

A Cold War-era Seychelles mission



VAPPALA BALACHANDRAN

IN APRIL 1986, Seychelles President France-Albert Rene made a special request to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi during his visit to New Delhi: Depute a small team of Indian security officials to discreetly assess the existing security and police systems in his country.

This arose because of his doubts about his own security setup and since the entire Indian Ocean Islands were caught in the whirlpool of Cold War polemics. Consequently, this writer was chosen to lead a two-member team in 1987. The other member was a senior Intelligence Bureau (IB) official.

Rene, a “leftist,” had ousted James Mancham, the first “right-wing” president, from power in 1977, one year after the country’s independence. Since then, Mancham was openly in cohorts with the Western and South African intelligence agencies to return to power through counter coup or elections.

Although Rene personally knew many foreign leaders like French President Francois Mitterrand or Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, there were reasons why he turned to India to do this sensitive work. He did not want to be caught in the Cold War crossfire. Also, France, which had guided Seychelles’ security for long, had turned against it for geopolitical reasons, forcing Rene to Free Telegram Channel https://t.me/+2RvD_RGf9mJmZg1

temporarily turn to Tanzania and the Soviet Union to save his government.

Further, the May 13, 1978, coup in the Comoros orchestrated by a French mercenary named Bob Denard had successfully overthrown the leftist President Ali Soilih and had brought back former president Ahmed Abdallah, who was ousted in 1975. Ahmed Abdallah had then promptly restored his close ties with France and other Western countries.

Meanwhile, Mancham, on May 24, 1983, told *The Observer* in London that he had accepted GBP 12,000 from MI-6 for his campaign. He admitted he had signed two agreements with the CIA, well before the Seychelles got independence in 1976, through which the agency would set up an intelligence system to monitor his opponents and create a para-military unit in the Seychelles. The other agreement was to subsidise his weekly *Seychelles News* through the US embassy in Nairobi.

More light was thrown on Rene’s predicament by a CIA assessment document (“The Mellowing of President Rene”, October 1983), declassified only in 2008: In April 1979, he had to hurriedly request the Soviet Union to send warships to show support during a suspected coup in the Seychelles. In November that year, the Soviet Union was again asked to send warships against a suspected French plot to oust him. During that period, Rene even arrested a French police adviser then working with him and deported him to France. *The New York Times* (December 23, 1979) identified him as Jacques Chevalereau.

The CIA paper also said that Rene detained a French military crew working in a Seychellois patrol boat “Topaz”. The paper

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said Rene’s suspicions against the French involvement “were not totally groundless according to US Embassy reporting”.

These destabilising efforts reached a nadir on November 25, 1981, when 43 South Africa-supported mercenaries called “The Froth Blowers” led by British-Irish Colonel Thomas “Mad” Mike Hoare arrived at Mahe, Seychelles International Airport through Air Swaziland F-28 (Fokker) chartered aircraft. Their original idea was to enter the country like tourists and incite Rene’s opponents to rise in revolt. This time India was unwittingly involved in this attempted coup.

Although Hoare’s boys were dressed as tourists, a chance examination by a local customs official led to the discovery of AK-47 rifles in their baggage. Knowing that their game was up, the mercenaries took 70 airport staff hostage. They also took control of the airport control tower.

At that time a Boeing 707 Air India flight 224 led by Captain Umesh Saxena from Salisbury (now Harare), which was going to Bombay with 64 passengers on board, was arriving at the Mahe airport for a scheduled refuelling. While Hoare’s mercenaries allowed it to land, the local security forces assisted by Tanzanian soldiers did not want it to come down. A fire fight ensued which damaged the mercenary plane F-28 (Fokker).

Hoare’s mercenaries realised they could escape only through the AI flight and tried to force Captain Saxena to take them to Zimbabwe. They finally agreed to travel to Durban due to fuel shortage. At Durban, the mercenaries were arrested and later prosecuted.

In this background, we landed early in 1987 at the Mahe international airport near

their capital city Victoria. We expected the airport and capital city to be ringed by uniformed troops in view of the earlier coup attempts. Surprisingly, we did not notice any unusual police or armed forces deployment there or on our way to the hotel.

The next morning, when we were taken to the presidential palace to meet President Rene, we were again surprised to find that except for a ceremonial guard outside, the corridors of the palace were deserted. We were first taken to the President’s secretary, who led us to Rene’s modest office, where he gave us a briefing on what he was looking for.

He frankly told us he could not trust his own security set-up due to “colour” divisions. He said he was changing the white Commissioner of Police and appointing a “mulatto” officer who had better relations with people, especially blacks. He wanted us to visit all the security establishments, including training institutes, assess their professionalism and give suggestions. In addition, he openly told us that he would have to work with the Western nations to dispel the notion that he was merely following the Soviet bloc. Amazingly, the same assessment was made by the CIA document in 1983 saying that Rene was “showing a more positive attitude toward the major US interest in Seychelles—the USAF tracking station in Mahe”.

We completed our assignment within a week and orally presented our findings to him, adding that we would send our written report through our Prime Minister’s office.

The writer is a former Special Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, and was part of the committee to enquire into the 26/11 terror attacks

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Democracy that survives wrecking balls



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

LAST WEEK America celebrated her 250th birthday, so I shall begin by saying happy birthday to the world’s oldest democracy from a citizen of the world’s largest democracy. As an admirer of America, I have been truly impressed that its institutions have managed to survive what The Economist recently called the ‘wrecking ball revolution’ that Donald Trump has used to try and weaken them. It has made me reflect and brood over how our own institutions have been less resilient. Our prime ministers may not have used a wrecking ball, but right from the time that we became an independent nation, there have been attempts to weaken the institutions of democracy.

At the risk of invoking (yet again) the ire of the Gandhi family’s belligerent supporters on social media, I shall remind you that the First Amendment to our Constitution was brought to curb dissent. The opposite was true in America. The first amendment to that constitution says, ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.’

Those who believe that such freedoms have been damaged only since Narendra Modi became prime minister should read our own First Amendment. And we must never forget that the only prime minister who took a ‘wrecking ball’ to Indian democracy was Indira Gandhi. It is against this backdrop that we need to examine what has happened in twelve years of Hindutva Raj, during which a disturbing allergy to dissent has become evident. As a judge of the Bombay High Court reminded us last week, ‘it is the right of citizens to protest’.

It is sad but true that every time there is a protest of some kind, Modi’s acolytes, spokespersons and social media warriors collude to damage the reputation of the protesters. When farmers protested for more than a year against laws that they believed benefited corporations and not them, they were called anti-nationals, Khalistanis and traitors. All that the prime minister needed to have done was invite leaders of that protest for a cup of tea and listen to what they had to say. Why this did not happen, I do not know.

For the past two weeks, the Cockroach Janata Party’s leaders and supporters have been protesting in Jantar Mantar with a single demand that the education minister take responsibility for the mess in the education system and resign. If this minister had the smallest shred of self-respect, he would voluntarily hand in his resignation. Since he does not, it is the responsibility of the prime minister to ask for his resignation. Inexplicably, this has not happened, so now the ‘cockroaches’ have backed him into a corner. If he sacks the minister, it would seem like surrender, and if he does not, he will continue to alienate young students.

Meanwhile, sundry leftist leaders who never protested the crushing of dissent by ‘secular’ prime ministers are now banding together to share the stage in Jantar Mantar. Personally, I think the fast unto death by Sonam Wangchuk is a bad idea. The old ways of ‘satyagraha’ have become stale and boring. Young Indians must find new ways to make their case. It is also time they stopped invoking dead leaders and started looking for younger leaders in their own ranks. They have a right to be very angry about the appalling state of our education system and the terrifying absence of jobs for those who somehow manage to get an education. They have a right to be angry about other things. Corruption has become a huge issue since revelations about the looting of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, and people are becoming increasingly angry about the deep roots of corruption in all our democratic institutions.

Corruption is, alas, not the only thing weakening our democracy. Almost as damaging has been the rise of a tendency in our political leaders to encourage an ugly form of cultism to build around them. They do this by plastering their pictures everywhere, from electricity poles and petrol stations to advertisements of their achievements in the newspapers and on television. If this is an attempt to show the people who hold up the institutions of democracy that big brother is watching, then they may have succeeded. But is this good for democracy? Clearly not.

The additional damage that this kind of narcissistic promotion does is that it proves that despite all our talk of development and modernity, we remain a third-world country in which elected leaders can behave like kings. It is true that in this 250th year of American independence, the leader of the free world is behaving more like a king than any leader in the third world, but American institutions have shown that they are strong enough to survive Trump.

In our own ancient and wondrous land, the institutions of democracy remain fragile. But here is a small warning to those political leaders bedazzled by their own propaganda: there is increasing evidence that voters are seeing through the propaganda. This is one reason why political parties built around the cult of a single leader and his extended family are beginning to crumble into dust. It is a warning that all political leaders would do well to heed.

Bring back the tigers that once roamed Mewar



AREFA TEHSIN

AFTER the Rajsamand MP’s statement opposing the proposed tiger reserve in Kumbhalgarh, a reactive skirmish has broken out. The MP, from the erstwhile royal family, has urged the Centre to drop the plan, stating that Kumbhalgarh “has never been a traditional tiger habitat”. The pushback is coming from erstwhile forest officers, some jagirdars of the former Mewar state. The tigers, one suspects, would twitch their whiskers on being told they had never actually been there. We, Mewaris, can’t take this as lightly.

Mewar stretches across south-central Rajasthan, from the Aravalli hills in the northwest to the Gujarat border in the south, and from Ajmer in the north to the Hadoti plateau in the east. Udaipur is its historic heart. The Kumbhalgarh forest was a royal hunting reserve. The right to hunt a tiger, notably, rested with the Maharana alone. Not other royals. Not the aristocracy. A leopard was fair game for the nobility, a tiger was not. A peer-reviewed paper in BT’s international journal (2022) by Bhanu Kapil and Uma Bhati of BN University, Udaipur, has dug into the Haqiqat Bahidas — the official shikar diaries of the Mewar rulers — and found that in 1838-39, Maharana Sardar Singh was receiving regular field intelligence about tigers near Udaipur. His men came across them at Kamlod, Tikhlya, Urjankhura. The Rajputana Gazetteers of the Mewar Residency record tigers in the Aravallis “from Kumbhalgarh to Kotra”.

Sherlock Holmes had warned Watson: “It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. One begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.” The data, in this case, is considerable. Jaswant Singh Nathawat, ex warden of Kumbhalgarh wildlife and park director of Ranthambore, has described in a video how he came across a tiger in Kumbhalgarh-Raoli Tatgarh sanctuary in 1967. My grandfather, T H Tehsin, later vice mayor of Udaipur, saw tigers in Mewar on several occasions. An archival register from the Raoli Forest Rest House in the Todgarh-Raoli Wildlife Sanctuary records tigers being shot from 1953 to 1955.

The concern about the Raika pastoral community and their camels is genuine, though it is worth noting that camels are not a tiger’s preferred quarry. The question of how a tiger reserve notification affects traditional grazing rights is one worth working through with the communities involved. It has a process; consultation, buffer zones, co-existence provisions, designed precisely because these situations are not new. We have navigated them in forests far more contested than Kumbhalgarh. It would be a pity to foreclose the conversation before it has properly begun.

There is also the question of what a tiger does to a landscape once it is back. Ecologists call it a keystone species, a polite way of saying its presence matters to things that have no obvious connection to tigers. Deer that know a predator is around don’t linger stripping a riverbank bare; they keep moving, nervously, which turns out to be rather good for the riverbank. The wolves of Yellowstone demonstrated this memorably. Kumbhalgarh’s wolves, leopards and hyenas lived alongside tigers for millennia. They did not find the arrangement disagreeable.

The Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary, our family’s regular summer haunt since my childhood, is already a success story. Leopards, wolves, sloth bears, hyenas, jungle cats, golden jackals, caracals, honey badgers — it is almost like ticking off a field guide chapter. These forests predate British documentation. Many naturalists believe the terrain, cover, and prey base make it suitable for a tiger reintroduction. The region has historically been a tiger migration corridor from Gujarat through Panarwa to Jaisamand into Madhya Pradesh. What’s missing is not the habitat. It is the tiger, and that is a human doing, not an ecological verdict. The Aravallis of Mewar housed tigers, then lost them fairly recently, and seem to be in adequate shape for a second chance. Whether they get one is, as usual, less a question of ecology than of who is inconvenienced by the answer.

Tehsin, former honorary wildlife warden, Udaipur, is the author, most recently, of *The Great Indian Safari*

How UP got control over Kashi Vishwanath 44 years ago



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY SHYAMLAL YADAV

IN UTTAR PRADESH, revelations of alleged embezzlement in the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya have once again highlighted the vulnerabilities in the management of temples. It echoes a case of theft from nearly 44 years ago at the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi. The theft in January 1983 not only exposed deep-rooted mismanagement but also became a turning point, prompting a change in the management of the temple and setting a historic precedent.

On the intervening night of January 4 and 5, 1983, the golden Argha — the base encircling the Shivalinga, weighing approximately 2.6 kilograms of gold — was stolen from the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. The incident, in the heart of Varanasi, sparked immediate outrage, leaving the government at the Centre and the state feeling uneasy.

At the time, Uttar Pradesh was under the leadership of Chief Minister Sriprati Mishra. The state police, headed by Shrish Chandra Dikshit, launched a swift investigation. By January 22, 1983, authorities had arrested 11 individuals. Much of the stolen property was recovered, though the process dragged on. The stolen items were finally returned to the temple trust in November 2006.

The fallout extended far beyond criminal proceedings. Public criticism mounted quickly against the mahant-led management system that had been in place for centuries. Facing growing pressure, the state government acted decisively. On January 28, 1983, an ordinance was promulgated, transferring management of the temple to a government-constituted trust. Later, on September 7, 1983, Social Welfare Minister Gulab Sehra introduced a bill in the UP Assembly to replace the ordinance. The bill passed swiftly and received assent from the President on October 12, 1983, becoming the Uttar Pradesh Sri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Act,



The state government took over the management of the Kashi Vishwanath temple in 1983. WIKIPEDIA

1983, which became effective retroactively from January 28. The Act established a board of trustees, comprising prominent religious figures and senior government officials, along with an executive committee for day-to-day operations. Vibhuti Narayan Singh was made trust president and continued in the position until his demise in 2000.

The transition highlighted stark contrasts in governance. Under the mahants, daily offerings were reportedly recorded at Rs 300-500. Temple assets were valued at nearly Rs 15.5 crore at the time of takeover. The government provided an initial loan of Rs 11 lakh to the new trust. Of this, Rs 6 lakh funded a replacement golden Argha, while the remaining Rs 5 lakh was deposited in a bank to generate interest for routine expenses. The government claimed that after the takeover, daily offerings increased up to Rs 1,500.

Minister Sehra, while tabling the bill, painted a picture of the pre-takeover era. Priests received a paltry Rs 8 per month plus meals — conditions he likened to “bonded labour”. In contrast, the new management raised salaries to Rs 300 per month, with lunch provisions. Infrastructure improvements followed: 20 tubelights and 11 fans were installed for better lighting and ventilation. Cleanliness campaigns were prioritised, and milk offered to the Shivalinga was distributed to orphans. Temple traditions continued, with 51 sanyasis fed every Monday and 30 poor individuals fed daily.

Families donating Rs 5,000 or more gained the privilege of performing puja in-

side the *garbhagriha* (sanctum sanctorum) once a year. The first major contribution was from then-PM Indira Gandhi. Within months, Rs 1 lakh had been raised. A police post near the temple bolstered security.

The management change, however, was not without controversy. Questions arose in the Assembly about Vibhuti Narayan Singh’s approach to the entry of Harijans into the temple — he had opposed it in the mid-1950s. Some MLAs asked whether any affidavits had been taken from him for not repeating the same. Shrish Chandra Dikshit joined the Vishva Hindu Parishad post-retirement in 1984 and joined the movement for the Ram Temple at Ayodhya. He eventually joined the BJP, got a ticket and entered the Lok Sabha in 1991.

The changes faced legal scrutiny as well, with challenges mounted in the Allahabad High Court and then, the Supreme Court. Finally, in a landmark March 14, 1997, verdict, the Supreme Court upheld state control. It observed that prior to 1983, “the management of Temple was in an appalling condition. Devoted pilgrims when they visited the Temples were subjected to exploitation at the behest of pandas, the precincts were in most unhygienic condition (sic).”

Yet, state control did not entirely eradicate problems. Thefts of a smaller scale continued, underscoring challenges to security and internal oversight.

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Entertainment industry’s war on statistical reality

THERE IS a particular kind of cultural conditioning that operates invisibly — so embedded in entertainment habits that we mistake it for taste. Viewers arrive at films primed by years of storytelling, by algorithms, and by the ambient noise of social media to receive male suffering as tragic, male grievance as legitimate, and male entitlement as worthy of scrutiny. The sympathy is allocated before the first scene has even begun.

At a standup show, comedian Pranit More encountered a crowd member who casually revealed he had bought a woman biryani for Rs 370 and considered this a transaction that entitled him to her body. He said it openly, in a room full of people. What’s striking was his ease. A person who has never been told, by anything he has watched or laughed at, that this outlook requires examination. That ease has a supply chain.

Dacoit, a Tamil production featuring Anurag Kashyap as a cop, centres around vengeance against a woman who betrayed

her partner. The emotional architecture asks spectators to understand his anger, follow his trajectory, and invest in his rage. *Bandar*, Kashyap’s Bollywood follow-up goes further, constructing a world where false allegations against men function less as an anomaly and more as atmosphere. Every thread points to the same conclusion: men are a persecuted class, women wield courts as weapons, and institutions have abandoned the former.

The NCRB logged 4,41,534 crimes against women in 2024. Spousal and family cruelty alone accounted for over 1,20,000 cases, the single largest category of gender-based harm that year. These dynamics are sustained by social, institutional, and patriarchal structures that have historically rendered them ordinary. Incidents where women commit crimes against men, however high-profile, however frequently cited, are neither systemic nor institutionalised in this way. Yet such examples get amplified, weaponised, and now cinematically immortalised.

The operative question is proportion,



SHE SAID
BY
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what gets funded, what gets widely distributed, and whose reality gets rendered as representative of larger truth. When a society consistently dramatises statistical exceptions while the pervasive danger women face remains peripheral, it is making a deliberate decision. What gets greenlit, what digital tools reward, and what legal mechanisms get deployed reflect whose interiority is considered universally legible, whose pain is deemed worthy of the screen, and whose precariousness is treated as a niche concern rather than a national crisis.

A woman is killed or driven to death by dowry pressure every 68 minutes in India. Women are murdered for rejecting men. Women are slain for leaving. These are not exceptional stories. These are the norm. But the falsely accused figure in a rigged system is what’s getting the big screen, the airwaves, and now the dock. That inversion is worth examining carefully, without looking away.

In 2026, the cultural ground is shifting beneath safety gains that were never secure

to begin with. Cinema positions male resentment as complexity. Standup stages generate laughs from transactional entitlement. Podcasts reframe women’s legal recourse as weaponised victimhood. Each medium reinforces the next, and the cumulative weight arrives as a revised social contract: women’s security is contingent on not making men uncomfortable.

Sharper cultural literacy is the first line of defence: reading the subtext before absorbing the text, asking whose anger is being rendered sympathetic, whose experience is conspicuously absent from the frame, and what worldview is being normalised under the cover of entertainment. The screen has always reflected power. Right now, it is rehearsing it, and women are the audience being asked to applaud.

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

RELIANCE ON SHORT-TERM FIXES MAY BE A WORRY FOR BANKS

Amid slowing CASA growth, banks turn to costly solutions

Akash Mandal
New Delhi, July 4

Credit growth has picked up over the past few months, but banks have struggled to grow their deposit base to match it. Growth in current account and savings account (CASA) deposits has particularly slowed, with retail investors now having a range of avenues to put their savings in, such as stocks and mutual funds. These avenues provide much better returns than traditional CASA accounts and have become more accessible over time due to digitisation and regulatory bodies' simplification of norms. CASA deposits are low-cost for banks and are used to fund loans, the major source of revenue.

They are considered a reliable and "sticky" source of funds for banks due to low churn, as such depositors aren't likely to shift this money to other banks easily.

Due to this mismatch in growth, the gap between credit and deposit growth has widened from 1.8 percentage points in December to 5.4 percentage points as of June 15, according to data from the RBI.

This has led to the credit-to-deposit ratio of banks — which is the percentage of a bank's deposits deployed as loans — widening to 82.5% as of June 15 from around 75% in mid-2025. The slowdown was also noted in the Reserve Bank of India's Financial Stability Report released last week.



CASA deposits are low-cost for banks and are used to fund loans, the major source of revenue. REUTERS
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Banks shifting to other funding avenues

As CASA deposits have slowed, banks have shifted to other sources of funds such as term deposits and CDs.

Term deposits refer to financial instruments where one locks in their money for a particular tenure to earn interest in return. This includes retail options such as fixed and recurring deposits. A CD is a type of term deposit used by corporates and institutions to raise money through the money markets.

"CASA is the low-cost liability available to banks. Additionally, on a behavioural pattern perspective, CASA can support creation of longer-tenure assets. CDs, on the other hand, have historically been used to manage shorter-dur-

ation liquidity by banks," said Rohan Mandora, associate director at Equirus Securities.

As a result, the share of CASA in the total deposit base of the banking system has fallen to around 39% from a peak of around 44% in FY22 (during the post-Covid liquidity boom). Meanwhile, the share of term deposits has inched up to all-time highs of over 61% from around 56% in FY23.

Why is it a concern

CASA deposits have always been a reliable funding source for banks due to their low cost (around 3-4% interest rate) and "stickiness". Term deposits and CDs, on the other hand, are much higher-cost (7-8% interest rate) options that ultimately squeeze the margins of banks. "CDs are wholesale, price-

• LOAN VS DEPOSIT

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RBI, IN its Financial Stability Report released last week, also took note of the slowdown

"On funding costs, the pressure is visible but contained. The current rate-cut cycle works in banks' favour. CDs and bulk term deposits re-price downward the fastest, so short-term wholesale reliance is cheapest to carry precisely now. The risk flips when the rate cycle turns," said Choudhary. "Incrementally, some banks have marginally increased their term deposit rates in Q1. We expect the impact of higher share of bulk deposits to flow into cost of funds during 2HFY27," according to Mandora. Experts also believe the sluggish CASA growth is cyclical in nature after the post-Covid boom in liquidity due to steps by the central bank. "We believe this is more cyclical in nature and linked to overall liquidity in the system.

With most banks showing little difference in asset quality, liability franchise quality is becoming the key competitive moat in Indian banking," an analyst at a domestic firm said.

Thus, while banks have found shorter-term funding solutions as CASA growth has dried up, the over-reliance on such temporary fixes is a double-edged sword.

While it helps manage liquidity and fund the booming credit growth for now, a hike in interest rates by the RBI or an external crisis may hit the sector hard if CASA growth is not rejuvenated.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Skyroot co-founder: India's aerospace industry is taking a private turn with ISRO's help

Nikhila Henry
Hyderabad, July 4

INDIA'S AEROSPACE industry is "very encouraging" to private players, with ISRO and private companies developing a relationship which is similar to NASA and SpaceX in the US, Skyroot Aerospace co-founder Pawan Kumar Chandana told *The Indian Express*.

On June 2, Skyroot announced they will launch an orbital class rocket, Vikram-1, into space within a window of July 12 to August 4.

Skyroot is a private space launch company. In 2022, Skyroot launched India's first private satellite — Vikram-S — from ISRO's facilities.

Vikram-1 is designed to deploy small satellites of up to 350-kg to low Earth orbit. Built with an all-carbon composite structure and powered by solid and liquid propulsion systems — including 3D printed engines — developed by Skyroot, Vikram is going to be a successful flight, its makers say.

"At Skyroot, we already launched Vikram-S from ISRO's launch pad. That was a suborbital launch. Now we are getting ready for India's first private orbital launch. It is the first test flight. There is also an expression of interest released with regard to the Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV), Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) and Launch Vehicle Mark-3 (LVM-3) by the government of India.

So that private companies can take ISRO's vehicles and operate them. We will see more and more of this kind of collaboration in India," Chandana said. India's space economy is expected to grow from around \$8.4 billion now to \$44 billion by 2033.

Indigenous launch capability will be a critical enabler of this growth, unlocking opportunities for India's rapidly expanding private space ecosystem, Skyroot believes.

Vikram-1's test flight is im-

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Skyroot launched India's first private satellite, Vikram-S, from ISRO's facilities in 2022. PHOTO: X/@PAWANKCHANDANA

portant because the ability to reach orbit reliably and frequently is a strategic capability that only a handful of nations have. Today, access to space remains a major bottleneck, with satellite operators often waiting months or even years for a launch opportunity.

"ISRO has been amazingly supportive. Their support has been excellent. What more they can do is that in whatever ISRO is doing, in their missions of national importance, they can have private startups as development partners. We could co-build some of the systems which ISRO would use — whether it be the space stations, new satellites they are developing or new rockets they are developing. We would like to be a more integral part of ISRO's developments making the ecosystem more sustainable, so that the startups would have revenue opportunities and ISRO would benefit from the startups' feed and energy," Chandana said.

The first flight would capture the real in-flight performance data from every system on Vikram-1. This will help the makers understand how the ve-

hicle performs from lift-off through every phase of ascent. "This data cannot be fully replicated through ground testing," Chandana said.

He added, "It is the first time in India that a private company has designed and developed a rocket meant to launch a satellite to space. This was enabled by the recent set of reforms by the government of India which opened up the sector to private players. We are completely designed, developed and manufactured rocket is going to take off from Indian soil. The rocket will have the capability to launch satellites to orbit. And in the entire world there are only a few companies with this capability. So it is a venture with a lot of business potential and also strategic importance for the country because we have the capability to launch more of our satellites to space".

Skyroot sees potential in the market because, "globally only two players who are regularly launching to space — one is SpaceX and another is Rocket Lab". "There are two or three other companies that have started their launches just like us but almost all of them are from the US. There are a couple of companies from China as well but access to the market is domestic for them. This will inspire other startups to come. Take the example of SpaceX, which has inspired others to come into the field. Similarly, we will also inspire others to venture into the field with unique solutions and differentiators," Chandana said.

The launch is called Mission Aagaman, meaning "the arrival" and it marks Skyroot's second mission following the successful suborbital flight of Vikram-S, the first private rocket to reach space from Indian soil, Chandana said.

Vikram-1 will be a partially commercial flight, with the company planning to commence full commercial flights after one or two successful demonstrations to orbit.

US DoJ urges judge to drop charges against Gautam Adani

New York: The US Department of Justice has forcefully defended its decision to abandon the criminal case against Indian billionaire Gautam Adani and 7 others, telling a federal judge the prosecution was legally flawed, diplomatically counterproductive and inconsistent with Trump administration's enforcement priorities.

In a sharply worded 10-page filing, the DOJ said the case "should have been dropped a year ago — or never brought in the first place," arguing that the court had only a limited role in reviewing its decision to dismiss charges with prejudice.

The filing came after US District Judge Nicholas Garaufis asked the department to explain why it was seeking to permanently dismiss the indictment, calling its earlier motion "terse, bland, and conclusory".

DOJ had in 2024 under the Biden administration indicted Adani and others for allegedly being involved in a scheme to bribe Indian government officials to the tune of \$250 million and to lie to investors to receive billions more in investments from other entities — during which alleged scheme Adani Green Energy Ltd raised at least \$175 million from US investors. The DOJ said requiring prosecutors to publicly justify decisions to drop cases would discourage future dis-

missals, expose privileged internal deliberations and infringe on the executive branch's constitutional authority over charging decisions. "Judicial inquisitions into the bases for dismissal will expose privileged internal debates," Principal Associate Deputy Attorney General R Trent McCotter wrote, adding that such demand hurt defendants by potentially chilling the Department from seeking dismissal of criminal charges it determines are not in the interests of justice.

Waiving privilege only for this case, McCotter said he decided to dismiss the charges after months of meetings with defence lawyers, reviewing hundreds of pages of submissions and conducting his own legal analysis.

"The decision to seek dismissal was not a close call," he wrote. The department cited six overarching reasons for dropping all charges, including that the alleged conduct was overwhelmingly centred in India, Indian authorities had investigated the allegations and found no actionable misconduct, investors suffered no financial losses, key evidence and witnesses were located abroad, the defendants were unlikely to ever appear before a US court, and the prosecution faced significant evidentiary hurdles. PTI



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman interacts with Indian professionals from Larsen & Toubro contributing to the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor in Cadarache, France, on Saturday. PHOTO: X/@FINMININDIA

Auto industry defends ethanol fuel mandate

Reuters
New Delhi, July 4

INDIAN GOVERNMENT and auto industry officials on Saturday defended the mandatory rollout of petrol blended with 20% ethanol, saying years of testing and service data showed no evidence of widespread vehicle damage, despite public concerns over lower fuel efficiency and engine safety.

The fuel — known as E20 — has faced rising criticism on social media in recent days, with motorists questioning whether older vehicles designed for lower ethanol blends could suffer corrosion, wear or reduced performance.

Automakers including Ma-

ruti Suzuki, Hero MotorCorp and Toyota Kirloskar Motor said even older vehicles can run safely on E20. Maruti Suzuki, India's largest carmaker, said it had serviced more than 15 million older cars over the past two years that were not certified for E20 and found no fuel-related problems.

"As a manufacturer, we have tested E10 cars which were prevalent before 2023 on E20 fuel for all parameters and we have not found anything of concern," Rahul Bharti, Maruti Suzuki's senior executive officer for corporate affairs, said at a joint press conference with government officials.

Industry officials acknowledged a minor trade-off: E20

reduces fuel efficiency by about 3-3.5% because of its lower energy content.

