply thrilling. Pure fun.

Nearly 50 years ago, when I was 21, I became a member in my own right. "You'll have to wear a suit, young man," the president informed me, as I prepared for the At Home. "I don't have one," I hastily replied. "I'm just here on holiday from Cambridge and it's the middle of a very hot summer." He laughed sardonically. "In which case you'll get blackballed." I hastily borrowed a suit from my cousin Lakshman and made it to the membership.

Except for when I was a regular squash

player, I haven't been a frequent user of the Club.

But I have always valued my membership and I've thought of visiting more often than I have. The Club has become a feature of living in Delhi. It has always been there. I never imagined a day when it would not be.

That's what the government intends to change. On May 22, it informed the Club that its 2 Safdarjung Road premises "is critically required for the strengthening and securing of defence infrastructure and other vital public security purposes. The land is essential to fulfill urgent institutional needs, governance infrastructure, and public-interest projects, integrated with the resumption of adjoining government lands." That's vague and imprecise but it's all the Club has been told. Unless the courts intervene, on these grounds the Club will cease to exist.

Is this prejudice, I asked myself? Is it class envy? Is the Club being targeted

because it's so obviously a colonial institution?

Critics call it elitist. But it's not. Its membership comprises the IFS, the IAS, the IPS, military officers, corporate executives, academics and reciprocal members of some 61 other clubs in India and 15 foreign countries. These are ordinary people. They are not rich. Many are retired. Most have ceased to be influential.

Does its location make the Club a threat to the Prime Minister's security? Unlikely. Since 1966, when Indira Gandhi first became PM, she and her successors have lived on either side of the Club and never has the Gymkhana or its activities threatened their safety. Remember Indira Gandhi was not killed by a member of the Gymkhana Club. It was her official security that did it. And, anyway, the present PM will soon be moving to a new residence.

No doubt the Club occupies prime real estate. But that's also true of London clubs in St James's and Pall Mall. Like the Gymkhana, they have the right to choose their membership and they necessarily restrict it to those that qualify. But the British government would never consider turfing them out. And it certainly wouldn't do so on grounds as spurious and specious as those cited in the case of the Delhi Gymkhana.

In fact, does it occur to the government that if ministers can live in five-acre bungalows in Lutyens Delhi, why can't the Gymkhana Club continue where it is? Why aren't their residences required "for

NO DOUBT THE CLUB OCCUPIES PRIME REAL ESTATE. BUT THAT'S ALSO TRUE OF LONDON CLUBS IN ST JAMES'S AND PALL MALL. LIKE THE GYMKHANA, THEY HAVE THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE THEIR MEMBERSHIP AND THEY NECESSARILY RESTRICT IT TO THOSE THAT QUALIFY

the strengthening and securing of Defence infrastructure and other vital public security purposes?"

Finally, consider for a moment what might replace the Gymkhana Club. It's unlikely to be a public park accessible by everyone. I suspect it could be houses for Members of our Parliament that's likely to be expanded soon, or, possibly, some form of defence establishment. Aesthetically neither will be an improvement. And neither will confer any benefit on the ordinary Indian. In fact, what they might prefer or want won't even count.

This is simply a case of the government acting in its own interest oblivious of the consequences. *C'est la vie* (that's life).

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

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



India's fight against dowry must continue

The recent deaths of several young women under suspicious circumstances in the homes of their in-laws, seemingly motivated by dowry demands, show that despite stringent laws, awareness campaigns, women's empowerment and education, the needle has not moved very much on eliminating this menace.

Take, for instance, the Twisha Sharma case. Sharma's mother-in-law, who spoke disparagingly of Sharma following her death, is a retired judge. Thus, questions are being raised about key institutions likely influencing the investigation into Sharma's death — from alleged mishandling of evidence by the police and discrepancies in the FIR to the delay in finding and arresting the husband — weakening public faith in the impartiality of the law.

According to 2024 data from the National Crime Records Bureau, 5,737 dowry deaths were reported that year. Uttar Pradesh tops the list, followed by Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and West Bengal. Among cities, Delhi tops the charts and Bengaluru too has a high incidence of harassment related to dowry. Even states like Kerala that pride themselves on their literacy and women's education are not inured from the social acceptability of this practice. There are sure to be many more women who have either suffered horrific injuries or have died by suicide because of dowry pressures but which have not been reported.

The very idea of dowry suggests that a woman's parents have to compensate her in-laws for taking her into their home. So, the in-laws feel emboldened to raise demands. Once the parents give in, the demands become blackmail, with the daughter as the hostage. Ranjana Kumari, director, Centre for Social Research, says,

"Greed for money, rationalised as a customary practice in the form of dowry, has become a death sentence for many young brides. It is not merely an individual tragedy for women; it reflects a deep collective social failure. Despite stringent laws, society has failed to achieve eradication of dowry."

Often, parents become silent participants by not acting in time to protect their daughters. This silence, social conditioning, and fear of stigma continue to strengthen the cycle of dowry-related abuse and deaths.

Parents are mostly aware that their daughter is suffering in her marital home, but she is told to "adjust". They send their daughter back to her marital home when she seeks support, knowing well that the demands and abuse will not stop — all to maintain their so-called honour in society.

There is no safe haven for women once dowry enters the picture. Parents who see visible signs of abuse but send their daughters back are also culpable of not reporting dowry harassment. Such is their financial and social investment in the marriage that they feel that they have to somehow make it work.

Women must get a safe space to go to when they suffer dowry abuse. There are State-run homes, but these are hardly the first choice for an already traumatised woman. Political parties talk about their commitment to *nari shakti*; they should campaign to fight societal pressure on families to marry off their daughters. Dowry cases only generate outrage in rare cases. The anger over the recent cases will die down soon enough. But, many women will still be in danger from all the evil rooted in the practice.

The views expressed are personal

GT Express: Journeys in character building

There are many ways to build character in life. Parents insist it is through waking up early in the morning. Schools vouch for 10+2 years of education as the route, and, now, fitness influencers insist it is pumping iron and consuming two scoops of protein powder every day, especially if it's the brand they recommend. All of it is nonsense.

A 36-hours-plus journey in an Indian Railways second-class sleeper coach in peak summer is where real character gets built. Thanks to the freight equalisation policy of 1952 that subsidised movement of natural resources away from my Indo-Gangetic home-state — leaving no incentive for industries to set shop close to the resources — five decades later, students like me had to make this inhuman 1,000-kilometres-plus journey just to access good college education or a decent job. Government policies are the funniest villains: Your entire childhood is lost suffering their fallout while you blame your luck, only to one day learn about those policies and leaders that kept you poor while preparing for a competitive exam. But, by the time your rage peaks, the said leaders are either dead or in a vegetative state. That's the arc for a majority of students from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, who still board long-distance trains to learn thermodynamics.

My train of choice was the 12615 Grand Trunk Express, running from MAS to NDLS

(Madras, now Chennai, to New Delhi). It is an iconic train, inaugurated in 1929 by the British, to connect two extremities of their empire (Madras and Peshawar). Post-Independence, Delhi became the terminating station. The route shrank, but travel time didn't — thanks to people who pulled the chain to alight closer to their homes as the train entered their cities, a train-full of man-hours are damned.

Let me tell you about this one time I was taking this train. It was 6 pm — 20 minutes before the train was to depart. The reservation chart was out. For a student preparing for competitive exams, it's always soothing to see one's name printed in a list on a notice-board. Life is nothing but a quest to bag coveted seats, anyway.

I had a side-lower berth, the business class seat of trains — a vantage point from where you could plan to write a Booker-winning novel about India. Imagine piercing through the entire cross-section of India and Bharat by paying just ₹700.

The train starts chugging, you settle in after securing your luggage beneath the seat with a questionable chain-lock bought from the platform. Some part of the bag is left peeping out from under the seat, to facilitate a periodic check. India teaches you self-sufficiency; if things are stolen from you, it is your fault.

There is no mobile internet, only the latest edition of *Manohar Kahaniyaan* to doze



Train journeys build character, forged in a furnace called the great Indian sleeper class.

HT ARCHIVE

off to. It is the next 24 hours that will be the real test. When you wake up somewhere in the middle of the Deccan plateau, it's so hot that you find the berth's rexine cover sticking to your skin. That's the baptism by fire you need. If you ever have to peel your face from the rexine, you will value things in your life thereafter much more.

You are hungry by now. You packed some *poori-aloo* — the national food of north Indian train journeys. After a few hours in the tiffin box, like humans in times of darkness, the *poori* stick to each other. You have to peel one from the other.

You are forever short of water, and if the compartment were temperature-controlled, it is surely set to "crematorium". The gust of air from the windows dries your wet handkerchief in 35 seconds flat. You wish to use the loo, but the water in the tap is boiling. The only respite are the guys moving around with buckets of icy-water that have an assortment of cold drink bottles, which cost an arm and a leg. You settle for a chilled Frooti. It tastes so godly that it gets men-

tioned in your column 20 years later.

"Bahut garmi hai iss baar" (it is really hot this summer) is the best ice-breaker on these journeys. With that, the bonhomie begins — questions are asked about destinations and discreet queries are made to check if you are of marriageable age and a caste deemed suited for the matchmaking fellow-traveller. Food is offered. The day is spent in the closest proximity — family histories, riches-to-rags stories (every Indian family has one) are shared. You sweat together in the heat, like a family facing a power-cut, only to never meet ever again. It teaches you to deal with separation, forces of nature, a full bladder, and to hope that you will graduate to the air-conditioned coaches soon. Train journeys build character, forged in a furnace called the great Indian sleeper class. These are lessons you take to the hundreds of flights you will take later in life.

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

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Sikkim's heritage

This is with reference to "Sikkim and five treasures of the Khangchendzonga" by Jyotiraditya Scindia (May 24). Heritage is preserved by community involvement. Schools and local communities must encourage the youth to learn about Sikkim's heritage. Preserving culture is the joint responsibility of the State and the people.

Bal Govind

Indian classical dance in the reel age

This is with reference to "Ananya Panday and classical dance in the age of virality" by Ranjini Nair (May 30). Whatever their limitations, the early reformers of Bharatanatyam were engaged in preserving, systematising, and transmitting a rigorous pedagogical tradition. By contrast, today's cinematic and social media ecosystem operates under an entirely different logic: one driven primarily by entertainment, immediate visibility, and virality.

Rohit Viswanath

Focus on symptoms & diagnosis

This is with reference to "More than correction of a medical misnomer" by Namita Bhandare (May 24). Changing lifestyles and food habits bring a shift in the diagnosis of diseases. Timely awareness is necessary.

Abhilasha Gupta

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

A democracy cannot thrive where power remains unchecked and justice is reserved for a select few
— John Lewis

New Delhi

May 31, 2026



The Government is legally empowered to take over properties, companies, assets and the management of organisations, but with a caveat: it must be done for the public good and in a democratic manner. The legitimacy of such actions depends strictly on necessity, transparency, fair compensation and public accountability, free from any hidden motive. The Delhi Gymkhana is a case in point

From land disputes to land ailments



VIVEK KUMAR SINGH
The writer is an ex-IAS officer and is presently Chairman, RERA Bihar

"Land dispute" is perhaps the most casually used phrase in India's administrative vocabulary. It appears in police station diaries, revenue court files, district reviews and civil litigation with remarkable frequency. Yet, despite its widespread use, the expression conceals more than it explains. Almost every kind of land-related conflict — from a minor boundary disagreement to a convoluted title suit — gets loosely classified as a "land dispute".

This generic approach is not merely semantically weak. It is administratively damaging. It leads to misdiagnosis, procedural confusion and inappropriate remedies. Different problems are treated alike, often resulting in avoidable litigation, delayed interventions and, in many cases, escalation into violence. India's land governance system, therefore, needs a conceptual reset. Instead of treating all conflicts as "land disputes", administrators should begin to view them as "land ailments" requiring proper diagnosis, sensitivity assessment and category-specific treatment.

The distinction is important. A land ailment framework recognises that land-related problems are not uniform in nature, intensity or consequence. A fraudulent registration, an encroachment on government land, a mutation mismatch, a title conflict among legal heirs and a seasonal boundary clash between neighbouring farmers are fundamentally different issues. They emerge from different causes, involve different stakeholders and require different interventions. Yet, the administrative reflex often remains the same — push the matter into prolonged civil litigation or invoke preventive policing provisions to maintain peace. Neither approach addresses the root cause.

The overreliance on civil suits has created a situation in which even routine issues drift into years of litigation. Simultaneously, excessive reliance on police intervention converts many land matters into law-and-order exer-

cises without resolving the underlying administrative deficiency. The result is a governance vacuum in which neither the legal nor the executive system produces timely closure.

A diagnostic framework offers a middle path. The first step in such a framework is classification. Land ailments should be categorised into distinct groups: title-related ailments, possession-related ailments, record-related ailments, tenancy-related ailments, public land ailments and acquisition-related ailments.

Title-related ailments generally arise from competing ownership claims, defective conveyances or inheritance disputes. Possession-related ailments involve encroachments, forcible occupation or boundary overlaps. Record-related ailments stem from inconsistencies between registration records, mutation records and cadastral maps. Public land ailments concern encroachments on commons or government land. Acquisition-related ailments emerge from disputes over compensation, rehabilitation or alignment.

This classification itself can significantly improve administrative clarity. Once the precise nature of the ailment is identified, the administration can design an appropriate response rather than mechanically pushing every case into the same procedural pipeline.

The second element is risk assessment. Not all land ailments carry equal potential for escalation. A dormant title dispute between absentee owners may not require urgent intervention, whereas a boundary dispute during the sowing season can rapidly deteriorate into violence. Encroachments involving community land may trigger collective mobilisation and political intervention. District administrations should, therefore, adopt a simple sensitivity matrix. Factors such as prior violence, proximity between parties, agricultural cycles, community mobilisation, political involvement and the strategic value of the land should be assessed systematically. Cases can then be categorised into low-, medium- and high-risk categories.

Such triage has practical value. Low-risk cases can be resolved at the circle/tehsil level through demarcation or mutation correction. Medium-risk cases may require supervision at the sub-divisional level. High-risk cases should come under the joint monitoring of the District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police. This allows

administrative attention to be directed where it is most needed.

The third pillar of the framework is category-specific treatment. Boundary- and possession-related ailments require rapid on-site demarcation using modern survey tools. Record-related ailments require synchronisation between registration and revenue databases. Community land ailments require geotagging, encroachment inventories and public disclosure. Acquisition-related ailments require transparent compensation mechanisms and grievance-redressal systems.

Technology can play a transformative role here. India's land governance architecture still suffers from fragmentation between registration records, mutation records and cadastral maps.

CONTINUED ON >> P11

Legacy of Government takeovers in India



J GOIKRISHNAN

The Government's power to take over property has become a hot topic after the Central Government issued a notice to the Delhi Gymkhana Club. The Government's power to take over has a long history. Earlier, the 'Right to Property' was a Fundamental Right, and the Government faced hardships in road and infrastructure construction. In 1971, Indira Gandhi removed

the Right to Property from the Fundamental Rights and changed the rule that, by paying a price, the Government can take over any property. The price decided by the Government and the people challenging it in the courts were curtailed.

This power of the Government was changed by the Janata Party Government in 1978 by making the Right to Property a Legal Right, and the prices of compensation were increased, and people could challenge the takeover in courts. Basically, the Government has to declare the reason or purpose for taking over a property. This was not seen in the Gymkhana Club eviction notice. The matter is now before the Delhi High Court, and this case will go on for many years, and both parties will go up to the Supreme Court. Many such high-profile takeover cases are now in court. During the initial days of the arguments, the Club cited the landmark judgment on Indian Express. When *Indian Express* was battling the Rajiv Gandhi Government, citing some changes made inside the building as a violation of land allotment, the Government issued a takeover notice. In the end, *Indian Express* won the case. Citing a series of violations, the Government has issued orders to take over the nearby Link House and Herald House. These two cases are still pending in different courts.

The Link House case has been pending in the Delhi High Court for the past six years. The Government won the case in the erstwhile *National Herald* newspaper's publishing office, Herald House, takeover. Now the matter has been pending in the Supreme Court since 2019. Meanwhile, the Enforcement Directorate (ED), in 2025, provisionally attached National Herald's properties in Delhi, Mumbai and Lucknow.

Recently, the Gujarat Government has taken over the land allotted to Asaram Bapu. The reason cited for the takeover was to construct a new stadium for the Commonwealth Games 2030. The High Court also ratified the Government's decision. Now the case is pending in the Supreme Court.

Not only properties, but the Government can attach anything. Indira Gandhi, during the Emergency period, appointed five directors in the Indian Express newspaper company in a bid to take over from Ram Nath Goenka. But the Government's attempt failed due to Goenka's objections at the very first board meeting. He picked a fight with

one of the Government-appointed directors, Congress leader Kamal Nath, and got the board meeting called off. Details of this incident are described verbatim in Arun Shourie's recent book, *The Commissioner For Lost Causes*. The *Times of India* was managed by a committee headed by Bombay High Court judges for more than 10 years when the promoters were arrested for financial violations, and Indira Gandhi, in the mid-1970s, returned the newspaper to the promoters.

India's famous takeover was in 1953 when Jawaharlal Nehru ordered the acquisition of Air India from the Tata Group. Another was the nationalisation of banks by Indira Gandhi in 1969, citing financial violations by private bankers. Many educational institutions were also taken over by the Government, citing mismanagement and corruption.

THE BJP GOVERNMENT OF UTTARAKHAND IN 2018 PASSED AN ACT TO TAKE OVER 51 TEMPLES IN THE STATE, INCLUDING KEDARNATH AND BADRINATH TEMPLES

In South India, many temples were taken over by the Government by creating a board to run the administration of temples. In Tamil Nadu, during the DMK regime, many temples were taken over, citing mismanagement. In 2014, the Supreme Court passed a landmark judgment on the takeover of a temple in a case filed by Subramanian Swamy. The apex court ordered that if there is any mismanagement in temple administration, the Government can take over and appoint a new management to rectify the problem, and it must be handed back to believers/priests within three years. The BJP Government of Uttarakhand, in 2018, passed an Act to take over 51 temples in the state, including Kedarnath and Badrinath Temples. The Government never explained why this Act was brought in. Due to huge protests from people and priests, after two years the Government withdrew the Act to save its skin from public anger.

The writer is Associate Editor, *The Pioneer*



A 112-year old heritage: Why Delhi cannot afford to lose the Gymkhana Club

NAVINA JAJA

Delhi has never been a city built through erasure. It has always evolved through accumulation. The city's identity lies not in uniformity, but in layering — in the ability to preserve different historical rhythms simultaneously.

This is why Delhi cannot be understood solely through monuments of state power. Its real autobiography lies equally in the spaces where diplomacy unfolded, where political negotiations occurred informally, where cuisine, sport, etiquette, conversation and governance intersected, and where generations inherited not simply buildings but ways of inhabiting the city. Within this larger historical manuscript of Delhi, the Delhi Gymkhana Club occupies a singular place.

Established in 1913 as the "Imperial Delhi Gymkhana Club", the institution

emerged during the creation of New Delhi itself. Yet, over more than a century, it transcended the politics of its origin and became woven into the civic memory of the capital. Today, the Gymkhana survives not merely as a club, nor merely as a historic structure, but as one of Delhi's most important living heritage landscapes — a place where diplomacy, governance, sport, cuisine, ecology, sociability, prestige and memory continue to coexist.

Its significance lies precisely in the fact that it remains inhabited history.

Unlike static monuments, the Gymkhana functions as a living civic environment. Its lawns, verandahs, courts, dining halls, kitchens, bars, reading rooms and gardens preserve inherited rituals of gathering and encounter. Its atmosphere has been shaped not only by architecture, but by continuity itself — by the fact that gen-



erations have continued to use the space as part of Delhi's civic life.

Certain institutions become important because they preserve not only structures, but habits of civilisation. Delhi Gymkhana belongs to this cate-

gory. The political and diplomatic importance of Delhi Gymkhana forms an essential part of its historical significance. The informal political discussions and negotiations that ultimately paved the way for the Gandhi-Irwin

Pact of 1931 were notably held within the club's premises. The pact represented one of the defining moments in India's freedom movement, symbolising a critical stage in the constitutional negotiations between the nationalist movement and imperial authority.

Delhi during this period was not governed solely through official chambers. The city's political culture unfolded equally through gardens, residences, salons, clubs and semi-public civic spaces, where relationships, conversations and informal negotiations shaped political outcomes. Mahatma Gandhi, Lord Irwin and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel belonged to a political era in which the social geography of Delhi formed part of the architecture of governance itself. The Gymkhana evolved into one of Delhi's principal environments of soft cultural diplomacy. Long before luxury hotels became

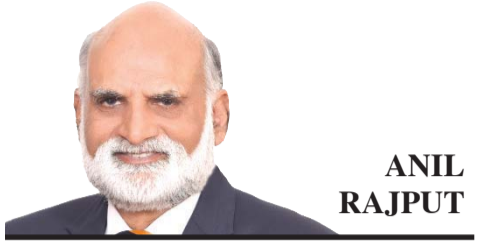
diplomatic stages, the Gymkhana functioned as one of the capital's most important social and diplomatic salons. Situated within the diplomatic geography of New Delhi and surrounded by embassies and state institutions, the Gymkhana continues to function as a softer extension of the capital's international identity. It represents not simply elite sociability, but the diplomacy of atmosphere — the manner in which a capital projects continuity, hospitality, prestige and institutional memory.

One of the central debates surrounding institutions such as Delhi Gymkhana concerns privilege. Yet privilege itself possesses a history, and cities mature when they learn to preserve the full complexity of their social evolution rather than flattening it into simplistic moral categories.

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"PEOPLE WILL TRAVEL ANYWHERE
FOR GOOD FOOD - IT'S CRAZY"
- RENE REDZEPI

Vibhuvana Sankashti: A culinary expression of prayer and discipline



ANIL
RAJPUT

Vibhuvana Sankashti, a sacred observance dedicated to Lord Ganesha, revered as the remover of obstacles, the guardian of wisdom and auspicious beginnings, is a rare form of Sankashti Chaturthi celebrated during the spiritually significant Adhik Maas. While Sankashti Chaturthi is observed every month on the fourth lunar day of Krishna Paksha, the waning phase of the Moon after the full moon, Vibhuvana Sankashti gains a special significance because it occurs within Adhik Maas, the additional month periodically added to the Hindu calendar to align the lunar and solar cycles. Its rarity gives the occasion a heightened devotional importance, marked by fasting, prayer and self-discipline. Like many sacred occasions in Indian tradition, food on this day is more than nourishment after abstinence; it becomes an expression of devotion itself. The cuisine reflects simplicity, purity and sacred offering, where vrat preparations, milk-based dishes and Lord Ganesha's beloved sweets such as modaks and laddoos become symbols of faith, gratitude and inner balance.

The significance of Vibhuvana Sankashti arises from the broader Hindu tradition of observing fasting and prayer as ways of seeking relief from difficulties and inviting auspiciousness into life. Over time, the observance came to acquire a distinct devotional significance, particularly because of its association with the sacred period of Adhik Maas. Across regions and communities, devotees may observe day-long fasting, visit Ganesha temples, recite sacred narratives and complete rituals connected with moon sighting before breaking the vrat. Homes and shrines are adorned with flowers, durva grass and garlands that hold special significance in Ganesha worship, while many devotees wear traditional attire as a reflection of reverence. As with many Indian sacred observances, these rituals gradually shaped culinary traditions of their own, carrying the spirit of gratitude and sacred offering. Regular grains, onion, garlic and heavy foods are usually avoided by those following a traditional fast, while ingredients such as sabudana, samak rice, rajgira, kuttu, sing-

hara, potato, sweet potato, peanuts, milk, curd, coconut, jaggery, fruits and rock salt form the heart of the meal.

The day usually begins before the food itself. The home is cleaned, the place of worship is prepared, and Lord Ganesha is offered flowers, durva, lamps, incense and sweets. The food prepared for Vibhuvana Sankashti is first offered to the deity, then distributed as prasad, and only afterwards enjoyed by the family. The prasad itself becomes a symbol of devotion and supplication that marks the spirit of the occasion.

Among the most familiar savoury preparations associated with Sankashti fasting is sabudana khichdi, prepared by soaking tapioca pearls until they soften and then cooking them gently with roasted peanuts, cumin, green chilli, boiled potato and rock salt. Its success lies in patience because sabudana must be soaked with care so that the grains remain separate rather than turn sticky. Often, it is finished with fresh coriander and lemon juice, giving the dish both energy and lightness after a day of fasting. Alongside it, sabudana vada offers a more festive variation to the same ingredients. Mashed potatoes, soaked sabudana, crushed peanuts and mild spices are shaped into small patties and fried until crisp. When eaten after the evening puja with curd or a simple chutney, it provides more sustenance without breaking the rules of vrat food.

Potatoes and root vegetables occupy an important place because they offer nourishment without the heaviness of regular grains. Vrat wale also are usually made with boiled potatoes simmered in a light gravy of cumin, green chilli, rock salt and sometimes curd, creating a dish that is soft, warm and suitable with puris. Jeera aloo, simpler and drier, is prepared by tossing potatoes with cumin, rock salt and a little ghee, allowing the flavour of the vegetable to remain central. Dahi aloo brings curd into the preparation, making the dish cooling and gentle on the stomach.

Sweet potato and arbi deepen this savoury range. Shakarkandi chaat is made by roasting or boiling sweet potatoes, cutting them into pieces and seasoning them with rock salt, roasted cumin, lemon and sometimes a little chilli. It is sweet, tangy and filling, and it reflects the Indian ability to create festive flavour from the simplest produce. Arbi fry, prepared with colocasia sliced and cooked until lightly crisp, offers an earthier taste. In some homes it is pan-fried with cumin and rock salt, while in others it is made slightly more elaborate with vrat-friendly spices. Both preparations provide substance without excessive richness.

ness, allowing the meal to remain devotional rather than indulgent.

Where a more complete post-vrat meal is prepared, fasting grains and flours become part of the recipes. Samak rice khichdi, made from barnyard millet, is one of the most widely used substitutes for rice during fasts. It is cooked with potatoes, peanuts, cumin and rock salt until soft, and may be served with curd or raita. Its texture makes it comforting after a long day, especially for elderly devotees or those who avoid fried food. The puris prepared on the occasion also hold pride of place. Depending on regional customs and fasting practices, households prepare different varieties of puris, ranging from traditional wheat puris to vrat-friendly versions made with flours such as rajgira, singhara or kuttu. The dough is typically kneaded with water or milk, sometimes enriched with mashed potato, banana or mild spices for texture and flavour, before being rolled into small discs and deep-fried until they puff into soft golden rounds. In some traditions, sweet puris prepared with jaggery and cardamom are also made, adding a gentle sweetness to the sacred meal. Rajgira puri, made from amaranth flour and Kuttu puri, made from buckwheat flour, are some of the more popular varieties. Singhara atta paratha, made from water chestnut flour, is sometimes used as a substitute for puris and is cooked on a tawa with ghee and served hot. Together, these preparations make the meal feel complete while retaining the discipline of fasting.

The accompaniments are equally important because they prevent the meal from becoming heavy or monotonous. Peanut chutney is made by grinding roasted peanuts with green chilli, cumin, rock salt and curd or lemon, giving the plate a nutty depth. Cucumber raita cools the body and balances fried foods, while plain curd itself is often treated as one of the simplest and most sattvic supports for a vrat meal. In some homes, grated coconut, roasted cumin and fresh coriander are added to curd-based accompaniments. Such additions may appear modest, but they show the refinement of Indian fasting cuisine, where balance is created through texture, temperature and digestive wisdom.

No Sankashti associated with Lord Ganesha can be complete without the memory of modak. Ukadiche modak, especially beloved in Maharashtrian households, is made with a rice flour covering and a filling of coconut and jaggery, gently steamed until soft and fragrant. Though regular rice flour may not be used by every fasting



household, the dish remains culturally connected with Ganesha as a symbol of sweetness, knowledge and fulfillment. Some families prepare vrat-friendly versions using permitted flours, while others offer modak symbolically as naivedya and keep the personal meal simpler. Fried modak gives a different texture, with a crisp outer shell and sweet filling, and is often made when the occasion is observed with a more festive household meal. The act of shaping modak by hand itself becomes a form of devotion, requiring attention, patience and care.

The sweet offerings extend beyond modak and reveal the breadth of vrat cuisine. Coconut laddoo is prepared by cooking grated coconut with jaggery or sugar until it binds into soft rounds, sometimes scented with cardamom. Til-gud laddoo brings together sesame and jaggery, creating a warming sweet that is particularly valued in cooler seasons, though it may be made at other times according to family practice. Rajgira laddoo, made from popped amaranth and jaggery, is both light and nourishing, and its crisp texture makes it a popular fasting sweet. These laddoos are not merely desserts but a source of energy, as they are made from ingredients that sustain and energize the body after long hours of fasting.

Milk-based sweets add another layer of fulfillment to the post-vrat meal. Sabudana kheer is made by simmering soaked sabudana in milk until the pearls turn translucent, then sweetening it with sugar or jaggery and flavouring it with cardamom. It is soft, cooling and easy to digest, which makes it suitable after a day of limited eating. Makhana kheer, prepared with roasted fox nuts simmered in milk, has a nutty softness and is often enriched with almonds, cashews or raisins where permitted. Shrikhand, made from strained curd mixed with sugar and cardamom, offers a creamy and cooling sweet that is especially valued in western Indian homes. These sweets are often taken after the main prasad, because they also serve the purpose of restoration.

The lighter end of the meal belongs to fruit and sacred mixtures. Panchamrit, made with milk, curd, ghee, honey and sugar, occupies an important ritual place and is received as a blessing. Fruit chaat, made with bananas, apples, pomegranate, papaya or seasonal fruit, may be seasoned lightly with rock salt and roasted cumin. Banana with milk or curd is perhaps one of the simplest vrat foods, yet it

remains deeply practical because it gives energy without elaborate cooking. In many households, these foods are taken during the day by those who cannot remain completely without nourishment, while others receive them only after puja. This flexibility is part of the strength of Indian ritual culture, where discipline is honoured but human circumstance is also considered.

Beverages during Vibhuvana Sankashti follow the same principle of cooling, restoring and supporting the body. Chaas is prepared by diluting curd with water and seasoning it lightly with roasted cumin and rock salt. Sweet lassi provides greater nourishment and is often taken when the fast has been long. Nimbu pani offers hydration with lemon, water, sugar or jaggery and a small pinch of rock salt. Coconut water is valued for its natural lightness, while aam panna, kokum sherbet and bel sherbet appear according to region and season. In some homes, rose milk or simple fruit drinks are prepared for children and elderly family members. These beverages remind us that vrat cuisine is not only about what is prohibited, but also about how the body is protected while the mind remains turned towards prayer.

The fast is broken after sighting the moon, offering arghya while reciting prayers, and sharing prasad. The arghya usually centres on water, sometimes accompanied by flowers, akshat and other ritual ingredients according to family tradition. There is no display or extravagance in the arrangement, yet the plate feels abundant because every preparation carries intention. A small serving of samak rice khichdi, a spoon of dahi aloo, a piece of sabudana vada, a bowl of sabudana kheer and a single coconut laddoo can become a complete festive meal when received after reverence. The significance lies not in the variety of dishes alone but in the movement from fasting to offering, from offering to gratitude, and from gratitude to shared nourishment.