However, they said the fuel's higher octane rating can help carmakers design future engines with higher compression ratios, which could improve performance, torque, drivability and even fuel efficiency. Officials also rejected viral claims that E20 had caused engine failures, saying at least one widely shared case was linked to contaminated fuel rather than standard E20.

They added that E20 is the highest ethanol blend currently tested for regular petrol vehicles and said any move to higher blends would need fresh trials

India-Israel bilateral investment agreement comes into effect

Press Trust of India
New Delhi, July 4

THE INDIA-Israel Bilateral Investment Agreement (BIA), which will ensure a secure and predictable investment climate between the two countries, came into force from Saturday, the finance ministry said.

The pact, which will provide protection to the two-way investments, is expected to contribute to increased cross-border investment activity.

The two countries inked the treaty on September 8 last year. Under the pact, India has cut down the local remedies exhaustion period for Israeli investors to three years.

Local remedies exhaustion means that investors must first try to resolve their disputes using the legal system of the host country before they can take the matter to international arbitration. Normally, India keeps a five-year period for this.

The India-Israel BIA also includes portfolio investments in a deviation from such treaties in the past.

Israel is the first OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) member with which India has inked this agreement.

The agreement is expected to pave the way for increased bilateral investments between the two countries. During April 2000 and March 2026, India received \$371.35 million foreign direct investment (FDI) from Israel.

The implementation of the pact is important as both countries are also negotiating a free trade pact. The negotiations for the trade pact are going slow due to the West Asia crisis. India is also negotiating bilateral investment treaties with other countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Switzerland, Russia, Australia and the European Union.

These investment treaties help in protecting and promoting investments in each other's countries. The government has earlier announced revamping the current model of BITs to make it more investor-friendly and attract foreign players.

Commenting on the pact, think tank GTRI said the 2015 model treaty has excluded portfolio investments, while the Israel agreement covers shares, stocks and other equity holdings, as well as qualifying bonds, loans and other corporate debt.

"This could widen India's exposure to investor-state disputes beyond traditional foreign direct investment to certain financial investments," GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava said. He said the Israel pact allows investors to seek international arbitration after pursuing domestic legal remedies.

FOUNDER USED AN AI COACH TO DEVELOP PITCH TO INVESTORS

For one small business, AI was key to a quick start and expansion

Reuters
Washington, July 4

Here Now Health isn't an AI-based company, but its quick path from an idea in founder Michelle Turner's mind to an operating mental health platform for foster children relied deeply on the technology now restructuring the US economy.

Working from her Virginia Beach home, she used AI tools to school herself in startup culture, create a business plan and fine-tune a presentation for early-stage investors.

Funding began to flow, and the company, launched in January 2025, now has 16 employees and is certified in three states to provide Medicaid-funded mental health counseling for

children entering the foster system, a gap in care she identified through her own experience as a foster parent.

"A mom of six kids who's a first-time founder, who's a sole female founder, should not be able to raise (venture capital). I don't have an MBA. I don't have these things to back me up," Turner said.

Developing her funding pitch with AI guidance was "like going to a master's level class every day from the robot. It was my startup advisor."

The rapid emergence and spread of AI has become a defining feature of the US economy, of prime interest to Federal Reserve officials trying to understand its potential to reshape productivity, growth, inflation

and labor demand. Among a broad review of the Fed launched by new Chairman Kevin Warsh, one panel will look solely at AI and its implications for productivity, a force that can allow the economy to grow faster with less inflation, but also means fewer workers are needed to create the same output.

Some Fed officials have already raised the possibility of an AI economy with structurally higher unemployment; other analysts have noted the steady dip in labor's share of national income and questioned if steadily higher returns to capital are also part of the AI future, a who-wins issue with social and political implications.

Much like when then-exotic



Here Now Health was launched in January 2025 and now employs 16 people. REUTERS

new brands such as Yahoo! and America Online fought to connect everyone to the internet, different AI models are now competing for attention and dollars — but with offerings that can

perform complex tasks, solve problems, or write computer code, not just shop and search the Web.

Investment in data centers is driving overall growth and in

some cases driving up power and labor costs. Scenarios around AI range from visions of plenty to mass unemployment, with banks, government agencies, the military and more looking to exploit the new tools but also protect from them.

"Markets are confronted with dramatically different competing narratives," Jean Boivin, head of the BlackRock Investment Institute, said in a seminar with journalists on Tuesday.

"We are framing this as scarcity versus abundance... Scarcity is the story of the moment" with the AI investment boom driving up some costs and driving demand for capital, but, "we are also talking about abundance... We are talking about AI that can lead to significant break-

throughs... Growth that might be breaking out of a 2% world."

Somewhere in the middle sits Turner's journey from non-profit manager to chief executive of a growing company, a story John Bailey, a nonresident senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and adviser to one of the firms that invested in Here Now Health, says is becoming more common. For small entrepreneurs "things that used to take too much time or cost too much — the price to access has fallen close to zero," said Bailey, who helped Turner from the outset develop the AI tools she relied on. "It is empowering entrepreneurs to scale faster and hire people. These are not AI companies. They are traditional companies trying to deliver ser-

vices but do it faster, cheaper."

Public debate remains focused on AI's job-disrupting capacity, with rounds of tech industry layoffs attributed to it and evidence it is letting firms reduce back-office and clerical employment. Bailey said he's become more convinced the AI economy won't kill jobs so much as change and rearrange them, much as happened with earlier technological leaps.

He isn't alone in seeing upside. Torsten Slok, chief economist at investment firm Apollo Global Management, attributes a recent upturn in already-high new business formations to AI, which is "dramatically reducing the cost and complexity of launching a company. As these firms scale, they will create jobs."



DOWN IN JUNGLELAND

BY **RANJIT LAL**

AUTHOR, ENVIRONMENTALIST
AND BIRD WATCHER



THE HOUR OF SILENCE
A misty dawn over Sultanpur National Park, Haryana

Nature’s Tonic & Tranquiliser

A sunset and a sunrise can evoke different moods and habits — in birds and cities alike

THESE HAVE got to be the best parts of any day and it’s amazing how many of us miss out on them. Especially dawn. Out of the deep indigo stillness of the night, the first clear whistles of an early rising bird, breaks the silence, informing everyone that it has survived the night and all its terrors and is proclaiming its rights over its territory and inviting a mate to join it. If you are lucky enough to be in a forest, a sudden chorus of bird song breaks out — this is the famous dawn chorus and can lift your spirits like nothing else can. You can only stand stock still and listen to this orchestra. Soon shafts of misty sunlight are slanting their way through the trees, lighting up the forest floor and the leaves you notice sparkle like diamonds — either from dew or exudation — that rims their edges like a coronet.

In Goa, I would wait for the first brilliant rays to pierce their way through the coconut palms, and gild through the house, pure gold, so brightly you had to move away. Skeins of white herons would fly past, on their way where the early fishing was good.

Even in Mumbai, it was well worth watching the sun come up over the city, usually shrouded in haze, as I listened to the sounds of the huge metropolis gradually waking up to face another day.

A misty dawn at Sultanpur National Park (this when there was mist and fog and not smog) shrouded the entire waterbody and its islands in mauve. From the water came the restive bugling of cranes, as one by one they lined up and took off in single file, heading no doubt for the nearby fields. They would be back again at the end of the day.

Sunset evokes a different mood entirely. As the light leaches out of the sky, the birds begin to return to their roost: In Delhi, when sparrows were still plentiful, they would stream into the avenue trees along with mynas and parakeets and gibber away at the top of their voices as they jostled for the most comfortable (and safe) roosts and excitedly exchanged the gossip of the day. The noise would rise to a crescendo and then suddenly as a switch being flipped — there would be silence.

Watching and photographing the sun go down — especially over the sea, a sheet of gold — has become a passion for many. On the beach, the crabs begin to stir, emerging from under the sand, or their rocky crevices clattering over the rocks in search of dinner. Fruit bats screech hideously as they unfurl their leathery wings and head for the nearest fruiting fig. Moths blur over white blooms and then crazily orbit bright lights before crashing into them and getting roasted. The first pinprick stars begin to flicker as sky turns to indigo again and if you’re lucky, a majestic butter-gold moon may rise in stately fashion, from the east.

Every dawn and every dusk is different. A brand-new 15-minute spectacle every morning and evening. Just the tonic and tranquiliser we all need as we face yet another hustling-bustling day, or wind down with our sundowners when the day is done.



SLICE OF LIFE

BY **SUVIR SARAN**

CHEF, AUTHOR, EDUCATOR
AND WORLD TRAVELLER

CHILDREN ARE NOT ASKING ADULTS TO PREDICT THEIR FUTURE. THEY ARE ASKING FOR ENOUGH SAFETY TO DISCOVER IT THEMSELVES

DR SHALINI MULLICK, a neuroscientist and a mother, had shared a private collection of essays she had written over the years — meditations on parenting, neuroscience and identity. Reading them, I realised that science has quietly begun proving what the best parents have always practised: love is not merely an emotion. It is an environment.

Her essay, ‘Parental Love: From Poetry to Biology’, begins with ordinary moments that alter extraordinary lives. A child dares to dream aloud. Another is gently corrected into conformity. A sentence here. A silence there. The smallest interactions begin sculpting neural pathways, emotional resilience and a lifelong sense of belonging. Childhood, she writes, is not remembered only by the heart. It is recorded by the brain.

As I read her words, I found myself travelling backwards. When relatives and



AKASH PATIL

THE BOY FROM SUI WALAN

How Himanshu Saini built the first and only Indian restaurant with three Michelin stars

Heena Khandelwal

THIS HAS not been a 100-ft journey,” said chef Himanshu Saini, when Trèsind Studio (Dubai) won three Michelin stars last year, becoming the first Indian restaurant in the world to do so. “It has been a marathon for many years.” He means it in every sense. The restaurant took seven years to find its footing. The chef took longer.

Saini grew up in Sui Walan, a neighbourhood in old Delhi, in a joint family home of around 50 people — 20 rooms across three floors, a courtyard at the centre, and a store room large enough to hold the copious quantities of food. Everything was made from scratch: spices were ground at home, peas shelled, papads rolled out, pickles fermented and wheat was cleaned. “The conversation in the house revolved around food. What are we eating next?,” he recalls, sitting at Trèsind Mumbai recently where he had come for a pop-up with Chef Manish Mehrotra and Chef Sarfaraz Ahmed.

Saini, who lives in Dubai, admits that he became a chef because he loved to eat. The cooking came later, and initially from necessity. “You are 10. You don’t have money. You are hungry. What do you do? You make something for yourself,” he says, recalling how he would buy a ready-made pizza base for Rs 10, put some sauce, vegetables, cheese and made himself a meal. “Or find aloo gobi, add some spices, sauces and turned it into a sandwich,” he adds.

Saini wasn’t academically inclined. Being a chef, he admits, was his destiny. His first interview was with Old World Hospitality in Delhi, after his graduation. “As a trainee, I had to spend a month each at their 18 restaurants. Sometime in the third month, I was working at a largely empty restaurant at the Manor Hotel when chef Manish Mehrotra came from London in 2008, to do trials for what would become Indian Accent. Mehrotra left, came back two months later, and asked for the same team. “If I had been in any other kitchen at that moment, my life

Guests now know why food in the Thar desert is built around dairy. Because of water scarcity. Or why Chettinad food is so spicy. Because the body needs to sweat in extreme heat

would have been completely different,” he says.

Saini stayed there for five years; it transformed him. Mehrotra used *umeboshi* and soy sauce alongside Indian spices, treated the cuisine not as a fixed thing but as a living one. “He introduced such an extraordinary inventory of ingredients.” The influence ran deep — when Saini later went to open the Masala Library followed by Farzi Café, the Indian Accent imprint on his cooking was visible, and he took some criticism for it. “But it was the only kitchen I had trained in. That was what I had,” he says.

Initially, Saini refused to join the Trésind. New York was the dream of every chef, and Saini was all set to leave for it when he received a call from Bhupendra Nath, founder of Passion F&B. He initially refused but two months later, he reached out to Nath and joined Trésind just 12 days before its grand launch was announced in Dubai. He walked in, changed the entire menu, and never looked elsewhere. The year was 2014.

Trésind Studio came four years later, and born out of a specific frustration. Their initial menu, he says, was ambitious and a bit stupid. “It was an Indian menu structured on the skeleton of a French classical tasting menu. It drew regulars and then they stopped returning,” he says. “In a large restaurant, even a great dish doesn’t get the respect it deserves when it’s one of 50. Servers sell what they like and understand — if they don’t connect with a dish, they won’t push it. If it doesn’t move fast, it sits in the kitchen



STRENGTHENING FLAVOURS
(Top) Chef Himanshu Saini, at Trésind Studio, Mumbai; the restaurant earned its third Michelin star last year

losing freshness, losing the care it was given in the trial. You do a trial in controlled conditions, you make the dish with complete focus, you eat it immediately — and it’s extraordinary. In an à-la-carte kitchen cooking 100 orders, that dish has a completely different value,” he says.

Then, they changed the menu every three months and with each new menu they changed the look of the restaurant entirely — painting walls themselves and rethinking the palette.

But Covid hit. The Studio shut, and reopened with a street food concept at Dhirams 200. To his surprise, that worked. “It was the most affordable, the least technical, the most comforting. We built upward from there,” he says.

The real turning point came with a collaboration. As Dubai reopened ahead of the rest of the world, post pandemic, Saini reached out to Ana Roš, among the most sought-after chefs in the world. She came for a two-day pop-up (at Trésind Studio Dubai) and stayed for a week.

Until then, Saini had been using luxury ingredients — caviar, truffle, wagyu — partly because the market seemed to require them. What Roš changed was his perspective. “I was making a strawberry chutney — I

started with *kalonji* and fennel seeds, put in star anise, did a *tadka*, then the strawberries — and she was fascinated because the way we use truffle and caviar is how they use our spices,” he says. The realisation that followed was simple but consequential: The strength lay in what he already knew. “That was the first moment where we said: Let’s go back, restrain ourselves, challenge ourselves and make our life a bit more difficult than using ingredients that are merely handy.”

The second turning point came in 2022. Now holding his first Michelin star, Saini was invited to speak at a food festival in Croatia. There were three rooms — a 500-seat auditorium, a medium one, and a small 50-seat room where he was placed. Ten people showed up. Midway through his presentation on modern Indian food, he stopped and asked those 10 people to name five Indian dishes. They could not name one. Not even butter chicken. On the flight back, Saini kept turning over one question: What was the point of calling the food modern or progressive when people had no foundation for understanding Indian food at all?

The answer to his question became Rising India — a menu of 15 dishes built around five macro regions: the northern plains, the Himalayan mountains, the Deccan plateau, the coastal plains and the Thar desert — which was part of the pop-up in Mumbai.

A 3D map of India on canvas comes to the table at the start of the meal. The host explains the structure, returns with each new region, and speaks only about what’s relevant to the dishes coming next. A physical tablescape stays on the table through each section — for the Himalayas, actual rocks, arranged carefully, lasting two courses. “Guests leave having understood something: why Thar Desert food is built around dairy. Because of water scarcity. Why is Chettinad so spicy? Because the body needs to sweat in extreme heat,” he says, adding that he is careful about not giving them a geography lesson but understanding the cuisine. “Then they go to another Indian restaurant with more open eyes. They understand why there is coconut milk. They know that the souring agent changes: vinegar in Goa, kokum in Maharashtra, raw mango on the Andhra side.”

Before leaving, we ask if he could say anything to that young boy making pizza from a ready-made base, he smiles before saying: “Trust your destiny, work hard. When I was in college, people used to say work smart, not hard. I always said the opposite. Smartness takes you ahead in the short term. Hard work takes you forever.”

How society is an invisible editor

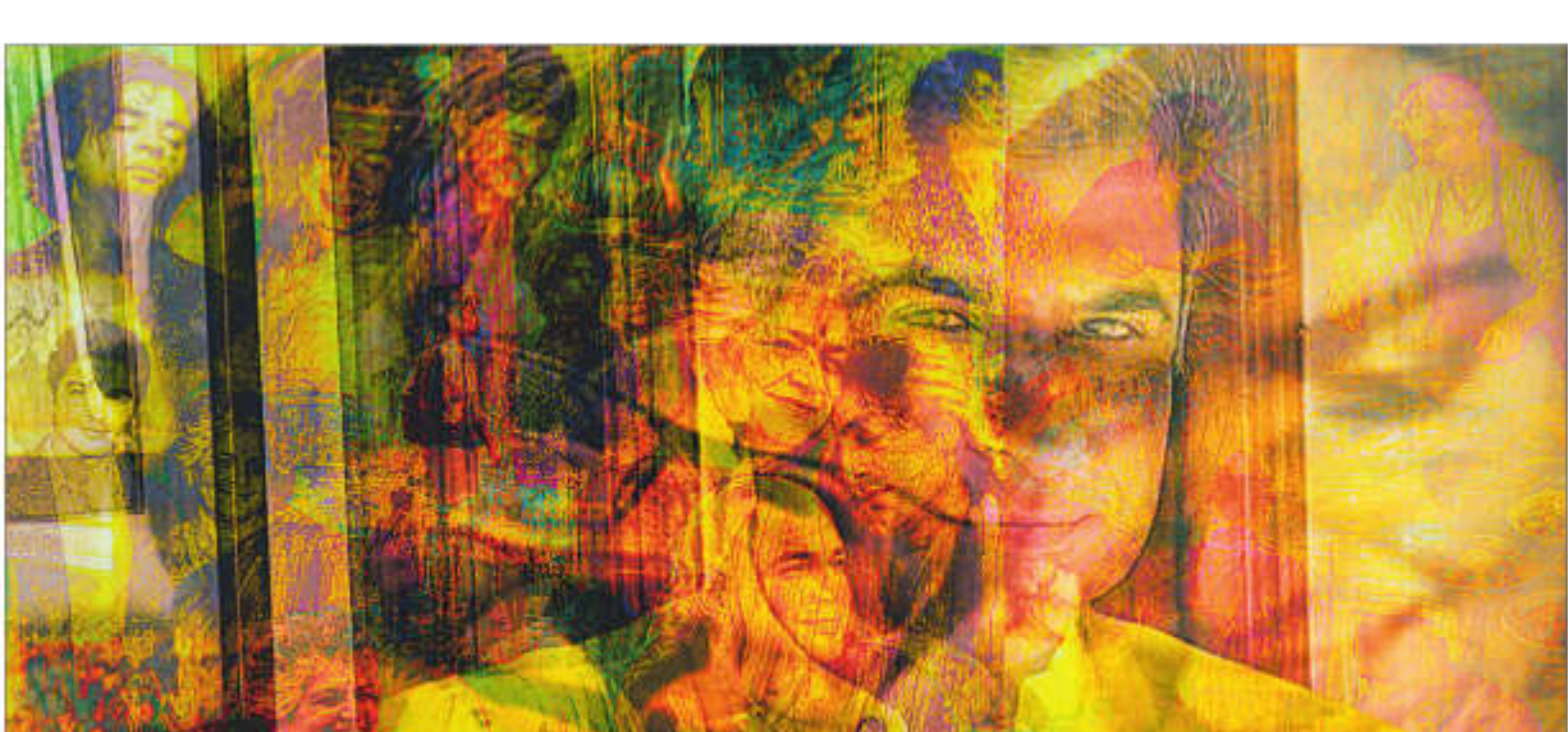
When children feel truly seen, the brain responds, neural pathways strengthen



SLICE OF LIFE

BY **SUVIR SARAN**

CHEF, AUTHOR, EDUCATOR
AND WORLD TRAVELLER



SUVIR SARAN

teachers suggested my lip should be corrected, my mother refused. “This is his voice,” she said, “This is his identity.” When others worried that I spoke too little, she smiled, “He understands everything. He is simply taking his time,” she would say.

Looking back, I realise how extraordinary that was. She never confused difference with deficiency. She never mistook quietness for failure. She trusted that identity unfolds at its own pace.

Long before neuroscience began speaking of neural plasticity and emotional regu-

THE MIND IS A RECORDER
Parenting can be something gentler

lation, my mother understood something far simpler and perhaps far wiser: children bloom; they do not need to be forced open.

But even homes filled with remarkable love exist inside societies that are still learning how to love.

I grew up in India during the 1970s and 1980s, carrying a truth I could feel long before I possessed the language to express it. I knew I was different. I did not know why. There were no stories that resembled mine, no public conversations that offered reassurance, no mirrors reflecting back the

possibility that a child like me could grow into a happy, healthy adult.

Home embraced me. Society had not yet learnt how. That distinction has taken me decades to understand. For years I thought something inside me had fractured. Today I know something else had simply not yet formed: the world’s vocabulary.

Mullick writes that children flourish when they are not merely protected but recognised. Affection matters, but recognition matters just as deeply. When children feel truly seen, the brain responds. Neural pathways strengthen. Confidence grows. Curiosity expands. When important parts of the self remain unnamed, they do not disappear. They retreat quietly, waiting for language, safety and belonging.

Like so many children, I became an editor of myself. Not because my parents asked me to, but because the world gently suggested I should. I lowered my laughter. Softened my gestures.

Children learn astonishingly early what earns approval and what attracts discomfort. They begin pruning themselves long before they understand why. Society becomes an invisible editor, quietly marking certain parts of their identity for revision.

Yet through all of it, my mother remained constant. She did not always have answers. She could not have. The questions themselves had barely entered public conversation. But she possessed something more valuable than certainty. She possessed trust. She trusted that I would become who I needed to become. She trusted that love did not require complete understanding in order to remain complete.

Reading Mullick, I realised science has finally begun catching up with mothers like

mine. Research now tells us what instinct sometimes knew generations ago: The developing brain does not need constant correction nearly as much as it needs consistent connection. Children are not asking adults to predict their future. They are asking for enough safety to discover it themselves.

For generations, we believed parenting meant shaping children into predetermined identities. Now we are beginning to understand that perhaps parenting is something gentler.

As I look back today, I no longer see my story simply as that of a gay child growing up in India. I see it as the story of every child who has ever sensed they were different before they knew how to explain why. The child who learns differently. The child who speaks differently. The child whose heart or mind refuses the categories waiting for them.

Identity has many languages. Belonging should speak every one of them. A different way of parenting can change a child’s future. Perhaps, that is how societies evolve. Not only through laws or landmark judgments, but through living rooms. Through dinner tables. Through parents willing to pause before they pronounce. To listen before they label. To wonder before they worry.

Today, I think less about the nights I lay awake questioning who I was and more about the remarkable woman who never questioned whether I was worthy of being loved. That was my inheritance.

Love is not measured by how successfully we shape children into our image. It is measured by how courageously we allow them to discover their own. The brain remembers that. The heart never forgets it.

A Thai study found how dogs' living conditions affect their physical and mental health. Researchers compared three shelters with different levels of space and enrichment such as toys and human interaction. Dogs in the facility that provided the most space and regular enrichment had the lowest stress hormone levels, normal metabolic profiles, and a healthy balance of gut bacteria. Dogs in the most crowded shelter had metabolic imbalance and less diverse gut bacteria.

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

PROFILES

A symbol of resistance

Aung San Suu Kyi

The junta, which has made some territorial gains in the civil war and held a farcical election to legitimise its coup, seeks international recognition, but it lacks what the NLD leader, now under house arrest, has always symbolised – popular support

Srinivasan Ramani

When Thailand’s Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow met Myanmar’s newly designated President Min Aung Hlaing in April 2026, he was told that the regime in Naypyitaw was “considering good things” for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. This was the same general who, as chief of the dreaded junta, had deposed the country’s civilian government yet again in 2021, plunging Myanmar into a protracted civil war before refashioning himself into a “civilian” leader.

Ms. Suu Kyi – the former State Counsellor and the symbolic head of the pro-democracy movement – had meanwhile been jailed in a high-security prison in the capital, Naypyitaw, after a sentence of close to three decades was handed to her in a farcical trial that followed the coup. The junta sought to legitimise its rule through a stage-managed election, which was held with a low-turnout vote, largely in areas the military controlled, and handed victory to its proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party. After the “victory”, it reduced Suu Kyi’s sentence several times. Yet when ASEAN asked for access to her, it refused outright.

The 81-year-old is understood to have been moved to “house arrest” somewhere within Naypyitaw, though very few even among the junta know her whereabouts. This led to a “proof of life” campaign online demanding details of her detention. Ms. Suu Kyi’s limbo is symbolic of the state of the pro-democracy movement, which still regards her as its icon, even in an ethnically fractured country that has been at war with itself since the coup.

Ms. Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, released only recently, and other leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD) were arrested in 2021, months after the party’s landslide victory in the 2020 elections. But the movement did not collapse with them. Ousted parliamentarians and party figures regrouped to form a government in exile, the National Unity Government (NUG), which took

up armed resistance against the junta by raising People’s Defence Forces in the Bamar-majority heartland and fighting alongside ethnic armed organisations that had renewed their own wars against the military.

Today, more than five years on, the civil war has claimed more than a lakh lives. While the junta has regained the initiative after heavy setbacks, the resistance remains formidable.

Hard-won authority

Ms. Suu Kyi’s authority as the symbol of the pro-democracy movement was hard-won, even if it was later tarnished by the stances she took as State Counsellor. The daughter of the independence hero Aung San, assassinated when she was two, she was educated in New Delhi and later at Oxford. She married a British academic and raised two sons abroad before returning in 1988 to a Burma going through a revolt against military rule. She soon led that uprising in a role that would cost her nearly 15 years of house arrest across two decades, and make her an international cause célèbre. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 while confined. Her release in 2010 came only after the dictator Than Shwe staged a controlled election and began cautiously opening the country to Western investment and legitimacy. The NLD swept by-elections in 2012 and then won a genuine landslide in 2015.

The military, forever wary of her clout and her intent to widen the democratic space, had sought to keep her from the presidency through a clause in the 2008 constitution barring anyone with foreign-national children. But she outwitted the generals by getting the NLD to use its parliamentary majority to legislate a new office, the State Counsellor, placed above the president and serving as effective chief executive.

Working pragmatically within a parliament where the military still held a quarter of the seats, Ms. Suu Kyi contained the generals politically but her accommodation of them carried a heavy cost. When the military, then commanded by Min Aung Hlaing, led a genocidal campaign against the Rohingya in Rakhine State in 2017,



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

leading to an exodus of more than 7,00,000 and killing thousands, she did not condemn it. In 2019, she personally defended Myanmar against the genocide charge before the International Court of Justice.

This pragmatic accommodation did not benefit her. The junta did not want to share power and wanted all of it. As the veteran analyst Bertil Lintner argues, the military had expected the NLD to lose in 2020, convinced that it had shed support in the cities and ethnic-minority areas. It was proven spectacularly wrong and refused to accept the result when the NLD won another landslide. It manufactured claims of mass fraud and orchestrated

violent protests through its proxy USDP, using the “crisis” as a pretext to seize power in the coup.

After losing vast territory during the civil war in 2023 and 2024, the junta has now turned the tide, clawing back some of what it lost. Propitious circumstances made that possible – China’s changed stance in particular. Having earlier indirectly enabled the gains of ethnic armies in the north, Beijing swung behind the regime once prolonged war began to threaten its border stability and economic corridor. It pressured the Ta’ang National Liberation Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army – two members of the

Three Brotherhood Alliance, the third being the Arakan Army – to accept ceasefires and pull back from crucial towns they held in Shan State and neighbouring areas.

With pressure easing in the north, and a forced-conscription law bringing new recruits, the junta could redirect its forces to other fronts, against the People’s Defence Forces and ethnic armies such as the Kachin Independence Organisation and the Karenni forces.

Seeking legitimacy

It is now trying to regain international legitimacy through the civilian-government route. On taking the presidency, Min Aung Hlaing installed loyalists in the high command, elevating former intelligence chief Ye Win Oo to commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Among his first visits as President was one to New Delhi, where he met Prime Minister Narendra Modi. India, wary of Beijing’s outsized sway over Naypyitaw and eager to revive its stalled connectivity projects and secure access to rare earths, has sought re-engagement with the regime. ASEAN nations, too, are slowly doing the same.

Does this mean Myanmar’s pro-democracy and pro-federal forces are facing defeat? Some developments suggest the military will not have it easy. The NUG and other Bamar democratic forces have joined with key ethnic organisations to form a Steering Council for the Emergence of a Federal Democratic Union (SCEF), which many observers term an improvement over the National Unity Consultative Council formed after the coup. It may be a key step to centralise the resistance against military rule and its proxies. Led by a battle-hardened younger generation of activists still inspired by Ms. Suu Kyi’s example, the initiative may still depend on fissures within the junta, and on the indulgence of a perennially frayed and somewhat insular ethnic resistance, for a genuine breakthrough. But it has something the junta lacks, and that Ms. Suu Kyi has always symbolised: the popular support of the long-suffering people of Myanmar.

THE GIST

Suu Kyi, 81, is understood to have been moved to “house arrest” somewhere within Naypyitaw, though very few even among the junta know her whereabouts

This led to a “proof of life” campaign online demanding details of her detention

Suu Kyi’s limbo is symbolic of the state of the pro-democracy movement, which still regards her as its icon, even in an ethnically fractured country that has been at war with itself since the coup

King of the North

Andy Burnham

The Labour leader, likely to succeed Keir Starmer as U.K. Prime Minister, has to steady the party and government while confronting the challenge from Reform UK

Joan Sony Cherian

On June 22, Keir Starmer stepped down as the U.K.’s Prime Minister via a teary speech in front of 10 Downing Street, just two years into his term. Elected with a landslide in 2024, he leaves office with abysmally low poll rates, having lost the confidence of both the public and his own party.

On the same day, Andy Burnham, the former Mayor of Greater Manchester, was sworn in as the new MP of Makerfield, a seat which he won on June 18 via a highly contested by-election. By taking his oath in Parliament, he is now being seen as the most likely successor to Mr. Starmer.

If elected by Labour to lead, Mr. Burnham will be the U.K.’s seventh Prime Minister in 10 years. He will also be the U.K.’s first life-long Catholic PM.

Mr. Burnham has had a long history with Westminster. Starting out as a researcher to an MP when Tony Blair first came to power in 1997, he climbed through the ranks and got elected as MP for the first time from his home town of Leigh in Greater Manchester in 2001. He served as a Junior Health Minister under Mr. Blair in his second Prime Ministership, and was later, under Prime



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Minister Gordon Brown, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and subsequently Health Secretary.

Mr. Burnham had previously run for Labour Party leadership twice, once in 2010 and later in 2015. Following the rejections over his bid for leadership, in 2017, Mr. Burnham made a curious shift in his political journey – he decided to run for the post of Mayor of Greater Manchester, which lies towards the north of the country. Politics in the U.K. has always been very London-centric, with the general logic being that one had to stay in Westminster for any sort of career progression.

Mr. Burnham went against this logic, stating that governments were too focused on London and did not give any attention to northern regions.

As Mayor, Mr. Burnham brought in various changes in the Greater Manchester region, which is now one of the fastest-growing city

ten played down his pro-European sentiment.

He had also voted for the 2003 Iraq invasion, which he later said in 2013 was the “worst foreign policy mistake in my lifetime.” Regarding the recent wars in West Asia, Mr. Burnham was one of the first people to call for a ceasefire after the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. However, he has stopped short of calling Israel’s actions in Gaza genocide.

As Prime Minister, he will be up against a strong opposition in Nigel Farage’s far-right Reform U.K. party, which has a strong hold in the northern region due to its anti-immigrant rhetoric. Mr. Burnham has taken a diplomatic approach with respect to immigration, arguing for bringing down asylum applications, reducing net immigration and at the same time, also talking about the positive impact of immigration in the U.K.

One of the major policy shifts that Mr. Burnham is advocating for, is a “devolution of powers” to local-level governments. He has called the U.K. one of the “most over-centralised countries in the world”.

As he prepares to take over as Prime Minister, the task before him is cut out: lead the party and the country out of its crisis of leadership and stagnancy.

Smriti Sudesh

“Won’t take that long.” That was Tang Jie’s response after billionaire businessman Elon Musk posted that Chinese artificial intelligence companies were still years away from matching the world’s leading AI models. Less than two weeks later, Mr. Tang, the 49-year-old co-founder of Zhipu AI, set out to back up his claim.

On June 16, Zhipu AI (Z.ai), listed in Hong Kong as Knowledge Atlas Technology, unveiled GLM-5.2, its most advanced large language model yet, alongside ZCode, an AI coding platform designed to write, edit and manage software. Early results suggest the model is now competing closely with Anthropic’s latest systems, including Mythos, adding momentum to China’s AI race with the U.S. The timing could hardly have been more significant. While American companies continue to dominate the frontier of AI, the U.S. has tightened export controls on advanced chips and AI technologies in an effort to slow Beijing’s progress. China, meanwhile, has doubled down on home-grown innovation. Over the past year, companies such as DeepSeek, Alibaba, Baidu and Moonshot AI have unveiled increasingly



REUTERS

capable models. Z.ai is now seeking to join the list.

Born in China, Tang Jie, also a professor of computer science at Tsinghua University, co-founded Zhipu AI in 2019 as a university spin-off and today serves as its chief scientist. Before launching the company, Mr. Tang was best known for creating AMiner, an academic search engine and knowledge graph platform used by researchers around the world.

Since its founding, Z.ai has steadily released successive generations of its GLM (Generative Pre-trained Language Models) family of language models, with each version edging closer to the capabilities of leading American systems. GLM-5.2 is the company’s biggest leap so far. Researchers say GLM-5.2 is among the first to seriously challenge leading U.S. systems in specialised coding and cybersecurity tasks.

In tests conducted by cybersecurity firm Semgrep, GLM-5.2 outper-

formed Anthropic’s Claude Opus 4.8 on certain software engineering tasks. In other evaluations, researchers found it could match the bug-finding capabilities of Anthropic’s frontier models. The model has also climbed into the top 10 most-used AI systems on OpenRouter, a platform that provides developers access to hundreds of AI models.

‘DeepSeek moment’

The launch has drawn comparisons with DeepSeek, the Chinese startup whose breakthrough model shook the global AI industry last year. According to *South China Morning Post*, some developers in Silicon Valley have described GLM-5.2 as another ‘DeepSeek moment’ for China’s open-source AI ecosystem, praising both its coding capabilities and its affordability.

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, unlike OpenAI’s ChatGPT or Anthropic’s Claude, GLM-5.2 has

been released as an open-weight model. In simple terms, developers can download, modify and run it on their own hardware rather than relying on Z.ai’s servers. Supporters say that makes cutting-edge AI significantly cheaper and more accessible. Critics, on the other hand, argue the same openness could allow hackers and malicious actors to deploy AI systems without the many safeguards imposed by commercial providers.

Alongside the model, Z.ai has also introduced ZCode, a coding assistant that can write, edit and manage software projects with minimal human input. Together, the company says, the two products are designed to make AI a more capable partner for software developers.

Yet, for all the excitement, GLM-5.2 is not without its critics. Researchers note that it still trails OpenAI and Anthropic on several complex reasoning and general-purpose tasks. Others point to the constraints Chinese AI companies continue to face because of U.S. restrictions on access to advanced semiconductor hardware.

According to Z.ai, however, the model delivers near-frontier performance at a fraction of the price charged by comparable proprietary systems.

On digital expressway sans guardrails



■ RAKESH KHAR

As India races ahead as a global digital payments leader, the absence of robust safeguards against AI-powered scams and cybercrime threatens both citizens and the country’s digital credibility

THE TRANSFORMATION OF India into a digital-first economy is monumental. As a nation, India has successfully bridged geographic and economic distances, turning our digital public infrastructure into a template for the global south. But this expressway of progress has a dark, undeniable underbelly: it is largely devoid of guardrails. And the big casualty already is financial well-being of citizens.

The sheer velocity and volume of real-time transactions outpacing citizen digital literacy has stretched our regulatory frameworks to their absolute limits. The debate around toxicity, trauma, transparency, truth and trust has moved out of academic privacy seminars directly into the financial and social realities of the Indian citizen. That digital technology bridges distances is good, but it is equally bad that it enables deception from several thousand miles away.

Weaponisation of trust

Today, we are witnessing the weaponisation of trust. The days of rudimentary phishing emails are over. In their place, we have synthetic media, voice cloning, and deepfakes staging a sophisticated dance of impersonation. The spectacle of suspicion, suspense, and sordidness is widening by the second, demanding critical care expertise rather than routine bureaucratic responses.

Crimes like the terrifying new wave of 'digital arrests' prove that digital bridges can transport trauma directly into our living rooms. Fraudsters no longer just hack systems; they hack human psychology



PM Narendra Modi at the 52nd PRAGATI meeting at Seva Teerth, New Delhi, where cybercrime and digital arrest grievances were placed on the governance agenda

while emptying bank accounts.

Institutional apathy

Yet, our institutional response remains siloed. It isn't that the top policy leadership is sleeping. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly and publicly spoken about the need for digital trust and transparency.

Nothing highlights this systemic inertia better than the Prime Minister's recent, and entirely justified, lament at a PRAGATI meeting. Reviewing grievances related to cybercrime, PM Modi noted with visible concern that a mere nine states have implemented the e-Zero FIR system for cybercrimes.

In an era where digital footprints vanish in milliseconds and fraudsters operate seamlessly across state and international

boundaries, a victim of financial fraud in India is still expected to run from pillar to post. The e-Zero FIR—an initiative by the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) meant to bypass these jurisdictional barriers and fast-track the blocking of stolen funds—is languishing in the corridors of state bureaucracies.

Security threat

This localised apathy is even more alarming when juxtaposed with the macro reality: cybercrime is no longer just a law-and-order nuisance; it is a sophisticated, non-traditional national security threat. This was starkly underlined at the recent BRICS meeting held in New Delhi. National Security Adviser Ajit Doval explicitly flagged how

innovative disruptive technologies, cyber threats, and new, camouflaged variants of terrorism have completely transcended national borders.

While bad actors operate in highly coordinated, agile networks—exploiting international telecom routing, virtual numbers, and real-time payment rails—our institutions continue to fight them in isolated compartments.

The liability debate

The human and economic toll of this asymmetry is staggering. Payment platforms and telecom infrastructure, which sit at the key stages where financial harm actually occurs, are grappling with the velocity of AI-enabled fraud.

To mitigate the bleeding, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has stepped in. The regulator recently announced a co-contributed safety net, slated for January 2027, where first-time victims of electronic fraud might receive 85% of the money lost or 25,000, whichever is lower. This limited compensation applies even if victims were tricked into sharing their passwords or OTPs, acknowledging that the sophistication of modern scams makes anyone vulnerable. Recovery, accordingly, is that much more difficult.

The ever-rising malaise raises questions about our liability framework. Who ultimately bears the cost of a compromised ecosystem? Is it the citizen, the government, or the digital platforms enabling the deception? For too long, big tech platforms and telecom operators have pitched safe harbour provisions. If a

telecom network cannot identify and block spoofed international calls, or if a digital platform cannot proactively curb deepfake-driven investment scams, absolute safe harbour must be challenged. We cannot socialise the losses of citizens while privatising the velocity and profits of tech giants.

Building guardrails

What India needs immediately is a shift from reactive policing to a proactive, national early-warning system. This requires an uncompromising, coordinated approach among stakeholders.

Signal portability is welcome but what about safety portability? Flag a bad actor on one network and instantly quarantine him or her across the digital universe.

Similarly, payment gateways have to introduce momentary transaction pauses when high-risk patterns are detected. Telecom operators have to be deploy AI to flag and block virtual numbers. Banks are equally a critical shield between the criminal and the citizen and must always act accordingly.

Remember, digital payments is India's most defining export to the world. Leakage at home is unpardonable but a breach globally is a setback to brand India. A digital expressway without guardrails is a recipe for disaster. If we are to secure the future of our digital economy, the time to build those guardrails is not tomorrow; it is right now.

A senior journalist, Rakesh Khar writes at the intersection of politics, business, technology & society

Film without a final scene



EVERY GOLFER HAS done it. You watch a golf movie, walk out convinced you've discovered the secret to the game, head to the driving range the next morning... and promptly top the first ball twenty yards.

I've lost count of the number of times a golf movie has become the evening's entertainment during tournament weeks. Long flights, rain delays, hotel lounges—somebody always finds *Caddyshack* or *Happy Gilmore*, and before long a bunch of professional golfers are laughing like it's the first time we've seen them. The jokes never get old, probably because golf itself never stops giving us fresh material.

Hollywood has given us superheroes who can fly, dinosaurs brought back to life, and cars that survive explosions better than my three-wood survives a tight fairway lie. Yet somehow, the toughest thing for filmmakers has always been making golf look as difficult—and as addictive—as it really is.

Let's start with the undisputed king of golf movies: *Caddyshack*. Now, I know people quote it more than they actually remember the plot. Bill Murray talking to flowers before putting, the dancing gopher, Chevy Chase looking impossibly cool while swinging a golf club—it has become less of a movie and more of a language golfers speak.

The funny thing is, *Caddyshack* probably explains golf better than any serious documentary ever could. Golf is ridiculous. We willingly spend five hours chasing a small white ball while debating whether it moved one dimple at address or whether that putt should have broken half a cup more. If aliens landed on Earth and watched a foursome on a Sunday morning, they'd probably conclude that humans are an intelligent species with a very strange hobby.

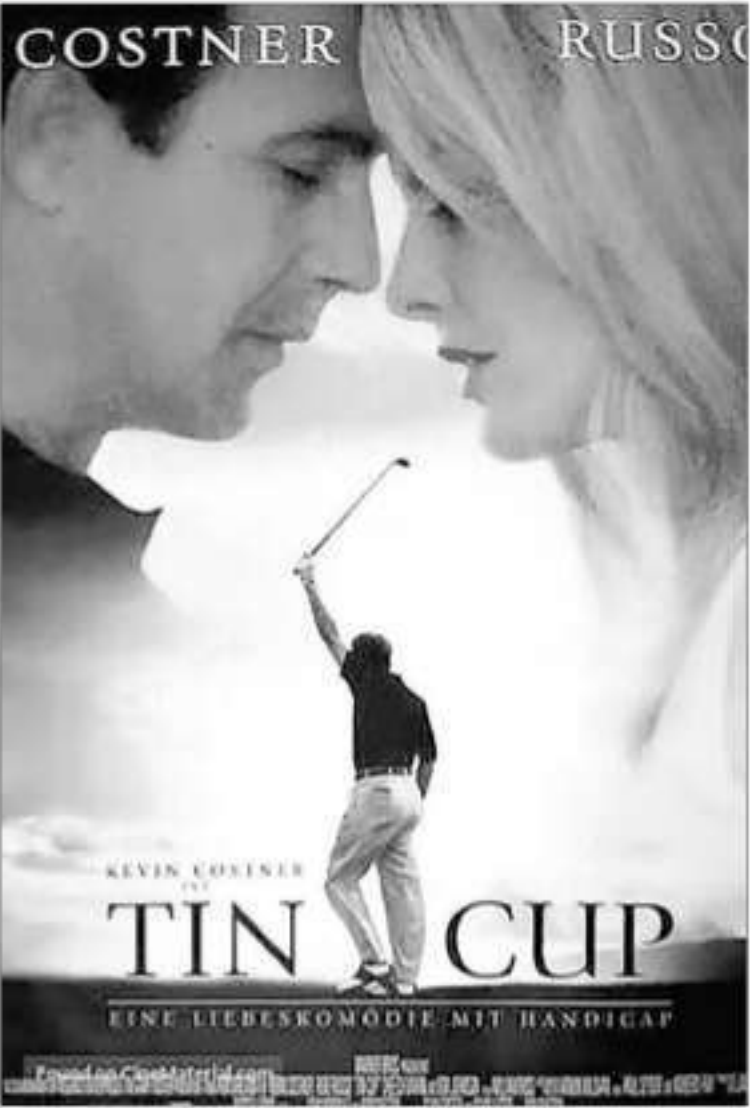
Then came *Happy Gilmore*. Now here's a man who proved that if you can hit a slapshot, you can apparently drive the ball 400 yards.

Every club golfer secretly wants to try that hockey run-up. Don't deny it. You've either tried it or seriously considered it when nobody was watching. Professionals aren't any different. I can guarantee that somewhere, after a practice round, someone on tour has attempted the *Happy Gilmore* swing. Usually it ends with laughter. Occasionally it ends with a pulled hamstring. Thankfully, never on tournament day.

With *Happy Gilmore 2* releasing, I suspect a whole new generation is about to discover that golf doesn't always have to take itself so seriously. That's one of the reasons the original became such a cult classic. It gave golfers permission to laugh at themselves—and believe me, this game gives us plenty of reasons.

One movie that deserves far more love than it gets is *Tin Cup*. Kevin Costner's Roy McAvoy is every talented golfer who believes the spectacular shot is always the correct option. Safe lay-up? Never. Sensibly play for par? Absolutely not. Carry the water one more time? Now we're talking.

Every golfer has a little Roy McAvoy inside them. We know the percentages. We've studied the yardage. Our caddie has given us the sensible

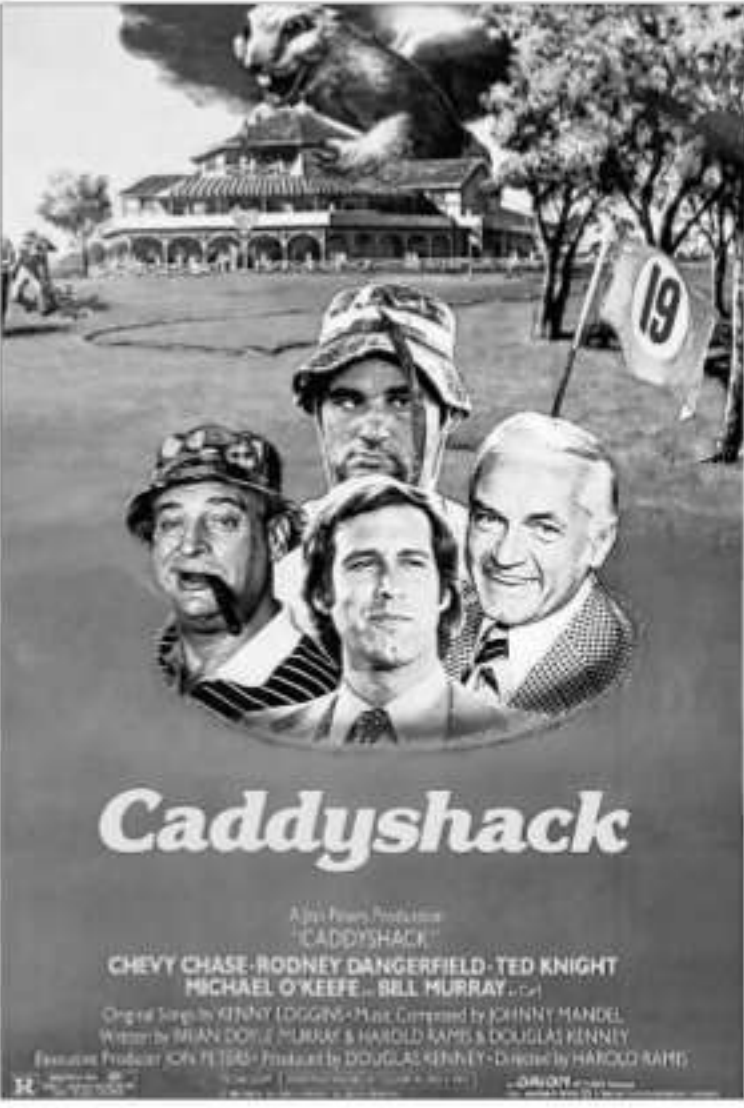


Golf movies like *Tin Cup* and *Caddyshack* blend sporting drama with the relaxed, and often chaotic, culture of the golf course

option. And then the little voice appears. "You know... if you absolutely flush this..." The next thing you know, you're asking your caddie for another ball. I've stood on enough fairways to know that ego often speaks louder than course management. Sometimes it produces magic. Most of the time, it produces a story your friends won't let you forget. Then there's *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, which is less about golf and more about finding yourself. Golf loves philosophy. People who have never played think we're discussing swing mechanics. In reality, golfers spend half their lives talking about confidence, rhythm, trust, patience and something called "staying present." It sounds suspiciously like therapy conducted on beautifully maintained grass. The older I get, the more I realise golf isn't won by the player with the prettiest swing. It's won by the player who manages his emotions better than everyone else.

One film that always makes me smile is *The Greatest Game Ever Played*. Based on Francis Ouimet's remarkable victory, it reminds us that golf has always been a game where the underdog has a chance. Unlike many sports, golf doesn't care about your reputation after the first tee shot.

The scorecard has no column for world ranking or Instagram followers or sponsorship deals or how many times you've appeared on television. It simply asks one question. "How many?" If they made a completely realistic golf movie about tour professionals, I'm not sure audiences would believe it. Imagine the script. Hero hits fifteen greens in regulation. Misses six putts inside eight feet. Walks off disappointed after shooting 70. Audience demands a refund. Golf isn't usually dramatic because of what happens. It's dramatic because of what you're thinking while it happens. One swing can contain optimism, doubt, commitment, fear, confidence and regret—



all before the club even reaches the ball. That's difficult to squeeze into a two-hour film.

Perhaps that's why the best golf movies don't really focus on golf. They're about people. About chasing dreams. About second chances. About friendships. About failure. About believing you can pull off one impossible shot. Actually... maybe they are exactly about golf. As players, we all become the stars of our own little movie every tournament week. We imagine the comeback. The birdie run. The perfect Sunday finish. Reality, unfortunately, has a habit of rewriting the script. But every Monday morning, we begin writing another one. That's the beautiful thing about this game.

Unlike most films, golf doesn't have a final scene. Every bad round promises redemption. Every missed cut whippers, "See you next week." Every topped drive somehow convinces you that the next one will be perfect. That's optimism worthy of an Oscar.

Until then, I'll happily keep watching golf movies, laughing at the impossible shots, admiring the dramatic speeches and quietly judging the swing doubles who clearly have handicaps much lower than the actors they're standing in for. And if Hollywood ever decides to make a movie about life on tour, I have just one request.

Don't spend all the time filming the golf. Film the locker-room banter. The airport delays. The endless card games. The caddie conversations that can't be printed in a family newspaper. Film the laughter after a terrible round and the optimism before the next one. Because that's where the real story of professional golf lives. The scorecards tell you who won. The stories tell you why we keep coming back.

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

Democracy that survives wrecking balls



LAST WEEK AMERICA celebrated her 250th birthday, so I shall begin by saying happy birthday to the world's oldest democracy from a citizen of the world's largest democracy. As an admirer of America, I have been truly impressed that its institutions have managed to survive what The Economist recently called the 'wrecking ball revolution' that Donald Trump has used to try and weaken them. It has made me reflect and brood over how our own institutions have been less resilient. Our prime ministers may not have used a wrecking ball, but right from the time that we became an independent nation, there have been attempts to weaken the institutions of democracy.

At the risk of invoking (yet again) the ire of the Gandhi family's belligerent supporters on social media, I shall remind you that the First Amendment to our Constitution was brought to curb dissent. The opposite was true in America. The first amendment to that constitution says, 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.'

Those who believe that such freedoms have been damaged only since Narendra Modi became prime minister should read our own First Amendment. And we must never forget that the only prime minister who took a 'wrecking ball' to Indian democracy was Indira Gandhi. It is against this backdrop that we need to examine what has happened in twelve years of Hindutva Raj, during which a disturbing allergy to dissent has become evident. As a judge of the Bombay High Court reminded us last week, 'it is the right of citizens to protest.'

It is sad but true that every time there is a protest of some kind, Modi's acolytes, spokespersons and social media warriors collude to damage the reputation of the protesters. When farmers protested for more than a year against laws that they believed benefited corporations and not them, they were called anti-nationals, Khalistanis and traitors. All that the prime minister needed to have done was invite leaders of that protest for a cup of tea and listen to what they had to say. Why this did not happen, I do not know.

For the past two weeks, the Cockroach Janata Party's leaders and supporters have been protesting in Jantar Mantar with a single demand that the education minister take responsibility for the mess in the

education system and resign. If this minister had the smallest shred of self-respect, he would voluntarily hand in his resignation. Since he does not, it is the responsibility of the prime minister to ask for his resignation. Inexplicably, this has not happened, so now the 'cockroaches' have backed him into a corner. If he sacks the minister, it would seem like surrender, and if he does not, he will continue to alienate young students.

Meanwhile, sundry leftist leaders who never protested the crushing of dissent by 'secular' prime ministers are now banding together to share the stage in Jantar Mantar. Personally, I think the fast unto death by Sonam Wangchuk is a bad idea. The old ways of 'satyagraha' have become stale and boring. Young Indians must find new ways to make their case. It is also time they stopped invoking dead leaders and started looking for younger leaders in their own ranks. They have a right to be very angry about the appalling state of our education system and the terrifying absence of jobs for those who somehow manage to get an education. They have a right to be angry about other things. Corruption has become a huge issue since revelations about the looting of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, and people are becoming increasingly angry about the deep roots of corruption in all our democratic institutions.

Corruption is, alas, not the only thing weakening our democracy. Almost as damaging has been the rise of a tendency in our political leaders to encourage an ugly form of cultism to build around them. They do this by plastering their pictures everywhere, from electricity poles and petrol stations to advertisements of their achievements in the newspapers and on television. If this is an attempt to show the people who hold up the institutions of democracy that big brother is watching, then they may have succeeded. But is this good for democracy? Clearly not.

The additional damage that this kind of narcissistic promotion does is that it proves that despite all our talk of development and modernity, we remain a third-world country in which elected leaders can behave like kings. It is true that in this 250th year of American independence, the leader of the free world is behaving more like a king than any leader in the third world, but American institutions have shown that they are strong enough to survive Trump.

In our own ancient and wondrous land, the institutions of democracy remain fragile. But here is a small warning to those political leaders bedazzled by their own propaganda: there is increasing evidence that voters are seeing through the propaganda. This is one reason why political parties built around the cult of a single leader and his extended family are beginning to crumble into dust. It is a warning that all political leaders would do well to heed.

An oxytocin vial that allegedly contained little more than water has laid bare many uncomfortable truths: spurious drugmakers continue to flourish, regulatory enforcement remains painfully weak and as organised pharma companies quietly exit unviable markets, shady players willing to cut corners move in

Teena Thacker

We were waiting for our first child to arrive," says Ravi Nayak, a 25-year-old mason in Kota, Rajasthan, his voice trailing off in anguish. When his wife Jyoti Verma developed labour pains on May 4, he rushed her to the Government Medical College. The next day, the 20-year-old underwent a caesarean section and delivered a healthy baby boy. Mother and child were fine, Nayak sighed with relief.

Doctors prescribed oxytocin for Verma shortly after delivery. An injection of synthetic oxytocin is widely used in childbirth to induce labour as well as to prevent and treat postpartum haemorrhage.

But that shot allegedly changed everything for the young woman. Within hours, recalls Nayak, his wife's blood pressure sank. As she screamed for help, her vitals showed distress signals. Soon her kidneys began to fail, forcing doctors to opt for an emergency dialysis. They placed a temporary catheter in her jugular vein for haemodialysis. All the efforts were in vain. A profusely bleeding Verma passed away on May 7, just two days after giving birth, leaving behind a newborn that will never know his mother.

"Mere paas toh nishani chhod gayi hai (She went, leaving behind the child)," says Nayak, as his mother gives the two-month-old baby powdered milk. He mumbles, "Maa toh maa hoti hai. Itna mushkil ho rahai hai bachche ke liye (Mother cannot be replaced. It's been so hard on the child)."

Verma's postmortem report offers no clear answers to her death. A terse line says, "Pending till receipt of histopathology report and detailed treatment record made available." Her death remains officially undetermined.

But it was not just Verma. Four other young women died in hospitals in Kota after delivery through C-section—Payal Malviya, 27; Priya Mahavar, Pinki Mahavar and Shireen, all 20.

Priya died in JK Lon Mother and Child Hospital and all the others in the Government Medical College.

Priya died within hours of being shifted to the general ward, says her husband Rohit. He recalls that an injection was administered to her. In a few minutes, he says, she turned black and her pulse stopped.

Rohit travels every day from his home in Bundi to work in Kota and makes just about ₹8,000 a month. He is torn between grief, back-breaking work and the responsibility of bringing up a baby alone.

All the five women who died in a span of 12 days—between May 5 and 17—in Kota belonged to families of daily wagers who do not know whom to sue and how to demand justice.

Eight other women who reportedly received oxytocin are undergoing treatment at the super speciality wing of the Medical College for complications and fighting for their lives.

Ravi Nayak, who is mourning the death of his wife Jyoti Verma, says, "Our entire world has been destroyed. But not a single phone call has come from the administration. We should at least get compensation. Don't we have that much right?"

OXY TOXIN?

Dr Nilesh Jain, principal of Kota Medical College and medical director, says an inquiry report prepared by an expert committee from AIIMS—Delhi found no evidence of "human error" in the deaths. The committee's findings indicate that the deaths resulted from multiple contributing factors rather than any single lapse or act of negligence by the hospital staff.

The needle of suspicion pointed to the oxytocin injection that was administered to all these women. Inspectors of Rajasthan's Food Safety and Drug Control Commissionerate sent oxytocin samples from the Kota hospitals to a state government laboratory. On May 25, the state's drugs controller issued an alert: the oxytocin samples did not contain the active ingredient, oxytocin. The vials just had water. The batch was tested and found "Not of Standard Quality". "The vials were labelled as a life-saving drug. They contained none of the active ingredient meant to be in them," the report says.

According to the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, a drug is called spurious if it does not have the active ingredient it claims to contain and has been substituted wholly or in part by another substance.

The deaths of five young mothers in Rajasthan have now widened into a probe into a Punjab-based company that manufactured the oxytocin injections used in the Kota hospitals—Jackson Laboratories.

At the centre of the investigation is its brand called Tocin, Batch No. I-7881.

Soon after the alert by the Rajasthan authorities, a six-member joint inspection team from the Punjab Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) and the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) descended on Jackson Laboratories' facility in Amritsar. They reportedly found end-to-end manufacturing lapses, failure in quality control and deliberate falsification of records.

On June 3, the Punjab FDA cancelled the manufacturing licence of Jackson Laboratories' Amritsar unit. On June 23, the licence of its unit in Baddi, Himachal Pradesh, was also cancelled with immediate effect. According to documents accessed by ET, both sites have been slammed by state regulatory agencies for a pattern of sustained, unchecked manufacturing violations.

Jackson Laboratories has not responded to queries from ET. However, according to media reports, it has approached the court challenging the findings of the lab and the regulatory authorities and contesting the discrepancies cited against it.