In conserving the cuisine associated with Vibhuvana Sankashti, we preserve more than a list of fasting recipes. We preserve an inherited understanding that food becomes integral to spiritual intent, a process of purification and a supplication for divine guidance. I believe such observances act also as a reminder that our culinary heritage is not built only on feasts, but also on devotion, offerings to divinity and sharing with the community. It is my belief that Vibhuvana Sankashti, rare in its occurrence and steadfast in its discipline, teaches us that the simplest meal, prepared with sincerity and received with gratitude, can itself become a form of worship.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)



The salad side of summer

Crunch matters. Colour matters. And a good summer salad, it turns out, is exactly what the season ordered

TEAM VIVA

When the brutal heat finally hits this summer, absolutely nobody wants to stare down a heavy plate of hot food. Your body practically begs for something cold, loud, and fresh. We start craving serious crunch and bright, sharp dressings that wake up a tired mouth instead of putting us to sleep. That is the truth about a proper green bowl. It is not about dieting; it is strictly about surviving the afternoon without feeling sluggish. Café Delhi Heights seems to understand this rather well. Their current menu—especially the sharp Raw Papaya Salad and the chilled Salmon & Mango Bowl — makes a quietly convincing case for the salad as something worth genuinely looking forward to.



Chef's Italian Chicken Salad: Hearty, tangy and vibrant

This cold plate loads up on juicy grilled chicken, smoky roasted peppers, and crisp greens tossed in rich, creamy Caesar. With a side of tangy French dressing to punch things up, it is a satisfying, bold summer staple.

Roasted Beetroot Salad: Earthy, tangy and satisfying

Roasted beetroot sits at the centre of this one, earthy and soft, balanced out by sharp rocket leaves and a generous crumble of goat cheese. A honey and lemon dressing pulls it all together, and somehow the whole thing tastes both light and satisfying at once.



Panzanella Salad: Rustic, bold and utterly satisfying

Watch the kitchen toss massive, rustic bread chunks straight into warm vegetables, letting the crusts soak up all that sharp garlic, lemon, and olive oil. Showered with oregano and heavy parmesan, this messy, comforting bowl feels more like a hearty feast than a simple salad.

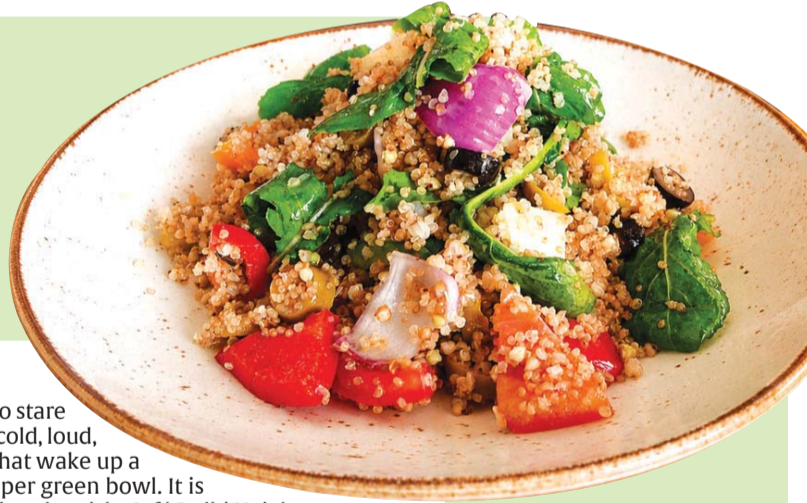


Greek Salad: Clean, bright and effortlessly free

The kitchen piles sharp raw onions, crisp bell peppers, salty black olives, and bursting cherry tomatoes over a fresh bed of chilled lettuce. Drenched in a punchy herb, lemon, and olive oil mix, then crowned with thick, creamy feta, it satisfies every salty, savory, and tangy summer craving.

Raw Papaya Salad: Papaya that packs a punch

Shredded green papaya brings a loud crunch to the table. The kitchen aggressively tosses these raw strands in a sharp, intense sweet chili and lemon dressing that bites back immediately. Buried under a heavy handful of crushed peanuts, this bold plate wakes up your tired mouth instantly.



IN CAESAR WE CRUNCH



Tossing the Caesar Salad



Sprinkling Fresh Cilantro



The Perfect Caesar Plate

PHOTO: PANKAJ KUMAR

Flavours of Taiwan



GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Taiwan is often celebrated for its technological advancement, vibrant cities and rich cultural traditions, but one of its most fascinating attractions is its food culture. The island nation offers a remarkable culinary experience where global flavours coexist harmoniously with local traditions. For Indian travellers and food enthusiasts, Taiwan has increasingly become a delightful destination because it offers not only authentic Taiwanese cuisine but also some of the finest Indian food in East Asia. Taiwan's tea ceremonies are calming experience. Over the years, Indian cuisine has gained immense popularity across the world. Rich spices, diverse regional recipes and the balance of flavours have made Indian dishes universally loved. Taiwan, too, has embraced this trend warmly. Cities such as Taipei, Taichung and Kaohsiung have numerous Indian restaurants — Pooja's, Doon Valley, to name a few — serving everything from butter chicken and biryani to masala dosa and paneer tikka. The growing

popularity of naan, curry and tandoori dishes among locals reflects how Indian food has become a cultural bridge connecting nations.

At the same time, Taiwanese cuisine has its own unique identity. Restaurant Chun shui Tang invented now world famous, bubble tea. Night markets across Taiwan are central to this culinary culture. Shilin Night Market offer an endless variety of street food that attracts locals and tourists alike. Iconic delicacies include beef noodle soup, xiao long bao and the world-famous bubble tea, which originated in Taiwan. Seafood lovers can enjoy oyster omelettes, grilled squid and fresh fish dishes, while healthy vegetarian options influenced by Buddhist traditions are widely available. What makes Taiwan truly special is the opportunity to enjoy both Indian and Taiwanese cuisines side by side. This coexistence of culinary traditions reflects Taiwan's openness, cosmopolitan spirit and cultural warmth, making it a paradise for food lovers.



Taiwan's iconic Baobing:

In Taiwan, this delicacy is served piled high with fresh fruits such as mango (pictured above), accompanied by finely shaved ice that blends beautifully with the flavours. Finished with a drizzle of condensed milk, it is cold, sweet and a must-try.

TAIWAN BLENDS SCENIC BEAUTY, MODERN INFRASTRUCTURE AND UNFORGETTABLE CULINARY EXPERIENCES FOR TRAVELLERS



"MINDFULNESS ISN'T DIFFICULT,
WE JUST NEED TO REMEMBER TO DO IT"
— SHARON SALZBERG

The Art of Living completes 45 years of global service

TEAM AGENDA

As The Art of Living marked 45 years of humanitarian service and global outreach, the organisation celebrated the occasion with the launch of five major initiatives focused on youth empowerment, entrepreneurship, sustainability, consciousness studies, and education. The event, held at The Art of Living International Center, also coincided with the 70th birthday celebrations of Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, whose teachings on peace, well-being, and human values have influenced millions across the world.

Vice President of India CP Radhakrishnan presided over the launch ceremony and joined dignitaries in unveiling a commemorative postal stamp on the occasion.

The newly launched initiatives — the Youth Career Excellence Programme, Faculty of Eastern Knowledge Systems, Art of Living Innovation and Entrepreneurship Incubation, Centre of Excellence on Consciousness Studies and Human Potential, and Eco Shanti — reflect the organisation's expanding vision in addressing contemporary social, educational, environmental, and human development challenges.

The launch ceremony marked the culmination of month-long celebrations at The Art of Living International Center, attended by 678 distinguished guests from India and abroad.

Addressing the gathering, CP Radhakrishnan spoke about the extraordinary global reach of the movement founded by Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

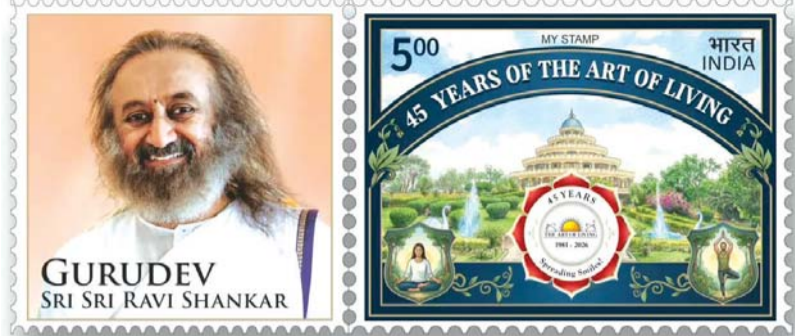
"Today is a celebration of a great vision that has touched millions of lives across continents. I was astonished to learn that The Art of Living is present in 182 countries. Almost the entire civilisation of mankind is getting linked through this movement," he said.

Praising Gurudev's simplicity and compassion, the Vice President remarked that what made his contribution extraordinary was "the humility and humanity he embodies".

Welcoming the Vice President and guests, Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar highlighted the growing global recognition of meditation and inner well-being in modern life. "The world today has recognised that meditation is no longer a luxury. With 192 countries coming together to declare World Meditation Day, there is a growing understanding that meditation is a basic necessity for a healthy, happy, and stress-free life," Gurudev said.

Emphasising holistic human development, he noted that "knowledge, meditation, and music" must accompany people throughout life.

Gurudev concluded with a call for global harmony rooted in the ancient Indian ideal of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam — One World Family. "Let us dream of a world free from fear, tension, and hatred. A peaceful and harmonious world begins with peaceful and harmonious individ-



(L-R) Karnataka Governor Thaaawarchand Gehlot, Vice President of India CP Radhakrishnan, and Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar at the Art of Living International Center

uals," he said. Governor of Karnataka Thaaawarchand Gehlot also addressed the gathering, highlighting Karnataka's connection to the origins of the global movement. "It is a matter of pride for Karnataka that the roots of this global movement are connected to our sacred land. For more than four decades, The Art of Living has promoted peace and well-being at the individual, community, and global levels through a variety of programmes," he said. The Governor also praised Gurudev's contribution to peace-building efforts across the world.

The five initiatives launched during the event aim to address some of the most pressing needs of contemporary society through innovation, education, sustainability, and human development.

The Youth Career Excellence Program seeks to prepare young people for careers in the civil services while also providing industry-oriented hospitality training to improve employability among rural and urban youth.

The Faculty of Eastern Knowledge Systems will function as a multidisciplinary platform integrating Eastern wisdom traditions with modern education and research to address ethical, social, and ecological challenges.

The Art of Living Innovation and Entrepreneurship Incubation initiative aims to support innovation-driven and hardware-focused start-ups through mentorship, prototyping facilities, and early-stage funding, with a vision to nurture 500 start-ups.

Meanwhile, the Centre of Excellence

on Consciousness Studies and Human Potential will create an interdisciplinary ecosystem for research and innovation in consciousness, cognition, mental well-being, and human potential.

Eco Shanti, the organisation's sustainability initiative, seeks to eliminate single-use plastics through sustainable alternatives and aims to reduce plastic production and usage by at least 100,000 tonnes annually by 2030.

For nearly a month, The Art of Living International Center hosted a series of celebrations reflecting the spirit of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. The event drew participation from prominent personalities across politics, business, spirituality, arts, and public life.

Among those who joined the celebrations were Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Ministers Nitin Gadkari and Sarbananda Sonowal, Maharashtra Chief Minister Shri Devendra Fadnavis, along with leading diplomats, scholars, faith leaders, and artists.

The month-long celebrations featured global meditations at the newly inaugurated Dhyana Mandir, cultural performances celebrating India's artistic heritage, discussions on mental well-being and consciousness, and stories of transformation from people whose lives have been impacted by Gurudev's work over the past 45 years. At its core, the celebration reaffirmed Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's enduring vision of building a stress-free, violence-free society rooted in inner peace, service, compassion, and human values.

One World: One Family

In a world increasingly troubled by war, division and uncertainty, the ancient ideal of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, One World, One Family' feels more relevant than ever before. At a time when humanity is often fragmented by borders, beliefs and conflicts, the BAPS Hindu Mandir Abu Dhabi stands as a living embodiment of this timeless vision. Through its message and service, the mandir quietly reminds the world that humanity flourishes not through division, but through unity



DR SWAMI GYANANANDDAS

On the evening of April 2, 2024, as the golden lights of Abu Dhabi slowly merged into the serenity of the Ramadan twilight, an extraordinary scene unfolded within the sacred stone corridors of the BAPS Hindu Mandir Abu Dhabi. Bathed in radiant illumination and adorned with elegant decorations along every pathway, the mandir blossomed into a special celebration. On this special evening, the mandir opened its doors for 'Omsiyat', an Arabic word evoking an intimate gathering of heartfelt conversation, reflection and companionship.

What followed was far more than a ceremonial gathering. Within the serene mandir complex, alive with the spirit of timeless Indian culture and spirituality, more than 200 distinguished guests from different faiths and nationalities gathered shoulder to shoulder. Hindu swamis, Muslim scholars, Christian priests, Jewish rabbis, Bahá'í representatives, diplomats, ministers and community leaders sat together not as representatives of separate religions, but as members of one human family.

Among them were His Excellency Sheikh Nahayan bin Mabarak Al Nahyan, UAE Minister of Tolerance and Coexistence; His Excellency Dr Thani bin Ahmed Al Zeyoudi; and His Excellency Dr Mugheer Khamis Al Khaill, leaders whose presence itself reflected the UAE's larger vision of harmony. Rabbi Jeff Berger of the Abrahamic Family House captured the spirit of the evening beautifully when he observed that "unity in diversity is not merely a principle, but a practice". And on that evening, the practice became visible.

Then came perhaps the most moving moment of all. As the Ramadan fast con-

WITHIN THE SERENE MANDIR COMPLEX, ALIVE WITH THE SPIRIT OF TIMELESS INDIAN CULTURE AND SPIRITUALITY, MORE THAN 200 DISTINGUISHED GUESTS FROM DIFFERENT FAITHS AND NATIONALITIES GATHERED SHOULDER TO SHOULDER

cluded, leaders of different religions gathered to share suhoor together in the mandir complex. Volunteers lovingly served pure vegetarian Indian and Arabic delicacies, simple meals transformed into symbols of coexistence. Around the dining tables, differences of race, language, nationality and belief quietly dissolved into conversation, laughter and mutual respect. It was diplomacy without negotiations, peace without slogans and spirituality without barriers.

Addressing the gathering, Sheikh Nahayan bin Mabarak Al Nahyan spoke with rare conviction. At a time when the world is threatened by "separatism, distrust, intolerance and conflicts", he said, the mandir brings "hope to the world". His words carried the weight of a deeper truth that humanity survives not through power alone, but through coexistence.

Swami Brahmaviharidas (Head, BAPS Mandir Abu Dhabi), speaking on behalf of the mandir and inspired by the guidance of Guru Mahant Swami Maharaj, expressed gratitude to His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and the UAE leadership for nurturing such a vision of harmony. Reflecting on the atmosphere of the evening, he shared a striking thought once voiced

by a scientist: that if humanity were ever judged by visitors from another world, he would rather they judge Earth by what was happening in Abu Dhabi that evening than by the wars and monuments of hatred scattered across the globe.

And perhaps that was the true significance of Omsiyat. It was not merely an interfaith programme. It was a quiet yet powerful declaration that the ancient Indian ideal of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, The World Is One Family", is not an unreachable philosophy.

That same spirit continued to reveal itself even during recent wartime anxieties across the Gulf. On the soil of the UAE, the leadership of the nation and the swamis of the BAPS Hindu Mandir Abu Dhabi came together in a shared effort of care, prayer and humanitarian support for stranded and distressed families, a living reflection that, in moments of fear and uncertainty, One World, One Family is not merely spoken, but lived.

Reinforcing the UAE's enduring commitment to coexistence and human unity, Swami Brahmaviharidas was recently received by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad Al Nahyan, Adviser to the President of the UAE and Chairman of Abu Dhabi Airports. In a warm and meaningful exchange, Swami Brahmaviharidas expressed gratitude for the visionary leadership of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in nurturing an environment of stability, security, equality and mutual respect for people of all faiths and nationalities across the UAE. His Highness, in turn, appreciated the mandir's growing role as a beacon of peace, harmony and shared humanity, advancing values that continue to unite hearts beyond cultural and religious boundaries.

Yet, beyond official meetings and ceremonial exchanges, something far deeper has quietly taken root. The mandir has now become a sacred thread of relationship between the UAE leadership and the Hindu swamis. Their bond, built upon mutual respect, trust, care and shared ideals, has evolved into a living expression of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, One World, One Family", a rare and inspiring symbol of harmony between two nations, two cultures and two faith traditions.

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



Weekly Overview

The week opens under an intense Scorpio Moon, bringing deeper reactions and stronger internal processing. Midweek, Sagittarius increases movement, communication and outward thinking. By the weekend, Capricorn shifts focus toward discipline, responsibility and practical decision-making.

Aries (Mesh): Early developments may prompt deeper reflection, particularly in financial or emotional matters where clarity has been delayed. Reactions around you may feel stronger than expected, making patience more valuable than confrontation. Midweek brings movement, discussions and fresh momentum, especially in work or travel plans. By the weekend, practical responsibilities demand attention, and discipline becomes essential.

Taurus (Vrisabh): Relationships and interpersonal dynamics may demand greater attention during the opening phase of the week. Others may appear emotionally intense or difficult to read, so avoid reacting too quickly to changing behaviour. Midweek supports practical thinking, communication and clearer planning, particularly where pending decisions require movement. Weekend brings clarity and confidence; stubbornness may slow progress.

Gemini (Mithun): Routine matters and unfinished responsibilities may dominate the opening days, making it important to avoid distraction or scattered effort. Emotional undercurrents in the workplace or within close interactions may require calmer handling. Midweek brings stronger movement, conversations and opportunities to reconnect with people or plans that had slowed earlier. By the weekend, practical judgment matters. Avoid emotional decisions.

WEEKLY MOON SIGN FORECAST | 31 MAY - 6 JUNE

Strong Reactions, Expanding Thoughts and Grounded Decisions

Dr Shanker Adawal
Astrologer, Author & Researcher

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

Cancer (Karka): The week begins with stronger emotional intensity, though this may also improve creativity, intuition and personal involvement in important matters. However, emotional reactions could become heavier if expectations remain too rigid. Midweek shifts attention toward routine responsibilities, health matters or work structure requiring practical balance. By the weekend, relationships and communication improve, though emotional maturity will still be necessary in sensitive discussions. Listen more, explain less.

Leo (Simha): Domestic matters, emotional comfort or unresolved personal concerns may shape the opening phase of the week. You may prefer distance from unnecessary noise or social pressure for a while. Midweek brings renewed confidence, movement and stronger external engagement, making this a useful phase for communication and practical progress. By the weekend, routine responsibilities and pending commitments may demand greater discipline. Avoid postponing practical matters that have already waited too long.

Virgo (Kanya): Conversations and communication may carry stronger emotional weight during the opening days, particularly where misunderstandings or assumptions already exist. This is not the best phase for impulsive

reactions. Midweek supports movement, learning, planning and broader thinking, helping mental pressure settle gradually. By the weekend, emotional stability improves and creative thinking becomes stronger. Practical judgment remains important, while confidence steadies.

Libra (Tula): Financial thinking or practical concerns may require greater attention during the early part of the week. Emotional spending or unnecessary commitments should be avoided. Midweek brings stronger social movement and improved communication, though not every opinion around you will require a response. By the weekend, family matters or emotional responsibilities may need patient handling. Maintaining balance between personal expectations and practical realities will become important.

Scorpio (Vrischik): With the Moon opening the week in Scorpio, emotional awareness, observation and personal intensity naturally increase. This can help you recognise what has remained unresolved beneath the surface. However, reactions may become stronger if control is pushed too far. Midweek gradually lightens mental pressure and supports practical movement in financial or work-related matters. By the weekend, communication improves, though measured words will still produce better results than emotional insistence.

Sagittarius (Dhanu): The opening phase may feel mentally crowded, with emotional or practical matters demanding quiet observation before action becomes possible. Midweek becomes your stronger phase, as the Moon enters Sagittarius and restores movement, confidence and outward

momentum. Travel, planning or meaningful discussions may move more naturally during this period. By the weekend, financial discipline and Practical matters return to focus. Excitement alone may not be enough.

Capricorn (Makar): Social expectations, group discussions or professional coordination may dominate the opening phase of the week. Emotional reactions from others could require diplomacy rather than direct confrontation. Midweek supports planning and broader perspective, though overcommitting should still be avoided. By the weekend, the Moon enters Capricorn, restoring steadiness, discipline and clearer personal judgment. This is the strongest phase of the week for organised effort and practical correction.

Aquarius (Kumbh): Responsibilities or professional expectations may feel heavier during the opening days, particularly where emotional pressure and practical demands become mixed together. Midweek brings improved communication and stronger support through discussions, planning or collaboration. However, not every opportunity needs immediate commitment. By the weekend, emotional energy becomes quieter and more inward-looking. Some matters may benefit from patience and observation before important conclusions are reached.

Pisces (Meen): The week opens with deeper thinking, emotional reflection and a stronger need to understand situations beyond surface appearances. Midweek supports movement, communication and practical progress, especially in work or responsibility-driven matters. However, expectations should remain realistic. By the weekend, social interactions become constructive, helping pressure ease. Practical discipline remains necessary, but balance becomes easier to maintain.

DECCAN Chronicle

31 MAY 2026



Sucheta Dasgupta

Off the beaten track

Be true to friends, & 'frenemies' too!

Some friends have your back. Some inspire you. Some hear you when you speak even if you are already close, already familiar. It is important to have this third category of friends as they keep you grounded, help you think, get a handle on reality, see things as they are. They bring you the gift of clarity. That is why you feel so comforted after those conversations.

Their role assumes significance in the latter decades of your life. By then, you have survived and have an idea of who you are, know your likes and dislikes.

I like people to think for themselves. Speak their mind. Even if they are about to disagree with me. Even if, potentially, what they say may put me in a spot because I may not have a clear or ready answer.

At that point, I become the boring friend. Liable to be misjudged/laughed at.

Though there is no compulsion, pressure, on the part of said friend to do either.

And so they don't. Because they are my friend. I don't really have to perform in front of them.

But do you know what's interesting about being a woman? Like the best of surprises, life will bring you these friends as you grow older.

Life will also let many of your friendships run their course. It is wishful thinking to believe that friendships are forever. Most last only for a season.

Some friendships may even be just for a few months. Especially those between editors and writers. Women and women. Even when both parties know whose ego it was that got in the way. People are not always equally idealistic even if they like each other.

Hubris is the common malady of ancient cultures. Albeit not the primary one. That would be competition in the world's worst populated nation today. Competition drives a wedge between the unlikeliest groups of people. Parents and teachers. Doctors and patients. Auto drivers and passengers. Journalists and IT workers. Not to speak of colleagues, acquaintances, strangers. People from different communities speaking different languages, following different religions, having competing histories and traditions.

Instead of exchanging notes about current events that are impacting their work and respective workplaces, sharing tips and ideas, solving problems by putting their heads together, small talk between neighbours is loaded with value judgements when they meet each other in elevators. Even if it is with zero benefit of information. But how ever would they have owned it? Their questions never deviate from a set script. Neither do the answers.

Even though there is no pressure on anyone to stick to either.

It's another one of those interesting things about being a woman; that expectation. Yet because of this reason, the simplest communication between people becomes one-sided. Friendships are stillborn.

Sometimes, it is fun to rant. Not that I'm known to indulge myself, not really. Even this here is a structured mood piece, not a fulmination.

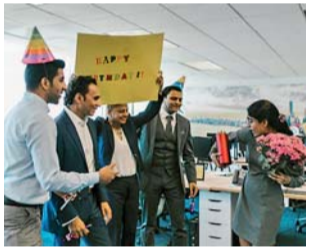
Yet if only for the sake of humour, let me list out some smart answers to those passive-aggressive how-are-you's that I've switched to dispensing for a while now, after having spent an overly long time doing due diligence to the process of figuring out the askers. These are:

1. Can't complain (or could be worse; but this old classic could still leave the asker sneering/smiling their smug smile simply because it is less than enthusiastic and so lends itself nicely to speculation)
2. *Shokuner obhishape ki goru mawre?* (This is another classic, a truism meaning, did you think my cattle would die just to please them vultures? No doubt it is more openly hostile than its slightly ambiguous alternative, if wishes were horses; only make sure to wait for the enquirer's reaction.)
3. Just so/see for yourself (the casual chic of responses)
4. What got in yer eye, friend, a cucumber? (a street version of the above)
5. Getting along with your blessings (this one is for the frenemy and is both snarky and diplomatic compared to a more direct "never better")

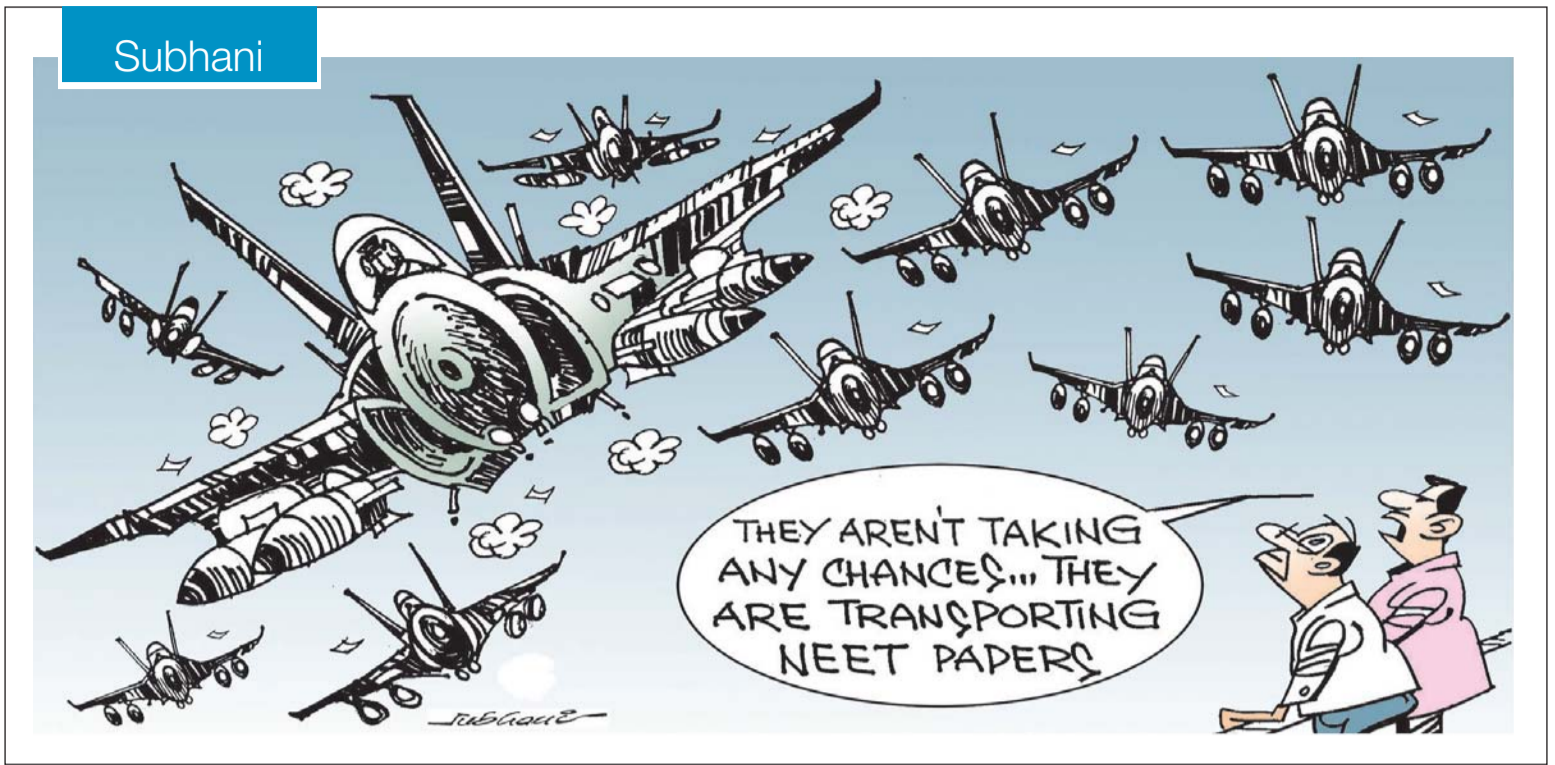
Why that single retort in Bengali? Well, because, for one, it is an epigram (which you can customise if you like), and two, evolution. Lately, I have been measuring out tone in my everyday communications. The heart is no longer on the sleeve, not even for close ones.

All of this takes me back, however, to an answer I'd given a former work colleague back in 2008 when I first came to do journalism in Delhi. From the outset, it was pretty clear I was Bengali and I didn't make any effort to disguise it (why would I? I had no reason to be self-conscious). But apparently, it had been expected of me, because my co-workers kept engaging me in yet another of those ubiquitous-yet-redundant inquiries; it was, as you can guess, the notorious, where are you from, rather than, are you Bengali, to confirm which had really been their secret desire. To it, I remember I'd once said, fish, medicine and roses. Not that I used to be much of a fish eater back then, *maachh* being an acquired taste of the mature palate and I was yet to hit forty, but my dad was a doctor, the house was full of medicine strips, we had the most beautiful rose garden in town and there was always fish for lunch and dinner.

I remember the fellow stop in his tracks, look at me goggle-eyed, decide I am mad (well, that was an easy one!) and proceed to repeat the question. Comebacks are cool. Serve them out and rule. Though there is no real pressure in life to do either.



Life will also let many of your friendships run their course. It is wishful thinking to believe that friendships are forever. Most last only for a season.



Yashwant Varma and the riddle of judicial liability



Manish Tewari

State of the Union

India's judicial accountability framework has entered largely uncharted constitutional territory. The case involving Justice Yashwant Varma is no longer merely about allegations against a sitting High Court judge; it has now become a test of whether India's impeachment architecture can continue to function after a judge has attempted to resign, but before that resignation has been formally accepted by the President. This peculiar constitutional limbo has few parallels in India's legal history.

Justice Varma reportedly tendered his resignation to the President in April 2026 "with immediate effect" amid mounting scrutiny and an ongoing removal process. Yet, crucially, there has been no public notification of acceptance of the resignation by the President. Reports indicate he technically remains a High Court judge as the resignation has not been formally acted upon.

At the same time, the statutory judges' inquiry committee constituted under the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968, has completed its work and submitted its report to Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla. The Lok Sabha secretary has now stated that the report will be laid before Parliament "in due course". This is what makes the present moment extraordinary: the institutional machinery of impeachment is still moving even after the judge has sought to demit office.

Historical evolution of the Doctrine of Impeachment: The first recorded judicial impeachment occurred as far back as 1350 in England, during the reign of King Edward III. The British Parliament impeached Sir William de Thorpe, the Chief Justice of the King's Bench, for taking bribes in exchange for granting pardons to people convicted of heinous crimes. In 1773 Robert Clive was investigated by two parliamentary committees for rapacious conduct during his tenure as Governor of Bengal.

From 1787-95, Warren Hastings the Governor General of Bengal, was also subject to a protracted impeachment process for his egregious acts in India.

The constitutional design of judicial removal in India: Under Articles 124(4) and 217 of the Constitution of India, judges of the Supreme Court and High Courts can only be removed by the President after an address by both Houses of Parliament supported by a special majority on grounds of "proved misbehaviour" or incapacity. The Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968 operationalises this process. The removal mechanism broadly unfolds in five stages: A motion signed by at least 100 Lok Sabha MPs or 50 Rajya Sabha MPs is submitted. The Speaker or Chairman admits the motion. A three-member inquiry committee investigates the allegations. If the committee finds the judge guilty of misbehaviour or incapacity, Parliament debates and votes on the motion. If both Houses pass the motion with the required special majority, the President issues an order removing the judge.

The framers deliberately made removal extremely difficult in order to preserve judicial independence. But they did not fully contemplate a situation where a judge facing impeachment could simply resign midway through proceedings. That loophole has now resurfaced yet again.

The Soumitra Sen precedent: The closest parallel remains the 2011 impeachment proceedings against Justice Soumitra Sen of the Calcutta High Court. In that case, the Rajya Sabha successfully passed an impeachment motion against him on August 18, 2011. Before the Lok Sabha could vote, Justice Sen resigned. There was initial debate on whether Parliament could still proceed with impeachment. Some constitutional experts and even the Attorney General reportedly believed the Lok Sabha could continue. However, President Pratibha Patil accepted Justice

The framers made removal extremely difficult in order to preserve judicial independence. But they did not contemplate a situation where a judge facing impeachment could simply resign midway through proceedings.

Sen's resignation before the Lok Sabha vote took place. The proceedings subsequently became infructuous.

Similarly, former Sikkim High Court Chief Justice P.D. Dinakaran also resigned while the inquiry committee proceedings were in motion, effectively terminating the process before its completion.

But the Justice Varma case differs in one crucial respect. Here, the resignation appears to be pending. That means the constitutional status of Justice Varma remains uncertain: Has he effectively demitted office, or does he continue to hold judicial office until formal acceptance by the President? That distinction could determine the proceedings' future course.

Can Parliament still proceed? The answer may depend on a narrow but important constitutional interpretation. Article 217(1)(a) permits a High Court judge to resign by writing addressed to the President. However, unlike ordinary employment law, constitutional offices often involve formal acceptance procedures and official notification. In practice, judges' resignations are generally notified by the Union government after presidential acceptance. Since no such notification appears to have been issued in Justice Varma's case, the government may still treat him as a sitting judge. If that interpretation holds, Parliament could theoretically continue with the impeachment process after the inquiry committee's report is tabled.

The report itself is important because the committee stage is the heart of the statutory process. It is here that evidence is examined, witnesses heard, and findings recorded. Once laid before Parliament, MPs may still choose to debate and move forward with a removal motion. Yet there are equally strong institutional and political reasons why Parliament

may hesitate. Historically, impeachment has always been viewed as a remedy to remove a sitting judge, not as a symbolic post-office censure mechanism. If the executive eventually accepts the resignation before parliamentary voting begins, the government may argue that the proceedings have become unnecessary. This is why the current moment represents a constitutional grey zone.

A larger accountability problem: Beyond the immediate controversy lies a deeper institutional question: Should judges facing impeachment be able to avoid a final parliamentary verdict simply by resigning? This creates a serious accountability vacuum. A resignation may remove the judge from office, but it prevents Parliament from formally recording findings on misconduct. It also denies the public a complete constitutional closure.

That concern has now become sharper because the Justice Varma proceedings have advanced further than most previous cases. The inquiry committee has already completed its investigation and submitted its report.

The spectacle of a completed inquiry existing alongside an unaccepted resignation exposes a structural gap in India's judicial accountability system. In many ways, the Varma case may become less significant for its underlying allegations and more for the constitutional precedent it leaves behind. If Parliament proceeds despite the pending resignation, India could witness its first full-scale attempt to carry an impeachment process forward after a judge has sought to resign. If the resignation is accepted before further parliamentary action, it will once again reinforce the long-standing pattern where resignation effectively terminates constitutional accountability proceedings.

Either way, the case has already exposed a fundamental truth: India's impeachment framework was designed to protect judicial independence, but it was never fully prepared for the possibility that resignation itself could become a constitutional escape hatch.

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

LETTERS

SMALLER FAMILIES

The right trend of smaller families in AP has started in particular sections of families long back (*Smaller families, new trend in AP, May 30*). Now it has spread to other sections also in recent years. It is very right on the part of parents to go for smaller family practices to give a better future for their child/children (one/two) in terms of better education, health, and lifestyles. Due to the strong decision of most of the parents for the smaller family trend, Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu's proposals for larger families scheme with cash benefits failed mostly.

Kankipadu
Secunderabad

NEET ACCOUNTABILITY

The Supreme Court on Friday stressed the need for accountability in conducting national level tests like the NEET-UG (*Modi will monitor NEET, says Centre, May 30*). The Supreme Court directed to evolve a system to conduct the test with fool-proof methods rather than depending on individuals. It also asked the government to switch over to Computer Based Best (CBT) instead of pen and paper right from next cycle. Giving medical admissions based on a single test, the government itself is giving importance to coaching classes indirectly which is being encashed by them.

Pratapa Reddy Yaramala
NTR district

CBT MODE

The National Testing Agency's decision to shift NEET-UG to the Computer-Based Test (CBT) mode from 2027 has sparked widespread discussion among students, parents, and educators (*NTA: NEET-UG shifting to CBT mode from 2027, May 30*). The reform aims to speed up evaluation, cut down on malpractices, and carry out examinations with greater efficiency and transparency. However, challenges related to digital literacy, computer accessibility, and technological infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, need to be addressed.

Raju Kolluru
Kakinada

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



Skand Tayal

Helsinki lessons: How East Asia set to redefine own strategic future

Three converging shocks since 2020 have unsettled the assumptions on which East Asian security has rested for a generation. The Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and now the US-Israel-Iran conflict, which has effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz to most commercial shipping — a chokepoint through which around 20 million barrels of oil per day flows, with nearly 90 per cent destined for Asian markets. The implications for East Asia are direct: China, India, Japan and South Korea together took the bulk of Gulf crude, and Asian consumers are already absorbing fuel shortages and price shocks while Washington focuses on a US Navy escort mission, Operation Project Freedom, primarily for its own ends.

These shocks coincide with rising unilateralism in US trade and sanctions policy, intensifying US-China competition and a thickening web of unresolved territorial and maritime disputes all across East Asia. Taken together, they argue for a regional process in which the East Asian nations accept primary responsibility for their own strategic and economic security. The Helsinki precedent of 1975 offers a political-usable, if imperfect, template.

The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) had opened in

Helsinki in July 1973 and concluded with a summit in Helsinki in August 1975, when 35 heads of state and government — every European country except Albania, plus the United States and Canada — signed the Helsinki Final Act. The Final Act was politically, if not legally, binding, and structured around three "baskets": (i) a security dimension containing 10 principles on sovereignty, territorial integrity, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-intervention and human rights; (ii) cooperation in economics, S&T and the environment; and (iii) humanitarian cooperation.

Two features matter for East Asia. First, Helsinki did not resolve the Cold War, only regulated it. By codifying the inviolability of borders while obliging states to settle disputes peacefully, it offered each bloc enough of what it wanted to sign. Second, the process, periodic follow-up meets in Belgrade, Madrid and Vienna, turned a single document into a durable habit of dialogue that ultimately produced the "Organisation for Security & Cooperation in Europe".

A similar "Conference on Security & Cooperation in East Asia" need not begin with the hardest questions. Several functional areas are candidates for early agreement, where the interests of most nations broadly converge:

- Energy security and crude oil and gas imports: Closure of the Strait of Hormuz demonstrated that East Asian states are jointly exposed to disruptions over which they have little political voice. Coordinated strategic stockpile drawdowns, joint chartering of insurance and shipping capacity, swap arrangements and shared outreach to Gulf producers are natural starting points.

- Climate change and disaster management — The 2011 Fukushima episode produced an emergency notification mechanism among China, Japan and South Korea that can be widened.

- Regulation of artificial intelligence: Building on the Hiroshima AI Process, the Seoul AI Summit and India's AI Impact Summit in 2026, regional standards on safety, model evaluation and cross-border data flows would reduce costs.

- Cybersecurity: Confidence-building measures on critical infra, financial systems and undersea cables could be pursued.
- Free and open sea lines of communication: Codifying behaviour at sea consistent with UNCLOS, including incident-prevention protocols could be devised.

Any East Asian Helsinki must confront a dense map of unresolved claims. The principal live disputes include the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, South China Sea features

in the Spratly and Paracel groups, Dokdo/Takeshima, Northern Territories/Southern Kuriles, the China-India boundary, Korean Peninsula maritime boundaries and the wider question of denuclearisation, and Cross-Strait questions concerning Taiwan.

An aspirational political outcome — modelled on Helsinki Basket I — would be a 20-year freeze on all bilateral territorial and maritime disputes, with all parties undertaking to maintain a strict status quo: no new construction on disputed features, no changes in administration, no use or threat of force, and standardised incident-prevention procedures. Such a freeze would not prejudice eventual settlement, exactly as the 1975 acceptance of European borders did not prevent later peaceful change.

The US extended deterrence underpins the security of Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and increasingly Australia. Any architecture perceived as supplanting Washington will struggle to win their support. Several disputes — notably the Senkaku/Diaoyu, India-China border and parts of the South China Sea — are at present moving in the wrong direction, with grey-zone incidents intensifying. Asean may feel its "centrality" is being questioned. These sentiments need to be overcome.

A way forward: Possible Track 1.5

Initiative: The seven largest East Asian economies — China, Japan, India, South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam — between them account for the bulk of regional GDP, energy demand and naval power. The China-Japan-South Korea trilateral, dormant from 2019 to 2024, was revived at the 2024 Seoul summit. India is a "strategic partner" of all these six countries.

A pragmatic beginning could be for the seven governments to commission a Track 1.5 process, anchored by leading think tanks to draft a framework "Final Act" over 12-18 months in consultations with Asean and other important countries of East Asia.

The Hormuz closure has crystallised what the pandemic and Ukraine had already suggested: East Asia's prosperity rests on sea lanes, energy flows and rules that its own states will increasingly need to defend together. Also, Asians should be responsible for their own security.

The CSCEA, modelled on Helsinki 1975 but adapted to Asian realities, offers a politically realistic vehicle. It would not solve every dispute — Helsinki did not — but it would, as Helsinki did, change the terms on which they are managed.

The writer is a retired Indian diplomat and a former ambassador to South Korea



Marking the 120th birth anniversary of Ramkinkar Baij, pioneering modernist sculptor

ARTS PAGE 3



Roopinder Singh's book maps the global spread of the Sikh diaspora and gurdwaras

BOOKS PAGE 4

CHANDIGARH | 31 MAY 2026

As it ingeniously reclaims the cockroach as a symbol of youth survival amid unemployment, systemic neglect and disillusionment, a parody movement is testing the limits of free speech and satire-driven political expression

COCKROSH

SHEKHAR SINGH

A COCKROACH has crawled into India's political conversation and nobody quite knows how to deal with it. Not political parties. Not television studios. Not social media platforms. Not even the courts. What began as an online joke has rapidly turned into a most unusual digital movement, blending satire, unemployment anxiety, meme culture, anti-establishment anger and Gen Z humour into a phenomenon now known as the 'Cockroach Janta Party' (CJP).

In less than two weeks, the parody movement exploded across Instagram and X, attracted millions of followers, sparked accusations of foreign influence, triggered fierce political debate and even reached the Delhi High Court after its founder alleged suppression and blocking of its social media presence.

For many older Indians, the movement appears absurd. For millions of younger users, however, the cockroach has become a strangely powerful symbol of survival in an India they increasingly describe as exhausting, unequal and unforgiving. And perhaps that is precisely why it resonated. The cockroach survives everything — poison, darkness, floods and attempts to crush it. It exists unnoticed until suddenly it is everywhere. For a generation battling unemployment, paper leaks, rising costs, online pressure and shrinking economic certainty, the metaphor landed instantly.

What transformed the movement from Internet curiosity into a political talking point was not merely its humour, but the emotion hiding beneath it.

The Cockroach Janta Party traces its origins to controversial remarks attributed to Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, in which unemployed or socially disengaged youth were allegedly compared to "cockroaches" and "parasites". The remarks triggered outrage online.

But instead of responding through conventional political protest, young users reclaimed the insult itself.

"If they think we are cockroaches, then we will become cockroaches proudly" became the underlying sentiment driving the meme explosion.

Soon, social media platforms were flooded with cockroach-themed political edits. AI-generated insects delivered speeches. Cockroaches appeared inside Parliament in satirical posters. One viral slogan declared: "Voice of the

Lazy and Unemployed." Another read: "Secular Socialist. Democratic. Lazy."

The movement's founder, Abhijeet Dipke, a 30-year-old political communications student based in Boston, initially appeared overwhelmed by the scale of the reaction. Dipke had previously worked in political consulting spaces and digital campaign ecosystems, including for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). He initially viewed the page as satire and digital commentary rather than a formal political project.

But within days, follower counts surged into millions. Soon, hashtags such as #CockroachJantaParty, #CockroachRepublic and #CertifiedCockroach began trending. Supporters and critics battled endlessly over whether the movement represented genuine youth frustration or manufactured outrage. AI-generated cockroach campaign posters resembling election advertisements started doing the rounds on social media. One meme imagined a cockroach addressing the nation from the Red Fort. Another showed an insect surviving attacks labelled inflation, unemployment, exam leaks and rent hikes.

The humour was ridiculous. That was precisely the point. Dipke himself became a target. Old consultancy links with the AAP were circulated.

Troll accounts accused him of disguising Opposition politics as satire. Some labelled him

anti-national. Others claimed the movement was part of a coordinated digital operation.

The founder responded by insisting the movement was intentionally non-partisan and rooted in frustration rather than party politics. Yet the trolling intensified. Screenshots shared by Dipke allegedly showed hacking attempts and efforts to compromise associated social media accounts. Supporters immediately converted that too into meme material. "Even exterminators fear united cockroaches," read one viral post.

IRONY AS POLITICAL LANGUAGE

India's Gen Z consumes politics differently from previous generations. Political engagement no longer arrives only through speeches, rallies or newspaper columns. It travels through reels, memes, screenshots, satire pages and short-form videos. For older generations, humour in politics was often secondary. For Gen Z, humour itself has become political communication.

Irony has become a political language. And the cockroach movement spoke that language fluently. The CJP had no manifesto in the conventional sense, no public meetings and no formal structure. Yet it managed to create emotional identification faster than many established parties.

That itself exposed something deeper: many young Indians are no longer searching for ideological perfection. They are searching for recognition. The memes often carried humour layered with exhaustion. One post joked about students preparing for competitive exams only to lose opportunities due to paper leaks. Another mocked the endless cycle of internships, unemployment and rising rents.

Several posts ridiculed television debates and performative nationalism. The joke was the delivery mechanism. Frustration was the substance. But as the movement gained traction, so did attempts to discredit it. Union Minister Sukanta Majumdar claimed a significant chunk of the movement's followers originated from Pakistan. Other BJP leaders suggested the account resembled a "cross-border influence operation". Union Minister Kiren Rijiju also questioned the authenticity of the movement's support base.

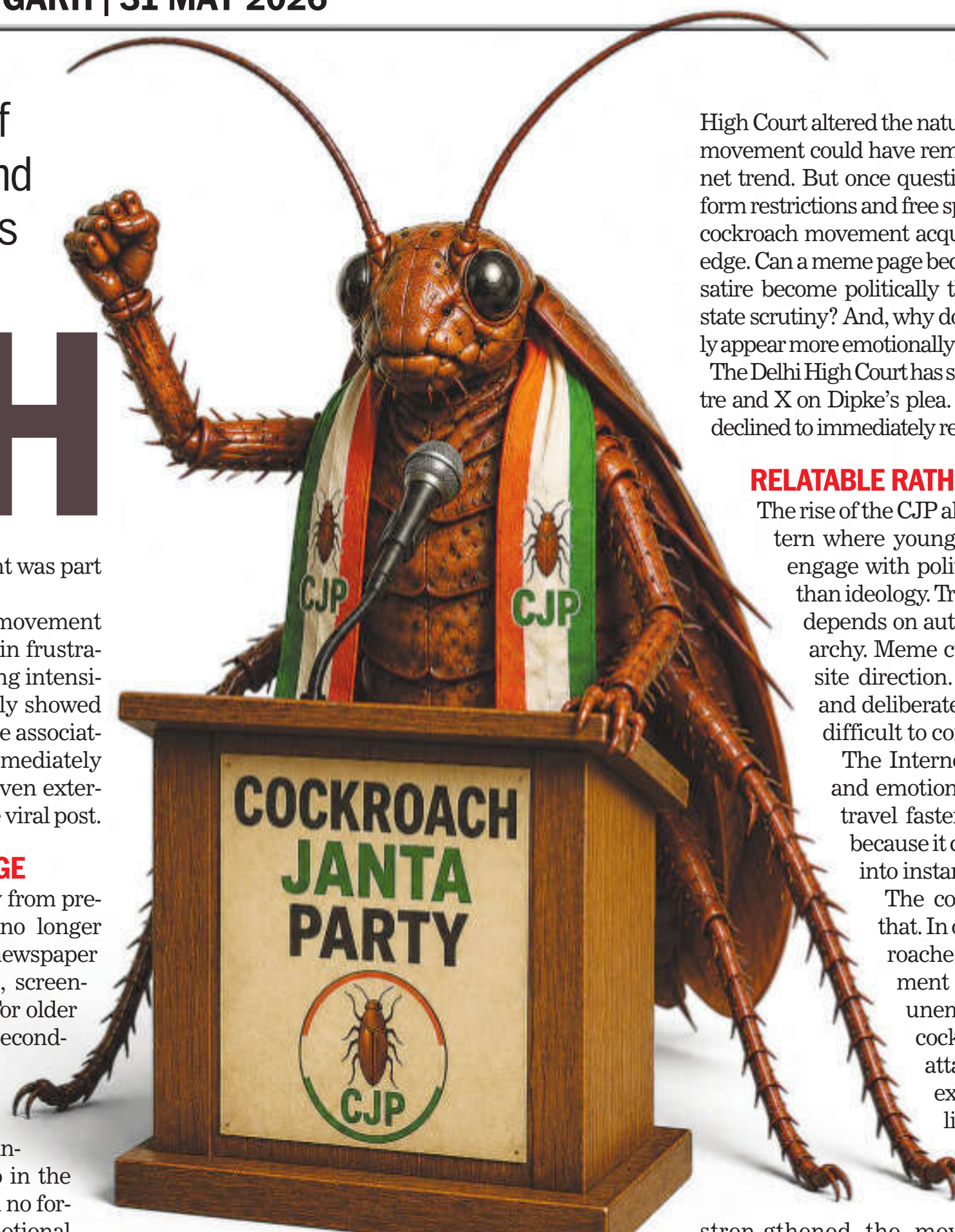
However, independent verification of those claims remains unclear. Digital researchers point out that viral meme pages often attract international audiences naturally, especially in South Asia where online humour ecosystems overlap heavily across borders. Pakistani meme pages did appear to actively replicate the cockroach format, launching their own versions: 'Cockroach Awami Party' and 'Cockroach Awami League'.

But there is little public evidence so far suggesting coordinated foreign amplification beyond the ordinary speed of Internet virality. In one of Internet's stranger moments, the cockroach crossed borders faster than diplomacy. That crossover revealed something larger about South Asia's younger population. Despite political hostility between India and Pakistan, many young users recognised similar frustrations, unemployment, distrust of political elites, social media exhaustion and anger at systems they feel excluded from.

Political scientist Suhas Palshikar believes the phenomenon reflects a deeper institutional anxiety rather than merely Internet culture. According to him, institutions weaken when those managing them gradually move away from their original purpose and begin using institutional authority for objectives beyond their intended role.

His reading of the cockroach phenomenon goes beyond memes. "Why are rulers afraid of cockroaches?" he asks, arguing that history repeatedly shows that seemingly insignificant individuals often carry the ability to unsettle overbearing systems.

Palshikar suggests that focusing only on Gen Z risks oversimplifying what the movement represents. The metaphor, he argues, stretches beyond young Internet users. "The condition of citizens in India itself makes the cockroach an apt metaphor for a much larger majority," he says, adding that the



High Court altered the nature of the story. Until then, the movement could have remained another passing Internet trend. But once questions around censorship, platform restrictions and free speech entered the picture, the cockroach movement acquired a more serious political edge. Can a meme page become a free speech issue? Can satire become politically threatening enough to invite state scrutiny? And, why does a joke movement suddenly appear more emotionally relatable to sections of youth? The Delhi High Court has sought responses from the Centre and X on Dipke's plea. Justice PK Kaurav, however, declined to immediately restore access to the account.

RELATABLE RATHER THAN IDEOLOGICAL

The rise of the CJP also reflects a wider global pattern where younger generations increasingly engage with politics through humour rather than ideology. Traditional political messaging depends on authority, seriousness and hierarchy. Meme culture operates in the opposite direction. It is decentralised, chaotic and deliberately unserious. That makes it difficult to control.

The Internet rewards speed, absurdity and emotional connection. A meme can travel faster than an official statement because it compresses complex feelings into instantly recognisable images.

The cockroach achieved precisely that. In one viral reel, animated cockroaches marched toward Parliament carrying placards about unemployment. In another, a cockroach survived repeated attacks labelled inflation, exams, rent and politics. Millions shared the content because it felt relatable rather than ideological.

Even criticism strengthened the movement. Each accusation generated more memes.

That ability to convert pressure into humour reflects how Internet-native political culture functions today. Fear no longer always silences online communities. Sometimes it energises them. Political establishments across the world increasingly struggle with this reality.

country increasingly appears trapped in a strange moment where citizens recognise themselves in symbols of survival rather than symbols of power.

SHARED FRUSTRATION

The phenomenon also fits into a longer global history of satire-driven political expression. During the Arab Spring, memes and digital humour became tools of dissent against authoritarian governments. Hong Kong's protest movement used Internet art and coded humour to evade censorship. The Occupy Wall Street movement relied heavily on viral online symbolism. Even India's anti-corruption movement during the Anna Hazare years saw early forms of meme-driven mobilisation.

But unlike those movements, the Cockroach Janta Party is deliberately ideology-resistant. It thrives not on clear political demands but on emotional relatability. Back home, Opposition politicians quickly recognised the cultural pulse the movement had tapped into. Congress MP Shashi Tharoor criticised the blocking of the movement's X account, warning that suppressing satire in a democracy was "deeply unwise".

Former Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Priyanka Chaturvedi argued that the rise of the Cockroach Janta Party reflected growing disillusionment among young voters not only with the ruling BJP, but also with the Opposition. According to her, many young Indians increasingly feel politically unrepresented altogether.

That observation perhaps cuts closest to the movement's real significance. The cockroach phenomenon is not merely anti-government satire. It is also a warning to conventional Opposition politics. Young users participating in the trend are not necessarily ideologically aligned. Many appear detached from formal party structures entirely. Their politics is emotional, digital and fluid.

Mahua Moitra also weighed in, arguing that blocking satire reflected insecurity rather than strength. Meanwhile, Dipke moved the Delhi High Court challenging the withholding of the party's X account in India. According to his plea, the account was withheld under provisions of the Information Technology Act. Government sources reportedly cited national security concerns. Dipke's petition, however, argues that the action violated constitutional protections around free speech.

LEGAL QUESTIONS

Indian courts have handled free speech battles involving comedians, stand-up artistes, digital creators and political commentary before. But a meme movement centred around cockroaches entering constitutional free speech territory reflects how dramatically digital politics has evolved. The petition in the Delhi



Abhijeet Dipke, 30, the movement's founder, initially appeared overwhelmed by the scale of the reaction.



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Global spread of Sikh diaspora & gurdwaras

NEELAM MANSINGH CHOWDHRY

THIS is a gift to the world of literature and spirituality by Roopinder Singh, the writer and researcher behind this much-awaited book. Its cover design in inky blue with gold embellishment, evoking the luminous relief work at the entrance of Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar, is indeed stunning. More than a meticulously researched document, it is a labour of love.

Holding this very weighty book, both metaphorically and physically, I felt as though I had in my hands an important aspect of living history — of a community, its belief system, and the enduring values embedded within it. Leafing through this collection creates a sense of reverence, akin to holding an ancient handwritten *granth*.

It is staggering to realise that from the tens of thousands of gurdwaras scattered across the world, just 51 unique shrines were identified and profiled. From a gurdwara in Glenwood, New South Wales, to one in Johannesburg or Rockville, Maryland, with local architectural features creeping in subtly. The most noticeable is the gurdwara at Stockton, California, with its brick entrance that does not conform to a typical gurdwara template.

This curation maps the global spread of the Sikh diaspora — anchoring each gurdwara by its location to a singular historical, spiritual, or communal significance. In doing so, the book illustrates how the community's spiritual DNA remains identical worldwide, seamlessly binding spiritual life with community service through the



GURDWARAS: ABODES OF THE GURU
by Roopinder Singh.
Illustrated by Allan Quesada.
Gentry Press.
Pages 340.
₹2,999

three essential qualities ingrained in the Sikh psyche: spiritual singing — *kirtan*, selfless service — *sewa*, and the community kitchen — *langar*.

A work of this monumental scale could easily have devolved into a dry encyclopaedic catalogue, but a creative partnership prevented that. Roopinder Singh's text illuminates the narrative with personalised reflections, injecting a human pulse by blending historical facts with insightful details and keeping the description of each gurdwara accurate and informative, but never dry. Complimenting this text are exquisite paintings by Allan Jay Quesada, who with his magical paintbrush captures the serene, atmospheric silence of these holy shrines with a depth and warmth that perhaps a camera lens may have skipped.

The shimmering play of light and movement on the *sarovar*, the intricacy of the



The entrance to Golden Temple. Illustration by Allan Quesada.

geometric design on the ceiling of the Harmandir Sahib, embedded with precious stones and gold leaf, the frescoes, mirrored pieces, the intricate patterning of the cool marble floor, all combine together to create a sensory experience that transforms a massive historical archive into an intimate handwritten treasure.

Ultimately, this lusciously produced book achieves the highest purpose any literature can aspire for. It does not merely teach history or catalogue architecture from a detached distance; it stirs the soul

and awakens personal memory. By bridging the grand scale of global heritage with the quiet comfort of personal roots, it reminds us that the true abode of the divine is found wherever community, faith and selfless love converge.

The foreword by the late Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh captures the anthology's tone: "The gurdwara is a material expression of the spiritual, devotional and social aspects of the Sikh way of life."

The publisher's note amplifies and observes that "in a world where race, religion,

and ideology often divide us, gurdwaras — abodes of the Guru — stand as quiet yet powerful reminders of our shared humanity; faith, while sometimes misused to separate, can also bind people together in unity".

This book is a homage to the spirit of collaboration that is symbolised in the conceptual framework of Sikhism. Its secular values are manifested in the fact that the writer, Roopinder Singh, is a Sikh and the illustrator is a Roman Catholic and the publisher a Hindu, becoming a symbol of affirmation of shared respect and reverence, especially to be emphasised in trying times. This book is a reminder of the synthetic richness that exists in most religions and particularly in the Sikh ethos.

For anyone who grew up within the embrace of this culture, reading this book is like being catapulted into a time machine. It triggered memories of how during summer vacations, my family would pile into the battered Fiat car to drive across the plains of Punjab, visiting grand historical gurdwaras and humble village shrines alike. In today's age of hyper-stimulation and digital distractions, it may sound weird, but spending summer holidays listening to *kirtan*, washing dishes and eating on the floor of a community kitchen might sound unusual, but to a child of my generation, born into a Sikh family, it was entirely natural.

The rhythmic routine of the gurdwara — the comforting clatter of steel plates during *langar*, the warmth of shared labour in *sewa*, and the soothing cadence of *kirtan* — all created a profound sense of safety, structure, and belonging.

— The reviewer is a theatre director

Eternal Bond

LAUGHTER is the best medicine — Ruskin Bond lives by the dictum. And the author, who turned 92 earlier this month, feels that if you can see the humour in your life, and if you can laugh at yourself from time to time — you will be a happy person.

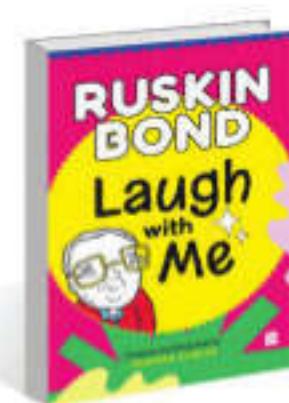
As such, his latest book, 'Laugh With Me', is full of hilarious anecdotes from his own life. From swimming escapades, train adventures and courtroom dramas to mistaken identities, school episodes and much

else, these stories have you rolling with laughter. He writes about the book that no one would buy; the cat who wouldn't leave her chair in the sun; the kid who wanted an interview of the author of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer'.

Such simple yet hilarious tidbits gleaned from daily life dot the book.

'Laugh with Me' is Ruskin Bond's invitation to all readers to join him on a crazy, fun ride through a book that is funny and witty! The book has been brightly illustrated by Shamika Chaves. It includes candid images of the author clicked by his granddaughter, Shrishti.

So, do read, and laugh out loud. — TNS



LAUGH WITH ME
by Ruskin Bond.
HarperCollins.
₹399

Dalit experience in Punjab, felt and seen

GURUPDESH SINGH

THE works of poets such as Kabir, Ravidas and Namdev have resonated for centuries, but it is only recently that Dalit literature has come to occupy centre stage. With the rise of subaltern studies, literature has developed many a niche segment, where hitherto invisible or suppressed groups have asserted their literary presence. Dalit writing, particularly under the influence of Marathi pioneers like Babasaheb Ambedkar and Namdeo Dhasal, started showing its prowess some 60 years ago, and has now become an irrepressible voice in almost all states of the country.

Punjab has a very large presence of Dalits and an equally large body of Punjabi Dalit literature, yet not much has been translated so far to give it readership beyond Punjabi. The anthology 'Gangrene' offers for the first time a set of 12 stories in English to fill that gap. Translated by Akshaya Kumar and Navdeep Singh, the book comes with an elaborate introduction that gives an insight into the development of Punjabi Dalit writings as well as the dynamics of Dalit narratives of exploitation, discrimination and oppression. The translators claim that in contrast to progressive writers' narratives of the poor and the underprivileged, these stories by Dalits themselves explore more authentically their lived experience.

Veracity apart, the stories in the collection stand out for the diversity of experience, both in terms of physical and mental trauma, as perceived by Dalits and as enacted



GANGRENE - PUNJABI DALIT SHORT STORIES
Translated by Akshaya Kumar and Navdeep Singh.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 208.
₹499

by their oppressors. If there are stories like 'Cry of the Sky', 'My Story', and 'Everybody's Story', in which crimes like rape and violence against Dalits are portrayed, then there are also stories like 'Doomsday', 'Cancer' and 'Cactus', where the dominant caste characters have been shown to harbour deep-seated hatred, but not without giving us a peep into their mental and emotional conflict.

The stories are equally divided between rural and urban settings. If the *vehra* (Dalit colony in a village) is the site of open disdain and exploitation by Jats and other village heads, then the city is an equally inhospitable place where Dalits, even after education and economic progress, cannot live without hiding their identity.

A cobbler's son will remain a cobbler's son and a Dalit rising up to become a landlord will find trust and strength only in his

own community, as in the story 'Gaurjan'.

Religion, the much-touted *causa prima* of the caste divide, figures in three stories — 'Gangrene', 'Doomsday' and 'Roots'. Though Hindu Brahmins' attitude towards Dalits is well known, in these stories, even Dalits who converted to religions like Sikhism and Buddhism find no respite.

One muted theme that runs through almost all the stories is that for a Dalit, there is no escape from being a Dalit. Even if they try to override it with professional progress, pecuniary leap or physical prowess, the Dalit identity does not leave them. It will continue to lead them to misery and humiliation.

I particularly liked two stories: 'Bathloo' and 'Aatu Khoji'. Both are proud and professionally skilful workers, yet one ends up dead because of his sense of internalised lowliness, and the other in an effort to save Dalit honour.