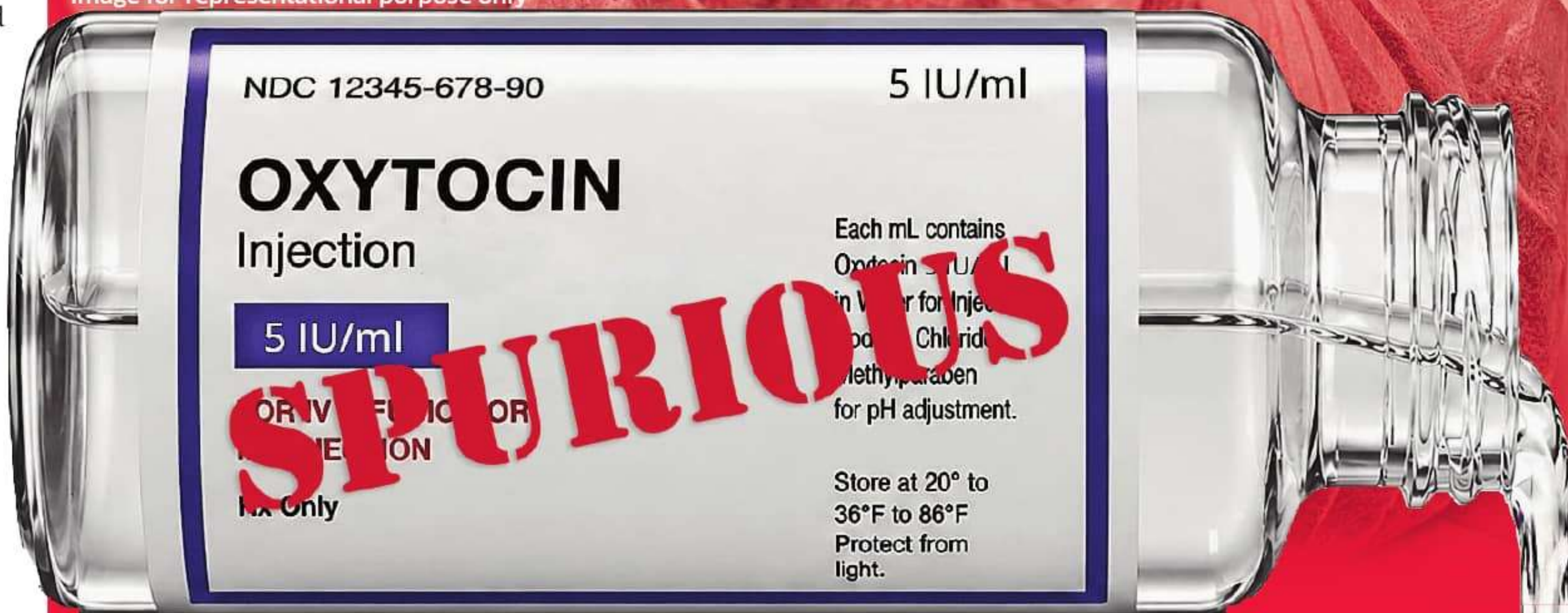
Meanwhile, Rajasthan authorities have sent samples from the implicated batch to a lab in Kolkata for independent testing. Amulya Nidhi, national convener of the public health advocacy group Jan Swasthya Abhiyan India, says the charges of spurious oxytocin are alarming. He says: "This points to a serious failure of drug regulation and public health governance. The cancellation of the manufacturer's licence must be followed by a transparent investigation and strict action against all those who are responsible." He has urged the government to strengthen drug quality surveillance, ensure accountability and prevent such avoidable tragedies from recurring again.

THE INVESTIGATION

The probe of the Punjab FDA and CDSCO into Jackson Laboratories began with a review of con-

Death in a Vial

Image for representational purpose only



Five Women Died After Delivery

WHERE: Government Medical College & JK Lon Mother and Child Hospital, Kota
WHEN: May 5-17, 2026



Payal Malviya



Jyoti Verma

Payal Malviya, 27
Jyoti Verma, 20
Priya Mahavar, 20
Pinki Mahavar, 20
Shireen, 20

Needle of suspicion pointed to oxytocin injections given to the women. On May 25, Rajasthan drugs controller issued an alert: the oxytocin samples did not contain oxytocin. The vials just had water

The vials were manufactured by Jackson Laboratories based in Amritsar. The company has refuted the report

Inspectors of Punjab FDA & CDSCO visited its factory, reported multiple violations

They found that test records certifying the oxytocin vials were fabricated and the equipment was uncalibrated

Jackson Laboratories is under a Stop Production Order from Punjab FDA since 2023

trol samples from 80 ampoules in two boxes of 40 each. They reportedly found worrying discrepancies. The two boxes allegedly had conflicting packaging information like different storage instructions although they contained the same batch of the same drug, raising questions about the product being sold.

The investigating team found other incongruities as well. According to Jackson Laboratories' Certificate of Analysis, the batch was tested and released on December 8, 2025. However, the company's own quality control register reportedly showed that the sample was received in the lab nine days later—on December 17.

There was more. The firm's certificate said a high-performance liquid chromatography machine was used for testing and analysis. However, there was reportedly no record of such a test in the machine's software.

Investigators, instead, found the test was conducted in a different machine—one that had been installed just days before testing began. It had never been calibrated and showed signs of a deliberately altered audit trail—dates were changed, entries were deleted and the system was reportedly configured "to avoid the traceability of activities performed on the instrument", according to documents seen by ET.

Investigators also found that wrong equipment and standards were used for lab tests which could compromise results—a 150 mm chromatography column (a cylindrical tube) was used instead of the required 100 mm, according to Indian Pharmacopoeia rules. Also, the company's own paperwork says it injected 100 microlitres of the sample during testing, instead of the prescribed 100 picolitres. A mi-

Food & Drugs Administration (Drugs Wing), Punjab,
Government Dispensary Complex, Mohali Stadium Road, Phase-9, Mohali,
District Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar-160062.

To: M/s Jackson Laboratories Pvt. Ltd.,
22-24, Majitha Road, Bye Pass, Amritsar,
District Amritsar, Punjab.
Memo No. Drugs (2) Pb. 2023 / 3763
Dated: 2/6/26
Subject: Cancellation of Drugs Manufacturing Licence No. 1307-OSP
(Form 25), 1308-B (Form 28) and 1914-B (Form 28-B) under the
provisions of Drugs & Cosmetics Act, 1940 & Rules, 1945.

CDSCO-HQ, and all authorities having jurisdiction over the provisions of Drugs & Cosmetics Act 1940 and Drugs Rules 1945 on the basis of a complaint received from AIIMS Jodhpur regarding contaminated Caffeine Citrate Injection (Batch No. I-5735), which had reportedly caused infections in neonates. The sample of the same batch was taken for test & analysis during the investigation and the same has been declared as grossly Sub-Standard with respect to BET & Sterility parameters. The inspection team again reported, severe GMP lapses, including unclassified manufacturing areas, lack of environmental monitoring, and poor aseptic practices in violation of provisions of Schedule M read with Rule 73, 74, 76 & 78 of the Drugs & Cosmetics Act, 1940 and Drug Rules 1945.

The inspection team had further reported that your firm was not complying the Stop Production Order issued by this office vide letter dated 25-04-2023 as many drugs

As per order dated 13-10-2023 of this office, your firm was again directed not to conduct any manufacturing activity during the suspension period and non-compliance of the above said orders shall lead to cancellation of drugs manufacturing licences and/or initiation of legal action against your firm. It has been further informed by CDSCO (Sub Zone) Baddi that during inspection, dated 23-25 August 2023, 11 types of drugs were also drawn for test to ascertain the quality of products being manufactured by your firm and 08 samples were declared as of Standard Quality and 03 samples had been declared as grossly Sub-Standard.

A probe of Punjab FDA and CDSCO into Jackson Laboratories' Amritsar facility found many discrepancies. They also flagged that drugmaker has a history of violations and data fabrication. In August 2023, AIIMS-Jodhpur complained that Jackson Laboratories' caffeine citrate injection (used in neonatal intensive care units) had caused infections in newborns. In October 13, 2023, the company was ordered not to conduct any manufacturing activity. An inspection of Jackson's Baddi unit in HP in August 2023 also reportedly revealed that 3 out of 11 drugs tested were grossly substandard.

What is Oxytocin?

An injection of synthetic oxytocin is widely used in childbirth to induce labour as well as to prevent and treat postpartum haemorrhage. It is given to virtually every woman who delivers in a hospital

Source: Dr Mala Srivastava, director, Gynae Oncology, Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, Delhi



cro litre is a million times bigger than a picolitre. Investigator suspect that either the test was not conducted properly or that the records were mindlessly copied, raising questions about data integrity. They reportedly could not find any reference standard for oxytocin nor any data for the mandatory vasopressin impurity test.

The purchase records of the active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) were also reportedly sketchy. Sixty litres of oxytocin API (Batch PS-321951) were purchased from Mumbai-based Hemmo Pharmaceuticals on June 2, 2025. However, investigators found no raw data for the test that certified it. They say it was "fabricated/fake test data". API requires cold storage but the inspectors reportedly found no temperature monitoring records.

What's more, when the inspectors went into the quality control lab, they allegedly saw an operator copying entries from old log books into new ones. Quality assurance did not have any oversight of log books, which had no issuance register or controlling signatures, pointing to possible data manipulation, the report says.

The inspection report concludes that "a strong possibility for any changes and manipulations cannot be ruled out", rendering the firm's manufacturing, quality control, stores and microbiology records "in question and cannot be trusted/relied upon". Investigators say they could not even confirm that the API had been properly weighed and dispensed into the batch. The issuance slip was reportedly missing weights, dates, time and signatures entirely.

HISTORY OF VIOLATIONS

If anything can be more concerning, it is that this is not the first time Jackson Laboratories has been hauled up for manufacturing substandard drugs and ordered to stop production.

Government records seen by ET show the company has a history of serious violations and data fabrication. Worse, despite regulatory actions, the management of Jackson Laboratories allegedly paid no heed to orders for a complete halt of production.

It began three years ago. A joint inspection team of CDSCO and Punjab FDA audited its Amritsar facility and found it to be "grossly deficient in compliance with GMP (good manufacturing practices) and GLP (good laboratory practices) norms". It was reportedly found to be in violation of Schedule M (Part 1A), Schedule U and Rules 74 and 78 of the Drugs Rules, 1945—which cover manufacturing standards, protocols for keeping records and conditions for drug-manufacturing licences.

In March 2023, a show-cause notice was served along with a "stop production" order. The firm was

THE MORNING BRIEF PODCAST

The Water in the Vial



A drugmaker allegedly sold oxytocin injections that had no active drug, and five women bled to death.

Tune in to **ETPlay.com**. Available on **EconomicTimes.com/podcast**, **Amazon Prime Music**, **Apple Podcasts**, **JoSaavn** and **Spotify**.

asked to immediately halt the manufacturing of small volume parenterals or sterile injections, external preparations and beta-lactam antibiotics, sex hormones, steroid tablets and capsules. Jackson Laboratories did not appeal against that order. Instead, the company allegedly chose to disregard it and continue production from the same facility.

Soon, in August 2023, AIIMS-Jodhpur complained that Jackson Laboratories' caffeine citrate injection (used in neonatal intensive care units) had caused infections in newborns. A sample was tested and reportedly "declared as grossly sub-standard with respect to BET (bacterial endotoxin tests) and sterility parameters".

A further inspection by state agencies in August 23-25, 2023, reportedly uncovered serious GMP violations, including unclassified manufacturing areas, lack of environmental monitoring and poor aseptic practices. An interim stop-manufacturing order was passed for its sterile injections. A final order came on October 13, 2023. The company was ordered not to conduct any manufacturing activity. Otherwise, they would cancel its drug manufacturing licence or initiate legal action against it.

The company, according to Punjab FDA, did not take any steps to rectify the shortcomings observed by the regulatory authorities.

Jackson's Baddi unit in Himachal Pradesh was allegedly no different. An inspection in August 2023 revealed that 3 out of 11 drugs tested were grossly substandard.

The same irregularities were reportedly found in 2024 and 2025. An inspection of the liquid oral drugs and cough syrup section in December 2025 allegedly found that its renovation work was incomplete and the HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) system non-compliant. Production in that section was ordered to be halted in January this year.

A compliance report submitted by the firm later that month was found to be inadequate by CDSCO's Baddi unit in March 2026, which asked for a detailed, point-by-point documentation.

Five young women have paid with their lives for a vial of allegedly spurious drug and lax enforcement even after authorities repeatedly investigated into and flagged critical flaws in a drug-manufacturing company.

"For most drug manufacturing units, the state is the licensing authority—the onus of monitoring, inspection and enforcement lies entirely with them. The question of how production continued despite stop orders is one that the state licensing authority must answer," says a drug regulatory official.

According to Drugs and Cosmetics Act, if a spurious drug causes death, punishment is 10 years' imprisonment, extendable to life, plus a fine of ₹10 lakh or three times the value of drugs seized

NOT THE FIRST TIME

In India, spurious and contaminated drugs have played havoc with public health, time and again, and resulted in tragic fatalities.

In 2024, five women who had C-section died of multiple organ failure in Ballari, Karnataka, after they were administered a contaminated solution of Ringer's lactate.

Just last year, spurious cough syrups laced with a toxic industrial chemical killed nearly two dozen children in Madhya Pradesh. Similar incidents were also reported in African nations, raising concerns worldwide over the quality of drugs made in India.

TINY MARKET

When it comes to oxytocin, the Indian market is valued at just ₹42 crore, according to market research firm PharmaTrac. It is an alarmingly small market for a drug that is administered to nearly every woman who delivers in a hospital across the country. The organised, branded generic segment is dominated by a handful of companies: Pfizer, Viatris, Neon Laboratories, Maneesh Pharmaceuticals and Karnataka Antibiotics and Pharmaceuticals Limited. Several other manufacturers—Zydus, Mercury Healthcare, Laborate, Themis and Torque—have reduced their production of oxytocin or exited the segment entirely, shrinking the pool of large, traceable producers.

The dwindling of the formal market, say industry insiders, has opened up space for a parallel and opaque supply chain to take root. "There are many players in the grey or under-the-radar market," says an industry insider familiar with the sector. "In places like Gaya in Bihar, oxytocin is manufactured in small factories that follow no standards and are completely unregulated," alleges the insider, pointing to firms that work under little to no oversight and distribute drugs through channels that rarely find mention in official data or inspection schedules until something goes catastrophically wrong.

What are the consequences of such catastrophes? According to Section 27A of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, if a spurious drug causes death, the punishment is 10 years' imprisonment, extendable to life, plus a fine of not less than ₹10 lakh or three times the value of drugs seized, whichever is greater. Meanwhile, back in Kota, Ravi Nayak, who is mourning the death of his wife, says he has not got a single call from the authorities, either to condole or to talk about compensation.

"Our entire world has been destroyed. But till today, not a single phone call has come from the administration. We have lost trust in everyone now," he says. "We should at least get compensation. Don't we have that much right? We may be poor but we are human beings."

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C Suite to Startup Street

Corporate veterans are increasingly choosing entrepreneurship as a second act. Senior founders, who give up the comforts of India Inc for the chaotic energy of startups, bring to the table instant credibility, networks and industry knowledge that young founders strive for years to build

Lijee Philip & Kala Vijayraghavan

When he quit Tech Mahindra two years ago, Jagdish Mitra could have walked into the boardroom of almost any technology company in India. Over three decades at the IT services giant, Mitra had held many leadership roles, including chief strategy officer and president of India business. He was accustomed to the rhythms of corporate life. Executive assistants planned his calendar. Teams prepared briefings. Meetings were curated long before they reached his desk. Today, he books his own flights. “There are no car pickups, no assistant managing your calendar,” says Mitra. As CEO of Humanizetech.ai, a generative AI-powered software-as-a-service company that he founded in 2024, the 57-year-old is now embracing the chaotic energy of the startup world. He wouldn’t have it any other way. “Ab nahin to kab?” he asks. If not now, then when?

designed for women and children. She says it addresses a massively underserved opportunity in a country where nearly 30 crore women and 60 crore children ride pillion every day. “I am a late-stage entrepreneur, while continuing to serve on boards of Nestlé and Nykaa, and that is what my life is centred around today. What I’ve learnt is simple—entrepreneurship at a later stage in life gives you the freedom to define your own terms. No one gets to decide when you should retire. The energy remains the same as it was at 40; what grows stronger is wisdom, networks, perspective and the courage to build with far greater conviction,” says Parida. Senior founders bring with them something that younger founders often spend years trying to build—credibility, relationships, industry knowledge and a deep understanding of how businesses actually work.

THRILL OF CREATION For many, the trigger is surprisingly similar. After years of operating at scale, they miss the thrill of creation. “At a certain scale, the job stops being about creating

wasn’t looking for another big corporate role. He was looking for the zero-to-one journey again—the messy, uncertain phase where ideas are still being shaped and every small win matters. The startup ecosystem has also changed dramatically. Technology infrastructure that once required significant investment is now available off the shelf. Products can be built faster and cheaper than before. But if starting has become easier, succeeding has not. “The hard part has moved,” says Srivastava. “It’s no longer mainly the engineering. It’s distribution and sales.” That observation resonates with 53-year-old Abhijit Tannu, who has cofounded Mavs AI, which helps organisations use generative AI without exposing sensitive information. Before that, he held leadership positions, including as CTO at L&T Infotech and Seclore. For Tannu, the question was straightforward: why start over at 50-plus when a comfortable advisory career was available? The answer arrived soon enough. “Mavs AI

Abhijit Tannu, 53
EARLIER: CTO at L&T Infotech and Seclore
NOW: Founder of Mavs AI, which helps organisations use generative AI without exposing sensitive information
“It is easier to launch. But it is not necessarily easier to win. The bar is far higher now”

tor in startups like Parida’s Tvarra, says backing an early-stage venture is about betting on the individual rather than the product. “Every startup is an experiment, and what you are really backing is the experimenter,” he says. “The more experienced the entrepreneur, the greater the courage and conviction they bring to navigating uncertainty. Not every experiment unfolds the way you envision, and knowing when to course-correct requires judgment that often comes with experience.”

The biggest challenge, founders say, is not money. It is ego. The corporate identity that took decades to build can disappear remarkably quickly. For founders who start late, entrepreneurship often begins with a hard question: what are you willing to walk away from to build something new? Falguni Nayar knows that journey. She was 50 when she founded Nykaa in 2012. She says for late-stage entrepreneurs, the real barrier is not risk appetite but sacrifice. Reflecting on her decision to leave Kotak Mahindra Group, she says the shift demanded far more than giving up a paycheck. “When I quit Kotak, there was a lot I gave up—financially and in terms of position and the recognition that comes with it. Crossing that barrier is often the hardest part,” she says.

PAST LIFE Mitra recalls one of the hardest adjustments he had to make after leaving the corporate world: “You realise that the brand your business carried had a significant role in your ring as often. The phone does not recognition.” Emails can go unanswered.

REASONS FOR SHIFT	
◆ Plateauing of corporate careers ◆ Networks becoming monetisable ◆ Lower startup costs ◆ Purpose over designation ◆ Investors trust experienced founders	
DRIVER	IMPACT
AI disruption	Senior executives see new opportunities
Shrinking CXO openings	Entrepreneurship becomes attractive
Better savings	Can bootstrap without salary pressure

Sectors CXO are Leaving: IT Services, Banking, Enterprise Sales, Consulting
Sectors They are Entering as Founders: AI, B2B SaaS, Agtech, Healthtech, Infotech

thing, from strategy and fundraising to operational details that would never have appeared on a corporate executive’s desk. Tannu remembers catching himself thinking: “I used to have people for this.” In his previous roles, teams executed plans. In an early-stage startup, the presentation deck, customer follow-up and product issue often return to the founder. Yet what initially feels humbling later becomes liberating. “There’s an honesty to building with your own hands,” he says. “I’m closer to the product, closer to the customer and learning faster than I have in years.” There are other changes too at the leadership level. Large organisations reward alignment, predictability and risk management. Startups demand speed, adaptability and direct action. The founder’s behaviour becomes the culture. Tannu recalls a recent customer issue. His team found the problem did not originate from their product. The easy way would have been to point that out and move on. Instead, he joined the call and helped solve it. “I didn’t give a speech about customer-first culture. I just did it.” In a startup, culture is rarely built through presentations. It is shaped through daily actions. “When you build from scratch, you are the culture,” says Tannu.

LATE-STAGE FOUNDERS Investors are increasingly paying attention to this emerging founder profile. Davesh Manocha, founder of early-stage investment firm CDM Capital, says the number of senior executives launching startups is steadily rising. But experience alone is not enough. “We assess whether they can use their industry expertise, networks and credibility to create an advantage while showing the adaptability, speed and resilience needed to build an early-stage company,” he says. The strongest signal, says Manocha, is not age but the ability to combine domain expertise with founder-like urgency. That can be particularly valuable in enterprise software, fintech infrastructure, manufacturing, compliance and other sectors where trust, regulation and long sales cycles create barriers that experience can help navigate.

As Nayar says, while younger founders may spot emerging ideas early, executing at scale often demands the judgment and pattern recognition that come with experience. For years, the startup ecosystem celebrated the mythology of youth, the first-time founder, the college dropout. But another set of founders is here. They arrive with decades of operating experience, hard-won industry relationships and a clearer understanding of customers that many younger founders don’t immediately possess. They are not starting companies because they need a job. They are doing it because they still feel the pull of building. The irony is hard to miss. After spending years climbing the corporate ladder, many are drawn back to the beginning, to small teams, uncertain outcomes and the possibility of creating something from scratch. The corner offices may be behind them. The entrepreneurial itch, it turns out, is not. And for a growing number of executives in their 50s and 60s, the question is no longer whether they can take the risk. It is whether they can afford not to. As Jagdish Mitra puts it: “Ab nahin to kab?” *lijee.philip@timesofindia.com*



Jagdish Mitra, 57
EARLIER: President & head of India Business at Tech Mahindra
NOW: Founder and CEO of Humanizetech.ai, a GenAI-powered SaaS startup
“I can create a deep tech company out of India which has a global impact and create a product that influences the entire IT services industry”

SECOND WIN That question is being asked by a growing number of senior corporate executives in their 50s and early 60s who are choosing entrepreneurship over retirement, board positions and advisory careers. Unlike first-time founders in their 20s and 30s, these executives are not chasing entrepreneurship as a career option. They are embracing it as a second act. Alpana Parida, 62, has known the whirlwind of corporate life. She headed marketing and merchandising at Tanishq, ran the brand consultancy DY Works, repositioned L&T and built brand architecture for IHCL. Now, she is happy to be known as the founder of Tvarra, which makes helmets specifically

was actually born over a cup of chai,” he says. The idea emerged during a discussion with the CIO of a bank whom he had known for years. What began as a casual conversation evolved into a business. It is also a reminder of one of the biggest advantages senior founders possess. Trust. “That doesn’t happen to a 25-year-old who is cold-emailing strangers,” says Tannu. “It happens because of trust you’ve compounded over years.” Those relationships become sounding boards, design partners and customers. The ability to call someone who will give honest feedback can shorten the journey from idea to execution. Harit Nagpal, CEO of Tata Play and an investor

Ritesh Srivastava, 51
EARLIER: CXO at BharatPe, Jindal Steel
NOW: Founder of Tavastra, a startup accelerator/co-creation platform
“The sharpest change is the loss of institutional safety net”

Alpana Parida, 62
EARLIER: MD of DY Works, chief marketing officer and head of merchandising at Tanishq
NOW: Founder of Tvarra, which makes helmets for women and children
“Entrepreneurship at a later stage in life gives you the freedom to define your own terms”

Srivastava says a senior executive’s track record changes the nature of conversations with investors and customers. As they have managed scale, unit economics and complex tech rollouts, they spend less time establishing credibility and focus more on execution. Mitra sees a similar advantage. Humanizetech.ai operates in a business-to-business environment where access to decision-makers matters. The network Mitra and colleagues have built over decades is one of the company’s valuable assets. “The credibility and trust in that network are the biggest assets,” he says. Yet if experience provides advantages, entrepreneurship extracts a different price.

Meetings are not automatically confirmed. The lesson, he says, is perseverance without entitlement. “The startup world is like a blank slate. It gives you an open canvas, but it also takes time to find the colours that make the picture beautiful.” For executives accustomed to leading large organisations, the shift can be humbling. Corporate life comes with an invisible support system: HR, legal, finance and operations teams and specialists who quietly solve problems in the background. Founders soon discover how much of that infrastructure they relied upon. “The sharpest change is losing the institutional safety net,” says Srivastava. The founder becomes responsible for every-

Ayushi Gupta-Mehra

Every city has a version of itself that doesn’t make it to the guidebooks. London’s is particularly good. Its best discoveries—a bookshop with a glass ceiling, a martini served on a silver tray, an auction house hiding a world-class exhibition—reveal themselves not to those rushing between landmarks, but to those willing to slow down. This is a personal edit of the city’s most compelling addresses, from sought-after reservations to the pleasures London offers freely, along with a few well-kept secrets that locals might rather keep to themselves.

ASPARAGUS & DIPPY EGGS AT MOUNT ST RESTAURANT: There are few more elevated ways to start your day than surrounded by Auerbach, Picasso and Freud in one of London’s most impressive dining rooms. The art beckons you to sit with it, not rush past it. Refined British cooking matches the mood. Lobster pie or Oscieta caviar omelette for brunch anyone?

ALAÏA ON NEW BOND STREET (AND THE FLOOR YOU DIDN’T KNOW EXISTED): While you may wander in for Alaïa’s signature dresses or on-trend mesh

The London Edit

ballerinas, don’t leave without climbing the spiral staircase to the café and bookstore above. Curated by Claire de Rouen, the modish shelves are brimming with rare, autographed books on photography, fashion and design. The bookstore sits beside a minimalist café counter and slender aluminium table, echoing Azzedine Alaïa’s legacy of gathering artists, models and intellectuals around a table in his atelier. The cakes are from Violet Cakes, of royal wedding fame. You already know they’re going to be good.

DISCO FRIES AT DOVER STREET COUNTER: Settle in around the gleaming counter by the open kitchen, watching the chefs work while an impossibly good-looking London crowd does the same. There’s a specific late-night energy that’s hard to pin down and genuinely hard to resist. The disco fries first, dressed with pickled chilli, ginger and mayo. The fiery, startlingly crunchy spaghetti

all’assassina next. Count on staying far longer than planned.

MARTINI AT 74 DUKE: While Dukes Mayfair may be the birthplace of the London martini, 74 Duke carries the tradition forward with modern European chic. Cold, crisp and stirred exactly as you’d like, served on a silver tray with just the right amount of ceremony. Order the morel rigatoni alongside and always save room for freshly baked brown butter cookies for afters.

THE AUCTION HOUSES: How many times have you walked past Christie’s, Sotheby’s, or Bonhams without ever going in? Next time, do. In the days before a major sale, the works go on public view with no ticket or obligation to buy. The curation is almost always extraordinary—Old Masters alongside contemporary works, furniture beside jewellery, objects you’d never encounter in any single museum. It’s one of

The city offers many pleasures to those willing to slow down—from impressive dining rooms and disco fries to martinis on silver trays, auction houses that let you in and a secret garden in Hyde Park

the most versatile and quietly thrilling ways to spend an hour in London, and almost no one does it!

MEANDER ON MOUNT STREET: There’s a particular kind of afternoon that Mount Street does better than almost any street in London. It starts at Realisation Par with stylish prints and matching silk sets in a space that feels more like a very chic friend’s wardrobe than a shop. From there, the afternoon forks: a crisp glass of Billecart Salmon paired with impeccable scones at The Connaught or a more rugged corner at The Audley for a proper pint in a modern Victorian pub.

Delfino is non-negotiable—crisp wood-fired pizza and a tiramisu that never disappoints. Either way, Mount Street is never done with you quickly.

THE V&A: It has

always been worthy of an idle afternoon, but this summer it’s unmissable. The exhibition, “Schiaparelli: Fashion Becomes Art”, spans the 1920s to the present day, charting the fashion house’s paradigm-shifting past and its deep roots in the interwar surrealist movement. Elsa Schiaparelli was fashion’s great philosopher, crafting couture with imaginative flair, from astrologically inspired pieces to a shoe worn as a hat. The only surviving Skeleton Dress, designed in collaboration with Salvador Dalí in 1938, is among the 400 objects on show. On until November 8; book ahead.

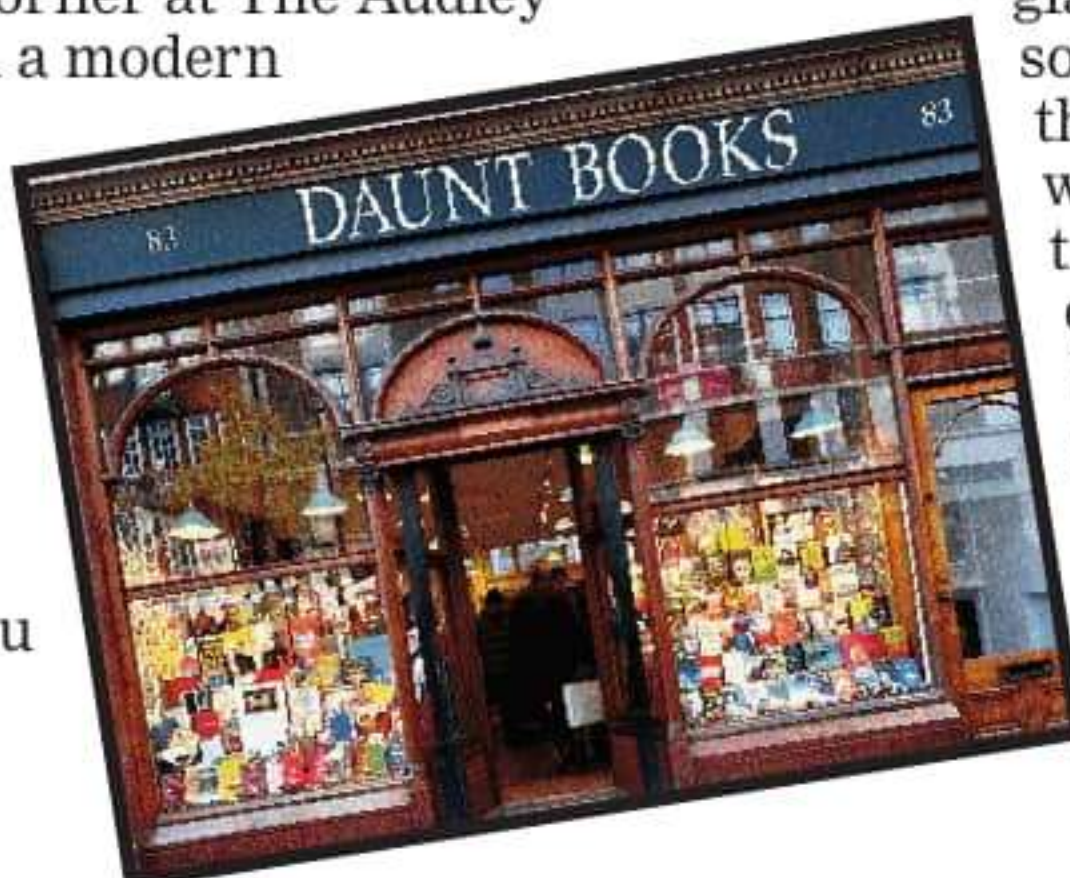
DAUNT BOOKS, MARYLEBONE: Oak galleries, stained-glass windows and a sky-lit glass ceiling—there is so much to love about this Marylebone stalwart. What makes it truly compelling is the organisation of books by country rather than genre, inviting you to traverse the world without ever leaving the room. I’ve never once left empty-handed, and I’ve stopped trying to.