The book is a ready compendium to understand the psyche of both Punjabi Dalits and their oppressors. At times, it also portrays the Dalit reaction where violence and highhandedness of the dominant caste are met with equal aggression. But the stories largely remain clueless about how the conflict can be reduced or resolved.

The book is translated well despite the usual intrusion of local terms here and there. It is going to prove to be a good resource material for comparing the Punjabi Dalit experience with other regional writings, particularly in Marathi and South Indian languages.

— The reviewer taught English at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar



BACKFLAP



THE MEMORY OF SHADOWS AND OTHER FOLKTALES FROM THE NORTHEAST
by Mijing Gwra Basumatary.

Rupa.

Pages 216. ₹285

A grief-stricken tigress teaches man to respect the wild, a redeemed poacher becomes the forest's guardian, a woman transforms from being the village 'witch' to a healer, and two brothers face the wrath of an elephant that doesn't forget injustice. The stories in the collection offer lessons and insights into Northeastern rituals and traditions. Forests come alive with spirits, bamboo groves whisper secrets, rivers carry curses, and man learns to live in harmony with wildlife. Each story reflects universal values and themes that have shaped the collective imagination of readers.

Why the persistence of antibiotic resistance is difficult to break

SAMIR MALHOTRA

DO you know that by 2050, antimicrobial resistance (AMR) may directly account for two crore deaths annually? Or that Fleming (discoverer of penicillin) demonstrated antibacterial properties of lysozyme using his own nasal mucus? Or that he was not an inspiring speaker, which may have contributed to a muted early response? Or that penicillin found its way into consumer products, including toothpaste and lipstick?

If you find these minutiae interesting, here are a few more: during WW-II, treatments on injured soldiers were written on their foreheads ('M' for morphia; 'P' for penicillin); patient zero to receive penicillin in India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a strong advocate of science and technology; there's been a staggering rise of e-pharmacies (we saw the tensions these generated, including recent protests by brick-and-mortar pharmacists).

The most startling statistic in 'A World of Resistance', however, is that there are 23 billion chickens alive, four times the global human population. These are mostly raised in industrial farms that feed sub-

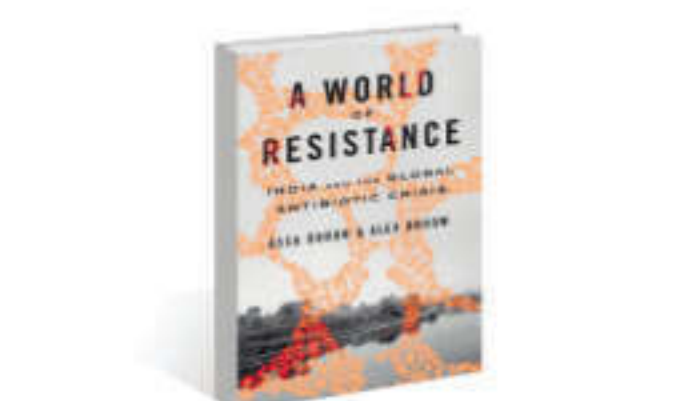
therapeutic doses of antimicrobials for growth promotion and to prevent infection in cramped, unsanitary conditions.

Assa Doron and Alex Broom trace antibiotic use through Green, White and Blue Revolutions, showing progress as a double-edged sword. They discuss "protein gap", its marketing, caste dynamics, rural versus urban healthcare, and even USA's "ag-gag" laws.

Yet these interesting facts, while helping the narrative, are not the central theme of the book. Its focus is AMR, often framed as a problem of individual behaviour — patients demanding antibiotics for viral fever, doctors overprescribing out of habit and farmers using them indiscriminately. The authors dismantle this simplistic view.

They make a bigger argument: antimicrobial resistance is fundamentally a systemic problem, embedded within our social, economic and political systems. "AMR is not a crisis born of individual poor choices, nor can it be resolved through education or awareness campaigns alone."

Their thesis is fundamental, clear and radical — focusing only on individuals, or isolated behaviours, while ignoring the structures producing these outcomes is unlikely to achieve meaningful progress.



A WORLD OF RESISTANCE: INDIA AND THE GLOBAL ANTIBIOTIC CRISIS
by Assa Doron & Alex Broom.
HarperCollins.
Pages 245. ₹699

The critique shifts to the capitalist mode of production. Their argument is not that capitalism hasn't delivered progress; it has indeed transformed medicine, food supply and longevity. It is that relentless incentives toward expansion, productivity and consumption have also generated conditions favouring AMR. We daily observe the irony of a system that simultaneously gives thousands of varieties of unhealthy processed snacks while also marketing anti-obesity medications to manage the consequences. This inexorable drive for more — more production, more profit,

more growth — drives the engine of antimicrobial resistance.

India's unique position is explored particularly well — we are the pharmacy to the world. But did you know that USSR helped India set up pharma manufacturing factories? Later, the Indian Patents Act of 1970 transformed the sector, allowing generic production and driving down prices globally. That same success, however, created other issues, which are well-captured. The contributions of Yellapragada Subbarow (1895-1948) get special mention; many outside medicine may scarcely know his name despite his enormous scientific legacy.

The environmental impact of antimicrobials is another of the book's strongest sections. Industrial pollution of rivers is thoroughly discussed. Particularly striking is the account of Batte Shankar's struggle against pharmaceutical pollution. Equally telling is the observation that after he lost local elections, activism itself appeared to diminish.

The authors repeatedly mention Kerala and Tamil Nadu — states that have consistently outperformed others on health indicators. Yet we saw how political rewards do not necessarily follow public health achievements. Ruling parties in both states

recently faced heavy electoral losses.

The book offers a fascinating description of how pollution persists despite regulations. The most polluting steps of drug manufacturing, the authors describe through personal visits and discussions, are outsourced to smaller, unregistered entities operating below regulatory radar.

The authors repeatedly return to themes of "corporate interests, privatisation and marketisation". Their critique is difficult to disagree with. While they stress that systems matter enormously, they also note that "deviant actors" exist. Personal gain motivates behaviour throughout the chain; several players exploit system weaknesses. Human behaviour remains relevant.

Their concluding message is persuasive: "Our challenge is not to wage war on resistant microbes but to transform the conditions that give rise to them."

Overall, it's an excellent book. It describes complex subjects yet remains accessible; references encourage deeper reading. Anyone interested in AMR, public health, pharmaceutical history, environmental policy or sociology of medicine will find much of value here.

— The reviewer is professor of pharmacology at PGIMER

When Kohli seeks privacy



PRADEEP MAGAZINE

VIRAT KOHLI, that epitome of cricketer perfection and celebratory excess, seems to have had enough of the incessant camera scrutiny. Ah, for a moment away from its constant gaze, a gaze that intrudes and inhibits his private space, even extending into his training sessions. In a recent interview that revealed a sensitive mind and refined eloquence, Kohli made a quiet appeal to the roving eye: please leave me alone.

For someone who represents an age that celebrates triumph as an emotion needing assertion through aggressive, intimidating body language, something must have disturbed his inner space for him to make such a lament. When the prowling sweep of an intrusive camera invades the interior world of a sportsman, it may be time to cry foul.

We are all shaped by the times we inhabit. In the historical arc of cricket and the exposure of its captains to the world, even a cursory study of changing behavioural patterns can be revelatory. We are, after all, what we are repeatedly fed. What follows is an admittedly amateurish exploration of that historical arc, prompted largely by Kohli's earnest appeal.

A chuckle and a brief clasp of hands marked celebrations when the fiery Sardar of Spin, Bishen Singh Bedi, led India in the Seventies. The all-pervasive camera was still in its infancy and the public remained largely dependent on published photographs to recognise their heroes. Even that easy chuckle represented a dramatic departure from the impassive, almost inscrutable, presence of Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi in the 1960s.

Sunil Gavaskar's pragmatic aloofness, Kapil

Dev's earthy sermons — the long line of Indian captains belonged to a less demonstrative age, before the inquisitive eye sharpened itself. Unlike today, it was an age in transition when dignified, muted celebrations were the norm.

Sachin Tendulkar took over the captaincy from the reluctant, introverted Mohammad Azharuddin and by the time he handed it to Sourav Ganguly, the public eye had begun shifting its gaze, growing steadily more invasive.

The reticent Tendulkar created a persona where distance deepened reverence. He revealed little of himself beyond the bat, remaining at heart a private, almost reclusive, figure whose silence only enlarged his myth. His flickering uncertainty in dealing with the media reflected a man uneasy around people he did not trust, yet careful not to offend. The obtrusive camera arrived late at the scene when Tendulkar's name already carried weight whose burden he alone could bear. His

Camera is their window to fame, and can eventually turn into a culture that devours the stars

aura had, in a sense, sanitised the surroundings that "forced" everyone to be careful and not trespass upon his privacy.

The irreverent Sourav Ganguly didn't care what the world thought of him and revelled in the blurring of private and public spaces. He confronted and even courted controversy without getting unduly hassled by it. In changing times, a thick skin was necessary to remain insulated from outside noise, a "quality" his successor Rahul Dravid, perhaps, lacked. Dravid was too engrossed in building his solid wall of milestones. Captaincy, for him, was an irritant and he quietly walked away from its tedious managerial chores.

MS Dhoni seemed to intuitively grasp the threatening nature of the "demon" the camera

was becoming. He evolved a new grammar to subdue and disarm its intimidating presence. A crisp, measured manner of speaking that often bordered on silence became central to his persona. Those chasing a story or a scandal seemed, almost by magic, to withdraw on their own. His reserved yet affable demeanour, which muted the noisy surroundings, will remain a case study in how to maintain distance without creating enemies.

Anything that came after the high decibel, emotional outbursts and verbal release of a suppressed rage that defined Kohli's frustrations — and, surprisingly, even his celebrations — was bound to feel like an anti-climax. Rohit Sharma was stepping into the shoes shaped by a long history of behaviour patterns that modern cricket had both encouraged and normalised. Rohit was like the schoolmaster who pretends to be strict but at heart remains an endearing figure whose barbs directed at his players never quite seem offensive.

From striving for excellence to eventually being acclaimed as an icon and a celebrity, a successful sportsperson once followed a fairly well-defined path. In the times we live in, however, such a trajectory appears almost too staid, even boring. It neither titillates, nor draws eyeballs. The cricket field itself has expanded. Public is private and the private is public. The contest increasingly resembles a pantomime in which the lead actors must perform, becoming reel-makers even beyond the game itself.

When the more reflective Kohli speaks of privacy, he may be missing the larger reality that marketing of the modern sport has created. He is that captivating figure whose achievements, petulance and anger-fuelled antics act like a magnet. So what if he has grown wary of media scrutiny? Our appetite for theatre and the theatrical has become so voracious that had there been no Kohli, we would have invented one.

The stars of the present age live by the camera and die by the camera. It is their window to fame, one that can eventually turn into a culture that devours them.

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

The ugly and the not so ugly Indian



RAAJA BHASIN

WRITTEN by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer, the novel 'The Ugly American' was published in 1958.

It was an instant sensation and is still a steady seller; it remains in print to the present day. Considered an iconic book of the Cold War, this fictionalised text, rooted in reality, pierced deep into the failures of the American diplomatic corps in Southeast Asia (by the Kennedy administration, the US Peace Corps is considered to be an offshoot of the book's immense impact).

An oft-quoted passage from the book is when a Burmese journalist says: "...the (American) people I meet in my country are not the same as I know in the United States. A mysterious change seems to come over Americans when they go to a foreign land. They isolate themselves socially. They live pretentiously. They are loud and ostentatious." The last bit gave rise to the stereotypical image of the 'Ugly American' outside his borders — whether he was a tourist, diplomat or businessman. It is also believed that the title was a play on Graham Greene's book, 'The Quiet American', which had been published some years earlier (both books were turned into successful films).

On the other hand, I don't think there are too many 'Ugly Indians' abroad — unless we are desperate to make a reel for social media and find that creating a nuisance facilitates the purpose. We behave reasonably well when we are overseas. We stand in line, we rarely shout. We may be 'Silly Indians', 'Fawning Indians' or 'Irritating Indians' — but we are rarely 'Ugly Indians'. We keep that for when we are home. Here, we litter, we often shout, we often fight; even when none of the above are desirable or necessary.

Of late, I seem to have had my share of the 'Ugly Indian' — who has come in all shapes, sizes and in varied avatars. There is a tenant who arrived with references and grand promises. Before decamping and leaving the premises locked, he has not paid the rent for well over a year and has also burdened me, among other things, with an unpaid garbage bill. As if that was not enough, a set of goons decided that a fight was the way to get things turned in their favour; and found that beating up my son and manhandling my wife (in my noted absence) would move matters their way. So between shouts of 'how they would set the house on fire', and threats to life and limb, we have much to thank for the protection of the local police force.

A less personal but an unforgotten impact of ugliness stemmed from something very different. This was a professional assignment in Srinagar

some two decades back. I had been asked to be the compere for a tourism promotion event for J&K's Tourism Department. With the appropriate approvals, one had been hired by the event company.

Kashmir's tourism business, the backbone of the local economy, was in doldrums. This was to re-showcase one of the most beautiful places in the world that was beset by terrorism and human tragedy. One drove past the Dal and Nagin lakes and their largely empty houseboats and noted, again, their delightful names — Young Mona Lisa, Cherry Ripe, Sea Hawk, Noble House, Rolex and New Golden Fleece. The absolutely magnificent setting of the Sher-i-Kashmir International Conference Centre took care of a substantial



In fractured times, a barefoot act restores faith in the goodness of people.

PHOTO BY THE WRITER

part of the show. The storied lawns were bordered by packed flower-beds flowing down to the banks of the Dal Lake. In the background are the low rolls of the Zabarwan Range.

As the sun slipped behind the hills, the lights and fountains came on. As best as I can tell, the programme was a success. This event was a bit of a junket and excursions were also on the menu. On the first visit, the very first thing that we saw as we got off the bus was graffiti on the wall that read: "Indian dogs get out." That, I'm told, has now changed.

This time, the column may be somewhat grim, but these things and the insecurity that they carry with them is something that we common people seem to face on a fairly regular basis. And then, perhaps strangely, what set this tirade off is something that made me feel so wonderful about our country — despite the fractures and the toll the last few days have taken. I am not a religious person, but every once in a while, I go to the temple that is close to our house.

Prone to taking shortcuts, and not wanting to take off my shoes, I pay obeisance from outside the door that leads to the sanctum. This time, there was a relatively aged man, obviously one of the many Kashmiri labourers who come to Himachal's hills. He must have delivered something to the premises adjoining the temple. This person first asked if he could have it, then removed his shoes, bowed his head and took the *prasad* that I had taken a moment before with my shoes still on.

— *The writer is an author based in Shimla*

Do not obsess over wealth

IN the *Shanti Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, it is mentioned that all kinds of meritorious acts flow from the possession of great wealth like rivers from a mountain. From wealth springs all religious acts, all pleasures and heaven itself.

Wealth gives us the ability to experience life fully. It is one of the four *Purusharthas* (goals of life). Wealth, however, has to be created ethically and without cheating others. Do not obsess over wealth. Wealth is elusive when you seek it directly, and it invariably comes to you when you are creating value for others. Spend less than you earn. Save and invest the surplus. Limit debt unless you are creating long-term assets. Insure for hard times and unforeseen calamities.

We all have customers, either in business or as employees. Understand and satisfy their needs. Create value for them and price fairly. Do not cheat or overcharge them. Resolve their problems promptly.

KRISHNA & THE FRUIT SELLER

A wandering fruit seller was once passing by the streets of Gokul. She happened to stop by little Krishna's house. As Krishna's parents were away, she found herself displaying her



UNIVERSE

RAVI SWAMINATHAN & ANANTH

wares to the only potential customer in the house, Krishna himself!

Krishna was tempted by the ripe, juicy fruits he saw in the fruit seller's cart. He wanted them all! He pointed to each of them. It was a hot afternoon, and the fruit seller was feeling thirsty. She had yet to sell any fruit, but she found herself drawn to the little fellow, with a peacock feather in his hair and a cheeky smile, and decided to humour him and make him her first customer of the day. She said to him, 'You can have them for a fistful of grain!'

Krishna understood what she said and ran inside excitedly to fetch her what she asked. He gathered as much grain as his little fists could hold and ran back towards the vendor, squealing with joy. He did not realise that in his excitement, most of the grain he held had fallen to the floor, slipping from his tiny fingers and loosely clenched fist.

Proudly, he offered her the few grains remaining in his hand and demanded his fruits. The fruit seller was so overcome by her maternal instinct and touched by his innocence that she took the few grains he had given her and cheerfully handed over all the fruits that Krishna wanted.

That evening, as the fruit seller returned to her house to count the day's earnings, she was most surprised to find that each of the grains she had taken from Krishna were transformed into precious gems.

Shiksha: Think of each of your customers as little Krishna and keep him happy. Create value for him. You will be rewarded with far more than you expect, as the fruit vendor learnt to her pleasant surprise.

— *Excerpted from 'Dharma Yoga: The Hindu Code and Way of Life', with permission from Rupa*

Our parade at IMA in 1956 for the Shah of Iran



LT GEN BALJIT SINGH (RETD)

EVER since the launch of Operation Epic Fury, my memory has remained fixated upon an early morning of mid-February 1956.

My batchmates and I, in the final term at the Indian Military Academy in Dehradun, were practising for the Passing Out Parade (POP) when we were brought to an abrupt halt. The be-medalled Adjutant of the Academy, mounted on his White Charger, announced that Their Majesties, the Shah of Iran and Queen Soraya, would shortly be on a State Visit to India. After a deliberate pause, he further stated that the Academy would honour them with a Ceremonial Parade (an abridged version of the POP) which we would practice to perfection over the days ahead. Then, in menacing tones (as is the purport of the entire tribe of Adjutants), he warned that should there be a single mis-step by any one of us, the "wrath of hell" would descend upon the entire lot!

Maintaining his put-on fearful visage, the Adjutant pirouetted the White Charger on its

hind legs and galloped off the Parade Ground. We were left agog, pondering for a while on this brouhaha — to parade for an Oriental King and Queen when we had just broken free from subjugations of the Continental British King and Queen? However, the very next moment, our spirits lifted sky high with the youth's fancy that we would have the good fortune to at least catch a glimpse, maybe even a handshake, of Queen Soraya, one among the five most beautiful women of the world, in a class of our own Maharani Gayatri Devi of Jaipur!

As I understand now, that Ceremonial Parade was among the several deliberate and far-sighted diplomatic outreaches by India's first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The Prime Minister, who had authored 'The Discovery of India' among other accomplishments, would surely have known about the chance discovery of a petroleum source in the Brahmaputra valley at Digboi (Assam) around 1790s, later upgraded as an oil refinery in 1901, the first and only in Asia then! And also that it was a mere statistic, with a maximum annual output of just 1 tonne of crude, woefully insufficient for India, newly born as a sovereign nation "at the stroke of the midnight hour".

Propelled by those compelling national energy security interests, the visit was spread over 28 days, the longest in the annals of world diplomacy because Iran at



The Shah of Iran (left) at IMA, Dehradun. IMA ARCHIVES. COURTESY: THE WRITER

As I understand now, it was a far-sighted diplomatic outreach by Prime Minister Nehru

that time had an annual commercial output of 1-1.3 million barrels per day peaking to 6 million by 1974!

For a start, Their Majesties were received at the Delhi airport itself by President Dr Rajendra Prasad and Prime Minister Nehru and then feted for four days in the colonial opulence of the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Similar regal courtesies at potentate

levels were again orchestrated through the Nawab of Hyderabad. By the 1960s, India had an assured supply chain of petroleum and crude, on the most favourable trade terms in Indian currency, and subsequently an assured export market for India's wheat, rice, tea, etc.

On our part, Gentleman Cadets had spared no effort in marching past the Ceremonial Saluting dais to perfection in that once-in-a-lifetime kind of duty. As rehearsed, we of the senior batch alone had gathered in groups of 10 to 15 on the adjoining vast lawn a few paces away when, to our sorrow, we learnt that Queen Soraya was indisposed with a touch of food infection, shattering our dreams of seeing her in person. Nevertheless, we were charmed by the persona of the handsome Shah Reza Pahlavi, who moved from group to group with practised poise, making polite conversation. I happened to be in the group which also had the senior civilian instructor who taught military history and comfortably engaged the Shah. The Commandant, Brig Apji Randheer Singh, looked for a suitable pause in conversation to wean the Shah to the next group.

Now, coming back to 1941, when Hitler had invaded Russia, Churchill in collusion with Stalin attacked Persia with Indian army's 10 Infantry Division as the spearhead, luckily leading to capitulation without a shot fired.

The ruling Shah was exiled and his 21-year-old son, Reza Pahlavi, made the puppet Head of State. Learning from that humiliation, he first set about creating formidable armed forces, equipped with the most lethal weaponry purchased almost entirely from USA, and then nationalised the UK-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The subsequent two decades of oil boom had filled the coffers of Iran with unlimited wealth and the Shah wisely ploughed it to modernise Iran and uplift its population in all walks of life.

However, the prevalence of hubris, coupled with counsels of sycophants, eventually misled the Shah to organise a Grand Durbar in 1971, culminating in Pahlavi re-crowning himself with the new fabulous creation by Cartier of Paris.

The seeds of a bloody revolt, led by the Paris-exiled cleric Ruhollah Khomeini, sprouted rapidly, reaching its zenith around the mid-1970s, which brought my fleeting association of the Ceremonial Parade for the Shah at IMA eventually to full circle at Tehran! By the sleight of *kismet*, I was on an assignment at the Imperial Iranian Command and General Staff College, Tehran, and so happened to exchange another salute in October 1978, by the then Shahenshah. Following two months of blood-bath, the Shah and family were flown out to USA on January 16, 1979.

"Those who live by the Sword, shall perish by the Sword" — Anonymous

INDEPTH

As the second phase of the Sukhu govt's Anti-Chitta Campaign begins tomorrow, the police and the administrative machinery are gearing up to strengthen efforts to curb the menace

Himachal's uphill war against drugs

NAVNEET RATHORE

HAVING battled the menace of drug trafficking, primarily hashish and opium, in the Kullu-Manali valley for the past three decades, Himachal Pradesh is facing a major challenge to curb the sale and addiction of *chitta*, or adulterated heroin, and other synthetic drugs — mirroring the crisis in neighbouring Punjab.

Chitta is a white or brownish powder made from diacetylmorphine (heroin) and laced with toxic chemicals. Commonly known as brown sugar, smack, or synthetic heroin, it is highly addictive, relatively cheap, and more dangerously, rapidly spreading among students and youth.

The state's battle against synthetic drugs began in earnest in 2016, when the first official recovery of *chitta* was registered in Una district. Since then, the problem has escalated into an uphill struggle that threatens the future of the state's youth.

Official data from the Home Department presented in the Vidhan Sabha confirmed 66 registered cases of death by overdose, including women, over the last three years, though the actual number of unreported fatalities due to societal stigma is likely to be much higher.

STATEWIDE CLAMPDOWN

The state government has adopted a zero-tolerance policy against drug syndicates, and even within its own ranks. It has established the involvement of 123 government employees, of which 21 police personnel and 10 administrative employees have been dismissed from service. Going a step further, on May 12, a drug test was made mandatory for any candidate seeking a government job.

Since 2023, the state has witnessed a massive spike in enforcement activities under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985. According to the police, as many as 6,811 cases have been registered under the Act during this period, with the arrest of 10,357 accused persons. Over 45,860 kg of narcotic substances, including *chitta*, have also been seized.

Citing the reasons behind the surge of the *chitta* menace in the state, ADGP (CID) Gyaneshwar Singh stated that while *chitta* is not produced in Himachal, it is being trafficked through interstate routes. He said the rapid spread is fuelled by youth curiosity and peer pressure; unemployment and socio-economic stress; low cost, easy availability in small packets, and promotion via social media.

The highest-risk districts are Shimla,



Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu launched an Anti-Chitta Awareness Campaign in November last year to make Himachal 'chitta-free'. PTI

Kangra, Una, Solan, and Mandi. According to ADGP Singh, extensive operations are being carried out to dismantle the drug trafficking networks. "Key drug kingpins and suppliers are being identified and arrested by establishing backward and forward linkages as well as through financial and digital investigations. Over the past few years, the police have been successful in dismantling major drug trafficking networks, arresting several interstate kingpins from Punjab, Haryana, India-Pakistan border, Indo-Nepal border and several other states," he pointed out.

The ADGP said the "state police constantly remains in touch and coordinates with its neighbouring counterparts; regular meetings at the SP and DIG level are held to ensure collective efforts to dismantle interstate drug trafficking networks".

PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT

Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu launched an Anti-Chitta Awareness Campaign on November 15, 2025, aiming to make Himachal "chitta-free". An Anti-Chitta Walkathon was organised from The Ridge, Shimla, to make people from all walks of life actively participate in the fight against drugs.

Thousands of people, including children, public representatives and government officials, participated in the walkathon, sending a clear message of a relentless battle to eradicate the menace in the hill state. During the event, an oath was administered, urging people to stay away from drugs and addictive substances.

Similar walkathons were organised across the state.

Along with mass awareness campaigns, the state police also launched a crackdown on drug trafficking networks. Under this drive, around 12,000 individuals have been identified, and special police and CID surveillance has been activated in 234 highly-sensitive panchayats across the state.

The police have also undertaken the exercise of identifying the worst-affected panchayats by placing them in the red, yellow and green categories. Of the total 234 panchayats falling in the worst-affected red category, 28 are in Kullu district, followed by 27 in Bilaspur, 26 in Police District Baddi, 24 in Mandi, 22 in Nurpur, 20 in Sirmaur, 19 in Shimla, 15 in Kangra, 14 in Hamirpur, 13 in Chamba, 10 in Una, nine in Solan and seven under Police District Dehra.

To ensure that these panchayats are free from the drug menace, a special deployment of police and CID personnel has been made to maintain strict surveillance and curb drug-related activities. Many panchayats have also announced a boycott of drug traffickers and users.

The police have also detained 174 drug traffickers under the PIT-NDPS (Prevention of Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances) Act. Since the launch of the campaign, the Special Task Force (STF) of Himachal Pradesh Police has examined over 700 cases and identified 300 of these for financial investigation and freezing of property.

Assets worth ₹8.53 crore have been frozen and 76 illegal properties have been identi-

fied; demolition and eviction action has been taken in 17 cases. Since 2023, the government has seized illegal assets worth nearly ₹51 crore, while property worth ₹8.53 has been seized since the launch of the Anti-Chitta Awareness Campaign.

KEY DIRECTIVES FOR PHASE II

Chief Minister Sukhu recently announced that the Congress government will be launching the second phase of its massive Anti-Chitta Awareness Campaign from June 1 to August 20 in all government schools and colleges across the state. The announcement was made during a Narco-Coordination Centre (NCORD) meeting, held under the chairmanship of the CM, on May 11.

To ensure commitment at the top level, the state will now include numerical grading in the Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) of Deputy Commissioners (DCs) and Superintendents of Police (SPs), directly tying their career progression to their performance in tackling the drug menace. The DCs have been asked to convene regular meetings regarding the anti-*chitta* campaign so that the menace can be eradicated in Himachal.

The government is also enforcing regular checks on pharmaceutical manufacturing and distribution. Any diversion of prescription drugs into the illegal market will result in immediate cancellation of retail licences and criminal prosecution, according to the government directions.

Administrative and police officers have been tasked with personally visiting at

least 10 educational institutions in their jurisdiction to educate students about the perils of substance abuse.

To accelerate legal proceedings, forensic laboratories have been ordered to clear and prepare drug analysis reports within five days of seizure.

The authorities have been directed to demolish illegally encroached properties belonging to *chitta* smugglers. One such demolition drive was recently undertaken in Jwala area of Kangra district.

REHAB STRATEGY

Transitioning from enforcement to empathy, the state is establishing dedicated rehabilitation centres at Mashobra (Shimla) and at Dr Rajendra Prasad Government Medical College (Tanda) to help victims of drug addiction reintegrate into society. Last year, an amount of ₹5.34 crore was sanctioned for construction of a 100-bed de-addiction centre at Kotla Barog in Sirmaur district. Work is also underway to establish five new drug de-addiction centres in Solan, Mandi, Sirmaur, Chamba and Lahaul-Spiti districts.

An official said counselling and early intervention is being provided at 108 new 'Disha' centres in health institutions across the state where ASHA workers, doctors and psychiatrists are being specially trained. Currently, four de-addiction and rehabilitation centres for men are operational in Kullu, Una, Hamirpur and Kangra, while a separate centre for women is being run by the Red Cross Society in Kullu.

For several years now, the Centre has been asking the insurance companies to improve their quality of service, including the internal grievance redressal mechanism. Recent proposals offer some hope for consumers

REINING IN INSURERS

PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

THE continuing dominance of insurance cases before the consumer courts is a clear indicator of the deepening consumer dissatisfaction with the insurance service providers. While grievances against the banking, real estate and power sectors constitute 9.83 per cent, 8.18 per cent and 6.46 per cent of the total complaints filed before all consumer courts, respectively, insurance cases form a whopping 23.58 per cent, as per the government data.

This has been the trend for many years now, despite the Insurance Ombudsman Scheme that offers a much easier and simpler way of resolving consumer disputes with insurers.

The reason for this continuing consumer-insurer conflict obviously lies in the fact that the contract of insurance is between unequal parties and the insurance companies have been unashamedly exploiting their dominant position. This is reflected in the consumer grievances on a variety of issues, ranging from opaque policies, non-disclosure of exclusion clauses, mis-selling or deliberate misrepresentation at the point of sale, as well as blatant violations of regulations and guidelines framed by the Insurance Regulatory and Development

Authority of India (IRDAI) for the protection of policy holders. Problems also include unfair interpretation of clauses during the claim process, repudiation on flimsy grounds or without assigning any valid reason, delayed settlement of claims, failure to pay interest on delayed payments, and to top it all, an ineffective internal grievance redressal mechanism.

In fact, before the Insurance Ombudsman too, the largest number of complaints filed in respect of life insurance policies pertained to mis-sale or misrepresentation of policy terms.

For several years now, the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs has been expressing concern over this trend and asking insurers to improve their quality of service, including the internal grievance redressal machinery. In fact, with increased digitisation, unfair trade practices in the sale of insurance through online platforms is going up sharply, posing a big threat to consumer protection.

The use of dark patterns or user interfaces that manipulate consumers into buying unneeded or wrong policies or opting for premiums higher than intended, are all becoming too common, despite a clear prohibition on such dark patterns under the Central Consumer Protection Authority's Guidelines for



There is deepening consumer dissatisfaction with the insurance service providers. ISTOCK

Prevention and Regulation of Dark Patterns. A couple of recent developments, however, bring some hope for consumers. The first is the comprehensive improvement of the Insurance Ombudsman Scheme proposed by the Union Ministry of Finance through extensive amendments to the Insurance Ombudsman Rules. Released for public comments last November, the draft amendments vest with the Ombudsman more punitive powers and hold the insurers liable for any undue hardship caused to the complainant on account of their unjust, arbitrary or malafide action.

The Ombudsman can impose steep penalties in such cases, to be paid to the affected consumer. The Ombudsman can also recommend to the regulator imposition of penalty on the insurer for repeated acts that are arbitrary, unjust and tantamount to

harassment of the policy holder; and for non-compliance of the recommendation or award passed by the Ombudsman.

The draft rules also propose a substantial increase in the number of Ombudsmen — one in each state capital and UT, thereby doubling the present number (18) and increasing their accessibility. The Rules also propose an appellate authority.