A SERPENTINE: The Mexican studio LANZA atelier has created the 2026 Serpentine pavilion: a brick structure titled a serpentine, its winding form borrowed from the English crinkle-crackle wall tradition. It creates a permeable space that feels both solid and surprisingly open to the elements. Weekend family mornings make it an easy case for a slow Saturday: activities keep small hands occupied while adults do what the architecture quietly insists upon—linger, look and forget to leave. On until October 25.

A SECRET GARDEN IN HYDE PARK: Technically part of Hyde Park, the terrace at Mandarin Oriental Knightsbridge feels like a delicious secret. The breeziest spot in the city to sink a glass of rosé while grazing on the best of British cuisine from Dinner by Heston Blumenthal—rounded off with the tipsy cake, a modern reimagining of an 1810 recipe served with pineapple roasted for hours on a rotating spit.

AN EVENING AT THE THEATRE: London’s theatre is, still and always, one of its great distinguishing features—and a good excuse to dress up, eat somewhere excellent beforehand, and remember that some things are best experienced live and in a room with other people. Book early. Go often.

The writer is an economist and founder of The Foodie Diaries



Trump may be 79, but the amount of bile and braggadocio he can spit out at a moment's notice would make any 25-year-old proud. And that is a source of his power. If that is what it takes to be a success on social media, I quickly grasped that I should stay away. I have never, literally never, posted on any of the platforms, though I do occasionally lurk — I believe that is the right technical term — on Instagram, indulging my cravings for food and design.

My favourites on Instagram tend to be of a type: the woman in a housecoat and a faded bindi, laying down the law about the right way to make, say, a paturi of fish or paneer, swathed in a mustard sauce and pan-fried in a package made from arum or pumpkin leaves. And the smiling man in ill-fitting pants and a caterpillar moustache who seems intent on whacking the viewer with his collection of beautiful Uzbek carpets. Unlikely characters, bizarrely comfortable in their skin.

But then there are the baffling many whose studied perfection frightens me. There is the French woman who peels her aloe and mashes it to make her morning aloe vera drink, dressed in a body-hugging aloe-colored dress that remains magically unsoiled, before cooking and blending strawberries to make strawberry

INSTA JALEBIWALLAHS

is judging and being judged. The result is that Instagram and TikTok are now home to the entirely superhuman, conjuring up marvels of cooking or couture with no apparent effort, or if there is any acknowledgement of something that stands between intention and achievement, it has a rhythm and a poetry that makes it look entirely unlike hard work.

I squinted at the making of a blueberry layer cake for evidence that a few specks of powdered sugar or flour got onto her blueberry-colored frilly dress, but no.

I don't, of course, blame her. Or any of them. She is clearly responding to the norm of white-washed perfection that we seem to have collectively set, because she can: she has a collection of vivid dresses, a great editor, a competent cinematographer and a good camera voice. The problem is more for the rest of us, for whom these miracles are inaccessible. I can cut onions as well as the next man, but I wouldn't want to expose my ageing dad-body while doing so, and if I did, you would be well-advised not to watch it. Even when we know that there might be some air-brush-



Illustration by Cheyenne Olivier (France)

Social media is now home to superhumans conjuring marvels of cooking or couture with no apparent effort. I can cut onions as well as the next man, but I wouldn't want to expose my ageing dad-body while doing so, and if I did, you would be well-advised not to watch it

bubble-tea, in a hat and a dress the color of strawberry milk shake. And the good-looking young chef who prefers to cut onions with his shirt off, probably with the explicit goal of making me jealous of his pecs. And many others.

In fact, though the original discourse about social media was that of shared spaces where we can each be ourselves, I feel it's now a very tense place, where everyone

ing involved, it is hard to avoid being slightly intimidated and depressed when confronted with the flawless execution and carefully curated looks on display.

Some young women in Kolkata whom we interviewed explained that to be on social media, they need to dress differently every day. Given their budgets (their word), they had no choice but to go for the cheap and shiny over the authentic

and truly beautiful. They seemed troubled but didn't see a way out.

Of course, being on social media is a choice, and those who are not having fun, or dislike these videos, can always opt out. Or at least watch what they like. Or can they? Unfortunately, sharing is the lifeblood of social media — half the fun will be lost if we can't reach out to our friends with our latest discovery, be it creme brulee doughnuts or Noor-mahli qorma. Not reacting to those is to risk the friendship.

There is also a deeper and more insidious issue: social media algorithms can be very manipulative, as a recent, original and insightful experiment by two economics PhD students, Nancy Wang from MIT and Hannah Solheim from Columbia University, demonstrates. Given the emphasis on looking

good, and the broader cultural norm, in East Asia and much of the West (and increasingly in India too), that women need to be slim (though toned), social media abounds with weight-loss content. Some of it is free, but often it involves, more or less subtly, advertising products or programs for sale. And a lot of that seems to function by making the women feel bad about the way they look and getting them to spend money to 'fix' it. The body-positivity movement pushes back against this, asserting, rightly, that beauty comes in all shapes and sizes. Like with everything else, social media accommodates every view and its opposite, and thousands of body positivity videos co-exist with weight-loss content.

Hannah and Nancy created TikTok accounts for 424 fictitious

users, all 22-23-year-olds across the US. With some of these accounts, they followed and watched videos from a long list of body positivity influencers; with others they followed and watched videos from fashion experts; and the rest were blank, with no history at all. They then invited a group of young female users to adopt the TikTok persona they had created (using them as they pleased) and paid them a small amount for agreeing to do so. The accounts were assigned at random, so there was no systematic difference between the users to start out.

However, 30 minutes after this experiment went live, some clear patterns emerged. The TikTok algorithm showed the most weight-loss material, paradoxically, to those who got the body positivity accounts. Those who got the blank accounts saw the least; and the fashion accounts were roughly in the middle. The difference was large — a factor of 5 between the body-positivity and the previously blank accounts. In other words, despite signalling that they were committed to resisting the slowness norm, the algorithm decided that they were the right targets for the weight-loss videos.

And it seems the algorithm was onto something. The participants had been asked about their interests before they were assigned to an account. Among those who said they were interested in body-positive content, only some got sent weight-loss videos by the algorithm in the initial minutes. Based on TikTok histories that Hannah and Nancy scraped, these were watched for 50% longer than the other videos. In other words, people who express an interest in body positivity actually get hooked when weight-loss gets thrown at them. TikTok knows that and targets exactly those people.

Are the women then better off being shown the videos that they purportedly do not want to see? Not at all. Self-reported well-being at two weeks after the women get access to the accounts is substantially lower for those who randomly got assigned to the body positivity accounts and therefore get shown more weight-loss videos, and at

least part of this is accounted for by the fact that they end up more unhappy about the way they look.

In other words, weight-loss videos are like fresh-fried jalebis or a slice of a delicious orange-almond cake for a diabetic or someone trying to lose weight. Once they cross your path, it is a no-win situation — you can walk away and feel sad or give in now and end up with the weight of failure and the fear of the future. It's best not to pass the jalebi-wallah or the patisserie, just like it is better not to be identified by TikTok as a potential target for weight-loss videos.

But to make matters worse, TikTok is like a jalebi-wallah who runs after the diabetics. Given the slant in the public discourse on body shape, a lot of those who seek to embrace body positivity, unsurprisingly, tend to be anxious about their bodies and unable to fully shut down the voice in their ears that whispers "lose weight", even though they know that losing weight (and keeping it off) is hard (perhaps less so now thanks to GLP-1). So, when the video comes, they have a hard time looking away. In fact, the experiment finds that TikTok shows more weight-loss ads to the body-positivity group and that they are watched for longer.

To confirm that this is at least in part the right story, Nancy and Hannah offered another group of 1,000 young women the option of paying to avoid being shown weight-loss videos, which is what someone who is aware of her own vulnerability would want. Of those who said they preferred to avoid weight-loss videos, 37% agreed to pay. It would be better, at least for these women, and probably many others, if these options were simply not available. But this is how TikTok makes money: being able to target based on body positivity has raised its revenue, while making its clients less happy. Nancy and Hannah, quite appropriately, describe this as TikTok's parasitic strategy.

Govts are contemplating a more drastic step: Australia, Indonesia and the UK, among others, are implementing a social media ban for those under 16, partly to protect them from facing these painful temptations and difficult choices. India has been silent on this.

This is part of a monthly column by Nobel-winning economist Abhijit Banerjee illustrated by Cheyenne Olivier

ORANGE-ALMOND-RICOTTA CAKE

I have a friend, a beautiful and confident woman, who loves her cake. She is alone for once, with no one to 'share' with, but she goes ahead and orders a slice. She knows this cake is mostly healthy, high on protein and low(ish) on sugar, but then she opens her TikTok feed and for a minute, feels overwhelmed.

Pre-heat oven to 150 degrees C. Zest two small or one large orange (or blood orange). Set it on its flat side and slice it horizontally into slices 2mm thick. Butter a 9" baking pan and line it carefully with a sheet of parchment paper. Heat a small frying pan and add ½ cup brown sugar and 1 tbs water and stir until the sugar dissolves. Paint the inside of the parchment paper with the resulting slurry and then tile the lined area with orange slices. Then carefully separate 3



large eggs and use an electric beater to whip the egg whites until they are medium firm. Then, using the same beater, beat the yolks with 2/3 cup ricotta, 1 cup sugar or the equivalent amount of stevia, the orange zest and ½ cup extra virgin olive oil. If you don't have ricotta, substitute 1/3 cup of the softest fresh paneer you can find, grated, and mix it with ¼ cup milk. When the mixture is light and pale yellow, add 1.5 cups of almond flour or 2 tbs less than 1.5 cups of almond flour and 2 tbs of polenta for the crunch. Plus ½ tsp salt. When the flour is fully incorporated, add in the egg whites with a light hand to lighten the batter. Pour over the orange slices and bake for 40 minutes or so. Let it cool. Use a large plate to cover the cake and flip it over, tapping at the sides of the cake pan if need be to get the cake onto the plate. Peel off the paper.

Can digital twins help athletes win? How AI is changing sport

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One of the biggest stories of this year's football World Cup isn't just about star players but about how artificial intelligence is changing The Beautiful Game. From AI-enabled match balls that help officials make split-second decisions to algorithms crunching millions of data points for coaches, players and managers, it has become an integral part of the tournament. Of course, no algorithm can tell you how to stop Lionel Messi. But it could help discover the next one.

Closer home, AI is reshaping how Indian sport identifies and trains talent. From AI scouts that spot talent in youth academies to performance analysis based on wearables, athletes and coaches are turning to rapidly evolving technology to minimise error and maximise performance.

James Hillier, athletics director at Reliance Foundation, says it is a really exciting time in sport. "Not only is there lots of technology that we can use, but we also have a lot more information than we had 20 years ago on coaching and biomechanics, which we use to give us better results on the track," he says. Hillier, who coaches India's fastest 100m sprinter Gurindervir Singh, says technology played a crucial role in helping him become the first Indian sprinter to touch the 10.09-second mark. Using an AI tool called OptoJump, Hillier and his team created a digital profile of the athlete, feeding inputs like height, body composition and medical reports. They then ran simulations to ask what it would take for this profile to run a 100m race in 9.98 seconds, broke the performance down into factors such as stride frequency, force production and race steps. "All these things we could measure now were probably hard to do even three years ago," he adds.

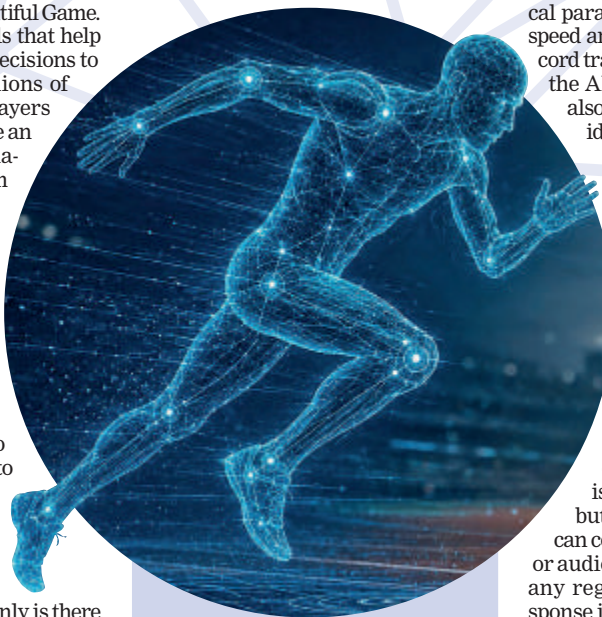
A similar Digital Athlete Twin project has been set up by GoSports Foundation, in partnership with Infosys, which consolidates an athlete's physical attributes, performance metrics, and training data. Nandan Kamath, managing trustee of the GoSports Foundation, says such simulations open up a whole new world of innovation in training.

"It's almost like a test tube we use in laboratories, where we can test multiple hypotheses, playing around with elements like nutrition and training regimes. The range of experimentation can go up if you're not testing on a live subject, where there are opportunity costs and risk of injuries," he says.

LEVELLING THE PLAYFIELD

Such tech can be a game-changer not just for elite athletes but also for grass

From analysing a sprinter's stride to identifying a footballer's potential, AI has joined the coaching staff to help build the next gen of athletes



TECH-NICAL PLAY

- Sports Authority of India has launched the **Speed AI program** for tracking athletes' injuries
- **OptoJump** is used by Reliance Foundation for analysing performance of sprinters
- GoSports and Infosys have set up a **digital athlete twin** project

roots academies. In Bengaluru, Prakash Padukone-backed startup Machaxi has developed an app that acts as an AI coach for badminton players. The idea was born four years ago, says co-founder Pratish Raj. "My brother Tushar, who was a state-level badminton player, started an academy for a couple of kids. Parents soon started asking about the progress of their children."

"We debated internally that if schools provide an academic report card to parents, then even a grassroots sports training institute should ideally provide some sort of fair and transparent assessment to help the parents decide if they should invest more or how the progress can be accelerated."

The Machaxi premium training centres and app analyses around 40 techni-

cal parameters, including grip, smash speed and footwork. Players simply record training sessions or matches, and the AI coach provides feedback and also plays a video alongside on the ideal technique for the same shot.

"This democratises access to coaching and helps a player go from beginner to intermediate level. Once the talent is scouted, the pipeline automatically gets created, and then there are centres of excellence where advanced-level coaching by manual coaches is actually needed," adds Raj. Kamath says AI is also making coaching more personalised and accessible. "Another beautiful thing about AI is that it's not only multilingual but also multimedia. So, the input can come in the form of a photo, text, or audio. You can ask your question in any regional language and get a response in the same, which might not be possible at times with manual coaching staff," he says.

For para swimmer Himanshu Nandal, such technology has been transformative. Completely blind since birth, the 22-year-old athlete from Rohtak struggled for years to find suitable coaching and facilities, with his father often doubling up as mentor and guide. "My father would have to stand there telling me not to touch the lane dividers in the pool. I also had to manually count my strokes to avoid touching the wall, but still ended up with many injuries or swellings," says Nandal, who represented India at the Para Asian Games in 2022.

Today, he uses wearables and AI-assisted video analysis to monitor training intensity, refine his technique and better understand his own performance. Yet, he does not want to become "over-reliant" on technology, he says. "If human coaches are 80% precise, AI coaches are only 50-60% precise at the moment. And even if they improve, they're likely to cost a lot, and are not accessible to athletes like me," he says.

TALENT HUNTING

While the training is one aspect of the story, the other is spotting fresh talent. In Brazil, for instance, the Footba app, which allows young players to



COACH 2.0: Machaxi users can get badminton advice from an AI app

upload their videos and have them analysed by an AI scout, has led to the discovery of promising talent from remote towns. Closer home, Chennai-based startup ScoutEdge offers an AI-based scouting platform to spot young cricketing talent in smaller towns across India.

At Reliance Foundation, AI scouting is now being used both to identify football talent and flag possible age-fraud cases. "The AI Scout is something that anybody in this country can sign up for on the app, enrol for a trial, and be considered for the foundation's football academy final scouting camp," says Durva Vahia, performance manager at Reliance Foundation. Participants complete a series of football tasks that are automatically scored. The highest-ranked performers are then reviewed by human coaches before final selections are made.

Age fraud is more difficult to tackle. Although technology is not "foolproof", admits Vahia, it helps in singling out suspicious cases. X-rays and medical scans are analysed using AI-assisted software to estimate bone age, with findings subsequently verified by hospitals.

THE HUMAN EDGE

Despite the rapid advancements, there are also calls for proceeding with caution around privacy and data governance. "We haven't gone tossing all of our athlete data into AI engines yet. We have to remember that almost all performance data is also medical data. This is active heart rate data, or somebody's sensitive injury details," says Kamath.

Hillier worries that the industry risks becoming overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information available. "There's a lot we can measure and do with each. But we also have to remember that just because you can measure, it does not mean it's important." While data and algorithms can improve accountability, they cannot replace the art of empathy-led coaching. "At the end of the day, you need to sit down with a human athlete as a human coach and talk about mental barriers and other humanistic things because technology cannot run the race for you. It cannot help you deal with an audience of 60,000 in an Olympics final."

Meet the volcanic wit behind Iceland Cricket's viral posts

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You'd imagine the person behind cricket's funniest account would be a professional comedian. Instead, it's a bespectacled environmental economics professor in Iceland who fires off six posts a day between lectures. David Cook, secretary of the Icelandic Cricket Association, runs an X account with more than 175,000 followers — nearly half the country's population — even though Iceland has only around 150 active cricketers.

Sample this recent barb after India's second T20 defeat to Ireland. "We can confirm that we don't wish to add Gautam Gambhir to our coaching staff. He clearly has talent, though. To take those Indian players and deliver those results in Ireland takes truly remarkable gifts."

This dig came from @icelandcricket, the 13th most-followed cricket board on X. "If you have never been trolled by us, you are not failing enough," declares the account of the tiny North Atlantic nation with barely a domestic season to speak of. When Trump mixed up Greenland and Iceland during his speech at Davos, Iceland Cricket responded with a list of what the country actually has to offer — peace, gender equality and cricketers who play purely for the love of the game — before concluding with the deadpan claim that its three Coast Guard vessels were "much feared".

Earlier this year, amid Pakistan's T20 World Cup boycott drama, the account published a lengthy mock-formal letter explaining why it couldn't step in as a replacement, citing the practical difficulty of pulling players away from their day jobs: a captain who was busy tending his bakery oven, a ship captain who needed to steer his vessel, and bankers who had to "go bankrupt (again)".

"My students have no idea about any of this," says Cook, whose 6.30 am (Iceland time) Zoom backdrop for our conversation is an empty cricket ground backed by what's likely a volcanic ridge. "We are the only association trying to be funny, deliberately," he says. "We have nothing to lose."

Cook, who grew up playing cricket, moved from England to Iceland to study Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Iceland, and eventually joining the faculty. He now plays for the Icelandic national team and serves on the board without pay, like almost everyone else involved in the game. "None of us, apart from one person, was actually born in Iceland, but most of us are Icelandic citizens," he says, describing a board whose members' professions and origins could rival the cast of 'Lagaan': chairman Samuel Gill, originally from Pakistan, works in shipping; national coach Bala Kamalakaran is a startup investor; youth coach Lee Nelson is a professional clown; and treasurer Jakob Vinkinger-Robertson, the only native Icelandic on the board, runs a pie-making company called Arctic Pies.

"Most nations want to develop their cricket and think the fan base will follow. We're doing things the other way round," says Cook, who draws his inspiration from the 1980 Kevin Costner-starrer 'Field of Dreams', in which the protagonist builds a baseball field first, and the sport arrives after.

SPIN DOC: Environmental economics prof David Cook fires off darkly funny posts between lectures

When the account was launched in 2015, it was "about what Norway Cricket's account has today," he deadpans. Cook took over in 2021; within a year, followers jumped from 20,000 to 70,000. Today, it has more than 175,000 followers — more than several ICC Associate nations that regularly compete at World Cups.

It's not just to annoy the English that the ICA's X bio claims cricket's "birthplace" as 911 CE. "This is humorous, but not entirely speculation on our part," Cook says, citing a book that references knattleikr — Old Norse for 'ball game' — a bat-and-ball sport in the Icelandic Sagas from 911 CE, in the Saga of Egill Skallagrímsson, where a game by the river Hvítá ends with an axe to the head and seven dead.

Modern Icelandic cricket has calmer origins: it was founded in 1999 by a fan named Ragnar Kristinnsson who watched a World Cup semi-final while on holiday in Cyprus. By 2008,



An X post marks Iceland as the world's only 'cricket zone', joking about its lack of rivals

the sport was driven by an influx of Indian players when the Tata Group opened a consultancy in Reykjavik only to shut it a year later. That same year, Sachin Tendulkar visited the country, not to play cricket but golf.

Today, more than 40% of Iceland Cricket's followers are Indian, enough that the board consciously produces more India-focused content in return. Of the roughly 150 people who play cricket in Iceland, about half are of Indian origin, sustained by the country's small Indian diaspora. There are five clubs, with a long-term goal of eight, the minimum required to qualify for ICC Associate membership. There's also a domestic T20 competition that Cook calls the "Íslensk Premier League" because the BCCI threatened legal action when it briefly went by "IPL".

Asked whether cricket could ever become a profession in Iceland, Cook laughs. Sponsors remain hard to convince, he says, and he still occasionally meets people who mistake cricket for croquet — the lawn sport where players use mallets to hit polymer balls through metal hoops. Still, the board's long-term ambition is to win a World Cup by 2082. "If we fail," says Cook, "none of the current board members will be alive to see it."

Investment Confidence

India's economic story has reached an unusual turning point. For years, policymakers focused on removing the structural bottlenecks that discouraged private investment. Public sector banks were recapitalised, bad loans were cleaned up, infrastructure spending gathered pace, corporate tax rates were lowered and targeted manufacturing incentives were introduced. By most conventional measures, the ecosystem for private capital has become considerably stronger. Yet the expected surge in corporate investment has not materialised. The explanation lies beyond corporate balance sheets. Businesses are no longer constrained primarily by access to finance; they are constrained by uncertainty. Companies making investments that will generate returns over two or three decades must evaluate not just today's demand but tomorrow's risks. The global economy offers little reassurance on that front.

The prolonged geopolitical instability in West Asia has once again highlighted India's vulnerability to imported energy shocks. Protectionist trade policies are reshaping global supply chains, while currency volatility and fluctuating capital flows have made long-term financial planning more difficult. Simultaneously, rapid advances in artificial intelligence are disrupting established business models across industries, forcing companies to reconsider investment priorities. In such an environment, caution is a rational corporate response rather than evidence of weak entrepreneurial spirit. This hesitation carries significant implications for India's growth trajectory. Public investment has successfully created highways, ports, airports and digital infrastructure, but governments cannot permanently substitute private capital. Sustainable economic expansion depends on thousands of businesses investing in new factories, technologies, research, logistics and skilled employment.

If investment remains concentrated among a handful of large conglomerates, the economy risks becoming less competitive, with smaller and mid-sized enterprises falling behind in productivity and innovation. The next generation of reforms must therefore address a different challenge. Tax concessions and financial incentives have their place, but they cannot eliminate uncertainty. Businesses require confidence that regulatory rules will remain stable, commercial disputes will be resolved swiftly, approvals will not become administrative obstacles and contracts will be enforced predictably.

Simplifying compliance, reducing bureaucratic discretion, accelerating judicial processes and ensuring greater policy consistency would lower the hidden costs of doing business more effectively than additional subsidies. Equally important is the need to preserve macroeconomic stability. Predictable inflation, a stable financial system and prudent fiscal management strengthen investor confidence far more than short-lived stimulus measures. When businesses believe that the policy environment will remain dependable through economic and geopolitical turbulence, they are far more willing to commit long-term capital. India has already demonstrated that structural reforms can transform its economic foundations. The challenge now is less about creating capacity than creating confidence.

Capital is available, banks are willing to lend and entrepreneurs recognise India's long-term potential. Unlocking the next investment cycle will depend on whether policymakers can provide the certainty that encourages businesses to deploy their resources rather than keep them on the sidelines. Only then can private investment become the engine that delivers sustained growth, productivity and quality employment.

At 250

America's 250th birthday has naturally prompted reflection on what remains the world's most consequential republic. Such anniversaries invite celebration, but they also encourage honest stocktaking. The question is not whether the United States remains a great power; it plainly does. The more relevant question, as the fireworks fade, is whether it still stands as far above every other nation as it once did. Increasingly, the answer is no. This distinction is crucial because absolute strength and relative dominance are not the same. By almost every meaningful measure, the United States remains pre-eminent.

It is home to the world's largest economy in nominal terms, the dollar remains the backbone of the international financial system, its universities continue to attract the brightest minds, and its companies dominate frontier technologies ranging from artificial intelligence to biotechnology. No country can yet match its combination of military reach, financial influence, innovation and alliances. What has changed is the distribution of power around it. China has emerged as a technological and manufacturing powerhouse. India is steadily expanding its economic and geopolitical footprint. Countries such as Japan, South Korea and Germany remain formidable centres of advanced industry, while innovation is increasingly dispersed across multiple economies. The world is no longer organised around a single, overwhelming centre of gravity. History offers useful perspective. America's extraordinary dominance after the Second World War owed much to the devastation of Europe and Japan. Its unrivalled position after the Soviet Union's collapse reflected another exceptional geopolitical moment. Neither period represented the normal condition of international politics. As other nations rebuilt, educated their workforces, invested in research and integrated into global markets, a narrowing of the gap was almost inevitable.

That reality does not diminish America's achievements. If anything, it underlines how unusually dominant it once was. The challenge today lies elsewhere. Mounting public debt, deep political polarisation, contested immigration policies and recurrent institutional gridlock threaten to erode advantages that competitors cannot easily replicate. External rivals have become stronger, but internal dysfunction risks proving the greater constraint on American leadership. Even so, reports of American decline remain exaggerated. The United States has repeatedly demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for renewal.

It emerged stronger from the Great Depression, adapted to the Cold War, led the digital revolution and continues to shape the technologies likely to define this century. Few countries possess comparable entrepreneurial dynamism or institutional depth. As America is midway through its third century of independence, the appropriate conclusion is neither triumphalism nor pessimism. The age of uncontested American supremacy is receding, but the age of American relevance is not. The United States remains first among nations, even if other countries are catching up. At 250, its greatest challenge is not preserving an impossible monopoly on power, but adapting successfully to a world that has finally lengthened its stride.

Mandate without mechanism ~ I

India has built a regime that compels companies to disclose their environmental conduct ~ and no power to punish them for lying about it

The Aravallis were old before the Himalayas were born, raised in the Proterozoic more than a billion years ago, and for most of that unimaginable span they have done the quiet, unglamorous work of a frontier: turning back the Thar, recharging the aquifers beneath Rajasthan, holding the air over Delhi a fraction cleaner than it would otherwise be. They are less a feature on the map than a witness to it, older than every kingdom that ever sheltered in their rain-shadow. We have repaid that service with dynamite.

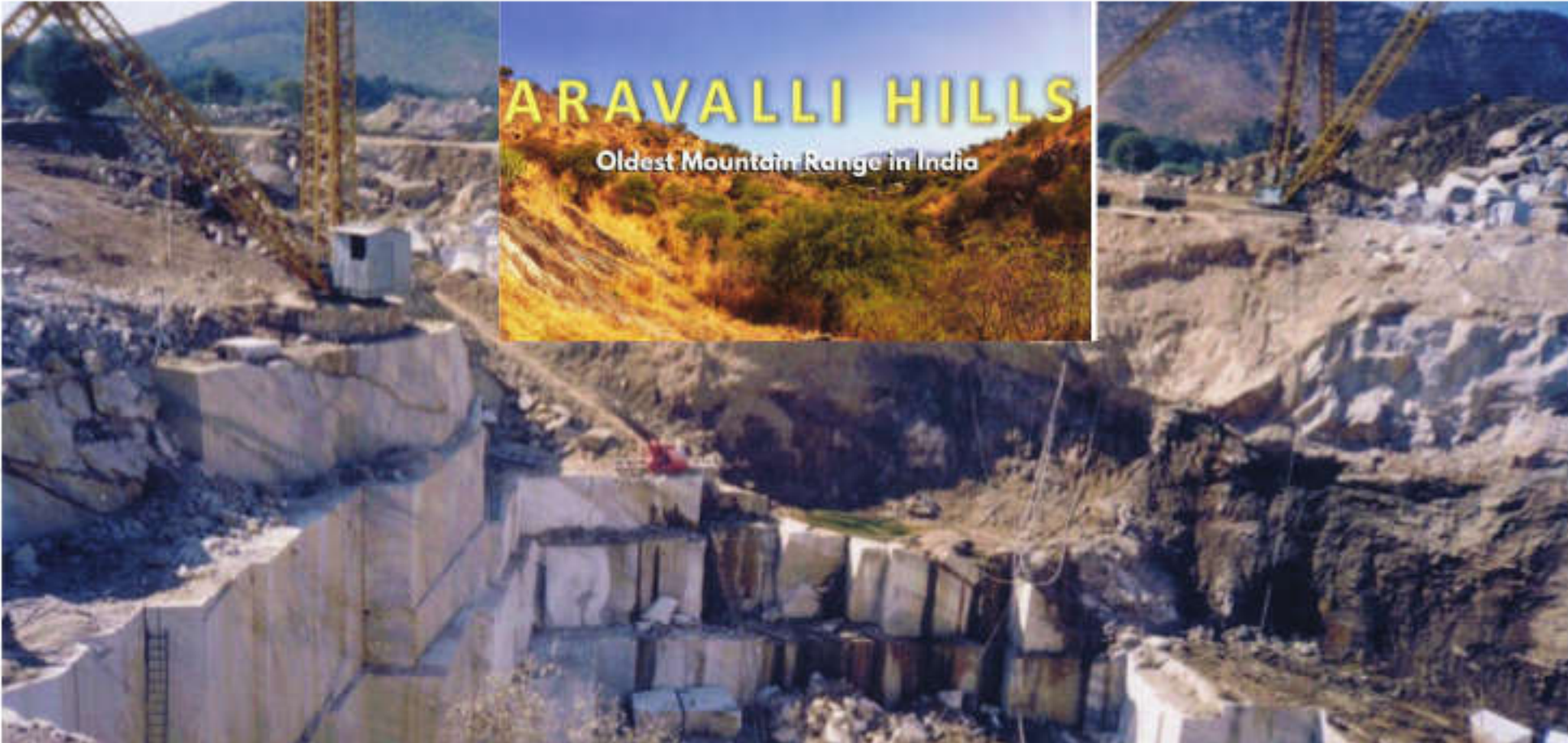
When the Supreme Court froze the grant of new mining leases across the Aravalli stretches of Rajasthan, Haryana, Gujarat and Delhi in November last year ~ pending a single landscape-wide Management Plan for Sustainable Mining, a blueprint drawn up through the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education to mark out where the hills may be cut and where they may not ~ it seemed, for a moment, that geology had won.

Then the Court did something rarer than a moratorium. On the twenty-ninth of December it stayed its own judgment, conceded that the definition needed a firmer scientific basis, and placed the question in abeyance pending a high-powered expert committee that must report by the end of this August.

A mountain range held in abeyance is a strange legal object. The order that put it there had fixed an elevation test ~ any landform rising a hundred metres or more above the surrounding ground would count as Aravalli ~ and the test was promptly attacked as too clinical by half, a metric that on careless application would have lifted protection from the low ridges, valleys and wildlife corridors that make up the greater part of the range.

The Court's retreat was an admission worth pausing on: that a living landscape cannot be carved into arbitrary contour lines, that the right unit of judgment is the whole system and not the isolated parcel.

The committee now at work will decide, in effect, how much of the oldest range on the subcontinent the law agrees to see ~ and



until it reports, the hills survive on a stay order and a promise, which is not protection but postponement. And the instant one accepts that a mountain must be judged whole, the mind travels, almost inevitably, from the ridge to the boardroom.

We have spent the past few years building, with real ambition, an architecture meant to hold companies to ecological account ~ and we have built it without a spine. The Securities and Exchange Board now requires the largest listed firms to file what is called BRSR Core: a Business Responsibility and Sustainability Report, distilled into nine measured indicators ~ greenhouse emissions, water, energy, waste, workplace safety, gender, inclusive growth and governance ~ and verified to a demanding standard.

The obligation reaches the top five hundred companies for the year just closed and widens to the top thousand the year after. The disclosure is real. The numbers are now assured. And almost nothing happens to a company that lies in them.

It is worth being precise about what that assurance does, because the comfort it offers is narrower than it sounds. The assurer examines the disclosed figure ~ the tonnes of carbon, the kilolitres of water ~ and forms an opinion on whether that figure is fairly stated.

The assurer does not walk the mined ridge. He does not reconcile satellite imagery against lease boundaries, transport records against royalty receipts, or a restoration

claim against the unhealed pit it describes. He certifies the number on the page. He does not police the act behind it.

A company can therefore report its emissions with scrupulous accuracy and still operate in a manner the law, the courts and the affected villages would recognise as ruinous. The figure is true. The story it implies is a fiction.

That gap between number and conduct is not a theoretical worry. An empirical study of the Nifty 50 last year found close to half the index ~ the concentration strongest in manufacturing and energy ~ practising some form of greenwashing, the dressing of an ordinary or damaging environmental record in the borrowed language of virtue.

The regulator itself has named the problem in unusually concrete terms: a whole-time member of SEBI catalogued, early last year, a manufacturer reporting no significant environmental impact while facing prosecution for environmental violations, a carmaker claiming recycled

inputs it could not substantiate, an oil and gas company simply omitting what it found inconvenient.

He warned, more recently, that the temptation will only grow as assurance deadlines bite and the gap between claim



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The Daily Star

The growing cancer crisis among Bangladeshi women

Bangladesh has made significant progress in reducing child and maternal mortality and infectious diseases over the past few decades. But non-communicable diseases like breast cancer and cervical cancer are still rapidly expanding. Every year, an estimated 13,000-15,000 women develop breast cancer and 8,000-9,000 women develop cervical cancer in the country.

In fact, breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among women (nearly 36 percent), followed by cervical cancer (more than 11 percent). And women from poor, marginalised and underserved communities are bearing the greatest burden of these diseases.

Most patients seek medical care only when the disease reach late stages and treatment becomes more complex and expensive. As a result, the likelihood of recovery decreases substantially, families face significant financial hardship, and premature death often becomes unavoidable.

In a country where nearly three-quarters of health expenditure is still paid out of pocket, cancer is not merely a health issue

but a profound social and economic crisis, with multiple biological, social, environmental and health-system factors interacting to increase the risk.

The primary cause of cervical cancer is infection with the Human Papillomavirus (HPV). In Bangladesh, factors such as early initiation of sexual activity due to child marriage, frequent pregnancies, lack of awareness about menstrual hygiene, and limited access to regular health check-ups and screening elevate the risks.

In many rural and low-income households, safe and hygienic menstrual management remains out of reach. Many adolescent girls and women lack access to clean sanitary products, safe water, privacy or adequate information.

Social stigma and cultural taboo surrounding menstruation further discourage women from seeking appropriate health services. Longstanding, untreated infections and chronic inflammation may contribute to harmful changes in cervical cells and

worsen the HPV infection.

For breast cancer, advancing age, family history, obesity, physical inactivity, unhealthy dietary habits, environmental pollution, and prolonged exposure to chemicals and heavy metals are important risk factors. Lead pollution, has emerged as a growing public health concern in Bangladesh in recent years.

A large proportion of these batteries are recycled or discarded through unsafe and unregulated methods, which leads to toxic lead getting released into the environment, from where it can enter the human body and increase the risk of cancer.

Although the country has an extensive network of community clinics, union health and family welfare centres, and upazila health complexes, many of these facilities suffer from shortages of personnel, limited service capacity, inadequate supervision, insufficient equipment, and shortages of medicines.

The situation is even more challenging in urban areas, where effective primary

healthcare services are largely absent. Consequently, most people, especially women, lack access to regular health counselling, preventive screening, and early diagnosis services.

As a result, opportunities for early detection of breast and cervical cancer are often missed. In many unions and urban wards, women have little or no access to routine breast examinations, cervical cancer screening using visual inspection with acetic acid (VIA), health education, or risk identification services.

The shortage of trained community health workers, weak referral systems, and the absence of integrated electronic health information systems further complicate the situation.

Yet, cervical cancer is one of the most preventable cancers in the world, and breast cancer can be successfully treated in most cases if detected early. These cancers may become one of the greatest public health challenges facing Bangladesh in the coming decade, and addressing this crisis requires a coordinated national response now.

(To be Concluded)

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Encouraging

Sir, Apropos "India's Industrial growth accelerates to 5.1 per cent in May" (June 30), the encouraging rise in India's industrial output reflects the resilience of the domestic economy despite an uncertain global environment.

Healthy growth in manufacturing and electricity generation indicates that demand remains robust and economic activity is gradually gaining momentum.

However, sustaining this growth will require more than favourable seasonal factors such as higher electricity demand due to rising temperatures.

The government must continue to strengthen manufacturing through policy stability, improved infrastructure, easier access to credit for MSMEs, and faster implementation of industrial reforms. Equal emphasis should be placed on enhancing exports, encouraging private investment, and creating skilled employment opportunities.

At the same time, policymakers must remain cautious about global geopolitical



tensions, volatile commodity prices, and external demand uncertainties that could affect industrial performance in the coming months.

Yours, etc., Sanjay Chopra, Mohali, 30 June.

Boon or bane?

Sir, The Delhi government's proposal to exempt electric cars priced below Rs 30 lakh from road tax and registration fees from July 1 is welcome.

At least 10 other states including Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh offer similar reliefs. Delhi's latest decision, coming after its call to phase out all non-electric two- and three-wheelers

sold in phases from 2027, are especially consequential for one of the world's most polluted capitals.

But for these measures to work well, two other enabling infrastructures need to be speeded up. Delhi's EV dashboard shows it has 1,919 charging stations and 232 battery swapping points, but the numbers for satellite cities Gurugram and Noida are far fewer.

And without a safe, well-monitored EV disposal mechanism, the boom can soon turn into a bane.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 30 June.

Nation at odds

Sir, Apropos "Brexit dividend" published today, Britain remains a nation at odds with its imperial memory. Though the empire has long vanished, its stature as a global financial hub and business enabler for much of the former Commonwealth has endured.

That lingering influence has often reinforced a belief that Britain could chart

an exceptional course, insulated from the constraints faced by other mid-sized economies.

In many ways, that sentiment underpinned the confidence behind Brexit: a conviction that echoes of imperial reach could be translated into renewed national sovereignty and economic advantage.

The years since have been sobering and Britain is compelled to gradually rebuild trade relationships, adapt to new commercial realities, and demonstrate resilience in sectors such as finance, technology and services.

Yet the greater challenge lies elsewhere. Political fragmentation, frequent changes in leadership, regional strains, and growing public discontent have eroded the aura of assured governance that once defined Britain.

For a country that gave the world the idea of stable parliamentary rule under the long shadow of Pax Britannica, this loss of political cohesion is perhaps more profound than any economic setback.

Yours, etc., R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai, 29 June.



NOW AND AGAIN

UNEXPECTED ADVENTURE

epaper.thestatesman.com



An upcoming exhibition showcases the artwork of Emily Eden in the 1830s

ARTS PAGE 3

The Sunday Tribune

SPECTRUM



Beverly Gage's 'This Land is Your Land' chronicles 250 years of the American dream

BOOKS PAGE 4

CHANDIGARH | 5 JULY 2026

The Army Uniforms 2026 regulations are really about memory, identity and the stories soldiers carry

SHIV KUNAL VERMA

THE Indian Army's recently released Uniforms 2026 regulations have generated considerable discussion, largely because they are being viewed as another step in shedding the colonial inheritance that has accompanied the Army since Independence. That interpretation is not entirely misplaced. Yet it is also incomplete.

Uniforms have never merely been about the cloth, badges, ceremonial distinctions or the arrangement of accoutrements. They are repositories of institutional memory, carrying within them the accumulated experiences of generations of soldiers, the victories and defeats of campaigns long forgotten by the public, and the values an army seeks to transmit from one generation to the next. Seen in that context, the new regulations deserve to be viewed not as an exercise in tailoring, but as part of a larger conversation about identity, history and the future direction of one of India's most respected institutions.

The temptation, of course, is to interpret every such change through the prism of decolonisation. There is a certain political attractiveness in doing so, for it allows complex historical processes to be reduced to a simple narrative of casting off the vestiges of foreign rule. The reality is considerably more nuanced.

By the time the British Indian Army emerged as one of the most effective military institutions in Asia, it had itself undergone a profound transformation at Indian hands.

The Sikh Wars of the 1840s demonstrated to the British that military effectiveness in the subcontinent could not be achieved through rigid adherence to European practice alone. The armies of Maharaja Ranjit Singh represented a formidable fusion of indigenous martial traditions and modern military organisation. Many of the adaptations that followed in dress, fieldcraft and military culture owed as much to lessons learned in India as they did to ideas imported from Britain. Even khaki, now universally associated with soldiering, emerged from the dust and heat of the subcontinent rather than from the parade grounds of Europe.

The story of military uniforms in India has, therefore, never been one of simple inheritance. It has been a continuous process of adaptation, borrowing and evolution. Independent India inherited this complex legacy in 1947. At the time, the preservation of military cohesion mattered far more than symbolic change. The nation faced Partition, war in Jammu and Kashmir and enormous uncertainty. The Army retained its regimental system, traditions and much of its institutional structure because continuity was essential. It proved to be a wise decision. The institution that emerged from those turbulent years would go on to fight every major conflict in Independent India's history, earning new honours and creating traditions entirely its own.

Today, however, India is no longer a newly Independent nation searching for its footing. The defining battles of the modern Indian soldier were fought not under imperial colours, but under the Tricolour. From the mountains of Kashmir to the icy heights of Siachen, from the deserts of Rajasthan to the ridges of Kargil, successive generations have built a military legacy that belongs exclusively to Independent India. It is, therefore, natural that the Army should periodically reassess how it presents itself.

Yet there is another aspect of this discussion that deserves equal attention.

Over the years, not only within the military but also across several paramilitary organisations, uniforms have gradually acquired a tendency towards excess. Decorative cords, flashes, badges, aiguillettes and assorted accoutrements have multiplied. The intention is invariably honourable. Every insignia tells a story. Every distinction seeks to recognise achievement, heritage or service. But there comes a point where ornamentation begins to distract from the very qualities it is intended to celebrate.

The finest military uniforms possess an elegance rooted in restraint. Their purpose is not to draw attention to themselves but to the soldiers wearing them. When too many embellishments compete for attention, uniforms risk becoming caricatures rather than symbols of professional confidence. An army secure in its identity does not require excessive adornment to command respect. It earns that respect through discipline, competence and performance.

The same principle applies to military ceremony. A Passing Out Parade remains among the most moving occasions in a soldier's life. It marks the transition from cadet to commissioned officer and draws its power from solemnity rather than spectacle. The measured cadence of marching boots, the bark of commands, the anticipation visible on the faces of the cadets and the pride of their families require little embellishment.

Increasingly, however, one encounters attempts to make such ceremonies more theatrical, with elaborate running commentaries intended to explain every movement on the parade ground. The intention is undoubtedly to make proceedings more accessible to guests, but there is a danger that constant explanation diminishes rather than enhances the dignity of the occasion. Military ceremonies derive their authority from understatement.

I was reminded of this while filming Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw as Reviewing Officer at the Indian Military Academy's Passing Out Parade in 2002. The ceremony itself possessed a solemnity that required no embellishment. When Manekshaw finally addressed the young officers, he did so with characteristic economy. "If you fail, don't come back. No one will look at you. Even your *gharwali* will not look at you." Beneath the humour lay a timeless military truth. Soldiers are ultimately judged not by the complexity of their uniforms, the number of badges they wear or the splendour of ceremonial display, but by professional competence, leadership and performance in the field. If there is one note of caution that



PHOTOS BY THE WRITER



TRIBUNE PHOTO

Uniforms, badges and distinctions matter not because of their appearance but because of the stories attached to them. Every regiment possesses its own folklore, battle cries, customs and symbols. Generations of officers and soldiers have lived and died beneath these symbols.

should accompany the current enthusiasm for reform, it is the danger of assuming that everything inherited from the past is somehow tainted by its origins. Institutions such as the Indian Army endure not because they periodically reinvent themselves, but because they possess the wisdom to distinguish between traditions that merely reflect historical circumstance and those that continue to serve an enduring purpose.

The architects of the old British Indian Army, whatever their political motivations, possessed a deep understanding of Indian society and of what motivates men in combat. Military theorists may speak of national objectives, strategic interests and political aims, but soldiers rarely fight for abstractions. They fight for the men beside them. They fight because loyalty to comrades, platoons, companies and regiments creates bonds stronger than fear itself. The regimental system evolved because generations of military leaders understood this simple truth.

Perhaps this is where discussions of military reform occasionally lose sight of what gives military institutions their strength. Uniforms, badges and distinctions matter not because of their appearance but because of the stories attached to them. Every regiment possesses its own folklore, battle cries, customs and symbols. These are the threads that bind generations together. An officer commissioned today inherits not merely a uniform but a narrative stretching back through decades, and sometimes centuries, of service.

The Rajput Regiment's red and blue hackle provides a good example. To generations of Rajputs, the sight of that distinctive plume evokes an immediate emotional response. Its origins, however, lie not in some committee room but in the field. Battalions of the old 7 Rajput Group operating through the rhododendron forests of the Naga Patkai are said to have plucked the bright flowers and placed



British Colours stored at IMA. PHOTO BY THE WRITER

them in their blue *pagris*. Over time, a battlefield habit evolved into a regimental distinction.

Similar stories accompany the hackles of the Grenadiers, the Kumaon Regiment, the Brigade of the Guards and the Naga Regiment, to name just a few. To the uninitiated, they are merely adornments. To those who wear them, they are repositories of memory.

This is why the debate over military symbols is rarely as straightforward as it appears. Soldiers do not become attached to traditions because of who first designed them. They become attached because those traditions become intertwined with regimental memory. Generations of officers and soldiers have lived and died beneath these symbols. Many who first wore them have long since passed away. Others remain, carrying memories of campaigns fought under circumstances very different from those faced by the Army today. Their emotional response to change deserves neither dismissal nor ridicule. Institutions that endure understand that symbols are powerful precisely because they connect the living with those who came before.

The same applies to Battle Honours. Every regiment carries its history upon its Colours and insignia.

Behind every honour lies sacrifice. Real blood was shed to earn those distinctions. Some were won under the Union Jack, many under the Tricolour, but all were purchased at a cost measured in human lives. The young soldier who fell at Flanders, Gallipoli or El Alamein had no more control over the politics of his age than the soldier who fell in Kashmir, 1965, 1971 or Kargil. To erase one from institutional memory while celebrating the other would be to misunderstand the very nature of military history. Regiments do not remember governments. They remember sacrifice.

The Army Uniforms 2026 regulations therefore raise questions that go well beyond tailoring. The issue is not whether a badge, a lanyard or a ceremonial distinction originated during the colonial era. The more important question is whether it continues to contribute to the identity, cohesion and effectiveness of the institution that inherited it. Where the answer is no, change becomes both necessary and desirable. Where the answer is yes, caution is warranted, for traditions once discarded are seldom recovered.

The Indian Army's greatest strength has always been its ability to evolve without severing its connection to the past. That balance remains as important today as it was in 1947. For, an army is not defined by the cloth it wears, but by the stories, sacrifices and memories that the cloth represents. An army that forgets its history risks losing its soul. An army that refuses to evolve risks becoming a museum. The art lies in avoiding both extremes, preserving what gives meaning while discarding what no longer serves a purpose.

One hopes the latest changes continue that tradition, for it is that delicate balance, rather than any particular uniform, that has sustained the Indian Army through generations of war and peace.

— The writer is a military historian

BOOKS

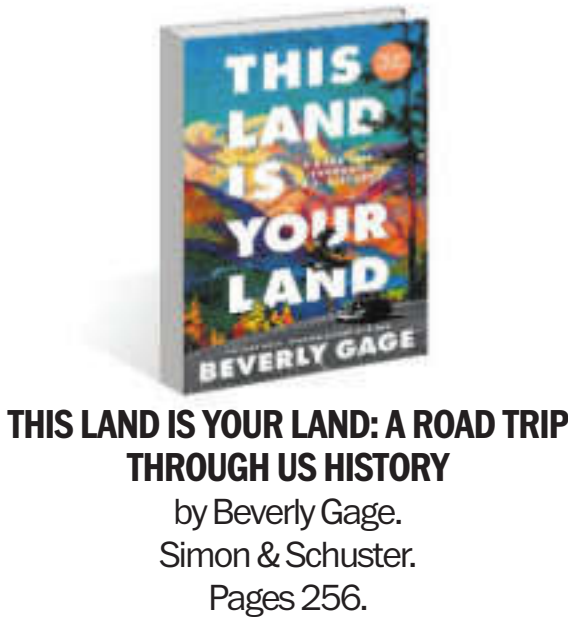
250 yrs of the American dream

RAJNISH WATTAS

WAY back in 2007, I remember how Chicago was abuzz with excitement on the eve of July 4th. The crowning jewel of the Independence Day celebrations was, of course, the magnificent symphony of fireworks and pyrotechnics reflecting over the vast, dark waters of Lake Michigan. I can only imagine the scale of excitement gripping the United States as it celebrates its ‘Semiquincentennial’ — the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

It is a moment of profound national reflection, and a perfect backdrop for Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Beverly Gage’s new book, ‘This Land Is Your Land: A Road Trip Through US History’.

Gage’s seminal work offers a deeply introspective and historically rich narrative born from a simple premise: experiencing history the way everyday Americans do. Rather than remaining “holed up in the archives”, she spent a significant portion of 2023 and 2024 on the road, criss-



THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND: A ROAD TRIP THROUGH US HISTORY
by Beverly Gage.
Simon & Schuster.
Pages 256.

crossing the nation to visit approximately 300 historical sites, museums, souvenir shops, and battlefield re-enactments.

The result is a chronicle framed around 13 foundational historical sites and moments that continue to define the American consciousness.

The book unfolds chronologically, and the first national icon we encounter is George Washington. Gage presents him in his full complexity: the first President was a fierce votary of lofty democratic goals,

and in a glaring contradiction to his stated moral stance, was also a master slaveholder on his Virginia plantation.

As Gage illustrates, the economic engine of the early American republic, particularly agriculture, demanded the brutal efficiency of slave labour. This and other profound ethical compromises pockmarked the moral sheen of the newborn nation.

It wasn’t just Black Americans who bore the brunt; the systematic exploitation and displacement of Native Americans further strained the grand, universal proclamations of 1776.

Gage forces the reader to confront how hollow those immortal words must have sounded to the marginalised: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

‘This Land Is Your Land’ spans the geography of America’s meteoric rise as a scientific and industrial powerhouse. We are introduced to the relentless architects of modern capitalism and innovation, such as Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, and

even the eccentric creators behind Coca-Cola’s secret formula.

A pivotal stop on Gage’s itinerary is Chicago. To commemorate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ arrival in the New World, the city hosted the monumental Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. The Expo became a global talking point, a gleaming ‘White City’ that showcased America’s arrival as a premier global empire.

The author seamlessly updates American history through the turbulent 20th century. The haunting landscape of the world’s first atomic bomb blast in New Mexico is a site that fundamentally altered warfare, and geopolitics.

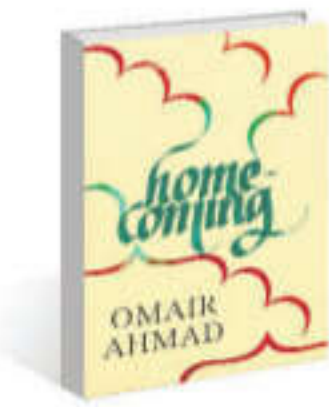
Reviewing the book, acclaimed critic AO Scott notes: “This book is ideal for history buffs and anyone looking for a ‘warts-and-all’ journey through the American past.”

For those watching from afar the ongoing evolution of the superpower, Gage’s book stands as the definitive armchair travelogue through a complicated, remarkable, and contradictory history.

— **The reviewer is former principal, Chandigarh College of Architecture**

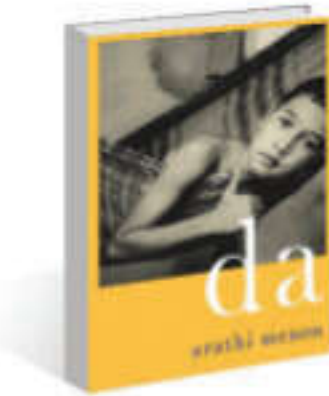


BACKFLAP



HOMECOMING
by Omair Ahmad.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 180. ₹499

After years of trying to belong to Lucknow, Hassan meets a kindred spirit — Ahmed Sahib, an elderly man of quiet warmth, who gives him the gift of unspoken friendship. He also leads him to love — to Samina. Spare, nostalgic and moving, Omair Ahmad’s new novella is a meditation on love, lost and gained, and on ideas of family, home and belonging.



DA
by Arathi Menon.
Picador India.
Pages 185. ₹399

Inquisitive 13-year-old Ved’s entire universe is his adoptive father, Da. Their relationship harbours a secret that could destroy them both. Da is gay at a time when Section 377 labels homosexuality a crime. Set in 2013, it’s a tender story of a boy caught between devotion and fear, chronicling the courage it takes to love someone the world refuses to accept.



MY FIRST IK ONKAR
by Sarita Saraf.
Illustrated by Parmmeet Arora Bori.
AdiDev Press.
Pages 28. ₹599

The Mool Mantra is the opening section of Guru Granth Sahib. These words by the first Sikh Guru have brought comfort and strength to the Sikhs for centuries. This book presents a simple translation of the Mool Mantra along with illustrations by Parmmeet Arora Bori. It aims at making children understand Guru Nanak’s cherished words.

Rani Jind Kaur storms back Forgotten battle of Narnaul

SONYA J NAIR

COUCHED in fiction, ‘Fourteen Springs of Separation’ allows Jind Kaur — the legendary queen of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the mother of Duleep Singh — to make a majestic re-entry into public memory. Sakoon Singh writes with fervent purpose and her background in academics shines as her work benefits from meticulous research. The book pays homage to the oral traditions of the *dhadhis* (folk singers) who have sung of the Queen and whose narratives have been crucial to the folk traditions of Punjab.

Told through multiple narrators, the novel reads like an investigative thriller as the protagonists — Sam, Mehr, Angad and Shaminder, who come from different walks of life — converge because of their interest in Jind Kaur. It is through their eyes that we see her story unfold.

The novel leaps over centuries with ease as it goes back and forth, weaving a tapestry that intersperses Jind Kaur’s life with the issues that plague the world and, in particular, Punjab today. The Queen comes out in vivid detail. Her legendary punk blazes across the pages as she restlessly seeks a way to reconnect with her son and avenge the wrongdoings of the Empire.

At one point, while being served tea in Queen Victoria’s presence, she makes pointed remarks upon recognising the teacup as it was part of the loot that the British took away from the *toshakhana*. And this happens while she is expected to curry favour with Victoria. One cannot help but admire her characterisation.

Sakoon Singh has fleshed out all the characters and ensured that no one is lost in the polyphony. One ends up thinking of Dan Brown’s ‘The Da Vinci Code’ or Amitav Ghosh’s ‘Ibis Trilogy’ or ‘Gun Island’ in the course of reading the novel.

The author ensures that the fictionality of the narrative is remembered while retaining the historicity. And this balancing act is



FOURTEEN SPRINGS OF SEPARATION
by Sakoon Singh.
Rupa.
Pages 326. ₹395

crucial and indeed ethical.

Sakoon Singh tries to draw attention to the customary ways in which women with strong personalities are painted as immoral or power hungry in order to de-legitimise their stories, or to justify their exclusion from the histories that are theirs to claim.

The novel is written with a clear sense of purpose, a balance of passion and calm, fervent love and scholarly detachment. It is history with the gaze fixed firmly on the here and now. This level of control over the urge to chronicle events of the past and yet maintain creativity is enviable.

The novel loves its Queen. And thanks to it, the tale of one of India’s strongest queens storms back into public consciousness. The title is an acknowledgement of the number of years Jind Kaur was separated from her son.

Jind Kaur’s story brings with it the urgent questions of bodily autonomy, gender bias, maternal rights, colonial scarring and the alternate ways of reading history — not just from books, but from the rhythms of the land and its people.

The book is brilliantly multilingual, with the songs of the *dhadhis* in praise of Jind Kaur and the lovely cadences of Punjabi, as characters slip in and out of languages.

Reading it made me feel that I too was in the presence of a *dhadhi*, a bard.

— **The reviewer teaches at All Saints’ College, Thiruvananthapuram**

MAJ GEN RAJ MEHTA (RETD)

APLEASANT surprise awaits readers of ‘The Battle of Narnaul’. Here is a book that moves beyond colonial accounts of the victors to indigenous storytelling that evokes awe and pride.

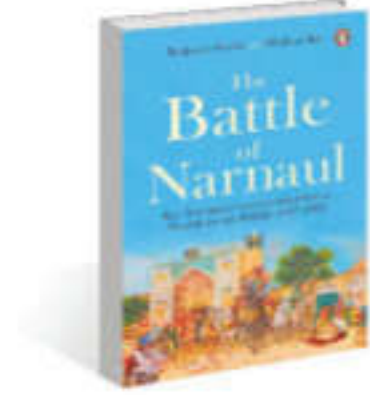
The book is divided into three parts: Rao Tula Ram’s ascent to power in Rewari; his role during the 1857 Mutiny, culminating in a fierce face-off at Narnaul which was more than a mere “skirmish”; and finally, how Tula Ram escaped tactical defeat to diplomatically attempt a regional Great Game. This strategy is presented as a ‘Global Plot’, involving a proposed Russian attack through Persia and Afghanistan on British India. Tula Ram’s early death led to discussions on the “what if” possibilities.

Remarkably, 53 chapters, 19 appendices and scholarly notes are packed into a spiffy 304-page book without impeding the narrative flow.

Rewari, a vast kingdom with ancient origins, came under British control after the defeat of the Marathas in 1803. Due to East India Company machinations and Ahirwal family disputes settled through shrewd British intervention, what Rao Tula Ram inherited in 1839 at the age of 14 was just 87.5 villages generating ₹5 lakh in annual revenue — along with residual angst.