The other extremely important development is the proposal, made by the IRDAI, mandating all insurers to appoint an independent internal Ombudsman to resolve policyholder complaints up to ₹50 lakh. The Exposure Draft on the topic issued by the regulator details the qualifications for such an internal Ombudsman and prescribes precise procedures and timelines for quick resolution of consumer complaints, as a step towards enhancing consumer trust and confidence in the industry.

Both these measures have the potential to rein in insurers and force them to be more respectful of consumer rights. This will also give consumers an additional forum for grievance redressal, besides strengthening the existing Ombudsman system. Having said that, I must point to another factor that is adding to the number of insurance-related complaints before the consumer courts — the interpretation of an exclusion clause in the Consumer Protection (CP) Act by the apex consumer court in the Harsolia Motors vs National Insurance Company case (2004).

This judgment of the apex consumer court opened the doors of the consumer courts to large businesses to settle their disputes with the insurance industry and their numbers are increasing, more so after this interpretation was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2023.

A look at the orders of the apex consumer court in the last one year in respect of insurance cases (between May 18, 2025, and May 18, 2026) shows the consequence of the rulings. Out of a total of 679 cases decided by the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission during this period, a large number constitute complaints filed by big businesses and pertain to destruction of stock, plant and machinery. Some of these have been filed as long back as 2008, 2009, 2015, and 2016.

Because of the nature of these cases, they take up considerable time of the courts, adding to the backlog. It's time to stop these companies from cluttering the consumer courts, clearly meant for settling consumer complaints, through an amendment to the CP Act. And the consumer affairs ministry must do this without delay.

— The writer is a consumer affairs expert

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



لا تُطالِبوا العالمَ بما لا تُطالِبونَ بهِ أنفسَكمُ.
ولا تُطالِبوا إنساناً بغيرِ ما تُزَوِّنُ منَ حقِّه أن يُطالِبَكمُ بهِ
(مختار، نهد)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

Do not ask of the world what you do not ask of yourselves, and ask of no one anything beyond what you would acknowledge as their right to ask of you.

Mikhail Naimy
(Lebanese emigre author, poet and intellectual)

Opinion

Trump's desire to acquire Greenland is unwise, unnecessary

LUKE COFFEY



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Greenland, an overseas territory of the Kingdom of Denmark located in the Arctic, is back in the news after the governor of Louisiana, Jeff Landry, who is also US President Donald Trump's special envoy for Greenland, paid a visit to the island this month. He received a cool reception from locals, with video clips on social media showing awkward exchanges with residents of the capital, Nuuk. He was appointed special envoy in December, in the aftermath of the White House suggesting that the US wanted to annex the territory. Trump first floated the idea of acquiring Greenland during his first term, but after strong criticism at home and in Europe he quickly dropped it. The idea resurfaced late last year when he refused to rule out the use of military force to acquire the island. At the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos in January, NATO's Secretary-General Mark Rutte was able to work

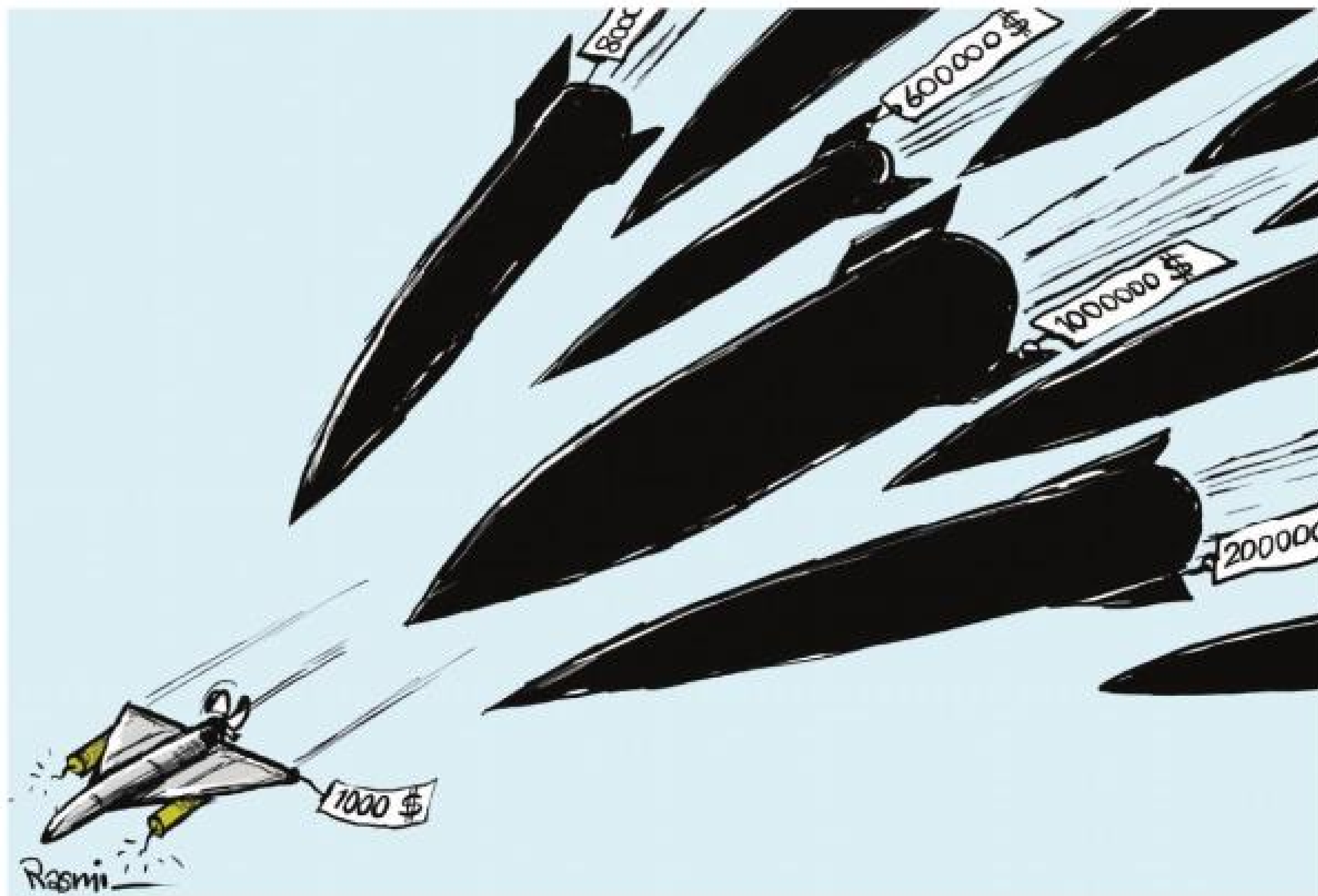
behind the scenes to cool temperatures over this issue and begin a process of consultations between Greenland, the US and Denmark. Since then, the debate had calmed — until Landry's visit last week. Trump is right to raise the importance of Greenland for America's national security. In fact, because of its location the island is important for the security of all of North America. Greenland is already home to a very important US military base in the north, and during the Cold War the island played a key role in monitoring Russian naval activity moving from the Arctic into the North Atlantic. The US has had a military presence on Greenland since the Second World War, when American forces landed there to keep it out of the hands of Nazi Germany. During the Cold War, the US maintained a large presence on the island, only for this to be reduced in the 1990s, much like America's military footprint across the rest of Europe. However, Trump's desire to acquire

Greenland is unwise and unnecessary, for a few reasons. Firstly, Denmark is a model US ally. It meets NATO spending targets. It has been willing to deploy troops for US-led military operations in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq, in large numbers and without restrictions on what its forces could do, including in some of the most dangerous areas. At Trump's request, Denmark has bolstered its investment in Arctic security. It is also a leading European supporter of Ukraine. This matters for the White House at a time when many in Washington are demanding that Europe do more for its own security. Suggesting that the US should annex part of Denmark sends exactly the wrong message. At a time when Washington wants European allies to step up, it makes little sense to antagonize an ally that is already doing so. Secondly, the US is already able to achieve what it needs under existing agreements it has with Denmark and Greenland itself, so there is no need to try to annex it.

If Washington wanted to increase its military footprint on the island, it could do so through the current arrangements. There is nothing stopping US mining, shipping or commercial aviation companies from doing business in Greenland, other than the fact that, right now, it is often not profitable from a business standpoint. There is no doubt that Greenland plays an important role in North American and transatlantic security. Russia remains active in the Arctic. China has long shown interest in Greenland's resources and strategic location. Rising temperatures are opening up new maritime routes and increasing the outside interest in the region. These are all legitimate reasons for Washington to pay more attention to Greenland. But instead of threatening to invade or annex the island, the US should work with Denmark and the Greenlandic government to bolster the territory's security. It should deepen defense cooperation, increase situational awareness in the Arctic, and explore ways to improve infrastructure on the island.

Suggesting that the US should annex part of Denmark sends exactly the wrong message

COURTESY: AMALAO RISMWASHAQI AL-JAWBAT



For Syria, it adds essential electricity-generation capacity vital for reconstruction efforts and economic revival

Syria-Jordan-Lebanon deal could fuel huge benefits

DR. MAJID RAFIZADEH



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One of the latest and most important recent developments in the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Levant is a tripartite agreement this month on energy between Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. This pact, which facilitates the utilization of Jordanian infrastructure for liquefied natural gas imports and the reactivation of the Arab Gas Pipeline, ought to be considered a significant step toward practical regional cooperation. There are several benefits to the deal. First of all, building on previous bilateral arrangements, it addresses immediate energy deficits in Syria while extending indirect benefits to Lebanon's strained power sector. Considering that Syria is still at a critical juncture in its post-civil war reconstruction, it also offers a pragmatic foundation for broader collaboration extending far beyond energy alone. The gas-exchange framework also demonstrates the potential of practical cooperation

in an area long beset by conflict and institutional challenges. These mutual dependencies will also incentivize more engagements among the three nations. For Syria, it adds essential electricity-generation capacity vital for reconstruction efforts and economic revival. It strengthens Jordan's position as a regional logistical and energy hub. And it offers Lebanon partial relief from the chronic power shortages that have long undermined socio-economic stability. The collaboration will also establish trust and operational mechanisms that can gradually extend into more complex domains. In other words, these initial, pragmatic steps can pave the way for deeper cooperation. Another significant aspect of the deal is that it can be used by the three nations as a starting point to foster expanded partnerships in four areas: security, humanitarian affairs, economic connectivity, and resource management. This will not only advance their own individual interests

but also the stability and prosperity of the wider Middle East. One of the key areas in which they can expand cooperation is efforts to combat drug smuggling and other transnational criminal networks. These networks exploit porous borders and instability. It is also worth noting that the production and trafficking of illegal substances such as captagon from areas within Syria and Lebanon fuel violence, strain law-enforcement resources, and pose significant public-health challenges across the Levant. Another critical, and equally pressing, issue is related to the need for coordinated responses to the ongoing refugee crisis, particularly stemming from Syria. Jordan and Lebanon continue to host substantial refugee populations, which has created significant burdens on public services and social cohesion, and fiscal challenges remain acute. A third issue is linked to the strengthening of border security, which represents another critical avenue for collaboration

among the three countries. The successful management of energy-related infrastructure near borders points to the feasibility of joint protocols for monitoring border security. One way to adequately address the risks posed by nonstate actors is to enhance surveillance and modernize border-crossing facilities. This would also facilitate and allow the safe movement of goods and individuals across borders. In Syria's postconflict environment, such measures are essential because they increase legitimacy and further create conditions conducive to reconstruction. In a nutshell, the agreement between Syria, Jordan and Lebanon represents a positive and pragmatic move. It establishes a valuable platform for expanded collaboration in other critical areas, including efforts to combat drug smuggling, address the protracted refugee crisis, strengthen border security, enhance trade and infrastructure, and coordinate water and energy policies.

Opinion

The mineral wars of the future begin in Myanmar

DR. AZEEM IBRAHIM

Myanmar's brutal civil war might be entering a dangerous new phase. What began as a struggle between a military junta and pro-democracy resistance forces is increasingly becoming something else: a battle over critical minerals that power the modern global economy.

The recent escalation of fighting around Myanmar's rare earth mining regions near the Chinese border should alarm policymakers far beyond Southeast Asia. Behind the headlines about territorial offensives and armed clashes lies a deeper geopolitical reality: Myanmar might be emerging as one of the world's first true "mineral wars" of the 21st century.

For decades, oil shaped the geopolitics of conflict. Entire wars, alliances and foreign policies revolved around securing access to energy supplies. Now, however, the strategic resource landscape is changing rapidly. The technologies that will define the future global economy, including artificial intelligence, electric vehicles, advanced semiconductors, drones, renewable energy systems

and precision weapons, all depend heavily on rare earth elements and critical minerals.

Myanmar sits at the center of this transformation. The country has become one of the world's largest suppliers of heavy rare earths, in particular dysprosium and terbium, which are essential for high-performance magnets used in advanced technologies. While China dominates global rare earth processing, much of the raw material increasingly comes from the northern frontier regions of Myanmar.

Myanmar has become one of the world's largest suppliers of heavy rare earths, in particular dysprosium and terbium

This dependency matters enormously to Beijing. China's technological ambitions, military modernization and industrial dominance all rely on stable access to these supply chains. The fighting now intensify

ing in Kachin State and surrounding areas is therefore not simply a local conflict; it is directly connected to the strategic competition that is shaping the future balance of global power.

The junta understands this. So do the ethnic armed organizations operating in the mineral-rich borderlands. Control over rare earth mining areas is no longer just about territory; it is about leverage, revenue and



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geopolitical importance. Whoever controls these regions controls access to resources increasingly viewed as vital national security assets by major powers.

This dynamic fundamentally changes the nature of the conflict in Myanmar. Traditionally, civil wars were often driven by ideology, ethnicity, religion or struggles for political control. Myanmar's war still contains all these elements but the growing importance of rare earths introduces a new layer: the intersection of technological competition and resource extraction.

The implications extend far beyond Myanmar itself. As the global economy transitions toward AI-driven systems and green technologies, demand for critical minerals is expected to surge dramatically over the next decade.

The International Energy Agency has repeatedly warned that the world faces growing vulnerabilities in critical mineral supply chains. Rare earths, lithium, cobalt, nickel and graphite are increasingly becoming strategic commodities in the same way that oil was in the 20th century.

This creates incentives for states, armed groups and corporations to compete

aggressively for access and control.

Myanmar, therefore, might represent an early glimpse into the future of global conflict, in which competition for resources is no longer confined to oil fields in the Middle East. The next generation of geopolitical struggles could increasingly center on mineral-rich regions in fragile states.

China has historically maintained relationships with both the junta and various ethnic armed groups in the country, precisely to preserve its interests regardless of who controls territory.

China has historically maintained relationships with both the junta and various ethnic armed groups in the country

Myanmar is not an isolated crisis. It is a warning. The conflict now unfolding in the country's rare earth regions offers a glimpse of how the geopolitical struggles of the coming decades might look: unstable states sitting atop strategically essential resources, global powers competing indirectly for influence, and local conflicts becoming inseparable from worldwide technological competition.

The wars of the future might not be fought primarily over ideology or even territory alone. Increasingly, they might be fought over the minerals that power civilization itself.

The economic path to climate justice

SALIEM FAKIR

As the world pursues decarbonization, the concept of a "just transition" has become ubiquitous, particularly when describing the shift away from fossil fuels in emerging and developing economies.

Emissions targets at the global and national levels are viewed as the main drivers of the energy transition, and the climate policies developed to meet those targets must balance environmental and social objectives.

But decarbonization is not always the product of a planned emissions-reduction pathway. In fact, with the cost of renewables continuing to fall, many emerging and developing countries now see the phasing out of fossil fuels as a matter of economic survival and energy security.

For example, in January 2024, Ethiopia banned the import of petrol and diesel vehicles with immediate effect. The move was striking precisely because it was framed not as a climate commitment, but as a way to reduce its annual fossil-fuel import bill of more than \$5 billion, which consumed a huge share of the country's scarce foreign-currency reserves.

With the country constructing Africa's largest hydroelectric dam, it made little

economic sense to remain dependent on expensive fuel imports to power transport. Chinese-made electric vehicles quickly filled the market gap created by the ban; the streets of Addis Ababa are now teeming with BYD cars.

Tax exemptions and import duty waivers for electric vehicles, coupled with the rising costs of secondhand internal-combustion-engine vehicles, have accelerated this shift in consumer behavior. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which officially opened in September 2025, produces enough

Decarbonization is not always the product of a planned emissions-reduction pathway

surplus hydropower to run these electric vehicles cheaply.

Crucially, economic and energy-security concerns, rather than any formal emissions-reduction framework, were responsible for such rapid decarbonization. A similar pattern seems to be on display in Pakistan; the country's swift uptake of solar power reflected factors that created an opportunity for disruptive change, and not green advocacy or a national climate plan.

In 2022, a massive flood left about one-third of the country under water and caused more than \$30 billion in economic damage, straining government budgets, reducing household incomes, and undermining the state's ability to operate public utilities. With energy costs rising,



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there was a clear need for an alternative to diesel generation.

Meanwhile, China had surplus solar-panel production, and the US had imposed export restrictions. Pakistan took advantage of discounted Chinese solar panels to adopt renewable generation at a rapid clip.

Between December 2021 and December 2025, the share of electricity in Pakistan generated by solar increased fivefold. A late mover in confronting unique energy-security challenges, Pakistan benefited from cost advantages created by global trade dynamics.

Similarly, the liberalization of South Africa's power market, coupled with load shedding (imposed blackouts) and rising electricity tariffs, led to a 349 percent increase in installed solar rooftop capacity in one year. While the country has been following an emissions-reduction pathway for decades, it was an affordability crisis that ultimately drove widespread decarbonization.

These countries are moving away from fossil fuels largely because of mounting economic and energy pressures, then, rather than a narrow focus on emissions reductions. But this does not mean the question of justice disappears.

Policymakers have used the concept of

a "just transition" to make a morally and emotionally compelling case for decarbonization. But they should be focusing on how to foster systemic change. Understanding that the primary drivers of solar uptake in South Africa and Pakistan, or the adoption of electric vehicles in Ethiopia, were structural and economic could help policymakers develop better tools and systems.

This also has direct implications for the ways in which philanthropists and governments allocate resources. Channeling funding toward grid capacity, storage infrastructure and affordable-financing mechanisms will likely produce more durable results than funding for climate education and communication.

Certainly, the world must reduce emissions to prevent the planet from overheating. To achieve this goal, it should focus on efforts to expand energy access and ensure affordability. This means recognition of and adequate responses to the external pressures that can support decarbonization pathways in emerging and developing economies.

Ethiopia, Pakistan and South Africa have shown that economic factors can provide better entry points for scaling green solutions and catalyzing systemic change than top-down, morally driven transition plans.

Certainly, the world must reduce emissions to prevent the planet from overheating

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OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Spencer Pratt | By Tunku Varadarajan

Los Angeles Has a Chance to Face Reality

S Spencer Pratt wasn't mugged by reality, but it literally burned his house down. He's now running for the hideous job of Los Angeles mayor, a citizen-avenger who wants justice.

On Jan. 7, 2025, a monstrous fire ravaged his Pacific Palisades neighborhood on the hillside edge of the ocean, reducing his home to ashes. In a few hours, he lost the Eden where he'd lived with his wife, the singer-actress Heidi Montag, and their two young sons. He also lost his hummingbirds. "I had, like, a thousand of them," all wild. They'd descend on his garden, where he'd set up feeders full of "nectar"—filtered water mixed with cane sugar. He'd walk out in the morning and "they'd land on my hand."

The loss of his house was his political awakening. It jolted Mr. Pratt, now 42, out of a life steeped in gentle eccentricity, including an obsession with healing crystals. He spent a year making an almighty nuisance of himself. He asked blistering public questions of city and

His house was destroyed in the Palisades fire. Now he's vying to be the first homeless mayor of a city overwhelmed by vagrancy, disorder and crime.

state leaders, badgered Washington to investigate the fire, and joined other displaced residents in filing a lawsuit for "inverse condemnation." The complaint alleges that the state and local governments allowed reservoirs that could have put out the fires to run empty.

Mr. Pratt says that state environmental bureaucrats "chose to protect milkvetch"—an endangered shrub—"over people." Gov. Gavin Newsom was irked enough last August to diss Mr. Pratt as a "C-list reality star." He repaid the governor's disdain by dubbing him "Mr. Hair Gel" in his memoir, "The Guy You Loved to Hate: Confessions from a Reality TV Villain." The book was published in January, shortly before Mr. Pratt announced his campaign for mayor.

Four months later, the irrepressible Mr. Pratt is poised to spring a surprise in the nonpartisan primary elections on Tuesday. A hummingbird is his political symbol, present on his campaign posters. It's a crowded field, 16 candidates in all, but the real contest is between Mr. Pratt and Karen Bass, the incumbent Democrat who has mismanaged her city by every objective yardstick. "She should be running as Karen Bass the communist," Mr. Pratt says.

Ms. Bass also faces a challenge from the left. Nithya Raman, who belongs to the Democratic Socialists of America and is chairman of the City Council's homelessness committee, is expected to finish third in the jungle primary, leaving Mr. Pratt and Ms. Bass to slug it out in November. The cocky Mr. Pratt insists he will earn a majority in the first round: "I'm going to be mayor."

Mr. Pratt appeared with his now-wife in "The Hills," an MTV series that ran from 2006-10. He was so widely reviled that he felt the need to carry a concealed weapon, which led him to register as a Republican in 2020: "I needed to protect myself and my family." Now he could well become L.A.'s first homeless mayor—fittingly, in a city where homelessness is the greatest civic obsession as well as the greatest civic bane.

To a New Yorker, what's striking about Mr. Pratt's mayoral campaign is how meticulously—even dramatically—local it is. Mayor Zohran Mamdani constantly weighs in on international affairs, especially in the Middle East. Mr. Pratt, by contrast, says: "I'm not going to have a word to say about anything but L.A." The "true failures" that afflict the city "are choices made in the city of L.A."

These begin with the coddling of "the homeless-industrial complex." California has about one-ninth of America's population but nearly one-fourth of the homeless, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; and the city of Los Angeles accounts for 10% of the state's population and one-fourth of its homeless.

"To me," Mr. Pratt says, "it's not homelessness. It's drug addiction. We have a drug-addiction crisis." The cause is "superdrugs like fentanyl and these new synthetic versions of it mixed with supermeth that creates a mental health crisis with the psychosis in between the highs and the lows."

He says Ms. Bass has exactly the wrong approach: "You cannot treat drug addictions with just four walls, and with this idea that we need more beds." You need "mandatory medical treatment to get these people off the hardest drugs in the history of planet earth." He says "a mom in South Central" came up to him recently. "She's crying to me. And she says, 'My daughter is not homeless. We have a home for her. She is loved. She lives on the streets right now on Skid Row because she's addicted to meth. She needs somebody to get her off that drug so she can come home.'"

Mr. Pratt has taken flak for calling Los Angeles vagrants "zombies." He defends the term. "I say 'zombie' when you're in a fentanyl hang and you're attacking moms naked with a weapon, or having sex on the sidewalk in front of



kids." Before our interview, I visited the infamous MacArthur Park, just west of downtown, where I got a sense of what Mr. Pratt means.

I saw hundreds of addicts, many hunched over while standing up, like waxwork men melting in the sun. Men and women injected themselves in plain view. A group were piled onto a prone body, fists flailing, beating the victim to a pulp. A man tried to wrestle a Canada goose, while a woman defecated at the edge of the park's lake. On a corner, a charity-operated food truck doled out lunches to a long, shuffling line. The squalor was breathtaking.

Mr. Pratt recently visited Skid Row, a few miles away, to rescue dogs that were being injected with drugs by addicts. He says he was sick for two days after inhaling "fences and dead dogs and fentanyl. I had to throw away my shoes. I was on an IV drip."

Nothing makes Mr. Pratt's blood boil more than the "torture" of these dogs, frequently caged and chained by addicts who use them to test the safety of their drugs. It enrages him that the city won't take action, "because it's 'culturally insensitive' to prosecute or give tickets or violations to someone without an address." Under Mayor Pratt, he says, "they'll have an address if they torture dogs: the jail."

"We're paying for their needles and their pipes," Mr. Pratt says, "and we're dropping them off in MacArthur Park. As taxpayers, we're financing this drug addiction." He says it is all to enrich nongovernmental organizations that have a direct financial interest in homelessness.

"The city spends \$1 billion a year on the homeless. If you can't house 70,000 people with \$1 billion, somebody's doing math wrong. These homeless NGOs have \$100 million contracts. They get to own the real estate. They have homes in Brentwood and drive Bentleys. They are conglomerate-level profiteer companies."

The people on the street, he says, "have Social Security numbers. There is money on every body that people can pull from. They are 'products' to a dark, evil set of human beings." There is, he continues, "a pyramid of scamming, with the needle deals and the people who buy senior-citizen facilities and turn them into homeless shelters" at an inflated profit, greenlit, he says, by Mayor Bass. "Once I'm in as mayor, we're going to really unpeel this onion. I'm going back in time with my criminal investigation, with the IRS. We're going to audit. We're going to find any stolen money. We're going to put cases on these people to get this money back."

Mr. Pratt is a registered Republican, but he insists he's a RINO, a Republican in name only. "The reality is, I connect a lot to what the Democratic Party was once like, but not necessarily to that party as it is right now. I look at Bill Clinton's 1996 policies and I could have them on my website."

Distancing himself from the GOP is shrewd. Many of his most generous donors are deep-pocketed Democrats like L.A. Lakers owner Jeanie Buss, investor Haim Saban, and former Obama administration official Nicole Avant.

He speaks more readily of his targets than of his precepts. "My goal, after eight years as mayor, is to have made L.A. the safest city in the country." His supporters "just want change and the truth. They want a novice. They don't want a politician. I've had people at fundraisers stand up and say, 'I support everything you do, but I would support Lassie the dog instead of these people,'" meaning Ms. Bass and Ms. Raman.

More than any other aspect of his campaign, the ads his supporters have made him have caught attention, particularly in their clever and subversive use of artificial intelligence. These ads, he says, are "a confusing thing," because he has never used AI himself. "All my ads are shot by one film director, Gabriel Mann, who used to live here,

then moved to Nashville because he didn't want to live in L.A. anymore." Mr. Mann directed the ad titled "They Not Like Us," which contrasts L.A.'s homeless crisis with the palatial homes where Ms. Bass and Ms. Raman live. "All of my ads are shot on a RED digital camera. All human beings. I've never made one AI video."

But his supporters have, with glee and gusto, some of which Mr. Pratt has appeared to endorse by featuring them on his social-media platforms. "I've actually made a mistake by retweeting them," he says. "If I could go back in time, I would never have reposted an AI ad." One of them portrays Ms. Bass as the Joker and also features Kamala Harris and Mr. Newsom. "There's things deep in there that connect to national politics, and that makes my campaign national," he laments. "There's a line in it about migrant trans vaginas." The ad itself uses coarser language and has given rise to awkwardness: "That makes the LGBTQ+ community think, 'Oh, Spencer,' and Heidi, my wife, is a huge gay icon."

The AI ads have "given my opponents a great way to attack me, which they have not had too many other opportunities to do," Mr. Pratt says. Ms. Bass "got to say 'It's dangerous, this rhetoric.' It just gives her talking points she would never have had. 'They threw tomatoes'"—a reference to a scene in the ad in which she is pelted with the fruit. "It's like, lady, I'm fighting you because you let 12 of my neighbors burn alive. That's dangerous. You let seven people die in the street every day. That's dangerous. But now I have to defend myself for a video where a tomato hits you?"

The subject of Donald Trump is sensitive. On May 20, at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy commencement, a journalist asked the president what he thought of Mr. Pratt. "I'd like to see him do well," Mr. Trump said. "He's a character. I hear he's a big MAGA person. He's doing well." Support from Mr. Trump could hurt Mr. Pratt in an overwhelmingly Democratic city, and he disclaims any endorsement: "He said he's heard of me. It's a big difference. He was kind of set up by that journalist to get clickbait. He didn't, like, do a post about me."

Mr. Pratt says he doesn't want any endorsements, "except for moms and animal lovers. Activated moms are the most powerful support I have. I'm married to one. I have a mom. I know that when a mom is locked in, that's all you need."

Mr. Varadarajan, a Journal contributor, is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and at NYU Law School's Classical Liberal Institute.

It Isn't Romantic When the Labor Department Says 'Your Mine'



CROSS COUNTRY
By Adi Dynar

a repair shop—qualifies as a "mine" under the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act. This means the Mine Safety and Health Administration is authorized to inspect it, regulate it and fine the people who work there, as if they were at a mine pulling coal out of the earth.

KC Transport doesn't mine coal. It hauls coal, along with dirt, gravel and whatever else its customers need moved. Its Emmett shop, more

A West Virginia company that hauls coal got hit with regulations as if it were extracting the stuff.

than a mile from the nearest coal-processing plant and several miles from any extraction site, is where its trucks get their oil changed and their brakes fixed. There are no shafts. No tunnels. No miners. Just truck drivers and occasionally mechanics. Yet the U.S. Labor Department considers it a mine.

The circuit court's reasoning rests on a "necessarily connected" test—if a facility is sufficiently intertwined with mining operations nearby, it qualifies as a mine under the Mine Act's definition. The problem is that

this test has no limiting principle. The majority admitted that regulated parties cannot "perfectly predict" when MSHA jurisdiction kicks in. In other words, we've ruled that your shop is a mine, but we aren't telling you what else might be. Good luck!

Under the labor secretary's reasoning, once a piece of equipment is used in mining, federal jurisdiction follows it wherever it goes. A truck that hauls coal is a rolling mine. A toolshed where a contractor stores equipment that sometimes gets used near a mining site is potentially a mine. A diner where miners stop for lunch? A church serving the spiritual needs of miners and their families and therefore "necessarily connected" to the mine operations? Don't laugh: The labor secretary's own lawyers, when pressed at oral argument, couldn't rule out that a pickax used for mining remains a "mine" even when transported 5,000 miles from any extraction site.

This isn't statutory interpretation. It's regulatory wordsmithing—exactly the kind of bureaucratic overreach that turns ordinary small-business owners into unwitting violators of laws they had no reason to think applied to them. KC Transport had never been inspected at its Emmett facility before that March 2019 visit. If the facility were truly a mine, federal law would have required MSHA to inspect it at least twice a year. The inspector apparently wandered over after finishing a nearby inspection, walked through an open gate, and decided on the spot that he'd found a mine. That isn't regulatory clarity. That's a surprise.

The dissent from Judge Justin Walker gets this exactly right: A facility has to be at an extraction site

or a processing plant to count as a mine. That's what the text supports, it's what common sense supports, and it's what gives regulated parties a fighting chance of knowing when they're subject to federal mine safety law.

But there's a second problem with this case that is at least as troubling as the first and it has nothing to do with how you define a mine. It has to do with who gets to define it.

One part of the executive branch—MSHA and the labor secretary—disagreed with another part—the Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Commission—over whether KC Transport's shop is a mine. The

commission, after a full administrative proceeding, said no. The secretary then filed a petition in federal court to override the commission's decision.

As Judge Walker explains in his dissent, that isn't how our constitutional system is supposed to work. The executive branch is supposed to speak with one voice, and that voice belongs ultimately to the president. When two agencies squabble over who gets to regulate a West Virginia repair shop, the answer isn't to drag the federal courts into the middle of it. The president—or someone he designates—is supposed to sort it out. The whole point of having a

unitary executive is that someone is in charge.

Federal courts hear cases and controversies between adverse parties. An arm of the executive shouldn't be suing a leg for the simple reason that as a structural matter, they can't be adverse to each other.

What we're left with, for now anyway, is a murky, "I know it when I see it" definition of mine that no business owner can reliably apply.

Mr. Dynar is an attorney in Pacific Legal Foundation's Separation of Powers practice. He represents KC Transport.

It's All About the Donalds

By Collin Levy

The Trump administration says it wants the president's face on a \$250 bill, and the big question is: What took so long?

What else to say about the ridiculous news that administration officials are pushing the Bureau of Engraving and Printing to mock up a new banknote featuring a portrait of Donald Trump. His signature has already been added alongside the Treasury secretary's on U.S. bills, and the U.S. Mint has approved a limited-production commemorative 24-karat gold coin with his likeness.

Don't forget the Trump Accounts for our wee ones, the TrumpRx prescription drug portal and the Trump Gold Card visas for immigrants who want to buy their way in with a "contribution" to the government. No one in Washington can go for a jog without seeing Mr. Trump's mug hanging on the Mall or outside the

Justice Department. And whatever happened to "Trump Gaza"?

This sort of leader-worship is common among autocrats. In Cuba, Vietnam and China, images of Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong have long been present in government buildings, schools and private businesses. (Not to mention T-shirts and key chains for despot tourist kitsch.) In North Korea, citizens are expected to hang pictures of Kim Jong Un in their homes.

Sober observers of our democracy note that these mundane flights of Mr. Trump's ego don't rise to the level of consequential decisions on policy or foreign affairs. But they are assaults on the country's character as a republic born from distrust of monarchical grandiosity.

Calvin Coolidge appeared on a limited-edition coin for America's sesquicentennial in 1926. No other living U.S. president has appeared on U.S. currency. Symbols like Lady Liberty,

eagles and shields appear in lieu of kings and queens favored on British coinage. Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton designed government to serve the people. For the same reason, the White House is comparatively modest next to the palaces of less-consequential nations.

The distaste for self promotion of living political leaders was first enshrined into law in the 1866 Thayer Amendment, which said "no portrait or likeness of any living person shall be . . . placed upon any of the bonds, securities, notes, or postal currency of the United States." Rep. Joe Wilson (R., S.C.) introduced the Donald J. Trump \$250 Bill Act last year to create an exemption for the portraits of living presidents on "currency and securities." It didn't get out of committee, so the administration's plan may be beyond what the law allows.

Ms. Levy is a member of the Journal's editorial board.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Newsom Wants an AI New Deal

Politicians never let an opportunity to grab more power go to waste, and Democrats are targeting public anxiety over artificial intelligence as their next opening. California Gov. Gavin Newsom is already talking about the party's chance for a second New Deal as he plots his run for President.

The California Governor is tilting toward an even larger entitlement state.

Mr. Newsom this month issued what he called a "first-of-its-kind" executive order to "prepare workers and businesses for potential AI disruption." The state can't clear its streets of homeless camps or prepare for wildfires, but we are supposed to trust elected leaders to know how to respond to economic changes from complex and fast-evolving AI technology.

While light on specifics, the Newsom order directs his administration to review "how worker voice is incorporated in adoption of emerging technologies" and "policies and practices that provide displaced workers with a safety net." This hints at more welfare programs and union favoritism.

Mr. Newsom told the left-leaning Center for American Progress this month that Democrats should talk about AI "as FDR talked in 1944, about a new social compact." He suggested imitating Europe's generous wage replacement programs and job protections. Perhaps he has missed Britain's debate, notably of late even in the Labour Party, over why a million young men and women have left the workforce while on the government dole.

If the government makes it hard for businesses to lay off workers, they will be more reluctant to add other jobs and hire young people with less experience. That's why the youth unemployment rate in France is upward of 20%. Mandated job protections—whether imposed by government or collective bargaining—make for a less dynamic economy and slower wage growth.

As for wage replacement, if workers can make nearly as much unemployed as they do working, many will stay home. That was one lesson from the pandemic when Congress juiced unemployment benefits and transfer payments. Unemployment stayed higher for longer, and businesses struggled to find workers.

Mr. Newsom also said he is considering "universal basic capital. I'm thinking about public equity funds and dividends. I'm thinking about ownership." Such ideas have come into vogue among the liberal intelligentsia, so expect Democrats to adopt the idea.

Universal basic capital looks to be socialism by a more politically palatable name. Under one version that some liberals have floated, government requires companies to hand over shares, which it puts into a fund. Politicians then distribute investment earnings from the fund to citizens as a "dividend." For progressives, this has the virtue of giving politicians more control over more of the economy.

"Businesses are going to make a fortune, and that's why you cannot continue to have a payroll tax system that taxes jobs and then subsidizes automation," Mr. Newsom said. Hmmm. This actually could be interesting. The U.S. tax system doesn't subsidize automation, but its high taxes and wage mandates do encourage employers to replace workers with technology.

If Mr. Newsom doesn't want to tax jobs, how about slashing income and payroll taxes? The top marginal tax rate in California on wage income over \$72,725 (including a disability payroll tax) is 10.6%. Or how about repealing his state's \$20-an-hour minimum wage for fast-food workers and climate regulations that have killed tens of thousands of jobs?

California is tied with Nevada and Delaware for the nation's highest unemployment rate (5.3%), followed by Oregon and Washington (5.2%), Illinois (5.1%), Connecticut and Michigan (5%). You don't need AI to discern what they have in common. With the exception of Nevada, the states are run by Democrats heavily influenced by public unions.

His statist bent aside, Mr. Newsom is recognizing the disruption from AI and trying to address it. It's a warning to Republicans that they need to do far more to explain to Americans the great change AI will bring and their own ideas for how the country can benefit. Otherwise voters may default to what will be the Democratic attempt to build a larger and even less affordable entitlement state.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EDF Makes It Harder to Reduce Emissions

I agree with the premise of Fred Krupp's May 22 op-ed ("Natural Gas Is Escaping Into Thin Air") that reducing methane emissions is an essential priority. It is, after all, the product that natural-gas producers are selling. Operators throughout the Appalachian Basin—America's largest and least-methane intensive natural gas producing region—have invested billions to do exactly that.

But what Mr. Krupp fails to acknowledge is that many of the infrastructure constraints he laments are the direct result of opposition campaigns supported by his organization, the Environmental Defense Fund, and its allies.

While Mr. Krupp notes that energy companies "haven't built the infrastructure" to bring gas to market, his organization has intervened against major pipeline projects like the Constitution Pipeline, which can safely transport abundant, low-emission natural gas into New York and New England. For nearly a decade, activist organizations have litigated, delayed and obstructed critical infrastructure

projects designed to move cleaner American energy to consumers who need it most.

The result? New England consumers continue to face some of the nation's highest winter energy prices while the region periodically turns to higher-emitting fuel oil and imported liquefied natural gas to meet demand. Imports from countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, for example, have a methane intensity four times higher than Pennsylvania-produced natural gas.

Constructive engagement on emissions is welcome. But the Environmental Defense Fund can't simultaneously lecture industry about inadequate infrastructure while working to block the projects needed to improve reliability, lower emissions and strengthen American energy security. If we are serious about reducing emissions, the solution isn't less natural gas—it is more modern infrastructure to deliver it efficiently and responsibly.

JIM WELTY
President, Marcellus Shale Coalition
Pittsburgh

When Labor Policy Leaves Its Workers Behind

Your editorial is right to call the Faster Labor Contracts Act a "bludgeon" that unions will use against businesses ("The New Big Labor GOP," May 26). Consider how it would have forced a contract at Volkswagen's Chattanooga plant, to the detriment of the automaker and its workers.

After Volkswagen employees voted to unionize in 2024, the company spent 22 months negotiating with the United Auto Workers union. They reached a contract that was generous for workers while preserving Volkswagen's ability to compete. But had the Faster Labor Contracts Act been in force, federal government mediation would have kicked in after 90 days, and binding arbitration would have been triggered only 30 days later. The law requires that arbitrators focus on industry com-

petitors when mandating a contract, which would have led them to look at the UAW's 2023 contracts with the Big Three automakers.

Those contracts, which followed a devastating strike, were even more generous than the deal Volkswagen subsequently reached with the UAW. But the bigger wage and benefits gains made the Big Three automakers less competitive. Since the contract negotiations, the three companies have announced more than 10,000 layoffs.

The Faster Labor Contracts Act empowers unions at workers' expense. Some Republicans failed to see this charade in the House, but hopefully the Senate will have more common sense.

KRISTEN SWEARINGEN
Coalition for a Democratic Workplace
Washington

A Welcome FDA Reversal on Melanoma

Some good news to finish the week. Replimune said Friday that the Food and Drug Administration has agreed to reconsider its treatment for metastatic melanoma on an expedited basis. This bodes well for patients with melanoma and other diseases who were casualties of the prior FDA regime's arbitrary drug rejections.

Marty Makary resigned earlier this month as FDA commissioner after the agency's rejection of treatments for rare and debilitating diseases sparked anger among patients, doctors and Members of Congress. The FDA moved the goal posts for approvals and demanded double-blind randomized controlled trials that would be impractical or unethical.

Replimune's RPI is a case in point. More than half of patients with metastatic melanoma will stop responding to approved immunotherapies, after which most won't live much more than a year. Yet one-third of patients who received RPI after progressing on other drugs entered remission, and tumors shrank in nearly all.

FDA staffers who reviewed RPI supported its

approval. Yet Dr. Makary's deputy Vinay Prasad overruled them and rejected the drug because the trial lacked a control group. This would have been unethical, as oncologists explained to the FDA. Drs. Makary and Prasad responded by claiming critics are in the pocket of Big Pharma.

Rare disease drug developers like Atara, Biohaven, UniQure, Capricor and Regenxbio also found themselves victims of the Makary FDA's vindictive regulation and shifting goal posts. The White House eventually had enough and pushed out Drs. Prasad and Makary, as well as deputies Tracy Beth Høeg and Katherine Szarama.

The regime change is much needed and there are promising signs under acting commissioner Kyle Diamantas. Replimune on Friday said it has "aligned on a path forward" for the FDA to reconsider RPI, which the agency will treat as "an urgent matter."

Let's hope the new leadership understands the importance of expediting treatments for deadly and rare diseases. That's a reversal all Americans can cheer.

The agency will now treat Replimune's drug as 'an urgent matter.'

What's Up With Trump and NATO?

A Russian drone crashed into an apartment building in Romania on Friday, and we doubt this is a coincidence, comrade. The Kremlin is probing to test NATO's response, which makes it all the more puzzling that President Trump is sending confusing signals about America's commitment to the defense of Europe.

"The peaceful sleep is over," wrote Vladimir Putin adviser Dmitry Medvedev after the incursion. European officials denounced the incident, but don't be surprised if there are more.

It's probably no accident that the incursion comes as the U.S. is telling the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to count on far less American firepower to defend the continent in a crisis. The Journal says Pentagon officials are floating a one-third to one-half reduction of available military assets in a war, including strategic bombers and ships. The Pentagon isn't denying the cuts, casting them on the QT as an "opportunity" for allies to handle more on their own.

This amounts to a rewrite of American strategy in Europe, without leveling with the public about the risks and costs to U.S. security. Mr. Putin has demonstrated with his war in Ukraine that, even though he's economically weak, he's capable of a ruinous miscalculation. NATO is facing arguably the worst security environment since its creation.

What threat assessment informed this U.S. decision? If the U.S. is cutting down on conventional forces ready to surge in a crisis, is Mr. Trump prepared to lean more heavily on the U.S. nuclear deterrent? If this is only about a better division of labor with Europe, why pare back strategic bombers, a unique American capability? If this is about putting more assets in the Pacific, then where's the evidence of more deployments there?

These are some of the questions the Administration doesn't want to answer, which is why it is conducting policy via press leak. Remember that the Administration last year yanked a combat brigade from Romania with little warning. The Administration is also threatening to pull 5,000 troops from Germany.

The Pentagon recently thought about pulling a brigade from Poland. Then somebody in the Administration remembered Warsaw is the top defense spender in the NATO alliance as a share of its economy. Mr. Trump walked back that mistake by promising on social media 5,000 more troops in Poland.

These policy leaks in dribs and drabs look like they're meant to make the changes hard to oppose—what's a few thousand fewer troops when 80,000 are on the continent? Europeans are easily spooked, but they also increasingly think the U.S. isn't an honest broker.

Congress has mandated a 76,000 U.S. troop floor in Europe, and a forthcoming defense bill asks the secretary of defense for policy to justify these decisions in Europe. That's Elbridge Colby, the JD Vance pal who is running this intellectual project. The defense hawks in Congress don't like to disagree with Mr. Trump, but they'll have to draw a line on Europe even at the risk of a social-media trashing.

The composition of American military forces in Europe shouldn't be based on score settling with leaders who didn't help in Iran or whatever the prime minister of Spain is saying this week. It should depend on the threats to peace and freedom on the continent, which are growing as Mr. Putin tests NATO's will.

If President Trump subscribes to a different risk assessment, Congress, our allies and the U.S. public deserve to hear it.

Iran's Government Is Incapable of Diplomacy

Regarding Walter Russell Mead's "Peace May Not Be at Hand in Iran" (Global View, May 26): Iran has been a growing threat to regional stability and commerce affecting the entire Middle East and beyond for decades. Diplomacy and non-lethal methods for containing Iran, such as sanctions, have pushed the ball down the road, but no more than that.

On the brink of obtaining nuclear weapons and after amassing overwhelming levels of missile and drone offensive weaponry, coupled with a government that espouses and engages in murderous armed conflict with its neighbors and religious demons, Iran epitomizes

hostility itself. Willing to attack its own population with lethal means of suppression, Iran's government has proven itself incapable of engaging either democratically or peacefully among the world's nations.

When diplomacy fails, and when a hostile nation espouses and wantonly conducts international terrorism, it must be engaged militarily and eradicated in its present form. There is no diplomatic agreement sufficiently that would compel the present Iranian government to exist aside free-willed nations with compromise or peaceful intent. Ongoing diplomatic efforts are useless and an impediment to U.S. and allied military success.

It is only by imposing military defeat upon Iran's government that its oversized disruption of world order and economy can be eliminated.

COL. ART SABOSKI, USAF (RET.)
Prescott Valley, Ariz.

The Era of Support Animals

Landlords like Bert Stratton are fighting a rising tide ("Who Let the Dogs In?" op-ed, May 26). Given the confluence of increasing anxiety among young people and couples supplanting procreation with pet ownership while remaining unable to purchase homes, the increased demand for pets in rental housing seems unavoidable.

While emotional-support animals may provide a service, the promotion of pets to emotional-support status appears as prevalent as grade inflation in today's colleges.

Mr. Stratton's tenant with two dogs presents a snowballing situation. Conditions like dissociative identity disorder may dictate multiple support animals, and the growth in pet psychologists portends a burgeoning trend of emotionally affected pets needing their own support animals.

Landlords may soon find it more practical to sell their rental properties and open pet boarding hotels instead.

GREGORY MARSHALL
Marietta, Ga.

The Good Man From Philly

My wife and I had the pleasure of meeting Robert Woodson a number of years ago ("A 'Community Activist' Who Listened to Communities" by Jason Riley, Upward Mobility, May 27). Since all three of us were originally from Philadelphia, we shared stories about how most people don't know a real Philly cheesesteak when they eat one in their hometowns.

When the conversation turned to the real issues that Woodson dedicated his life to addressing, I could only think of the Albert Einstein quote: "Strive not to be a person of success, but rather a person of value."

That was Woodson to a tee. The world is a better place for him having been among us, and he left a legacy that will continue to have positive effects on future generations.

MATT SEGAL
Cary, N.C.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"You need your laptop fixed. I need a puppy. There's a deal to be made here, Dad."

OPINION

Becoming Who You Are Ain't for Sissies



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

When Conan O'Brien walks into a room people immediately get a merry look, and when he spoke at a university commencement this week it was good to see an air of expectation ripple through the crowd.

The flame-haired entertainment icon didn't disappoint. His message: Be modest. You'll make mistakes. Don't be afraid to try. Be ready to "pivot."

I was seated to the left, with four other nominees for honorary doctorates, the great crowd spilling before us, and I'll tell you where my thoughts were, far away and far back in Massapequa, Long Island, when I was a child.

A commencement isn't only about beginnings. It is also a chance to look back at how you got there.

Oh those old days in the 1950s, when the houses that became part of the great substantial suburbs of today were brand-new. Their dormers hadn't been built yet; the lawns hardly had grass; the trees were plants held steady by sticks, a piece of paper attached by wire to the branches: "Apple tree." "Peach tree." So people from the city would know what it would become.

As you grow older you're more able to see the poignancy in your life, and in others'.

We'd moved out from Brooklyn into a little house—two bedrooms downstairs and two in the unfinished attic if you could finish it. We

were a family of five, then six, then seven children, nine in that small space, and we had brought the ways of the European immigrant enclaves of Brooklyn and the Bronx with us. I think now that Brooklyn came out to Long Island in hopes it would make us get organized, like an American, like a stakeholder. Many did but some did not, and they lived the great unspoken humiliation of the 1950s, of not making it work, of not being up to it when the prevailing national spirit, the prevailing insistence, was America Works. My parents were in their 20s when most of those babies came, and overwhelmed by circumstances.

I was a most unpromising child, third of seven—poor grades, thought I was a comic, didn't do my homework, missed a lot of school, preferring to stay home and watch endless repeats of old movies—"Yankee Doodle Dandy," "The Grapes of Wrath." I read a lot, anything—tabloid newspapers, children's biographies of the great. I had an active fantasy life and wished to be heroic.

All this culminated at the start of seventh grade when I met with a guidance counselor, who flapped through my record, sized me up—unkempt, ill-dressed—and told me I wouldn't be on a college track, but that if I aimed high, cleaned up my act, got myself together, I had a chance to become a clerk in an office, a person who files things. This wounded me. I'm sure I made a joke—"I was thinking poet laureate"—but it cut because I had it in my head that somehow a person in a position of authority who knew things might see beyond the mess and mediocrity, spy some promise in me, hearten me. Save me.

Having been tagged a loser I went on, as children do, to make my loser-



LIBBY O'NEILL/GETTY IMAGES

dom official. We moved a lot, sometimes suddenly, winding up with the nine of us in a two-bedroom apartment over a candy store in Rutherford, N.J. My sister Cookie was older by a year and we blew off school together, wandering around and chain-smoking. She did her hair like Cher, loved the Shirelles and the Ronettes, fashioned herself as a hood. (Decades later it was she who called the day Donald Trump announced his candidacy and told me of his power.) I presented in a would-be collegiate style, I think to cheer myself up. I didn't go to my high school classes, because I stayed up all night reading novels—Fitzgerald, Hemingway—and biographies. I'd sleep all morning, then creep out of the apartment when school was over and run back in banging doors, shouting to nobody, "I'm home!"

College wasn't in the picture. On graduating high school I went to work in the world, commuting on a bus to Newark to a job as a clerk at the Aetna Insurance Co. on Broad Street. The next year three unhappy friends and I ran away, pool-

ing our money for an old car and driving south until we reached Miami Beach. We got jobs as waitresses at the Lincoln Road Restaurant. It was near the auditorium where Jackie Gleason taped his weekly variety show, and his June Taylor Dancers used to come in for lunch. Once one came in and sat at the counter and we talked a long time about the news and life, and when I cleaned up after she'd gone she'd left a \$20 bill under the saucer. Wow. My fellow runaway Kathy, working the same shift, ran over to say, "She almost left \$100. She had it in her hand but hesitated!" Kathy thought I might be sad. No. It was one of the greatest moments in my life. I did have promise! A dancer for Jackie Gleason wanted to encourage it!

This and many other things helped activate something inside, some foundationless sense of promise, a belief that I was a writer, that this would somehow become apparent and concrete.

We returned to Jersey, I enrolled at Fairleigh Dickinson University at

night and made up the classes I'd failed in high school, and at age 20 I was accepted to attend FDU full time during the day. I was a college student. And eager now, finally, to sit in a class and listen, absorb. I worked hard, did well, edited the school newspaper. In coming decades I went on to work as a writer for a radio station, then a network, then for a great president, now a great newspaper.

I'm saying what you already know: Never count anyone out. Don't count yourself out. Don't take the world's appraisal of you and make it your own. Be aware of its appraisal—maybe the world has reasons for its reservations, maybe you should work on them. But maybe the world isn't giving more than a cursory look; maybe it's hardly looking at all. Even if it is, its estimation will likely lack a warmth of imagination. You may have to bring your own.

And after the warmth, the work. Becoming who you are ain't for sissies.

So back to this Thursday, and I am surrounded by other happy honorees in a bubbling brew of crimson robes and black caps.

Mark Twain said the honorary doctorate he was given by Oxford University in 1907 marked the healing of an old wound. He felt he'd been overlooked for such honors by American colleges.

That isn't the purpose of such worldly honors, healing wounds, but I suspect it's often an effect.

And so hello, seventh-grade guidance counselor: I am waving at you from the steps of Harvard University, where they have announced me a doctor of laws. Hello Massapequa, and the apartment over the store in Rutherford, and the Lincoln Road Restaurant and the June Taylor Dancers, one of whom gave me such a lift so long ago.

The Science of Talking to Strangers

By Nicholas Epley

Human beings are highly social creatures, made happier and healthier by connecting with other people. Yet every day offers opportunities to connect that we choose not to take. We avoid talking to strangers. Once talking, we stick to small talk. We feel grateful but don't express it, need help but don't ask, could express support but don't. By any measure, social isolation in America is on the rise. If being social is good for us, why do we choose to be so unsocial?

This paradox struck me hard one morning about 15 years ago while I was riding my commuter train to the University of Chicago, where I work as a professor of behavioral science studying social connection. Like every other day, commuters filed on, seeking out their own little refuge along the window. The train eventually filled up, with highly social creatures now sitting side by side for 30 to 45 minutes, completely ignoring each other.

A woman who looked more than a decade older than I, wearing a fabulous red hat, sat next to me. I put other people in experiments for a living, but that morning I decided to put myself in one. Instead of ignoring my neighbor, I would try to connect in a conversation. My brain immediately shut down the idea: "She doesn't want to talk; you'll have nothing to talk about; she'll probably think you're a creep trying to hit on her." Nevertheless, I worked up my courage and said, "Hi, my name is Nick. I love your hat. I have one just like it!"

This isn't an award-winning conversation starter, but it didn't matter. She turned to me, laughing through a smile. The conversation then flowed easily, and we found more in common than I ever would have guessed. When I got up to leave, she stopped me and said, "Thank you so much for talking with me this morning."

This conversation wasn't only good, it was surprisingly good. The gap between my pessimistic fears

and my positive experience was massive. That gap also suggested a resolution to the paradox of highly social creatures' avoiding each other. Social connection isn't something that just happens to us. It's a choice we make: to be bold and connect with someone or to hold back and avoid. It may be the most important choice we make routinely because it determines so much of our happiness, health and success. If we're overly pessimistic about how someone will respond to us, then we might choose to hold back too often.

That interaction on the train prompted me to conduct scientific research on the subject. My colleagues and I have now conducted more than 120 experiments involving more than 30,000 people and found that it is common for people to be overly pessimistic about how others will respond when they reach out to connect with them.

In one of our first experiments, we went to a train station and asked commuters to predict how they

would feel at the end of their commute if they kept to themselves in solitude, did whatever they normally did (our control condition), or tried connecting in conversation with a stranger. Most commuters thought that talking to a stranger

People are too pessimistic about how others will respond when they reach out to connect with them.

was a bad idea and expected that they would have the best commute if they kept to themselves and the worst commute if they talked to a stranger. When we recruited another group of commuters and randomly assigned them to do one of those three things, however, we found the opposite: Commuters reported having the best commute when they talked with a stranger. We found similar results on buses

and cabs in Chicago and among Londoners, who also enjoyed their train commute more when connecting. The results were the same for introverts and extroverts alike. The barrier to connecting was thinking that others didn't want to talk. But when people tried, they learned that reaching out with a hello usually yielded a hello in return.

We've also seen misplaced pessimism about having deeper conversations with strangers, talking about a political issue with someone who disagrees with us, or confronting a relationship partner about a concern. Mistakenly fearing that meaningful conversations would go poorly can keep us from creating the strongest connections.

Our pessimism extends beyond conversation. Asking for help, performing an act of kindness, giving someone a compliment, expressing your gratitude, or calling an old friend to reconnect is more favorably received than those who are reaching out expect. How much more often would you reach out in

kindness if you knew how much good you could actually do?

Being overly pessimistic doesn't mean we should reach out all the time or that it always turns out well. It simply means that we underestimate the likelihood that reaching out will turn out well and that our cost-benefit calculation might be miscalibrated. "Imagine what our real neighborhoods would be like," Fred Rogers once said, "if each of us offered, as a matter of course, just one kind word to another person." My advice is to test the pessimistic beliefs holding you back. I predict that the results of your testing will empower you to connect a little more often—not only for your own good, but also for the good of others.

Mr. Epley is a professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business and author of "A Little More Social: How Small Choices Create Unexpected Happiness, Health and Connection."



BUSINESS
WORLD
By Holman W.
Jenkins, Jr.

Many Americans still think the key question in climate politics is a human effect on climate, yea or nay, believer vs. denier. No. For 40 years, the only interesting questions have been how and how much are we influencing the climate, and the cost and benefit of proposed actions—questions that can't be answered by shouting yea or nay about a human role in climate change.

Activists have taught us one thing. Hectoring about the end of the world, insisting the science is "settled," equating doubters to Holocaust deniers, has been a stimulant to green pork and not real cli-

mate policy, the pinnacle of cynicism being Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act.

The public, understandably, long ago stopped listening. Or maybe it started getting its guidance from Donald Trump, which wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

This month, when an authoritative United Nations advisory panel quietly junked a long-misused worst-case emissions scenario known as RCP 8.5, one of the first to notice was the president, who charmingly tweeted about "Dumocrats" and their "WRONG, WRONG, WRONG" climate estimates.

This was a public service, it turned out, for Mr. Trump's post forced the media to reckon with a decade's worth of its own bad reporting.

Let's start with a bit of perspective. It all begins with a 2018 U.S. government assessment, instigating what I called a psychiatric moment for the news media. Piling up worst-case assumptions, including RCP 8.5, the report showed warming nevertheless to be an affordable burden for Americans, who would be three or four times as rich by 2090 despite an adverse climate.

But this created a problem for the press. All climate news must be bad tending toward worse. Reporters did the only thing they could. They ignored the numbers and filled their dispatches with adjectives indicating a doom that, hilariously, the study didn't support.

Par for the course, maybe, but the episode was so grossly stupid, it gave birth to a resolution by scientists to stop feeding the media worst-case scenarios to misrepre-

Donald Trump, Climate Scientist

sent. This impulse has now been honored with a semicongratulatory presidential tweet.

Always a laggard, though, is the New York Times. First, it resorted to a canard in response to Mr. Trump's posting, a story claiming that RCP 8.5, far from being faulty, simply was rendered moot by the glorious carbon-reducing progress of green energy.

This was so obviously false that the paper ran out a second story,

How a presidential tweet forced the media to come to terms with its faulty global-warming reporting.

now admitting that "news stories [i.e., its own] about climate research often emphasized results based on RCP 8.5 as a picture of what the world can expect unless countries slash their emissions, which isn't right."

Understand: RCP 8.5 was created to give scientists a high-emissions path to play with. From the start, it lacked any "consistent internal logic," as its original designers stipulated.

Only later was a back story of justification added. In a RCP 8.5 world, all technological progress in the energy field would end. That is, with a strange exception: The technology to allow the world to quintuple its coal consumption, such as burning coal in cars.

In any sane model, of course, technological advance is routine

and must be accounted for. And we've had plenty in all areas of energy production and distribution, including green energy. But the world consumes more of every kind of energy, even renewables, without necessarily having any deliberate effect on emissions, though those emissions remain far below the RCP 8.5 forecast, which proved useful only for overselling climate doom to the public.

The larger lesson is an extraordinary story of futility and cynicism, which passes itself off as climate politics. Literally trillions of dollars have been wasted. The story begins with the Obama administration ditching a carbon tax in favor of green pork. It ends with a former John Kerry aide arguing last year that because the effects of climate change "resemble those if China or Indonesia were to launch missiles at the United States," the U.S. should consider employing military power against emitting countries.

This record of disgrace only underlines the glory (and mystery) of the current moment. Organized climate science is finally repenting of its overuse of worst-case scenarios, and not because of searching criticism from an honest and competent news media, but because of embarrassment at shoddy mainstream coverage of climate science.

More amazing, the truth has now reached readers of the New York Times and likely wouldn't have if Mr. Trump hadn't posted about climate science, in his usual hyperbolic, all-caps way, on Truth Social.

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The New York Times

The Doping Olympics Were Underwhelming

Jessica Grose

An Opinion writer covering family, religion, education, culture and the way we live now.

AT THE beginning of the livestream of Sunday's Enhanced Games in Las Vegas — an Olympics-style competition where performance enhancement is not just allowed, but hyped, for the 42 athletes participating — an advertisement sums up what seems to be the worldview of the organizer, Enhanced Group: "Every era redefines what's possible, records fall, science advances, and progress doesn't ask for permission."

That last part, "Progress doesn't ask for permission," is written in big white letters, before those words shatter dramatically across the screen. Then just a few seconds later, in case you missed the message, the voice-over concludes: "No apologies, no permission, no going back. The future of human performance has arrived."

The pose is obvious: Old rules around both science and sport are for tradition-bound losers. If you want to succeed like our athletes, most of whom are taking unspecified combinations and amounts of testosterone, human growth hormone, stimulants, anabolic steroids and more, you should listen to us. Ignore those hall monitors from the International Olympic Committee or the research scientists or even your own doctor. Anyone who thinks off-label supplement and peptide stacks, hormone use and steroids are potentially dangerous is using antiquated logic. And if you're inspired by these athletes, we are also selling some of these products to you, the viewer.

I watched as much of the six-hour livestream as I could tolerate. The sports in competition — swimming, weight lifting, track — are not ones I find especially riveting. I understood at least one of the motivations for the athletes participating, and I am sympathetic to it. The winners of each event won \$250,000, or \$1 million if they broke a world record. Some of them competed clean, and at least two said they still wanted to be able to participate in the regular, non-doping competitions. Elite athletes aren't always well funded, and those amounts of money are truly life-altering.

But my sympathy ended there. The announcers barely pretended to be anything but Enhanced spokesmen. One, an Australian with a man bun named Kurt Mills Hanson, came right out and made the reason for the event clear. He explains that the medication and vitamins that "enhanced athletes" took under the close supervision of doctors and nutritionists in Abu Dhabi should also be available to the schlubs watching at home. Mr. Hanson talked about the journey of a few of the Enhanced Games athletes who came out of retirement to participate in their 30s and then said: "What's the cut through here? This is the cut through for that middle-aged person sitting at home, maybe 40s, 50s, even beyond, maybe they've had kids, family, you're out for 10 years, you haven't done much, then maybe you go online, check out our enhanced, you know, protocols, and see what you can do, and hook it up."

Christian Angermayer, a German billionaire who is a founder of Enhanced Group, is clear about the goals of the company, which recently went public and is listed on the New York Stock Exchange. In a post on X, he ex-



plained that the combination of the company's two main products, the sporting event and telehealth, "creates a flywheel of credibility, consumer trust, cultural relevance and proprietary insights that simultaneously strengthen both businesses."

He's right that supplements are a huge business and only growing. According to a report just released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in the United States, "38.7 percent of adults used two or more dietary supplements, and use increased with age." Sixty percent of adults over 20 take at least one supplement, and these percentages have risen over the past decade. The market for dietary supplements globally, which is already around \$200 billion, is projected to double in the next several years.