A day’s journey from Delhi, Rewari held strategic value in 1857, controlling access to south Haryana and Rajasthan. When the British sought Rewari’s assistance after their bloody recapture of Delhi that September, Tula Ram — already supporting the rebels under Emperor Bahadur Shah’s notional leadership — prepared for war instead.

On November 10, 1857, a British column of 1,500 troops under Colonel JG Gerrard departed from Delhi, swelling to 3,500 on the way. On November 16, the column halted for rest at Nasibpur on the outskirts of Narnaul. That’s when a hastily assembled, 5,000-strong Rewari force launched a sur-



THE BATTLE OF NARNAUL
by Kulpreet Yadav & Madhur Rao.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 304. ₹599

prise attack, with Tula Ram conceiving the opening cavalry charge that mauled the British right flank, killing Colonel Gerrard and other officers.

Firm British leadership as well as superior firepower and tactics ultimately turned the tables during the three-hour battle, with the brave but poorly synergised Rewari force suffering 400-500 dead or wounded against 80 British casualties. Tula Ram himself narrowly escaped capture.

Hagiography exaggerates losses on both sides; in truth, Narnaul was a battle of medium intensity, not among the Mutiny’s fiercest. Even so, Tula Ram’s choice to strike a complacent British force lends the battle a genuinely intuitive feel.

The book has considerable merit. It correctly identifies religion as a unifying, and not a disruptive, factor in 1857, and candidly lists princely states that sided with the British. Much of the content is backed by deep research as well as both factual and graphic evidence.

While references to Tula Ram are needlessly romanticised, the discordant leadership and poor preparedness of the Rewari force are not glossed over. Above all, the book captures the extraordinary vision and grit of a king without a kingdom, who sought to rally fellow princes behind Russia in its Great Game rivalry with Britain.

The best takeaway from the book is this fresh genre helping Indians rediscover their true military history.

Unravelling the purity and lasting depth of Firaq’s poetry

SHABIHUL HASNAIN

THIS book is perhaps the first of its kind on Firaq Gorakhpuri, presenting his true place in Urdu literature to scholars as well as common readers. Firaq was a poet born out of Indian soil — rooted in its history, culture, and traditions.

Being an English scholar, a student of Sanskrit, and a man widely read in logic, ethics, philosophy, and world history, his sensibility was of a very high order. Such depth was not easily grasped.

Firaq’s poetry reflects the spirit of *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram*. Drawing from both the romantic sensibility of English poetry and the metaphysical depth of Sanskrit thought, his verse forms a quiet bridge between East and West, speaking equally to the heart and the mind.

His critics, especially the traditionalists, often failed to understand this deeper music and vision. With their traditional outlook, they even labelled him a “Hindu *shayar*”. Such has often been the fate of great minds like Socrates, Gandhi, and Ghalib — to be truly understood only after their time has passed.

Firaq’s poetry gives *suroor* — not a passing intoxication, but a lasting depth.

His language may seem simple, but its meanings unfold in layers, taking the *ghazal* to rare heights.

Wo aalam mujh par hota hai jab fikr-e-ghazal main karta hoon, Khud apne khayalon ko, humdum, main haath lagate darta hoon.

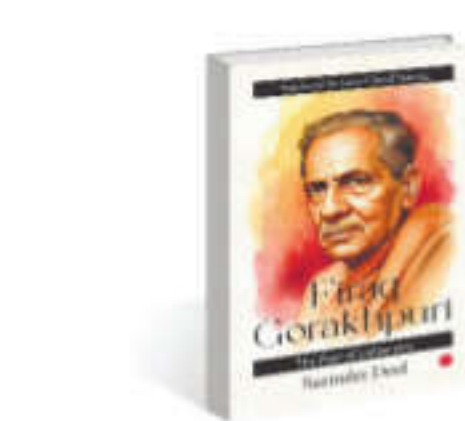
(When a thought for a *ghazal* comes to me, I become like a man possessed. I tremble, fearing that even the slightest careless touch might shatter it.)

Firaq’s language, a natural blending of *Khadi Boli*, Hindi and Urdu, flows freely, untouched by rigid ideology or dogma. For him, poetry remained pure, beyond narrow classifications. *Husn ko ek husn hi samjhe nahin, aur ai Firaq, Mehrban, namehrban kya kya samajh baithe the hum.*

(We could not see beauty as merely beauty, O Firaq — What all notions of kindness and cruelty we imposed upon it.)

No one can fully capture Firaq. His knowledge and vision were vast, placing him in a higher realm of Urdu poetry. Surinder Deol has done a careful job in selecting Firaq’s verses.

As a personality, too, Firaq left a lasting



FIRAQ GORAKHPURI: THE POET OF INDIANNESS
by Surinder Deol.
Rupa.
Pages 383. ₹495

impression. In *mushairas*, his baritone voice and striking presence would hold the audience spellbound. This book, however, does not dwell much on his wit and humour — an aspect beautifully brought out earlier in Mushtaq Naqvi’s ‘*Firaq ke Lateefey*’.

The Government of India recognised his contribution with several awards, including a postage stamp issued in his name. The cover of this book thoughtfully uses the portrait from that stamp.

Urdu poetry has been shaped by giants like Mir, Ghalib, Dagh, Momin, and Zauq. Yet Firaq stands apart. His poetry draws from Vedic imagery, Indian villages, and

lived cultural experience. It carries within it the spirit of *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb* — inclusive and harmonious.

His poetry feels like a bouquet of Indian flowers — the purity of the lotus and the fragrance of the rose — woven together in the delicate strands of Urdu. This fresh expression unsettled many traditional poets accustomed to fixed imagery. Yet Firaq was equally at ease with Islamic culture and shared a strong intellectual bond with poets like Josh Malihabadi. Intizar Husain rightly observed that with Firaq, the *ghazal* began a new journey; he was, in many ways, the guardian spirit of the new *ghazal*.

A long-time professor at Allahabad University, Firaq qualified for the PCS and ICS, but resigned to join Mahatma Gandhi’s Non-Cooperation Movement, for which he was imprisoned for 18 months. Gandhi is said to have described him as a “spoiled genius of India”, a remark that speaks as much of his brilliance as his restless individuality.

His masterpiece ‘*Gul-e-Naghma*’ earned him both the Jnanpith Award and the Sahitya Akademi Award. His other important works include ‘*Gul-e-Rana*’, ‘*Rooh-e-Kainaati*’, ‘*Roop*’, ‘*Mashaal*’, ‘*Shabnamistan*’, ‘*Shola-e-Saaz*’, ‘*Ramz-o-Kinayat*’, and ‘*Hindola*’.

He used Hindi words and metaphors beautifully, especially in ‘*Rubais*’: *Moti ki kaan, ras ka saagar hai badan, Darpan akash ka sarasar hai badan, Angdaai mein rajhans tole hue par, Ya doodh bhara Mansarovar hai badan.* (Her body is a treasury of pearls, an ocean suffused with nectar-like sweetness. It serves as a complete mirror of the expansive sky. In the grace of her stretching form, she appears like a swan, her wings poised and measured for flight — or like Mansarovar, a tranquil lake filled with milky radiance.)

Understanding Firaq is not easy even in simple Hindustani; translating him is an even greater challenge. In this respect, Surinder Deol, who has earlier written on Faiz as well, makes a sincere effort by presenting the *ashaar* in Roman and Devanagari scripts, along with English translations. This offers a three-dimensional way of approaching each *sher* and enriches the reader’s experience.

The rendering of such gossamer-like emotions and subtle thoughts into English is almost an impossible task, and it takes courage to attempt it. Surinder Deol does so with a fair measure of success.

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

Lessons for the pampered



TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

FROM time to time, I revisit my old columns to make sure that I am not repeating myself and to find something fresh to write about. This time, I discovered that two past columns, written years ago, could happily be lifted and they would still be relevant. Obviously, the more things change, the more they remain the same, as a wise man once remarked.

The columns I am referring to were on the mayhem that was created when Russia and then America decided to abandon Afghanistan and run back after having destroyed a country that had defeated them. They left the devastated country in the hands of the very Taliban they had vowed to exterminate and what was worse, they left behind a huge cache of weapons that fell into the very hands they did not want to inherit them. Few will forget the pathetic sight of desperate Afghans trying to board the planes that were going to ferry the *goras* back to safety, some even tossing little babies for soldiers to take with them.

Now tell me, how different from the above is what the same *goras* have done to the Middle East? Far from getting rid of the *mullahs* and Hezbollah, they are now desperately seeking some kind of face-saving deal with the Iranians, who hold all the Trump cards (forgive the bad pun). What is worse, they have plunged the entire world (including their own UN allies) into an economic crisis that shows no sign of easing. The 'Muddle East' and the locked Strait of Hormuz are going to be their nemesis in almost the same way that Afghanistan was/is.

European nations are helplessly battling the double whammy of the unprecedented heat-

wave and their failing economies by blaming what they have always done: it's all because of illegal immigrants.

The UK has seen six PMs in the past decade and all they can do is watch their once prosperous country slide into a deeper mess than ever imagined. Their economy, their once-famous National Health Service (NHS) and their young have devolved into total anarchy. Their young people, pampered by the Welfare State, are not interested in higher education or hard work. The family and the Church — that kept people sane and civil — are no longer the institutions

This is no time to say, 'We told you so,' but all careless actions have punishing consequences

they once were and their idyllic countryside has more immigrants from East Europe and Asia than they can handle. I am convinced that their prosperous post-war society was built and sustained by the loot that all the ex-imperial powers had brought back from their erstwhile colonies. Now that they have run out of that resource, there is nothing left. Brexit was the last nail in their coffin that permanently estranged them from the rest of Europe.

The high-minded lectures that are given to us by France, Belgium, Portugal, Spain and England about the abuse of human rights in Africa and Asia sound so hollow now when their own countries are attacking those of another colour or nationality. If India was blamed for being casteist, can we now ask whether they were not divided by class and feudalism? And if we look

deep enough, what the British did to destroy religious harmony in the subcontinent by partitioning it into areas of Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist faiths is in no small measure responsible for the harvest of hatred we have to now reap.

Let us come now to the dreadful heatwave sweeping over this once temperate zone. For years, climate guardians had been warning the developed nations about their profligate overuse of the earth's resources. Their response was to point to the developing world and place unfair restrictions on the use of coal as it was polluting the world. Today, we all know who is suffering the most as the hot winds from the Sahara, coupled with the El Nino hovering over the Pacific, are singing their own lands. This is no time to say, 'We told you so,' but all careless actions have punishing consequences. To read and see on our TV screens people in countries such as Switzerland now frantically buying air-conditioners to cool their homes, is a bizarre sight. There have actually been days when New Delhi has had lower day temperatures than London, Barcelona or Basel! What is worse, the poor dears don't know how to deal with such heat.

Their homes are designed to keep heat in and have low ceilings, double-glazed windows and no provision for cross-ventilation. The power consumption has reached levels that can no longer be supplied so schools and offices have to be shut down. The tar on the roads is melting, railway tracks are coming apart... literally a meltdown.

Finally, a word on the ongoing FIFA World Cup mania. Look at all the teams and what do you see? Barring Messi and one or two others, most of the brilliant players are from Africa or the Caribbean. Even that unheard-of little Cape Verde (I'm not sure where it is on the world's map) has humbled mighty opponents. England managed to just about defeat Congo, while Scotland quietly bowed out of the tournament.

Reflect on these gutsy coloured players — many of them probably did not even have proper gear or the kind of high-protein diet that the pampered European teams get. A lesson there? I think so. Will it be learnt? I don't think so.

— *The writer is a social commentator*

The cruellest, taxing month



AVAY SHUKLA

TS ELIOT had dubbed April as "the cruellest month" in one of his poems. I am sure he had his reasons for doing so, but it does reveal that he was not one of the four crore Indian taxpayers. For, which is as decipherable as the Dead Sea Scrolls and needs an expensive CA to do the job.

I have just shelled out one-fourth of my annual income, comprising pension, interest from fixed deposits, a dash of capital gains, and a drizzle of royalties and remuneration for my books and articles from grudging editors and publishers. The wolf is not at my door yet, but it is getting closer every year. And, for the life of me, I cannot see the justice in the government looting a large portion of my coffers every year, without doing anything for me in return. Whatever happened to the adage — *No quid pro, no quid?*

I can understand a tax on my pension, since the government is entitled to recover some part of what it paid me for doing nothing for 35 years. I can also see the logic in taxing the interest on deposits, etc — it is passive income, unearned moolah I have not laboured for. But why capital gains? If property prices go up, it's not because of the government, it's because of relentless population growth, rapid urbanisation because the villages continue to languish in poverty and lack of development, because of the dismal failure of the Smart City programme.

The government's only contribution is to ensure that the cities keep deteriorating, but will take its undeserved cut for any price increase. Take shares: they go up, in spite of a failing economy and declining FDI and FPI (the government's contribution!), because of insider trading, price rigging, cronyism, and a gullible retail investor. The inexplicable rise of the Sensex has nothing to do with economic logic and the government's contribution again is zero, if not negative. So why should Ms Sitharaman get a share of this gain?

Taxing what the editors and publishers pay me (after many reminders!) is a raid on my intellectual, if not personality, rights. Writers are doing a public service by

keeping alive the habit of reading, an activity (or lack of it) that is on ventilator support. Nobody reads nowadays, lacking the attention span to read more than 140 words, preferring reels and emojis. A recent study by the Booker Awards Institute reveals that only 4 per cent Indians read books (about the same number as those paying income tax — is there a connection here?).

Nobody other than Shashi Tharoor or Chetan Bhagat makes any money by writing, the rest of us get by on crumbs from the Amazon toast. We also take a huge risk every time we put pen to paper, not knowing when we might be hauled off to a police station for sedition, criminal defamation or contempt of court. I learn banks are now offering special FDs termed Bail Deposits: the interest on them starts at a low 4 per cent but goes up by 1 per cent for every year you stay out of jail; the full amount can be redeemed after eight years or whenever you are arrested, whichever is earlier.

Even the interest income from



It is when we have to render unto Caesar what is definitely not Caesar's

these deposits shall be taxable, with an 'anti-national' surcharge. There are rumours that insurance companies, sensing a great market opportunity, will shortly launch insurance policies to provide financial cover for arrests under UAPA and deportation under the Citizenship Act. Now that the Passport has been shown its place, they expect this market to grow at a CAGR of 20 per cent.

There used to be a time (which I can barely recall now) when the best things in life were supposed to be free. No longer. They are now taxed at 18 per cent GST. It is no coincidence that the words "taxidermist" and "tax-man" have their first three letters in common. The only difference between them is that the taxidermist skins you after you are dead, while the taxman does so while one is still alive. And the final question: now that it has been officially declared that no Indian has a document which provides "conclusive" proof of his citizenship, how come we still have to pay taxes as Indians?

— *The writer is a retired IAS officer*

The hardest goodbye

RASHMI OBEROI

NO one prepares you for the grand finale, the last goodbye. Watching a loved one fade is devastating, to say the least. While I did my best to prepare myself for this, when the time came, I was completely unprepared. There's unbearable grief, a void.

He was no ordinary man, my father; he was our warrior hero. A soldier who set infinite bars in soldiering, leadership, strategy, and acumen — displaying grit and everyday resilience in navigating personal adversity.

My father lost his right leg on the battlefield in 1965. He was only 24. What could have broken the spirit of any young man, Dad took it as a challenge. What a challenge it was!

He stuck it out for 40 years as an Infantryman and retired as the Vice Chief. It wasn't easy but with his sense of humour, perseverance and an uncommon zest for life, he did it. And brilliantly at that.

He was a General who held no place in his life for political or religious bigotry, or jingoism. He called a spade a spade, unbothered by the consequences. For him, what mattered above all was that one had to be a good person — in head and heart.

He did nothing for personal gain, and refused to surrender his values.

He was the founder-president of the War



Lt Gen Vijay Oberoi (Retd)
(October 10, 1941 – June 14, 2026)

Wounded Foundation and the founder-director of the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS). He remained deeply committed to the welfare and dignity of India's war-disabled soldiers, working tirelessly, day after

day, including fighting for their rights in courts, reminding the nation to not falter in giving them their due and the dignity and respect they deserved.

His legacy lives on through the people with whom he crossed paths. People who knew him speak of his military and strategic depth, his integrity and unwavering commitment to truth and loyalty to the Constitution, and the armed forces.

Now, when cynicism and selfishness are fashionable, he leaves behind an enduring legacy of sacrifice, courage, compassion, and love for the country and his family.

At times, life just sets things in motion — my moving back home to Panchkula in time instead of accompanying my husband on his last posting just when my parents' health started to decline. My father's cancer returned with a vengeance and each day I saw him fight it with all that he had... smiling fiercely and defiantly. But, in the end, he was tired and in pain and told me that it was time for him to go.

He slipped away gently like a brave soldier; with his loved ones surrounding him after a hard-fought battle. And yet, I was not ready. How can one be for the hardest goodbye?

Here's a final salute to an exceptional husband, father, grandfather, brother, friend, foe, relative and a legendary soldier! Some warriors live forevermore.

When Elvis met Ali, and no prejudice stood in the way



DIPANKAR GUPTA

IF you ever saw Elvis Presley and Muhammad Ali perform live, you would think they were aliens from another galaxy. Their talent was simply extraterrestrial; out of this world. Yet when the two met in Las Vegas in 1973, it wasn't as if two giant stars collided on that banner day. Instead, the greats melded into each other in mutual admiration.

Muhammad Ali, who loudly boasted that he was the "greatest", easily conceded the mantle to Elvis. In turn, Elvis acknowledged Ali as the "People's Champ".

Both Elvis and Ali grew up poor and in America's Deep South, which was racially divided and angrily bifurcated into Black versus White. Under these circumstances, one would have thought that Elvis would harbour racist feelings against the Black people,

and Ali would nurse hatred towards the White folks. Yet it did not happen that way.

Ali was an unknown Louisville boy till he won the Olympic gold in boxing in 1960. Seven years before that, in 1953, Sam Phillips, the owner of Sun Records, was dazzled by 18-year-old Elvis Presley, who came off the streets, paid \$4 and cut two records in his studio. Phillips called Elvis back a year later to commercially sing *'That's All Right'*, and the rest truly is history.

This number was first made famous by noted Black artiste, Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. Black or White, it did not bother Elvis. He sang what came closest to him. He was moved by Black music, particularly of the Gospel kind.

In an early interview with *The Charlotte Observer*, Elvis openly admitted: "Down in Tupelo, Mississippi, I used to hear old Arthur Crudup bang his box the way I do now, and I said if I ever got to the place I could feel how old Arthur felt, I'd be a music man like nobody ever saw."

Not just Crudup, but Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, BB King, Mahalia Jackson and many other Black singers were Elvis' idols, and he never forgot them. While some claim that Elvis stole Black music, Black artistes

themselves admired Elvis.

Arthur Crudup said that when Elvis sang the number he did first, *'That's All Right'*, he made it different, like a hillbilly record. Crudup went on to add, "But I liked it. Some people like the Blues, some don't. But the way he did it, everybody liked it."

Sammy Davis Jr, another legendary Black artiste and a member of Frank Sinatra's famous 'Rat Pack', rated Elvis "11 on a scale of one to 10 for his character and talent". BB King thought this of Elvis: "He had the looks, talent, he had everything." He also appreciated the fact that Elvis addressed him as "Sir". Whitney Houston and her mother, who was also a professional singer, confessed swooning in Elvis Presley's presence.

That is talent recognising talent free of colour prejudice. Those who have heard Muhammad Ali boasting and trash-talking his opponents might easily assume that he would also have a hostile attitude towards White boxing greats, but they would be wrong. From the time he was 14, Ali wanted to be like Rocky Marciano, who retired undefeated. Ali did not hesitate to concede that Marciano fought "like a bull". Next comes the unexpected humble admission: "I truly think that Marciano was better than Joe Fra-

zier and you saw what Frazier did to me."

Remember, Frazier handed Ali his first professional defeat in 1971. Yet Ali did not gloss over it. Of course, he won it back later, but that was a humiliating defeat. Not just Marciano, Ali also acknowledged other White boxers like the Canadian, George Chuvalo, and Henry Cooper, the British heavyweight boxer who was the first to knock down Ali before he recovered to win the fight. But that blew left Ali sagging on the ropes with glazed eyes. He later commented, with characteristic humour, that Cooper hit him so hard that "my ancestors in Africa felt it".

Ali admired Marciano when he was 14, heard Elvis when he was 15. In those years, the kids in Ali's Black neighbourhood in Louisville, Kentucky, were listening to Black artistes like Ray Charles and James Brown, but Ali was listening to Elvis. "When I was 15 and saw Elvis on TV," Ali recalled, "I wanted to be like Elvis." No trace of racist bias here, just as there was none in Elvis Presley. At the same time, Ali was very conscious of his Black heritage and of his affiliation with the Islamic faith, but when it came to measuring himself as a professional against others, colour was not a consideration.

Ali once said that when he heard Elvis had

bought his mother a pink Cadillac and a house, he vowed he would do the same. So when he won his first professional bout, Ali's mother got a pink Cadillac and when Ali won his second, his mother got a house. Elvis was his long-time role model. It is widely known that when Ali gifted Elvis a pair of boxing gloves, these were inscribed with the words: "Elvis, you are the Greatest." In return, Elvis presented Ali with a rhinestone bejewelled boxing robe on the back of which was written: "The People's Choice". That turned out to be an error, for Elvis wanted the words: "The People's Champ". Ali still wore it.

The most moving tribute that Elvis ever received was from Muhammad Ali. In 1985, Ali went to the graveside, heartbreak central for all Elvis fans, and sang Elvis' hit song, *'Don't Be Cruel'*. He did not bump and grind like Elvis, but did his best to imitate the legend. Let us end with this unforgettable Ali quote: "Nobody in boxing had the style, wit, speed and beauty of Ali and nobody in singing had everything like Elvis."

When Elvis met Ali, it was a picture-book shot of great meets great. At this golden moment, they were both the "Greatest" as no prejudice stood in their way.

— *The writer taught sociology at JNU*

As national records tumble, Indian track & field is gaining new momentum, but the athletes are still way behind world standards

FOR THE RECORD

VINAYAK PADMADEO

AFTER breaking the long-standing national record in women's long jump, Ancy Sojan spoke about consistency and how she and her team should be focusing on zoning in and around the 6.70 metres mark. The girl from Kerala's Thrissur district had just gone past Anju Bobby George's 22-year-old national record of 6.83m, set at the 2004 Athens Olympics, by clearing 6.88m at the National inter-state senior athletics championships in Bhubaneswar recently.

At the same meet, Sarvesh Kushare put Tejaswin Shankar's record of 2.29m to shade after he jumped 2.31m. He became the first Indian to cross the 2.30m mark in high jump. Ancy Sojan and Kushare's feats are part of a growing number of athletes who have rewritten the Indian record books this year alone.

A total of 26 national marks have been bettered over the course of a few months, none bigger than Gurindervir Singh's iconic 100m finish at the Federation Cup in Ranchi by clocking 10.09 seconds. Animesh Kujur registered the record that stood previously, 10.15s, only a day earlier in the heats.

Gurindervir's celebration where he tore away his bib number before the finish line and his statement — *"Indian gene tagde hai"* — were splashed all over social media.

So, has the Indian track and field turned over a new leaf and is it ready to challenge the world? If one looks at only the records, there is a positive vibe. Srabani Nanda, Sneha Shanuvalli, Sudeshna Shivankar and Tamanna clocked the season's best time of 43.85 seconds to win the women's 4x100m relay final to beat China at the Asian Relays Championships in China.

It was magical to see four Indian girls, from varied backgrounds, go toe-to-toe with China, and beat them to the finish line. But are they ready to take on the world? Surely not. A simple look at the World Athletics Top Lists, which shows the season's best timings in team and individual disciplines, and our Indian quartet are ranked 62nd in the world.

It shows a grim reality that Indian track and field has a long way to go to be taken as a serious global contender.

As per the Inspire Institute of Sport (IIS) sprints coach Saharsh Shah, hard work is the only way forward. "Getting close to 11 seconds is relatively easy. Any sprinter



Ancy Sojan has broken Anju Bobby George's 22-year-old record of 6.83m by clearing 6.88m. AP/PTI



Gulveer Singh (R) with his training partner and mentor Kartik Kumar. Gulveer Singh is the reigning national record holder in both men's 5000m and 10000m. PTI

with a few technical corrections and basic technique can get there. However, to get closer to the 10 seconds mark, not everything is about training alone. It has to do more with the mindset of the athlete, his recovery sessions, using high-performance programmes and biomechanical testing to reach there," Shah said.

"Let's use a toothpaste tube as an example. When the tube is new, it is easier to squeeze out the paste. As it nears the finish, one has to squeeze harder and harder. It is the same in sprints. Having said that, all these results create momentum and everyone one who is involved is forced to work harder to get better and better," he added.

It is not all doom and gloom as both Sarvesh Kushare in high jump and Rohit Yadav in javelin are among the leading athletes in the world. Kushare's record of 2.31 metres makes him joint third in the ranking with Great Britain's Kimani Jack. Yadav's gold-winning attempt of 87.05 metres makes him second on the list after Sri Lanka's Romesh Pathirage's monstrous throw of 92.62m this season.

The Athletics Federation of India (AFI), although cautious, states its decentralised training system is starting to show results. Previously, the track and field stars were being trained in national camps. Now, all these stars are free to train with their coaches at centres run by the Reliance Foundation, and JSW, while the jumpers



Sarvesh Kushare is the first Indian to cross the 2.30m mark in high jump. REUTERS

are training at the Anju Bobby George Academy in Bengaluru.

"The decentralised programme is clearly working. All these results make us happy and are a good build-up towards a healthy bench strength. Sarvesh, Gulveer, Vishal TK have been performing consistently," AFI former president and chairman of the selection committee Adille Sumariwalla said, talking about the host of records being broken.

"Not for a second am I saying that sud-



Several national marks have been bettered this year, none bigger than Gurindervir Singh's 100m finish. ANI

denly we are world class, but 20-odd records have been broken and this is a good indicator, but we still have a long way to go. When I saw 15 runners go under the Asian Games qualifying standard (1.48.80s) in 800m, I was shaken. We were used to seeing one runner way ahead. Now you do not know who is winning from the line-up. This is real progress," he added.

THE DOPING TAINT

Despite the positive vibes, Indian athletics is also topping the charts for the wrong reasons. India tops the Athletics Integrity Unit's (AIU) global list of doping. Kenya is second with 148 offenders, followed by Russia with over 60 names on the list.

One reigning 1500m national record holder, KM Deeksha, who ran 4:04.78 seconds to register the mark last year, is facing a four-year suspension after out-of-competition testing showed the presence of anabolic steroids in her sample.

Sports watchers are quick to point out that both the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and AIU are keeping a special watch on Indian elite athletes.

AIU has already put India on the list of extremely risky countries where the number of doping cases is consistently higher. The developments put a serious question mark on India's push to become a global sports superpower.

SEASON'S BEST

- Sarvesh Kushare is ranked joint third in rankings alongside Great Britain jumper Kimani Jack in the World Athletics Top Lists chart for 2026, as both cleared the mark of 2.31m in high jump.
- Ancy Sojan is ranked 7th after her national record of 6.88m in long jump this season. USA's Tara Davis-Woodhall leads the list with a leap of 7.21m.
- Gurindervir Singh (10.09s) is ranked 87th. The chart is led by Jamaica's Oblique Seville. He has clocked 9.82s this season.
- Animesh Kujur's timing of 20.32s (200m) would put him 73rd in rankings. Cayman Islands' Jayden Reid has clocked 19.63s.
- Vishal TK (national record of 44.98s in 400m) is ranked 66th. Nigeria's Samuel Ogazi, who clocked 43.38s, tops the list.
- Srabani Nanda, Sneha Shanuvalli, Sudeshna Shivankar and Tamanna clocked the season's best time of 43.85 seconds to win the women's 4x100m relay final of Asian Relays Championships. They are ranked 62 in the world. USA has posted the leading time of 41.58s.
- Gulveer Singh holds the national record in both 5000m (12:59.77) and 10000m (27:00.22). He would be ranked 21st and 11th, respectively.
- Tejas Shirse (13.27s in 110m hurdles) is 31st. USA's Ja'Kobe Tharp clocked 12.75s.

The Indian 4x100m quartet after winning gold at the Asian Relays meet in China.



AI's soaring memory demand, chip shortages and geopolitics are making your gadgets costlier than ever

Apple's price hike and the bigger picture



IF you've been eyeing a shiny new MacBook, iPad or even your next premium smartphone, you may have noticed something painful. The price tags have suddenly started aiming for the moon. Apple's recent price hikes are not just about branding or bigger profits. They are a sign of a much bigger global tech problem.

Apple may just be the first domino to fall. Behind the scenes, a memory chip crunch, AI's appetite and geopolitical tensions have collided to create the perfect storm. And yes, your wallet is caught in the crossfire.

AI GOBBLING UP MEMORY CHIPS

Artificial intelligence isn't just consuming electricity. It is also consuming enormous amounts of memory. Every AI chatbot, image generator and large language model runs inside massive data centres packed with GPUs. Those processors rely on enormous amounts of specialised High Bandwidth Memory (HBM), the fastest memory available today.

As Microsoft, Google, Meta, Amazon, OpenAI and other AI giants race to build bigger AI models, demand for HBM has exploded. The result? According to industry estimates, prices of conventional DRAM (Dynamic Random Access Memory) and NAND (short for NOT AND) memory have surged sharply in 2026, with some categories witnessing an increase of nearly 90 per cent compared to late 2025.

WHY APPLE FINALLY BLINKED

Apple is famous for squeezing suppliers on price. If any company could negotiate better deals, it would be Apple. But this time, even Apple couldn't escape the math. The company recently increased prices of several MacBook and iPad models after saying the cost of memory and storage chips had become unsustainable.