The Enhanced Games can be understood as a mega advertisement for the products Mr. Angermayer is selling all year long: expensive supplement protocols to help regular people live, work and lift better. Because advertisements for supplements are overseen by two different federal agencies, and

neither can keep up with the onslaught of quasi-medical advice on social media, a lot of shoddy science slips through.

Mr. Angermayer claims that his company runs on transparency, because at least its athletes are being honest about doping, presumably unlike mainstream athletes who dope and lie about it. This attitude is tough to square with the fact that we don't know exactly what each athlete participating in the event was taking or at what doses, or how that might apply to people who aren't exercising for a living. Though there is a clinical study of over 30 of these athletes in the works, I don't know how they would separate the effects of multiple drugs at once, or how we can take a claim of transparency seriously when the study is funded by the company.

Mr. Angermayer also claims that the company is about longevity as well as performance, but those goals are different, and sometimes in conflict. Some research suggests that certain former elite athletes may be in worse health at midlife because of the wear and tear they put on their bodies and

We're going to have to let this period of moral vacuity play out.

minds during competition, and one can only imagine the long-term repercussions for the athletes on the experimental protocols overseen by the Enhanced Games.

Take peptides, which Enhanced sells on its website. Eric Topol, a cardiologist, executive vice president of Scripps Research and the author of "Super Agers: An Evidence-Based Approach to Longevity," laid out the lack of solid evidence for the most commonly used peptides in his Ground Truths newsletter last year. And just last week, my newsroom colleague Dana G. Smith highlighted new research that "upends" the entire argument for one popular anti-aging supplement that Enhanced is selling, N.A.D.+ She explains that "part of the thinking that helped to fuel the booming market for these supplements may be wrong. A study published this month in Nature Metabolism showed that blood levels of N.A.D.+ don't actually fall with age."

I called Dr. Topol to vent my frustration with what feels to be an oppressive avalanche of direct-to-consumer marketing over the past few years. I asked him why the push for unproven remedies that promise to cure all of our ills seems relentless.

He explained it was a combination of a growing distrust of the medical establishment, the train wreck of Covid, the allure of influencers and the introduction of auto-injectors, which are supposedly less painful tools for self-administering shots. Now that millions of Americans inject themselves with doctor-prescribed medications from fertility meds to GLP-1s, they're more comfortable injecting themselves with just about anything.

Dr. Topol doesn't see any signs of the longevity and supplement craze abating. "It's a mess. I have not seen anything like it," he told me. It certainly doesn't help that Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is trying to relax federal restrictions on a handful of peptides, which according to Axios "could be a bonanza for telehealth companies, compounding pharmacies and longevity clinics looking for the next big wellness trend." Enhanced Group, which counts Donald Trump Jr. among its games' backers, would likely benefit from this deregulation since it could sell an even wider variety of peptides that will have the implicit and very public seal of approval from Mr. Kennedy.

I'm slightly more optimistic than Dr. Topol. We're going to have to let this period of moral vacuity play out, but I am hopeful we will come out on the other side realizing that, actually, gatekeepers and pearl clutchers at various oversight committees had a point.

The Enhanced Games' shortcomings might be the first step in that direction: Only one world record was broken by a doper, and three clean athletes — a swimmer and two runners — won their events. According to The Guardian, "organizers say that around 250,000 people watched the event live on YouTube," which is pretty underwhelming for a competition that pitched itself as a revolution.

Tristan Evelyn, a Barbadian sprinter who won the women's 100-meter race without using performance-enhancing drugs, said it best: "This proves that winning takes more than chemistry."

Now, we just need a credulous public to believe her.

Why Isn't the Pope Going to War Against A.I.?

Matthew Walther

A contributing Opinion writer and the editor of The Lamp, a Catholic literary journal.

LEO XIV is not quite what Sylvia Townsend Warner once called an "old harmless pope," but he certainly has a way of keeping headlines innocuous. He's from Chicago, he likes the White Sox, he's against the war in Iran — a year into his papacy, this is more or less what people know about him.

The mildness extends to his theological views. Unlike his recent predecessors John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Leo is not an academic theologian. Temperamentally, he is more cautious than Francis was. The questions that seem to interest Leo most are practical and pastoral. He is suspicious of grand, programmatic approaches even to the most serious questions — including that of artificial intelligence, the subject of his first encyclical letter, "Magnifica Humanitas," which was presented on Monday.

Even by the standards of modern papal encyclicals, with their uninspired phrasing, frequent auto-plagiarism and stultifying length, "Magnifica Humanitas" is disappointingly measured and cautious. (The least guarded language in the document — Leo's dismissal of just war theory as "outdated" — has nothing to do with A.I.) Despite voicing concerns about the dangers that A.I. poses to humanity, the encyclical nonetheless seems to envision a world in which it is simply a tool, rather than an evil that all people should reject.

The text begins with the arresting image of the Tower of Babel, perhaps the greatest biblical symbol of technological hubris, but seems to miss the point of the story, which is not that the tower's builders should have been more ethical by incorporating feedback from a more disparate assemblage of stakeholders. The moral was: Don't build it!

Otherwise, "Magnifica Humanitas" comes off as uninspired and unfocused. There are far too many unmemorable quotations and references to papal speeches.

'Magnifica Humanitas' was disappointingly measured and cautious.

Out-of-context lines from "The Lord of the Rings" and Hannah Arendt elicited groans from at least one reader. I found myself wishing that Leo had engaged with more recent and incisive critics of technological modernity, such as the Catholic philosopher Byung-Chul Han (the author of "The Burnout Society") and Anton Jäger, the historian of political thought whose "hyperpolitics" thesis anticipates many of Leo's concerns.

This is not exactly the Unabomber manifesto. One is even tempted to call it naïve. The encyclical certainly does not live up to its billing as the A.I. equivalent of "Rerum Novarum," the revolutionary text on the Industrial Revolution with which his predecessor and eponym Leo XIII inaugurated modern Catholic social teaching in 1891. The presence of Christopher Olah, a founder of the A.I. firm Anthropic, at the presentation of the encyclical on Monday rightly raised eyebrows. (Imagine if Leo XIII had invited John D. Rockefeller to hear him speak on the dignity of labor!)

For those of us who see the rise of A.I. as unambiguously evil, Leo's emphasis on its ethical use is a nonstarter. He seems to underestimate A.I.'s ability to exacerbate existing crises and to accelerate processes of cheapening and redefinition. The encyclical says nothing, for example, about how A.I. abets the replacement of medicine as a humanistic profession with an algorithmic conception of health care justified by the language of "access."

In perhaps the most telling passage, Leo contrasts the dangers of a myopic, self-aggrandizing "idealism" with what he calls "authentic realism," a clearheaded outlook that "does not give up on changing the world" but rather, "by clearly identifying interests, fears, constraints and power dynamics," is able to "determine what can be achieved, and the measures needed to achieve it." (This, perhaps, is an implicit rebuke to technophobic critics.)

The pope's sanguine attitude should not surprise anyone who is familiar with his personality. Unlike Francis, a well-known Luddite, Leo is an internet user, a quaint

phrase that describes roughly six billion of us. We know that he has a smartphone, that he texts, that he uses social media, that he plays Wordle. His relationship with digital technology is, in other words, typical of many people his age, for whom digital technology really is a tool rather than an atomizing, attention-span-destroying augmented reality from which it is almost impossible to escape. It's easy for him to be upbeat.

Indeed, a few months ago, in a message Leo delivered to a gathering of A.I. developers in Rome, his words were optimistic. He envisioned a world in which A.I. could be "a profoundly ecclesial endeavor," a technology that could serve "Catholic education," "compassionate health care" and "creative platforms that tell the Christian story with truth and beauty."

Leo's accommodating approach in "Magnifica Humanitas" also reflects his pragmatic attitude toward his office and the limits of the Roman Catholic Church's authority. Whatever one thinks about A.I., it is not going anywhere. Even a much more thoughtful book-length document would not make an impression on people who are too distractible to watch a feature-length film or finish a short news article. The days when papal encyclicals meaningfully affected public policy — for example, in the interwar period, when they helped to shape the New Deal — are long gone.

In theory, the church could use its juridical authority to fight A.I. But here, too, Leo is relatively powerless. A papal bull excommunicating ChatGPT users or placing Silicon Valley under interdict would be enormously amusing, and perhaps even justifiable. But what would it accomplish? More than half a century after Paul VI issued "Humanae Vitae" in 1968, only 15 percent of American Catholics affirm what the church teaches about birth control. A new teaching about A.I. that was rejected by the faithful would not only fail to achieve its stated object; it would also further undermine the very idea of the church as a teacher and lawgiver.

This is not to suggest that the church has nothing to say to the world about A.I. For

years now I have believed that in the face of the technological destruction of human relationships, literacy and contemplation, the church may well become the only guardian of humanistic values, even for secular people. But it will not fulfill this role by publishing encyclicals or issuing sterner disciplinary measures, but simply by staying true to itself.

Catholics are able to bear witness not only to the power and beauty of holiness but also to forgotten habits, practices and values, to the importance of craftsmanship and deliberation, to the past as a worthy and even delightful object of study rather than a catalog of forgotten barbarisms. They are able to present truth as something immutable and transcendent rather than contingent and self-constructed, and to speak to the value of liberality, magnanimity, filial piety and countless other shabby neglected virtues.

How exactly the church's message will reach a distracted world is unclear. But it will almost certainly not be a top-down endeavor, dependent upon the actions or personal charisma of a pope. What seems more likely is that in the decades to come we will see the emergence of a distinctly Christian cultural movement that defies standard political categories but is united against technological utilitarianism and the subsisting of human life into digital frameworks.

At the heart of this resistance, I suspect, will be the Mass. With its grand symbolic gestures, its hieratic language and profound silences, the liturgy exists outside the framework of ordinary human experience and even of time itself. The sacraments are impervious to technological improvement. And I suspect that in ways that previous generations of Catholics could not have guessed, the sacraments will continue to "effect what they represent": a world in which the humble elements of water, wine and oil, along with ancient words betokening promises and mercy, are more powerful than any machine.

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The Hard Truth My Party Needs to Face

Chris Van Hollen

A Democratic senator representing Maryland.

DEMOCRATS need to face a hard truth. While Republicans' approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has failed, so has ours. The Democratic Party has provided reflexive and unconditional support to Israeli governments, even as their actions have increasingly undermined American interests and values.

For decades, we have called for a two-state solution, but we've failed to use our leverage to make it real. It's past time that we use that leverage to end the occupation and achieve two states with full political and legal rights for all. That means withdrawing taxpayer support from Israel and conditioning arms sales.

More of my colleagues are realizing that the status quo is unacceptable. Forty Democrats recently voted to block the transfer of certain military equipment to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, compared with only 15 of us in April 2025.

To be clear, I support Israel's need for security. But for too long most Democrats have unquestioningly accepted Israel's argument that American weapons are needed and used solely for its defense. We have not yet fully confronted the fact that Israel has used its strength not only as a shield, but also as a sword to bury the two-state solution and advance the far right's vision of a "Greater Israel."

The evidence on the ground is overwhelming: Violent settlers in the West Bank have attacked Palestinians with impunity, and Israeli security forces are increasingly complicit. Israel's de facto annexation of the West Bank has pushed Palestinians into shrinking enclaves. Mr. Netanyahu's government has sabotaged the Palestinian Authority, which, unlike Hamas, has accepted Israel's right to statehood. Anyone who visits the West Bank under Israeli occupation can see an apartheid system at work. Meanwhile, Gaza remains in ruins, the humanitarian situation there remains catastrophic, and Hamas remains armed.

I've seen this with my own eyes. I've visited Israel and the West Bank seven times and witnessed the rapid expansion of illegal settlements across land that was supposed to be part of a Palestinian state. I've spoken to Palestinians pushed out of their homes and off their land. I've sat down with both Israelis and Palestinians who have lost loved ones to violence. In Ramallah, I spoke with Palestinian American parents who can't get justice for their children killed by violent settlers or Israeli security forces. I've seen aid trucks turned back from Israeli checkpoints while children in Gaza were starving on the other side. And I've seen how the once bustling city of Rafah was reduced to rubble by the Israel Defense Forces with American bombs.

It is these experiences — and watching this trajectory accelerate — that have shaped my growing alarm, which the American people increasingly share. They do not want to be complicit in ethnic cleansing in the West Bank, or what human rights organizations and scholars have determined to be genocide in Gaza.

Both Republican and Democratic administrations are responsible for where we are today. In his first term, President Trump moved the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, implicitly condoned settlements and closed the Palestinian Mission in Washington and our consulate in East Jerusalem.

President Joe Biden failed to reverse most of these actions, even as Israel elected the most extremist government in its history. Moreover, Mr. Biden de-prioritized the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. And while he was right to affirm Israel's right to defend itself after Hamas's Oct. 7 attacks, he failed to use U.S. leverage as Israel imposed devastating collective punishment on the people of Gaza.

These failures worked against U.S. interests. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has ensnared us in violence and caused instability throughout the Middle East. It has cost taxpayers tens of billions of dollars. It undermines our credibility, as countries see our un-

conditional backing of the Israeli government as inconsistent with the principles we profess to represent.

At home, the brutality of Mr. Netanyahu's government has eroded Americans' support for a historically close partner. At the same time, we're seeing a dangerous and reprehensible rise in antisemitism. Attempts to conflate criticism of the Israeli government with antisemitism do not combat that hate. They only undermine the fight against antisemitism by equating the Israeli government with all Jews, and they empower the enemies of free speech.

For all these reasons, we cannot accept the status quo. Democrats can — and should — be both "pro-Israeli" and "pro-Palestinian." To support both, Democrats must put forward a plan that moves beyond the failures of the past toward a durable peace.

Democrats should pursue a last-gasp effort to salvage a two-state solution. If that effort fails, the United States will have to consider

Democrats must use their leverage to end Israel's West Bank occupation.

other options to secure equal political and legal rights for all. The alternatives — either a permanent apartheid state or the expulsion of Palestinians — should be abhorrent and unacceptable to everyone. They would result in the unending oppression or displacement of Palestinians, chronic unrest throughout the region and Israel becoming a pariah state.

Many cynics will rightly roll their eyes when Democrats talk about pursuing a two-state solution. This time must be different. The United States must draw a red line against Palestinian displacement and enforce it.

The next Democratic president should recognize a State of Palestine that is subject to clear benchmarks, including free and fair elections. Until a different agreement is reached, the United States should treat Gaza

and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as part of Palestine.

In addition to ending taxpayer-funded support, that president should enforce the same terms and conditions for Israel that we apply to other countries that purchase arms. Israel must also comply with international law and U.S. policy. That means no offensive weapons should be sold unless Israel agrees to a time-bound plan to end the occupation and enact a two-state solution. At the same time, the United States should reinstate and expand Mr. Biden's sanctions on people and organizations that threaten the stability and security of the West Bank.

That next president should also work with Saudi Arabia and others in the region to commit to normalizing relations with Israel, along the lines of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. Together, these steps create a pathway to lasting regional stability.

Moving forward will not be easy. It will place the United States on a collision course with any Israeli government opposed to a Palestinian state. It will face strong resistance from many here at home, including the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which has opposed any efforts to condition support for Israel. AIPAC's influence in Congress remains formidable even as Americans increasingly reject its positions and its use of super PACs to pour money into elections.

Democrats must stand firm against these headwinds. Primary voters won't trust any Democratic presidential candidate who does not have a record of moral and strategic clarity on these issues, especially if, as a legislator, he or she voted to send Mr. Netanyahu bombs even as his government imposed a total blockade on Gaza. Nor will they support a candidate who plans to re-enlist the senior Democratic decision makers who whitewashed the truth during the Biden administration and refuse to acknowledge their complicity.

Democrats failed to meet the moment in 2024. Americans were rightly fed up with Democratic hypocrisy and complicity in the gross violation of the values we profess to hold dear. That in turn hurt our credibility with voters. We cannot let that happen again.

LETTERS

The Cruelty of Family Separation

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Push to Deport Splits Over 100,000 Families" (news article, May 19):

We are pediatricians trained to identify trauma and violence affecting children.

As ICE apprehensions rise, each of us has witnessed the effects on the communities we live in and serve: families tearfully preparing for parental detainment, older siblings caring for children whose parents have been taken, and traumatized and terrified children struggling in school.

Recognizing that family separation is intentional and can be stopped is paramount to ensuring that our focus shifts to ending this harmful practice.

The Brookings Institution's estimate that more than 100,000 children — a majority of them U.S. citizens, according to the report — have been separated from their families horrifies us as pediatricians.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has long documented the harms of family separation, which include toxic stress that affects brain development and lifelong, systemic effects to mental and physical health, leaving children susceptible to chronic conditions like post-traumatic stress

disorder and heart disease.

The scale of this harm ripples through homes, schools and neighborhoods, creating an environment of fear that has lasting consequences for children.

As physicians, we are taught to first do no harm. The traumatic separation of any child from a loved one, let alone 100,000 children, without proper legal and medical considerations represents a profound failure of our nation's responsibility to protect the most vulnerable.

It is time to halt this harmful practice, which disregards due process and endangers the lives of children.

ANIK PATEL
JULIA ROSENBERG
SURAL SHAH

The writers are members of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Immigrant Child and Family Health executive committee.

TO THE EDITOR:

The Trump administration is far outpacing the cruelty of its "zero tolerance" policy from 2018, which resulted in the separation of some 3,000 children from their families, as it uses the same approach as a tool in its expanded enforcement actions. It is flouting deeply held values and safeguards that prioritize child welfare and family unity and has targeted children and their caregivers in enforcement actions.

The administration has weakened and disregarded protections that ensure that detained parents and legal guardians can make alternative care arrangements and decisions for their children if they are arrested, detained or removed. These detainees need access to legal counsel, since separation has important legal implications for families.

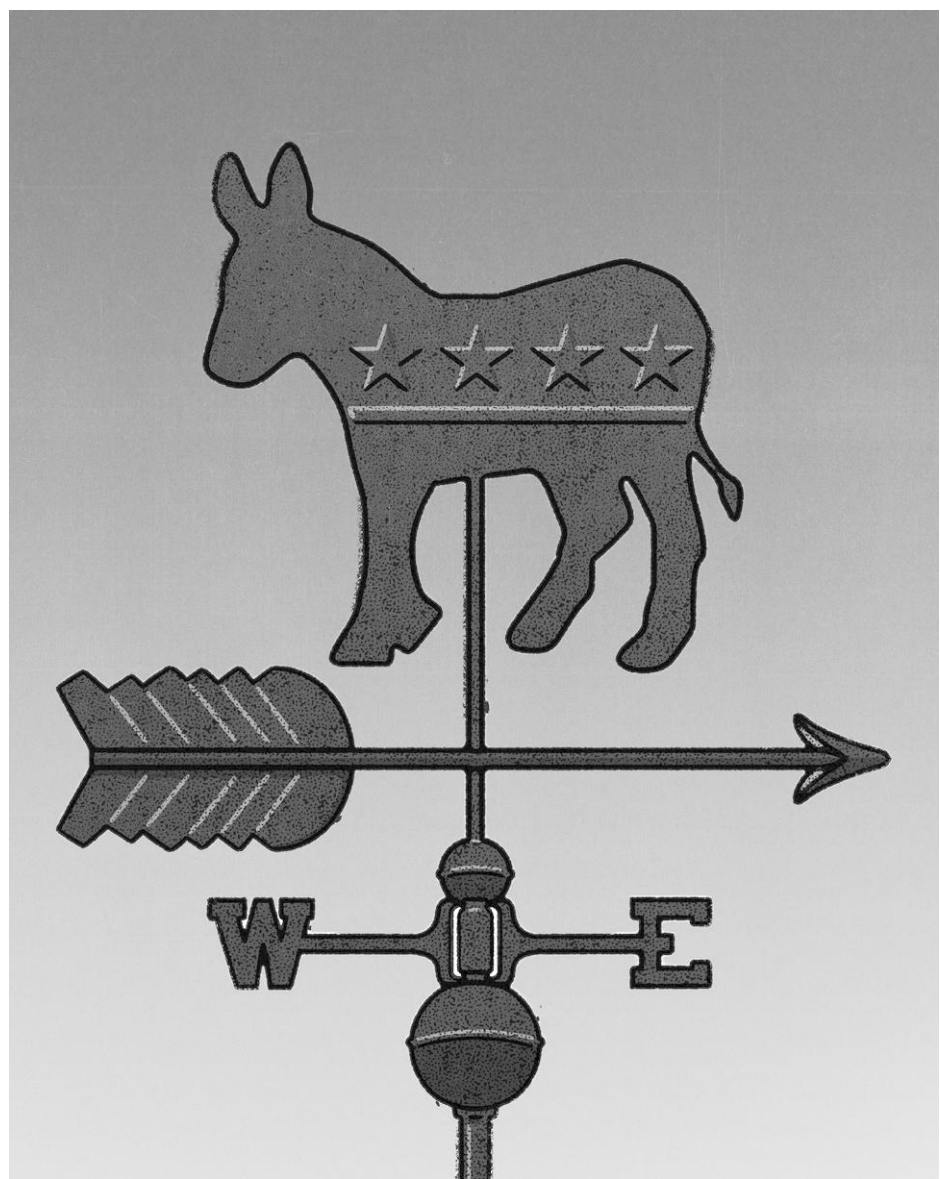
The administration must prioritize family unity and consider the critical role of primary caregivers when contemplating enforcement. It needs to uphold and strengthen policies that allow caregivers to ensure the safety of their children if they are separated from them.

The administration should take immediate steps to prevent unnecessary separations and restore limits on enforcement actions in or near immigration courts, asylum offices, schools, child care centers, health care facilities and other sensitive locations.

As in 2018, family separation is an outrage and cruel to its core.

WENDY YOUNG, WASHINGTON
The writer is the president of Kids in Need of Defense.

The Times welcomes letters from readers. Letters must include the writer's name, address and telephone number. Those selected may be edited, and shortened to fit allotted space. Email: letters@nytimes.com



ALBERTO MIRANDA

College Admissions Are Race-Blind. Jury Selection Is Not.

Avital Fried

A graduate of Yale Law School.

IN FEBRUARY 2006 a nearly all-white jury in Grenada, Miss., sentenced Terry Pitchford to death for his participation in a robbery that turned fatal. He and Eric Bullins, two Black teens, were robbing a store when Mr. Bullins shot and killed the owner. Mr. Bullins was 16, so Mississippi couldn't pursue the death penalty in his case, but it could for Mr. Pitchford, who was 18 at the time of the murder.

On Thursday the Supreme Court, in a 5-to-4 decision written by Justice Brett Kavanaugh, ruled that Mississippi's handling of jury selection in Mr. Pitchford's capital trial violated *Batson v. Kentucky*, the landmark case prohibiting racial discrimination against prospective jurors. The prosecutor had struck four Black prospective jurors, leaving a jury with only one Black juror in a county that was 40 percent Black.

All Americans benefit from the court's decision on Thursday. Every person has a constitutional right to be considered to serve on a jury — one of the highest civic duties, second only to voting — and people accused of a crime have the right to be tried by a jury representative of their peers.

The Supreme Court's ruling on Thursday takes an important step in upholding the existing protections against race discrimination in jury selection. And yet the decision highlights just how much work still needs to be done. Existing law still allows for the consideration of race in jury selection, which all too often leads to discrimination against prospective minority jurors, as it did in Mr. Pitchford's case.

The court recently ruled out the consideration of race in other contexts, like college admissions (as decided in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*) and voting rights (as decided in *Louisiana v. Callais*). The court has explained the shift toward a race-blind approach in those contexts as a way to reduce discrimination. To be sure, there are reasons to question this new approach in a racialized society like ours. But if that is the court's stance, it should be applied to jury selection, too, where the stakes can be much higher and the consideration of race can be even more clearly linked to discrimination.

Pitchford was the Supreme Court's first case to address race discrimination in jury selection since the court's 2023 *Harvard* decision, which ended affirmative action in college admissions. In that case the Supreme Court appeared to take a new approach to what qualifies as unconstitutional race discrimination, finding that the race-conscious college admissions processes used by Harvard and the University of North Carolina violated the 14th Amendment's guarantee of equal protection to all people, regardless of race.

Harvard and U.N.C. admitted to considering race as a factor in their admissions processes. They argued that race was used only as a plus for a given applicant — never a negative — in line with the Supreme Court's rulings in earlier affirmative action cases.

The court rejected that argument. If race was used as a plus for some applicants, the court reasoned, then it necessarily operated as a minus for other applicants. There is a finite number of spots at elite colleges like Harvard and U.N.C. Since college admissions is a zero-sum process, if one applicant

is given a boost into the admit pile because of race, every applicant left behind is worse off.

After the court's decision, universities had to stop considering the information obtained from check boxes where applicants could indicate their race. The effective elimination of these check boxes suggests that universities understood the decision to ban the consideration of race altogether — no matter how minor.

If this is the court's standard, then race discrimination runs rampant in jury selection. The equivalents of check boxes not only persist, but judges have even signed off on their usage. In 2023, after the court's decision in the *Harvard* case, a district court in Texas held that a prosecutor's list of jurors was perfectly fine, since the markings supposedly helped the prosecutors keep track of the potential jurors. These lists suggest that the prosecutors were purposefully tracking race when deciding whom to seat and whom to strike.

The Supreme Court's standard for race discrimination in jury selection — unlike in college admissions — allows for some consideration of race, as long as that consideration is not "motivated in substantial part" by discriminatory intent.

In the Pitchford case, the trial judge went even further, implicitly allowing lawyers to consider race as the basis for a strike, as long as the prosecutor could name at least one race-neutral reason. In the original trial, the defense lawyer objected when the prosecutor struck four prospective Black jurors. The prosecutor then provided race-neutral reasons for each strike, such as returning late to court from lunch. Without providing

By the Supreme Court's own standards, discrimination is rampant in trials.

the defense an opportunity to meaningfully respond, the judge found the reasons to be race-neutral and removed the prospective jurors.

This would be akin to allowing Harvard admissions officers to consider an applicant's race as long as they could identify one non-race-related reason for rejecting the applicant.

The court's decision on Thursday took a step in the right direction, upholding the current jury selection standard. But more needs to be done to align discrimination protections in this area with those in college admissions — both governed by the constitutional promise of equal protection under the law. The court has read that promise to protect high schoolers applying to elite colleges, and the very same promise serves as the bedrock of criminal trial rights.

No one has a right to be admitted to Harvard, just as no one has a right to be seated on a jury. Still, every person has a right not to be denied a spot at Harvard or a seat on a jury because of his or her race.

If anything, the stakes are higher in a criminal trial than in college admissions. Discrimination in jury selection undermines people's right to a fair trial when their life or liberty is on the line. Surely, high schoolers applying to elite universities should not get more protection than those facing the deprivation of life or liberty.

Mr. Pitchford's legal saga began when he was the same age as students around the country applying to college. Furthermore, racially biased strikes prevent members of the public from participating in an important civic duty. Just as the right to vote is carefully guarded, the right to be considered to serve on a jury is worthy of extra protection.

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

A bumpy road to electric vehicle success

Ferrari Luce's launch caused more heat than light but has lessons for incumbents

The unveiling this week of the all-electric Ferrari Luce has incensed the sports-car maker's many fans, but then the Italian group's innovations invariably do. On Reddit, haters reposted an image of the Luce linked to a charger powered by the rotation of founder Enzo Ferrari's coffin.

Among FT readers' kinder comments were comparisons between the €550,000 vehicle and a plastic soap dish, "the world's most expensive WiFi router" and, crushingly, Teslas (which sell at a fraction of the price). Former Ferrari chief executive Luca di Montezemolo told reporters he risked hurting the company if he said what he really thought. He then slid a stiletto between the ribs of his ex-employer by voicing his hope that the company would strip

its prancing horse badge — the *cavallino* — from the car and added: "At least it's a car the Chinese won't copy."

This is a thankless moment for any established carmaker to launch a new vehicle. EV technology and AI are changing engineers' century-old certainties about what works. In smart "software-defined vehicles", the hardware sometimes seems to take second place to the algorithm.

Customer tastes are changing, too. Younger users are often oblivious to make and model, if they drive a car at all. Regulatory uncertainty prevails, with the big markets of the US, Europe and China out of sync on whether they want to encourage or discourage EVs. Multiple new Chinese rivals are chasing market share at home and abroad. Bosses of established marques must feel like a smug supercar driver cruising in the fast lane, suddenly undertaken on the inside by a cheap hatchback.

Ferrari, to its credit, has gone all in to offset these forces. The company pre-

pared and promoted the launch meticulously. It brought in the world's best-known industrial designer Sir Jony Ive, formerly of Apple, and partner Marc Newson to create the look and feel of the car. It anticipated the design would be "polarising" and pitched the Luce, its first five-seater, deliberately to new customers, not just Ferrari cognoscenti. Unlike Jaguar Land Rover, which drew intense fire with its relaunch of Jaguar as an all-electric marque in 2024, Ferrari is ready to sell the new vehicle and is booking orders.

The Italian carmaker does not really have to worry about the angry buzz of social media or even a temporary downshift in its share price. Ferrari is highly profitable and runs a carefully calibrated scarcity model, never producing more vehicles than it can sell. The Ive halo effect may already have secured Luce sales in Silicon Valley or the EV-centric Chinese market.

The rise of electric engines is a particular provocation to petrolheads. But

The Italian carmaker does not really have to worry about the angry buzz of social media or even a temporary downshift in its share price

speaking after the Luce's launch, Ferrari chief executive Benedetto Vigna reminded grumpy fans that the group is committed to producing its petrol-powered bestsellers. One of those, the Purosangue, also attracted harsh criticism from armchair experts at its launch in 2022. It is now a mainstay of the range. Those who have driven the Luce extol its handling and performance. "Vedetelo e provatelo" — see it and try it — urges Enzo's son and Ferrari vice chair Piero in one launch video.

Ferrari long ago moved on from its founder's dictum that "aerodynamics are for people who can't build engines", to stay ahead of competitors and cater to shifting tastes. In the same way, the *cavallino* has to prance down the EV path, if only to neutralise regulatory risk. There are lessons here for mass-market incumbents. To stay in the race, they too must take some risks and shed some of their traditional approaches. But given their thinner margins, the road to survival is far more tortuous.

Opinion Data Points

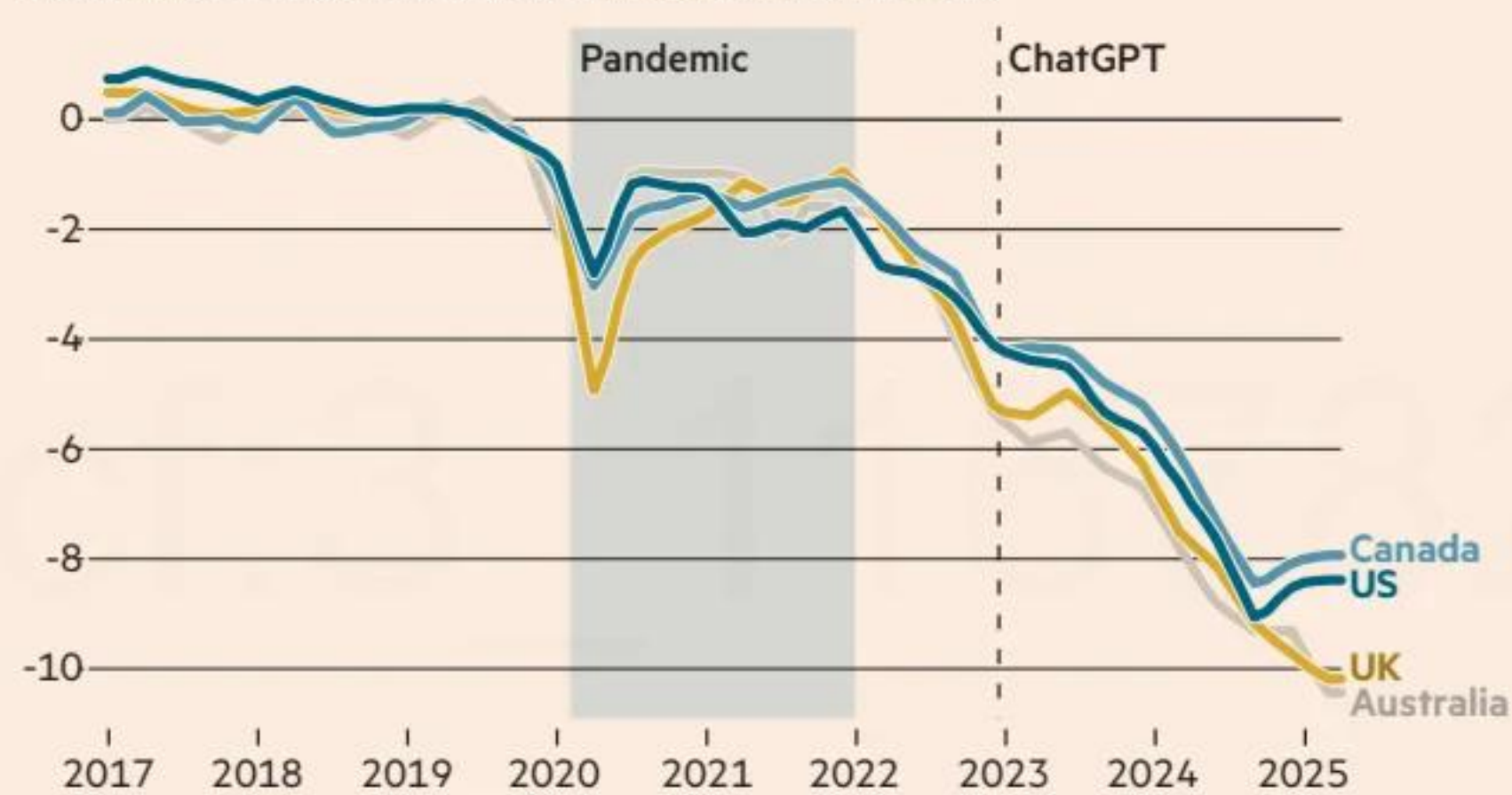
What if remote work, not AI, is to blame for weak hiring?

John Burn-Murdoch



The entry-level share of hires began declining as remote work took off, and was falling steeply before AI arrived

Junior share of new hires (%-point change from 2019)



Source: The Broken Ladder: AI, Remote Work, and Early-Career Hiring (Lambert and Schindler, 2026)

Graduates and other new entrants to the world of work have had a rough few years. A cool labour market for everyone has been icy for the youngest, with hiring of junior workers lagging the more experienced across a wide range of countries.

The early-career hiring pullback has been especially pronounced in white-collar work — software and other tech roles foremost among them — leading observers to point to an obvious culprit: the rise of AI tools that can perform much of the work typically done by juniors, but are less able to replace the accumulated knowledge and experience of seasoned professionals.

But a paper published last week suggests the particular woes of young would-be knowledge workers may not be due to AI, or at least not as much as assumed. What other large recent shock could tick the same boxes — hurting junior hiring more than senior, affecting knowledge work roles more than blue-collar jobs and hitting young coders especially hard? The authors Peter John Lambert and Yannick Schindler have a fascinating counter-proposal: the take-off of remote work.

The theory is persuasive. Early-career workers require more supervision than experienced hires, and build important skills, knowledge and social capital by observing and working alongside senior colleagues. Working from home adds friction to these processes, making entry-level workers more costly to bring on board in terms of time and resources and slowing their prospects for promotion. As such, the rise of remote work has worsened the trade-off for hiring entry-level workers, while leaving the calculus for senior hires unchanged.

The evidence fits the theory. Lambert and Schindler analysed hundreds of millions of new hires and job postings and found that although both occupational exposure to AI and remote working rates line up with the outsized pullback in junior hiring, the link with AI evaporates once you account for whether a role is remote. In other words, it only looks like AI is behind the hiring crunch for junior software developers because coding jobs are also disproportionately done remotely. Jobs less exposed to AI but amenable to remote work (eg lawyers) have also seen weak junior hiring;

roles with high AI exposure but an emphasis on in-person work (eg receptionists) have held up better.

None of this rules out AI as a threat to younger workers — remote work may even be a risk factor for AI displacement, since managers who mainly interact with reports over Slack may view their work as more automatable. The process may also be indirect: companies struggling to train and manage remote juniors may set a higher bar when hiring for these roles, with unfilled posts compounding into the trend we see in the data.

But whatever the mechanism, Lambert and Schindler's results are the latest evidence that for all the attention paid to the impact of AI, the take-off of remote work has been a hugely consequential and often under-discussed shift, with significant and unexpected impacts on the economy and society.

Many of these have been pleasant surprises. One study earlier this year found that US fathers in remote-friendly occupations used the extra time at home to take on more childcare, and their wives' earnings and employment rate rose. Another found remote work boosts birth rates.

Nobody would argue these are shifts we should reverse, but the new data underscores a recurring result from remote work research — that what benefits mid- or late-career workers can harm the youngest.

They also help explain an under-appreciated nuance to the story: contrary to the stereotype of boomers demanding that Gen Z return to the office, it is the youngest generation who is most opposed to fully remote roles and keen for their colleagues to spend more time in the office.

The rise of working from home has been a boon for thirtysomethings (such as myself) who are safely on the career conveyor belt and often juggling work with parenting. But it has hit the youngest workers twice: slowing their climb up the career ladder and now perhaps keeping some out of the labour market entirely. Demands for a return to five days in the office are a step too far — the evidence consistently shows hybrid arrangements get the best results — but next time you hear calls for an extra day in person, bear in mind the biggest beneficiaries won't be the bosses, they'll be the juniors.

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Letters

Here's a question Keynes anticipated almost a century ago

In "The new Luddite movement" (Opinion, FT.com, FT Weekend, May 23), Camilla Cavendish suggests that if politicians wish to reassure citizens who are fearful of AI, they should ban civilian autonomous vehicles — because so many people drive for a living.

The consequences of eliminating those jobs should not be viewed lightly. We should instead consider what we would really be doing if we banned self-driving vehicles to protect people's incomes. If a taxi cannot drive itself then the driver performs labour that is truly necessary to meet a demand. The

job in that case is a real one. But imagine it was decided that humans must continue to drive autonomous taxis though the taxis are perfectly capable of driving themselves. Such a policy would only protect the wage. It would not preserve the real job because the necessary human labour of driving would have ceased to exist.

And what a poor use of human time it would be: to spend 40 or more hours each week operating a machine that has no need to be operated.

This principle is universal. For thousands of years we hauled water from rivers, lakes and wells into our

homes until modern plumbing removed the need for such toil. No serious person would today argue that we should return to carrying water in order to create employment and provide a sense of purpose. Restricting AI would be no different — it would leave us performing fake jobs rather than doing real ones.

John Maynard Keynes saw all this coming almost a century ago. In his 1930 essay "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren", he imagined a world in which people no longer need to work. He concluded that the greatest challenge would not be economic but

psychological. We had been, he argued, "trained too long to strive and not to enjoy" such that "for many ages to come the old Adam will be so strong in us that everybody will need to do some work if he is to be contented".

AI presents us with a profound yet simple question — can we be happy and fulfilled if we no longer need to work? It's a question we must face openly and honestly. We cannot answer it by pretending that obsolete labour remains necessary, nor by suppressing humanity's progress.

Patrick Neill
Kilkenny City, County Kilkenny, Ireland

Kindleberger theory applies to more than one hegemon

In "Never mind the petrodollar" (The Weekend Essay, Life & Arts, April 25) Brendan Greeley rightly commended the Federal Reserve for providing an unprecedented injection of \$554bn of liquidity into the global monetary system at the height of the 2008 financial crisis. By encouraging lending such action prevented the Great Recession from morphing into a Great Depression.

This act of providing a global public good is in line with the recommendation of the eminent American economist Charles P Kindleberger.

In his 1978 seminal work *Manias, Panics, and Crashes*, he developed the "hegemonic stability theory" which argues that in financial crises a hegemonic power should provide liquidity to central banks through acting as a lender of last resort.

In dealing with the 2008 crisis, however, one should also acknowledge the vital role of China's massive stimulus package of \$586bn, equivalent to 12.5 per cent of the country's GDP at the time. This form of fiscal policy is credited with increasing Chinese imports and lifting global aggregate demand.

In today's world, both the US and China increasingly maintain swap lines with foreign central banks. There is, however, a major difference between the two cases. In the American case the swap lines are offered, as Greeley notes to a "few trusted central banks". In contrast, Chinese swap lines are mostly provided to friendly developing nations, generally deemed risky by rating agencies. These are typically countries who are facing severe liquidity shortages such as struggling to repay an international debt.

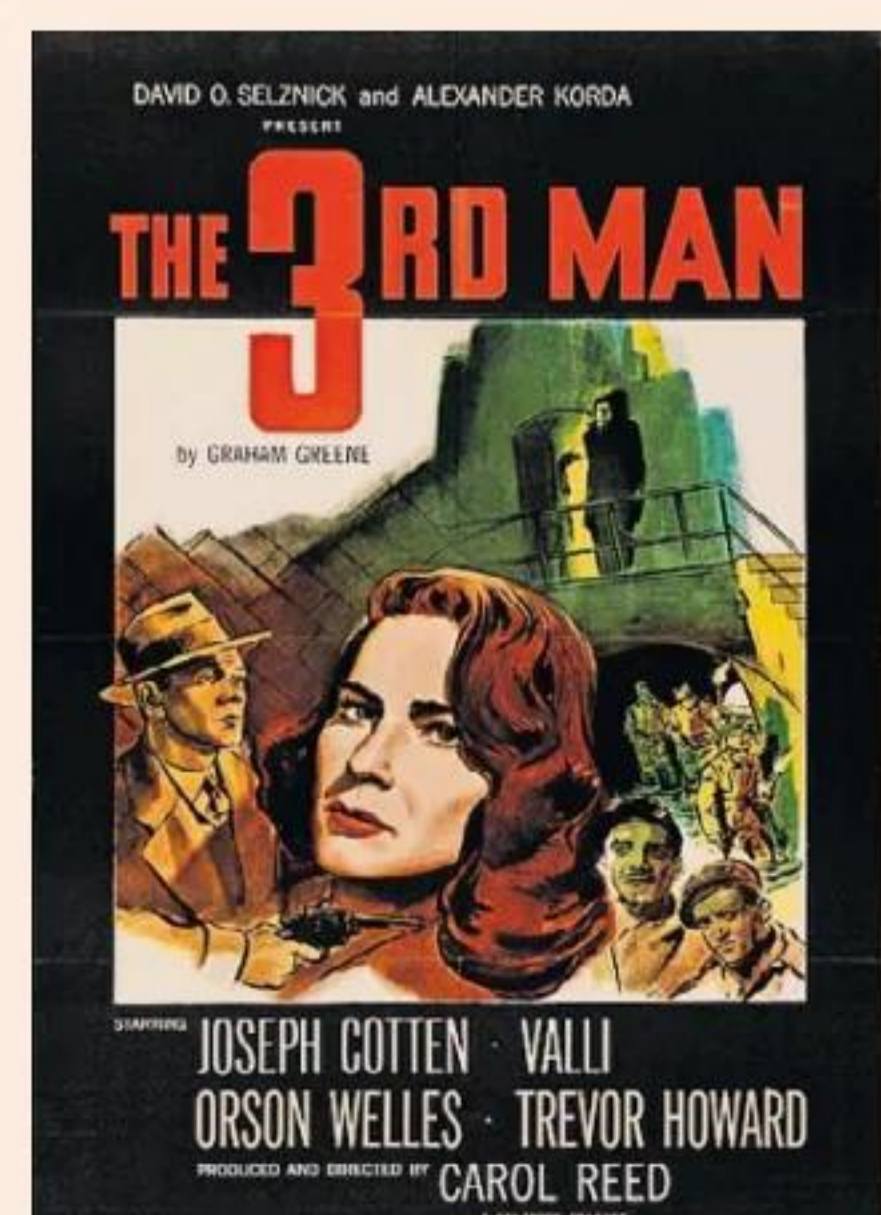
The above discussion shows that in times of crisis, each great power helps in its own way.

The 2008 crisis in particular has proved that Chinese fiscal policy complemented American monetary policy, thus ensuring the revival of the world economy.

In this regard, it is interesting to note the outside role played by Scott Bessent, the US Treasury secretary, in the preparations for this month's summit between Xi Jinping and Donald Trump in Beijing, which allowed him to establish good working relations with vice-premier He Lifeng, China's top economy official.

This should bode well for co-operation between the stewards of the two largest economies in the event of future financial crises.

Khairiy Tourk
Professor Emeritus of Economics,
Stuart School of Business,
Illinois Institute of Technology,
Chicago, IL, US



Carol Reed's 'The Third Man' won an Oscar for Best Cinematography

'The Third Man' is bleak film noir, not a spy movie

As a steadfast fan of *The Third Man* — in my book one of the finest films of the last century — I take issue with Quentin Peel's description of Graham Greene's screenplay as "possibly the best spy film ever made" ("What makes a traitor?", Books, Life & Arts, May 23).

In his review of three books on the Cambridge Five, including one on the complicated friendship between Kim Philby and Greene, Peel suggests that while possibly disappointed in Philby, Greene stayed true to his friend because friendship for him was more important than devotion to country.

The Third Man is about many things, but most importantly it is about concealing one's true self, even to one's most devoted of friends, and abandoning shared moral principles by seeking riches at the expense of the weakest in society.

A story of deceit and cynicism, *The Third Man* is a bleak film noir, postwar classic. An espionage film it is not.

Ellen I. Goldstein
Washington, DC, US

Strange Tudor echoes in a New York club's ante room

In "Trailblazing Tudors", Breeze Barrington reviews Nandini Das's book *This Little World* and comments on her observation that Tudor and Stuart England distinguished between the terms "foreigner" and "stranger" (Books, Life & Arts, May 23).

Amusingly, the esteemed Century Club in New York City has a waiting room off the entrance named the "Strangers Room" to this day.

As a non-member, I've been consigned there numerous times, awaiting the arrival of my generous and genial hosts.
Gaffney J Fesko
Woodbury, CT, US

Spare a thought for musicians who fly

I was full of empathy for Jo Ellison's air travel experiences ("Air travel sucks — now more than ever", Opinion, Life & Arts, May 23).

But please spare a thought for the poor professional musicians who have to fly with their instruments, as life can get really complicated and very expensive. Airlines don't like violins. Odd shape. Take up unnecessary room. And, in their opinion, they are best placed in the hold. I think we all have some idea how baggage handlers would treat a priceless violin.

Recently, I had a serious argument travelling with Ryanair when I wanted to take my violin on board. It's a very good instrument, worth more than I care to say and it's housed in an excellent case made specifically for economic travel by Bam. After personally volunteering to be put in the hold rather than the violin, they sort of saw the point and instead charged me an additional €70 for the flight! That's a lot of money to charge, on what is meant to be economy airline.

My colleague the violinist, Carolin Widman, had an even worse experience on Lufthansa/Austrian Airlines where they refused to allow her on board with the instrument in its case. So she was forced to check in the case and carry the violin (a priceless Giodagnini) wrapped in swaddling clothes, and held lovingly, but with some anxiety, on her lap for the entire trip. Her open letter of complaint did get the chief executive's attention and the airline has since changed policy, but many others have not.

Such attitudes just make air travel even more uncomfortable and threatening when the source of your livelihood is thought worthy only to travel in the luggage hold.

Tony Woodcock
Valencia, Spain

Bananas, unlike bonds, make good distressed assets

As someone with only a modest grasp of bond markets, I appreciated Katie Martin's banana analogy ("Bond slump stirs vigilante fears as inflation takes root", The Long View, May 23).

Mind you, if my local greengrocer were offering a particularly good price on blackened bananas, I would be inclined to buy a few for banana bread, with one or two leaves frozen to enjoy later. Which perhaps suggests that even distressed assets may still find willing buyers once prices fall sufficiently far.

Quite where the comparison ceases to hold in sovereign debt markets, I am less certain. Though perhaps that is the point.

Calum Mackay
London NI, UK

The Savoy takeover battle

A lot is being written about "super-voting" shares in advance of the SpaceX IPO ("SpaceX IPO shoots for stars and puts Musk on course to be first trillionaire", Report, May 22).

The first contested takeover bids occurred in the 1950s when Sir Charles Clore went against the established conventions of "gentleman's agreements" between companies.

However his hostile takeover bid for the Savoy Hotel was thwarted by its chairman Sir Hugh Wontner, whose defence included issuing "A" shares and "B" shares. His family trusts held the majority of these super-voting "B" shares. They were also issued to Savoy employees making chamber maids equity investors long before the "cult of equity" took hold more broadly.

This share structure enabled the Savoy to remain independent, keeping Trusthouse Forte at bay in the 1990s. In 1993 I did well buying the "B" shares for myself and my clients as they were undervalued in relation to the "A" shares. Not going to the Moon, let alone Mars. We took our profits back in 1994.

Paul Fellerman
London NW7, UK

Required reading for nervous Bitcoin owners

You report that the crypto industry is worried about quantum computers breaking its encryption (Report, May 23).

Peter Gutmann, professor of computer science at the University of Auckland, is famously sceptical. His recent paper "Replication of Quantum Factorisation Records with an 8-bit Home Computer, an Abacus, and a Dog" should be required reading for nervous Bitcoin owners — unless they are frightened of dogs.

Martyn Thomas
Tunbridge Wells, Kent, UK

Praise for Odey coverage, but did we need this detail?

I am seriously impressed by the courage of your journalists and the FT's leadership on this Crispin Odey story, as well as the role of your lawyers (Spectrum, May 16). However why was it felt necessary to include a description of the jacket worn by a female barrister as being "cinched in at the waist"? It may have had a significance that I did not understand but, as a former barrister, it felt like an unnecessary detail that echoed the types of comments about the attire of female employees that Odey is alleged to have made. That query aside, I am deeply grateful that this extraordinary story was published by the FT.

Michelle Pratley
Edinburgh, UK

Opinion

Why Iran fears a deal today means more war tomorrow

Vali Nasr

President Donald Trump hopes a deal will soon end the war with Iran and open the Strait of Hormuz. But a growing chorus of US politicians and pundits have denounced any agreement that gives Iran billions while leaving it in control of the strait and a nuclear programme.

Iran, meanwhile, is in no hurry to jump at the offer. American officials blame Tehran's obduracy on its fractured leadership. But if there is division in Tehran, it is over the wisdom of trusting the US government. After all, Iran has had a sordid experience of dealmaking with Trump, who scuttled the 2015 nuclear deal and has twice launched strikes against Iran during negotiations. Iran is driving a hard bargain because

this is an existential fight. What it seeks above all else is the guarantee that war will not return. That assurance will have to be embedded in the structure of any deal. The agreement now on the table — a short-term ceasefire to set the stage for a larger deal later — does not provide it.

The dominant view shared across the political spectrum in Tehran is that, given Trump's record, the promise of diplomacy could actually raise the threat of war. Washington's seemingly generous concessions are interpreted as too good to be true. Their aim is to lull Iran into lowering its guard as America prepares to finish the job.

Talk of US strategic defeat in Washington — which is widely discussed in Tehran — has not helped. Analysts in Iran have interpreted such commentary as a clarion call for more war. In their view, the US will not tolerate defeat, and the more that prominent Americans highlight Trump's failings, the more likely it is that the US will seek to reverse the outcome of this war by waging another. Tehran suspects that the US

seeks not a lasting peace but a free hand to keep Iran isolated and weak, checking its nuclear and missile activities by periodically "mowing the lawn". Faced with such a prospect, deterrence is all that matters. And Iran is seeking it on three fronts: Hormuz, the nuclear file and by making America pay a price.

Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and its allies believe the heavy cost of war is the only true deterrent to another attack. The war has so far cost the US \$29bn and 13 American lives. Even greater has been the cost to the global economy. Trump has so far dismissed this, saying "short-term pain" is "OK" if it means denying Iran nuclear weapons. As the Guards see it, changing Trump's calculus by inflicting more pain on the US and the world economy is the only way to ensure the US president is ready for serious talks.

Not everyone in Tehran subscribes to this aggressive approach. Iran itself is paying a heavy price. Other Iranian leaders talk of control of the Strait of Hormuz and maintaining Iran's stock-

pile of highly enriched uranium as the key to deterrence instead. They believe any durable deal that includes economic compensation for war damage and lasting sanctions relief would hinge on these two issues; the US is demanding that Iran concede on both. This makes a lasting deal highly unlikely.

Tehran might agree to open the strait,

Washington's seemingly generous concessions are interpreted as too good to be true

but it will not relinquish control of it. Iran is now convinced that its ability to shut down this chokepoint is a major deterrent, especially if Yemen's Houthis join Iran in a future conflict and also squeeze trade through the Red Sea. In addition, control of the strait would let Iran collect fees on commercial maritime traffic. The revenue will be wel-

come economic relief, but also compel countries around the world to challenge US secondary sanctions by paying Iran tolls. If that happens often enough, it will weaken the sanctions regime.

Iran no longer sees a nuclear deal with the US as a solution to its economic and security problems. It thinks America is unlikely to lift sanctions and that, once Iran has done its part, Trump could again abandon it. Nor would a nuclear deal reduce the likelihood of war. In fact, the emerging consensus in Tehran is that a new nuclear deal aims to give Washington a freer hand to isolate Iran and attack it militarily. Giving the US what it could not get through two wars will not make Iran safer, but more vulnerable. A narrative promoted by the Guards holds that the US only agreed to a ceasefire and talks after it failed to snatch Iran's highly enriched uranium under cover of rescuing a missing pilot.

The more the US insists on Iran giving up enrichment and handing over its stockpile, the more Tehran becomes convinced that America's aim is to

remove Iran's deterrence through diplomacy so it can go back to war against a weaker adversary. Iran might agree to suspend enrichment for a period, but its leaders are adamant that concessions must be reversible. By keeping control over its enriched uranium stockpile, albeit diluted, Iran would be able to resume enrichment and thus be only weeks away from nuclear breakout. Only by building that option into the deal, Iranian officials argue, can it dissuade the US from returning to war.

The US and Iran may agree to end this round of fighting. That would be welcome news for the world economy, but we should not be distracted by any short-term gains or Trump's inevitable claims of victory and the dawn of a new era in the Middle East. A larger, lasting deal to address the future of Hormuz and Iran's nuclear programme will be far more difficult to attain.

The writer is a professor at Johns Hopkins University and author of 'Iran's Grand Strategy'

Removal of the oil major's chair coincides with an attempted turnaround, write Verity Ratcliffe and Jamie Smyth

When BP went looking for a new chief executive last year, the British oil company did something it almost never does — it hired an outsider.

Meg O'Neill, the no-nonsense chief executive of Australia's Woodside Energy, was handpicked by BP chair Albert Manifold to right the company after its disastrous pivot to green energy. As the first woman to lead a top-five oil major, she stood out among her peers.

Investors hoped she and Manifold would return BP to its roots as a hydrocarbons company. This week, however, Manifold's time as chair came to an abrupt end after the board, including O'Neill, voted to fire him. Manifold faces allegations of aggressive behaviour towards colleagues that some claim amounted to "bullying". He has characterised claims against him as "lies".

The chair's sudden departure leaves O'Neill in the driving seat at a particularly turbulent time. BP has lost two chief executives and two chairs in three years and this latest round of corporate bloodletting coincides with what the International Energy Agency says is the worst energy crisis in history.

Yet those close to her say O'Neill is well qualified for the task, with a management style very different to the allegations around Manifold. "She does not have a tolerance for bullying," says Ann Pickard, who serves on Woodside's board.

When asked whether Manifold had ever acted aggressively towards O'Neill, one person with knowledge of the situation laughed and said: "Even if he did, I'm sure she could handle him."

O'Neill, who is almost universally referred to by her first name, is described as calm, unfussy and pragmatic. "She's an introvert, she thinks and then speaks," says Pickard, who remembers questioning whether this would make O'Neill a suitable candidate for Woodside CEO. She was reassured after reading a study that suggested introverted leaders were often more successful.

Those who know O'Neill tend to point to her "toughness" and hard-nosed approach. She is, they say, direct and seems to dislike small talk. Within weeks of taking the top job at BP, she had rearranged its structure into an oil and gas business reminiscent of its pre-renewable energy shift.

Born in Boulder, Colorado, in 1970, O'Neill earned bachelor's degrees in chemical engineering and ocean engineering and a master's in ocean systems management from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. According to her new colleagues at BP, she tends to be most animated when talking about technical and operational work, frequently asking, "What have you learned?" during conversations.

She also bears the hallmarks of an ExxonMobil alumnus, having spent the first 23 years of her career with the US oil major, including as an adviser to former CEO Rex Tillerson before he left to become US secretary of state.

"She's a product of the Exxon machine



CUMMINGS

Person in the News | Meg O'Neill

The no-nonsense CEO leading BP out of crisis

and they groom good people," says one veteran oil executive who worked with her. "She is calm, considered, humble and it's all about the team."

O'Neill, who lives with her wife, Vicky Hayes, with whom she shares a daughter, excelled at Exxon. But life as a gay woman living in Texas was not without its challenges. "I know it's one of the reasons she came to Woodside... she wanted to be out," said Pickard.

Peter Coleman, the former Woodside chief executive who persuaded O'Neill to leave Exxon in 2018 and join the Australian company, said she was also unusual in the CEO world because she didn't seek the trimmings of office. On her first day as interim CEO she unlocked the permissions on the lifts so that all employees could access the executive suite on the top floor of the headquarters. "In many ways she is a joy for a chair to work with because you are not worried that your CEO is engaged in corporate politics," he says.

"Meg is a good person to deal with:

honest, calm, a very good listener and straightforward. There's no nonsense and you know you're dealing with a trustworthy counterparty," says Martin Houston, who as executive chair of Tellurian was involved in the sale of the LNG company to Woodside in 2024.

Throughout her career O'Neill has

'She's a product of the Exxon machine and they groom good people. She is calm, considered, humble'

been unapologetic about her support of investment in oil and gas, doing little to provide any strategy for an energy transition away from fossil fuels while at Woodside and calling some young activists "zealous". While her approach has angered climate groups, it has garnered praise from the industry.

Bayo Ogunlesi, chair of Global Infra-

structure Partners, calls her a "standout leader", saying she combines "intense focus on operational excellence with clear strategic thinking".

In its statement announcing the sacking of Manifold, BP said it was "very impressed" with O'Neill. But the company now faces intense pressure from battle-weary shareholders who want to see it capitalise on higher oil prices resulting from the Iran war. And O'Neill will be judged on whether BP meets ambitious targets to bring down its debt.

"She made massive changes at Woodside without so much as a hint of scandal," says Saul Kavonic, an analyst with MST Marquee who covered the company during O'Neill's tenure. "I can't think of a better oil and gas executive to sort out BP's mess. Maybe BP is unfixable but if anyone can do it, it's her."

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Additional reporting by Malcolm Moore and Arash Massoudi

Don't bet Trump will rein in prediction markets

FINANCE

Gillian Tett



Five centuries ago, Pope Gregory XIV waged war on prediction markets. The reason? Back then merchants and priests were betting on papal elections, sparking tales of insider trading. So in 1591 the Pope excommunicated these gamblers. You could see this as one of the first attacks on market manipulation in history.

Should US President Donald Trump — a man who last year presented an AI-generated image of himself as pope — do the same with prediction markets today? Yes, to some degree. But sadly it seems unlikely to happen.

This matters. The prediction market sector is now exploding at stunning speed following a partial rollback of previous controls in the US. Betting volumes are expected to quadruple this year and hit \$1tn by 2030, according to Bernstein. Meanwhile Kalshi and Polymarket, the two leading platforms, are valued at \$22bn and \$9bn respectively.

Sports betting dominates. But punters can now gamble on numerous other issues, such as whether Trump will run for a third term, invade Cuba, or confirm that aliens really do exist. (If you're curious, the implied probabilities are 25, 23 and 16 per cent.) Nearly a third of Gen Z and a quarter of millennials have participated or are considering doing so, according to Northwestern Mutual, comparable to crypto.

Free marketeers argue this is merely a new form of risk-taking, like equity investing, and maintain that being free to trade is a basic human liberty. They have a point. They also say that predictions have social utility because they "do a very, very good job at distilling information and surfacing truth", as Tarek Mansour, chief executive of Kalshi, says.

This is also sometimes true: FT analysis shows that since 2023, prediction markets have slightly outperformed other markets in forecasting Federal Reserve rate moves. They also beat pollsters in the 2024 election race.

However, these virtues coexist with big sins. Finance leaders complain that these platforms create "financial exploitation" and some politicians fear they encourage a speculative mindset (and addiction) among users.

Congress is also rightly worried about widespread insider trading, because liquidity and transparency are sometimes poor. Just last month, a US soldier was charged with using insider information to make a profit of more than \$400,000 on bets linked to the Iran war. This is undoubtedly just the tip of a sordid iceberg.

A third problem, notes Gary Gensler, former head of the Securities and Exchange Commission, is that the "underlying" event for these contracts

is sometimes so ambiguous it can be manipulated. For instance, there are tales of people trying to shape media reports around the Ukraine war after placing bets about the frontline.

Then there are more philosophical criticisms. A new book by Carisa Véliz, an Oxford professor, questions whether prediction markets really have economic utility, given that they neither allocate capital (like equity markets) nor create risk sharing (like insurance).

Worse still, Véliz says, the markets can reinforce echo chambers and create self-fulfilling prophecies. Or, to cite the financial sociologist Donald MacKenzie, the key point about predictive models is they are not mere "cameras" that offer independent snapshots of our world; they are also "engines", because forecasts can shape outcomes too.

So will Trump act to curb such risks? Don't bet on it. (Ironically, this is one gamble *not* offered on Kalshi or Polymarket right now.)

Last month Trump admitted he was "never much in favour" of the sector, since "the whole world unfortunately has become somewhat of a casino." Quite so. But his son, Donald Trump Jr, is an adviser to Kalshi and major investor in Polymarket. Howard Lutnick, commerce secretary, is entangled too.

So — entirely predictably — this week Trump loudly backed the industry and attacked as "scum" state politicians who have tried to impose some sensible regulations. The White House now wants the Commodity Futures Trading Com-

The sector is exploding at stunning speed following a partial rollback of previous controls in the US

mission to wield "exclusive" control.

The idea is not mad; cyber space transcends state borders. But the CFTC seems very unlikely to provide tough oversight, since it is so short of resources. And Trump's demand contradicts prior Congressional rulings, Gensler says. It thus looks like self-dealing — creating a further cloud around the sector.

Don't get me wrong. In noting these issues I am not arguing against prediction markets per se; I personally believe people should be free to place bets, as long as there are very tight curbs on insider trading, clear warnings to retail investors and ethical limits. Gambling on the Super Bowl seems fine; betting on a possible assassination is not.

But my key point is this: if Trump dictates how prediction markets develop, while his family profits, it will make Washington look (even more) like a corrupt casino. So, too, if insider trading goes unchecked.

Let us hope then that Congress now exercises some proper oversight. Maybe we need another papal edict against unethical bets.

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