Depending on the model and configuration, prices have risen by roughly 15-25 per cent, with some premium variants becoming up to ₹1 lakh more expensive.

Memory isn't a tiny component anymore. Today's premium laptops routinely come with 16GB to 64GB of RAM and up to several terabytes of storage. When both DRAM and NAND become significantly more expensive at the same time, manufacturers face only three choices: accept



lower profits, reduce specifications or increase prices. Apple chose the third.

NOT JUST ABOUT SHORTAGES

This isn't the kind of chip shortage the world experienced during the pandemic. Back then, factories struggled to produce enough chips. Today, factories are producing plenty, but many are making different kinds of chips. The world's biggest memory manufacturers, including Samsung, SK Hynix and Micron, are increasingly dedicating production lines to AI-grade HBM because those chips generate much higher profits.

Industry estimates suggest global DRAM supply will grow by only around 16 per cent this year, nowhere near enough to satisfy the booming AI demand. A cutting-edge mem-

ory fabrication plant can cost tens of billions of dollars and often takes two to four years before it starts producing chips. And, relief isn't coming anytime soon.

TRADE TENSIONS ADDING TO COST

The semiconductor industry stretches across continents. Export controls, technology restrictions and ongoing trade tensions have made the supply chain far more expensive and unpredictable. Companies now have to diversify suppliers, maintain larger inventories and sign long-term contracts just to secure enough chips.

OTHER BRANDS WILL FOLLOW

Every electronics company buys memory from the same handful of suppliers. Whether it's Dell, HP, Lenovo, Samsung, Asus or smartphone brands, everyone is feeling the pressure. Analysts expect conventional DRAM contract prices to rise by 58-63 per cent this year, while NAND flash prices could jump 70-75 per cent.

Some brands may openly increase prices. Others may quietly reduce storage capacities, ship lower-RAM variants.

BUY NOW OR WAIT?

If you genuinely need a laptop, tablet or smartphone for work, studies or content

creation, waiting may not save you much money. Industry experts believe memory prices are likely to remain elevated well into 2027, largely because AI demand continues to outpace supply. But if your current device is still running perfectly, waiting isn't a bad idea.

Festive sales, exchange bonuses and cashback offers can often soften the impact. There's another smart trick too. Apple's storage upgrades are notoriously expensive. For many users, buying an external SSD or using cloud storage can offer far better value than paying a premium for higher built-in storage.

THE NEW NORMAL

For years, consumers got used to gadgets becoming faster, and smarter. AI has flipped that script. The same memory chips that power your MacBook or smartphone are now being snapped up by companies building billion-dollar AI data centres. Analysts expect the market for HBM alone to grow from roughly \$35 billion in 2025 to nearly \$100 billion by 2028. That's a staggering jump, and a sign that AI's appetite is only getting bigger.

For consumers, the takeaway is simple. Buy because you need a device, not because you are waiting for prices to magically crash.

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



COMMENT

Luo Gang

Read UNCLOS correctly to uphold justice

The abuse of the dispute settlement mechanism under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea by some countries is a threat to peace and stability. The international community must accurately interpret the Convention to distinguish legal principles from political machinations.

Since it came into force in 1994, UNCLOS has served as an important legal framework. It has strengthened multilateralism, checked maritime hegemony and fostered maritime cooperation and the sustainable development of the seas and oceans.

The Convention is essentially a carefully negotiated “package deal” forged through compromise. Before the Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea (1973-82), the law of the sea was fragmented and largely governed by customary law. To reach a broad consensus, the conference adopted a package deal approach that required countries to accept the Convention as a whole or reject it in its entirety. There was no option to cherry-pick favorable provisions. The result was a carefully balanced framework of more than 320 articles covering 17 major areas, allowing around 160 countries with competing claims to find common legal ground.

Yet, this approach also had inherent limitations. Vague wording, undefined terms, and increasing regulatory gaps over time led to misinterpretation and procedural abuse, with the ambiguity of certain provisions posing potential risks.

As renowned maritime legal scholar Robin Churchill noted, the Convention inevitably bears ambiguities in areas where negotiators managed only weak compromises. Those ambiguities constitute loopholes that are being exploited.

Regrettably, the Convention’s history of compromise and balance, along with its inherent limitations, is often overlooked or intentionally ignored. In recent years, UNCLOS has been described as “a constitution for the oceans” by some, a politicized rhetoric that sug-

gests it is superior to other international legal rules.

That label is not supported by international doctrine. The International Law Commission’s 2006 report on the Fragmentation of International Law clearly states that the “main sources of international law are not in a hierarchical relationship inter se”, and “drawing analogies from the hierarchical nature of domestic legal system is not generally appropriate”.

German international law expert Rainer Lagoni likewise warned that the “constitution” label — even if used metaphorically — could mislead when treaties clash. In legal terms, UNCLOS is not a superior law but one strand in a complex web of treaties, far from a panacea for addressing the challenges arising in ocean governance.

In fact, the preamble of UNCLOS explicitly states that “matters not regulated by this Convention continue to be governed by the rules and principles of general international law”. Today’s ocean governance does not rest on UNCLOS alone, but on a broader legal web — other treaties, plus long-standing customary international law. Matters such as historic rights and outlying archipelagos continue to be regulated by customary law, while sovereignty over land territory falls outside the scope of UNCLOS.

Yet some parties attempt to deliberately repackage their claims to sovereignty over land territory as maritime rights and then submit them as issues under UNCLOS’ jurisdiction. This tactic is what some legal practitioners term a “mixed-dispute” approach. French scholar Jean-Louis Iten likens this to a “soil-less” dispute, where claims are artificially detached from the “soil” of sovereignty over land territory. It is a procedural trick to circumvent the tribunal’s jurisdictional limits on sovereignty disputes.

The exploitation of the Convention’s ambiguities, along with efforts to weaponize UNCLOS, peaked during the 2016 “South China Sea arbitration”. The Philippines, in collusion with the so-called arbitral tribunal, attempted to secure jurisdiction over dis-

putes concerning territorial sovereignty, by flagrantly treating the word “or” in Article 121, paragraph 3 — which states that “Rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf” — as “and”. The aim was to raise the threshold for determining island status, downgrade many islands in the South China Sea and undermine China’s maritime rights in the region.

The move was roundly denounced by experts. Gilbert Guillaume, former president of the International Court of Justice, dismissed this misinterpretation as extremely tenuous. French scholar Pierre Michel Eisemann criticized the “tribunal” for overstepping and acting as a lawmaker. Romain Le Boeuf described the “arbitration” as mere formalism and unconvincing. Rather than resolving disputes, this procedural abuse to achieve a predetermined outcome severely undermined the credibility of the Convention’s dispute settlement mechanism and turned the law into a geopolitical tool.

UNCLOS is a significant achievement in international law. But like any other instrument born of compromise, it is also vulnerable to exploitation. Vigilance is needed to prevent overstating the scope of UNCLOS to serve narrow geopolitical interests.

Abusive legal practices undermine the solemnity, integrity and authority of the Convention. All parties should therefore remember the spirit of compromise that shaped the Convention, preserve its carefully crafted balance, and interpret its provisions accurately and in good faith. It is essential to oppose any attempt to weaponize or politicize UNCLOS, which will ensure it better serves the maritime well-being of all humanity.

The author is a professor at the China Institute for Marine Affairs. The views don’t necessarily represent those of China Daily.

Wang Yuxiong

Watching China from the sidelines of the World Cup

The 2026 FIFA World Cup, which kicked off on June 12 (Beijing time), is historic in multiple respects. It is the first to be jointly hosted by three countries; the first to feature 48 national teams; and it features 104 matches — 40 more than the Qatar 2022 edition — over a span of nearly 40 days.

As the most influential global sporting spectacle, the World Cup is, in essence, a vast transnational marketplace. It encompasses both a business-to-consumer consumption market driven by fan viewership, and a business-to-business market of intangible asset transactions — most notably broadcasting rights and sponsorship deals that are repeatedly packaged, traded and monetized across multiple layers.

Behind the behavior of each market participant lies a distinct decision-making logic shaped by broader economic, technological, cultural and social conditions. In this sense, the World Cup is not only a festival for global football fans; it also functions as a valuable lens through which national development can be observed.

This is particularly true for China, a rapidly evolving market where socioeconomic change becomes especially visible across each four-year World Cup cycle. As the saying goes, “the scenery remains the same, but the people change”. The World Cup may be the same tournament, but the audience and the corporate actors surrounding it are no longer what they once were.

Although the Chinese men’s national football team has not qualified for the FIFA World Cup since 2002, that has not dampened the enthusiasm of Chinese audiences or businesses. Yet in this year’s edition of the World Cup, despite a series of institutional and format innovations, the tournament has not generated the anticipated surge in consumer enthusiasm.

Public sentiment surrounding negotiations between China Media Group and FIFA over broadcasting rights offered an early signal of this shift.

The first change has been a gradual “demystification” of international sports organizations and premier global events. In recent years, sustained economic growth in China, breakthroughs in critical technologies, and progress in overcoming key bottlenecks have significantly strengthened public confidence. Against this backdrop, public perception of international institutions and mega-events has become less reverential.

The second change is the emergence of what may be described as “consumer awakening”. In the digital economy, audiences are increasingly aware that they are not merely buyers of sports entertainment products; they are also an integral component of the intangible asset value underpinning these events.

Fan attention and traffic form the foundation of broadcasting rights, sponsorship value and associated commercial monetization. A widely circulated comment on social media captures this sentiment succinctly: “Without over a billion viewers, their

advertising slots are meaningless. They should be paying us to broadcast their content.” This reflects a broader shift in perceived value distribution within digital attention economies.

The third change comes from the evolving supply-demand dynamics within the domestic sports market. As China’s sports industry expands rapidly, a growing number of alternative competitions — from the Village Super League (Cun Chao) in Guizhou to regional leagues such as the Jiangsu Super League (Suchao), and various north-eastern competitions — have emerged and gained popularity. Football-related consumption is thus no longer monopolized by the World Cup.

While these domestic leagues may not match the technical level of elite international football, they are deeply embedded in local communities and closely integrated with regional culture, tourism and service economies. They generate strong emotional value for audiences and have developed a distinctive and resilient form of sports economy with clear Chinese characteristics.

The evolution of sports broadcasting ecosystems is equally revealing. It not only reflects the rapid development of media industries in the digital economy, but also expands the boundaries of intangible asset value and diversifies its monetization pathways.

In China, World Cup broadcasting has traditionally followed a “centralized acquisition plus domestic platform distribution” model led by CMG. A brief historical review shows that during the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, CMG first introduced sublicensing of new media broadcasting rights. This marked a structural shift: audiences began moving from a “primary screen” viewing model toward a “secondary screen” distribution system.

Since then, the secondary screen ecosystem has evolved rapidly. In 2018, sublicensing partners included Migu and Youku, both long-form video platforms. By the 2022 Qatar World Cup, rights holders included Migu and Douyin, the latter representing a hybrid platform integrating short video, social networking, and e-commerce functions. Douyin’s entry into the broadcasting ecosystem therefore attracted significant attention at the time.

Different platforms have operationalized broadcasting rights in distinct ways, effectively creating differentiated consumption products for viewers. Migu, for instance, has consistently focused on deliv-



LI MIN / CHINA DAILY

ering professional-grade sports broadcasting experiences, assembling elite commentary teams to meet the needs of core football audiences.

By contrast, Xiaohongshu, or RedNote, which obtained broadcasting-related rights for the first time, emphasized the construction of an online fan community rather than traditional commentary depth or broadcast fidelity. Its value proposition lies in the “community space” — featuring former professional players in interactive live commentary, prediction games and entertainment-oriented discussions. Officially compliant short clips and user-generated interpretations of match footage circulate continuously across posts and videos on the app, extending the content’s life cycle.

This transformation of the broadcasting ecosystem signals a profound shift in how intangible assets — particularly broadcasting rights — generate value. In the earlier era dominated by long-form “first screen” and “second screen” models, monetization relied primarily on paid viewing and embedded advertising.

However, with the entry of social media and e-commerce platforms, short-form derivative content based on match footage has proliferated at scale. Multiple actors across digital ecosystems have become co-creators of sports-related content. Advertising itself has become embedded within algorithmic feeds and commercial platforms, generating new monetization structures.

In this sense, the rise of social media and e-commerce platforms mirrors the earlier disruption brought by internet media — once again expanding the value realization space of broadcasting rights and amplifying their economic significance.

The World Cup will continue, but as the saying goes, “the World Cup changes, while China’s pace remains constant”. Each tournament functions as a temporal marker, revealing China’s broader trajectory of socioeconomic transformation along a global timeline.

And so, while we watch world-class football unfold on the pitch, we are also — perhaps more subtly — witnessing a parallel narrative: the evolving story of China itself.

The author is the director of the Sports Economics Research Center at the Central University of Finance and Economics. The views don’t necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Suolang Zhuoma

Who perpetuates Xizang as ‘Shangri-La’?

For far too long, a deeply misleading narrative has shaped international perceptions of Xizang. The Western portrayal of Xizang as a mystical “Shangri-La” bears little resemblance to the region’s history and ground reality. It is a romanticized fantasy constructed through orientalist imagination, colonial legacies and political agendas.

Interestingly, many prominent Western Tibetologists themselves have dismantled this myth through research, providing some of the strongest evidence against the long-standing illusion. The idea of “Shangri-La” was never rooted in the real Xizang. The concept was conjured by British writer James Hilton in his 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, which depicted Xizang as an isolated utopia untouched by the troubles of the modern world.

Hilton himself had never visited Xizang, and his novel relied on selective accounts by Western missionaries and explorers, as well as a creative reinterpretation of “Shambhala”, an ideal realm in Tibetan Buddhism. The 1937 Hollywood adaptation of the novel popularized the story worldwide, cementing a highly distorted Western image of the region.

This imaginary vision of Xizang did not emerge by accident. Western missionaries and explorers had long been more interested in projecting their spiritual longings, colonial ambitions and sense of cultural superiority onto Xizang than in understanding the region’s history, society and people.

They deliberately ignored both China’s historical sovereignty over Xizang and the harsh reality of its system of feudal serfdom. Instead, Xizang was transformed into an imaginary land designed to satisfy the Western fascination with the exotic and to serve broader colonial and political purposes.

In fact, extensive research by Western scholars who are free from traditional orientalist assumptions has exposed the gap between Western imagination and historical reality. In *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (1989), Peter Bishop argues that Western travel writing on Xizang is more psychological than factual. Rather than documenting its society, these accounts projected Western fantasies and subconscious desires onto an unfamiliar landscape.

Bishop’s subsequent work *Dreams of Power: Tibetan Buddhism and the Western Imagination* (1993) critiques Western engagement with Tibetan Buddhism as lacking critical reflection on the complexities of cross-cultural understanding.

Whether expressed through idealized admiration or selective appropriation, both approaches reflect forms of cultural imperialism. In his view, the Tibetan Buddhism embraced by many in the West is a constructed “other” designed to fulfill Western spiritual aspirations and fantasies of power.

Dreams of Power is a landmark work in the Western academic reassessment of the “Xizang myth”. Through chapters such as An Imaginative Analysis, Tibet Discovered, Eastern Religion: Western Imagination, Spiritual Science, Sacred Technology, The New Monasticism, Images of Spiritual Transmission and Tibetan Buddhism: An Archetypal Appraisal, the book shatters the false illusions constructed by the West and strips away the deceptive veneer of “Shangri-La”.

Similarly, US scholar Donald S. Lopez Jr argues in his book *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (1998) that both Xizang and Tibetan Buddhism have long functioned as objects of Western fantasy. Rather than engaging with Xizang as it truly exists, the West has imprisoned it within the utopian image of “Shangri-La”, severing it from its real history, society and culture.

These conclusions are not products of Chinese official discourse, but the result of independent scholarship by Western academics. They challenge the entrenched anti-China narratives about Xizang. The “Shangri-La” myth persists not only because of its appeal to Western romanticism, but also its political utility. The reality of old Xizang’s feudal serfdom is conveniently omitted from these narratives.

In old Xizang, more than 95 percent of the population lived as serfs without personal freedom, illiteracy exceeded 95 percent and average life expectancy was under 36 years. Such conditions bore little resemblance to the idyllic paradise portrayed in popular imagination.

As China continues to develop, this false narrative is being repurposed as a political instrument. Modernization efforts in Xizang are portrayed as “assimilation”, the lawful protection of religious freedom is misrepresented as “religious persecution” and improvements in people’s livelihoods are reframed as evidence of “oppression”. These so-called issues are not about facts, they are narratives fabricated by the West.

Western media, films and academic works have reinforced the misconceptions, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of falsehoods. But an increasing body of Western scholarship reveals that what the West often sees is not the real Xizang, but its imagined projection.

The real Xizang is neither a mythical paradise nor a perpetual tragedy. It is a modern homeland developing as part of China. China’s sovereignty over Xizang has firm historical and legal foundations. The feudal serfdom system has been abolished and people are now masters of their own affairs.

Today, 15 years of publicly funded education are universally available in the Xizang autonomous region. Healthcare and elderly care systems cover the entire population, and extreme poverty has been eliminated. Religious freedom is protected by law and cultural treasures receive unprecedented conservation efforts. Traditional Tibetan medicine, opera, *thangka* painting and other elements of cultural heritage continue to flourish.

High-speed trains now traverse the plateau, while ecological conservation ranks among the world’s most ambitious. The everyday lives of the people of Xizang provide far more convincing testimony than any fictional tale ever could.

The most effective way to dispel falsehoods is to confront them with facts and academic consensus. The myth of “Shangri-La” is, at its core, a product of Western cognitive dominance and political manipulation.

The world should recognize that the real Xizang is found not in romantic fantasies but in historical reality, the lives of its people and China’s sovereignty and governance. Narratives built on misunderstanding, prejudice and political agendas cannot withstand facts, nor can they halt Xizang’s continued progress toward prosperity and development.

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Opinion

Five words that changed America

It wasn't Thomas Jefferson who made "All men are created equal" actually mean something.



Jamelle Bouie

There is a moment for every American when she first encounters the Declaration of Independence. For most, it comes to her as scripture—the highest and most sacred text in the nation's civic religion, encapsulated by its moving assertion of human equality: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." This Declaration is a profound statement of values: of a universal aspiration for human freedom. As President Gerald Ford said in a speech marking the nation's bicentennial, "The Declaration is the Polarix of our political order—the fixed star of freedom. It is impervious to change because it states moral truths that are eternal."

As a matter of civic faith, this is what the Declaration means. As a matter of history, however, the story is much more complicated.

AS THOMAS JEFFERSON WROTE IT, the Declaration was less an affirmation of human equality than a pointed claim about the nature of political authority and a powerful assertion of the right of revolution, informed by the Enlightenment writings of John Locke and other social contract theorists. It was meant as an argument about the preconditions of government—an assertion of the purity of prelapsarian life—not a road map for emancipation.

The opening assertions of "self-evident" truths concern men in a "state of nature" before government was established—the historian Pauline Maier observed in "American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence." "With regard to persons, equality meant simply that no one held authority over others by right of birth or as a gift of God." In other words, Jefferson was offering a common sentiment in Revolutionary-era America, "a political orthodoxy whose basic principles colonists could pick up from sermons or newspapers or even schoolbooks without ever reading a systematic work of political theory."

Maier wrote. Just look to Thomas Paine, who wrote in "Common Sense"—published about six months before the signing of the Declaration—that "all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others forever." Jefferson's equality was a thought experiment. It did not extend to political society, nor was it meant to be passed beyond the political community. Men could be created equal and still be different; men could be created equal and still be subordinate.

This, for many of the Patriot leaders, was a given. But then there were those outside the circle of belonging: women, Native, landless laborers and the starkly Black Americans, both free and enslaved. They did not read—or, most likely, hear—the Declaration as an abstract claim about a fundamental past. They understood it as a radical statement of principle for the present. And they wielded this principle against a society that would not extend the Revolutionary promise of freedom and self-government to those held in bondage.

It was their Declaration—the one that they made for themselves—that stood for a universal claim of human equality in the here and now. And it was their Declaration that would come to supplant Jefferson's historical and metaphysical one as the linchpin of America's civic ideal, passing from Black Americans to abolitionists to the Republican Party and Abraham Lincoln, who consecrated their Declaration at Gettysburg as the spiritual foundation for a "new birth of freedom" and a "government of the people, by the people, for the people," established "four score and seven years ago" in 1776.

It is this Declaration that is under assault from a political movement that rejects the creedal vision of the American Republic in favor of an exclusionary racial nationalism, that defines American citizenship by blood and heritage, that sneers at the "five words about equality" in the Declaration and that worships at the altar of hierarchy and caste. But it is also this Declaration that inspires Americans to fight for their place in this country and demand their right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

IT IS HARD TO EXAGGERATE the acidity with which Black Americans seized on the rhetoric of the Revolution to demand a free and equal place in the new and nascent American Republic.

"We would therefore humbly pray, that whilst you are consulting, asserting and maintaining your own natural rights against the arbitrary designs of those who would subject you to slavery, that you would think on our unhappy case,

who have been long groaning under the insupportable burden," Bristol Lambee, an enslaved man bound in Connecticut, wrote to the "Sons of Liberty in Connecticut" on behalf of "a number of poor Africans."

We do not know much about Lambee, but his petition—which was issued in October 1774—is written in the idiom of the Revolution, using the same terms that Jefferson would deploy just two years later. "Your petitioners apprehend that liberty, being founded upon the law of nature, is as necessary to the happiness of an African as it is to the happiness of an Englishman," Lambee wrote, "and that we, notwithstanding our present state of slavery, have, in common with other men, a natural right to be free, and without molestation to enjoy such property as we by our honest industry may acquire." Black Americans could speak the language of the Patriots as fluently as any member of the Continental Congress. And as the war intensified, so too did their petitions and demands, which began to make direct reference to the Declaration of Independence.

"Your petitioners apprehend that they have, in common with all other men, a natural and unalienable right to that freedom, which the great parent of the universe hath bestowed equally on all mankind, and which they have never forfeited by any compact or agreement whatsoever, but they were unjustly dragged, by the cruel hand of power, from their dearest friends, and some of them even torn from the embraces of their tender parents," reads the 1777 petition of "a great number of Negroes who are detained in a state of slavery." It is signed by Prince Hall—a leading member of Boston's Black community—Lancaster Hill, Peter Bess and Bristol Slesner, among others not listed.

"They cannot but express their astonishment," the petitioners continue, "that it has never been considered, that this principle from which America has acted in the course of all her unhappy difficulties with Great Britain, pleads stronger than a thousand arguments in favor of your petitioners."

The use of the language of the Declaration and of the Revolution was not merely rhetorical. The point of these petitions was to push legislators to treat the opening words of their Constitutions and laws as more than preambulatory; to treat them as pregnant with real meaning and live consequence.

A 1779 petition to the New Hampshire legislature from Nero Brewster, an enslaved man in his late 60s, and 19 others announces that "freedom is an inherent right of the human species" and beseeches the legislature to "graciously interpose in our behalf, and enact such laws and regulations, as in your wisdom think proper, whereby we may regain our liberty, and be ranked in the class of free agents, and that the name of slave may not be heard in a land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom."

To the words of the Black Americans, free and enslaved, to see the Declaration in motion was to see it as a living document with meaning far beyond the circumstances of America's independence. And it is to see the fact that this meaning was made: constructed by people with an intimate, shared understanding of what freedom meant and what it required.

THE DECLARATION is the beating heart of the American project. Black Americans, free and enslaved, to see the Declaration in motion was to see it as a living document with meaning far beyond the circumstances of America's independence. And it is to see the fact that this meaning was made: constructed by people with an intimate, shared understanding of what freedom meant and what it required.

AS A FORM, THE PETITION called on its authors to show some humility. Other formats allowed for more pointed, even fiery rhetoric, blasting Patriot leaders for their hypocrisy. "Against your own declarations," reads a 1783 editorial in The Maryland Gazette by the anonymous "Vox Africorum": "These truths are self-evident to all men, and are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." We shall offer no arguments—say, that we are insulting to the understanding of America at this enlightened period to suppose she stood in need of arguments to prove our right to liberty. It would be to suppose," Vox continued, "that she has already forgot those exalted principles she has so lately asserted with her blood."

Perhaps the most famous example of a founding-era Black American wielding the words of the Declaration as a promise to be fulfilled came from Benjamin Banneker, the naturalist and mathematician, who quoted Jefferson's words back to him in a 1791 letter confronting the secretary of state on his hypocrisy: "You publicly held forth this true and invaluable doctrine, which is worthy to be recorded and remembered in all succeeding ages," he wrote. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Having halled the Declaration as an eternal truth, Banneker then holds it up in negative contrast to its authors. "How palpable is it to reflect that although you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the father of mankind, and of his

equal and impartial distribution of these rights and privileges which he had conferred upon them, that you should at the same time contract his mercies, in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression, that you should the same time be found guilty of that most criminal act which you profess to detest in others, with respect to yourselves."

Jefferson, then serving under George Washington, had never understood himself as making a statement about political and social equality. But Black Americans absolutely did. And as we see, they did not hesitate to pressure the former American revolutionaries with their own words and commitments.

Many of them felt the contradiction in ways that put lie to the modern idea that such "men of their time" were innocent of moral fault, or that it is a distortion or corruption of history to tell the truth about their hypocrisy. And in the present, you should see the assault on Black history and Black studies by conservative reactionaries as an attempt to obscure the fact that the Black Americans of the early Republic were "men of their time" as well.

One consequence of this pressure was that, by the first decade of the 19th century, most Northern states had either abolished slavery or put it on the path to extinction. Even in the South, there was a burst of energy related to manumission: Virginia amended its laws in 1780 to make it easier for owners to free their slaves, and several men—including John Payne Jr., Dolly Madison's father—did just that.

This emancipatory energy was short-lived. Technological developments like the cotton gin and the burgeoning Industrial Revolution in England would make enslaved Africans newly valuable, a lucrative asset that drove the production of vital commodities. It was during this time that the Declaration faded from mainstream view as an object of veneration, to be supplanted by the Constitution in American political discourse. Except, that is, among Black Americans and their allies, who continued to wield it as a binding promise of freedom and equality against slavery, slaveholders and the government that served their interests.

GEORGE BOURNE, AN ENGLISH-BORN Presbyterian minister in Ireland, published "The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable" in 1816, where he condemned politicians who held "declarations of independence" in one hand and the lash in the other.

In his inaugural 1831 issue of The Liberator, his antislavery newspaper,

William Lloyd Garrison quoted the Declaration extensively in his appeal on behalf of the enslaved. "While our Declaration of Independence boldly proclaims as self-evident truths 'that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'—at the very seat of government human beings are born, almost daily, under the laws pronounced to be from their birth, not equal to other men, and who are, for life, deprived of liberty and the free pursuit of happiness."

Garrison, it should be said, hated the Constitution and condemned it as a "covenant with death" and "an agreement with hell" because of the ways it empowered and strengthened the grip of the slave-owning South on the national government. But the Declaration was a torch that lit the path to salvation.

The South Carolina abolitionist Angelina Grimké declared slavery "con- stary to the declaration of our independence" in her 1836 "Appeal to the Christian Women of the South," and in a stark condemnation of American hypocrisy, the Coleridge Anti-Slavery Society of Newark proclaimed in 1834 that "it is our opinion, that if all the blood of our colored brethren shed by the people of the United States since the Declaration of Independence was kept in a reservoir, the framers of that instrument and their successors might swim in it."

Throughout, Douglass made what was the most famous condemnation of the United States in his 1852 speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" "Throughout, he wields both the language and the ideals of the Declaration like a scalpel. "Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting," Douglass said to the hundreds of people packed in the Corinthian Hall in Rochester, N.Y., to hear him speak. "What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him, more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim."

It was in the hands of abolitionists, Black and white, carried over from Black Americans free, freed and enslaved, that the Declaration worked as both an indictment and a promise—the spiritual foundation of the nation and the standard that its institutions must meet. And it is this vision of the Declaration that Abraham Lincoln hailed as he ascended to political leadership in the 1850s, fending off Southern slaveholders and their apologists.

Provoked by men such as Senators John C. Calhoun of South Carolina and

Stephen Douglas of Illinois back into political combat at the start of the decade, by the eve of his election as president, Lincoln was hailing the Declaration's claim of equality as "a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression." It was an axiomatic truth, he contended in 1859, written into a "merely revolutionary document" that was "applicable to all men and all times."

And it is in the first line of his Gettysburg Address—"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal"—that Lincoln enshrines this representative, shaped by the demands of enslaved people decades before his birth, into America's national identity.

It is this vision of the Declaration that was written into the Constitution as the 14th Amendment, whose most consequential question section guarantees the equal citizenship of all people born in the United States, a promise the Supreme Court just affirmed against the president's attempt to end birthright citizenship by executive fiat.

"Let it be borne in mind that this is the government of men representing every people and kindred and tongue under the circle of heaven," said Representative John Bingham of Ohio, a key architect of the amendment, in an 1869 speech defending his work about a year after its ratification. "and that in the inception of our national struggle for representative government, in 1776, the declaration of the people was not that all white men are created equal, but that all men are created equal, and endowed by their creator with the rights of life and liberty."

AS WE MARK THIS YEAR, the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it is important to see that its meaning is dynamic. And that meaning, as we understand it, flows less from the men who signed it than from those who held its words and took ownership of them as a standard for their freedom and independence—not from Britain, but from bondage.

It is this Declaration—the "slaves' Declaration, the abolitionists' Declaration, Lincoln's Declaration—that is the beating heart of the American project. It is this Declaration that still lives as a promise to the people who call this nation home, as a challenge to those people to live up to their ideals and aspirations, and as a bulwark against those among them who would sacrifice their freedom for the false comfort of tyranny.

It is this Declaration that shows us the way we might be truly exceptional.



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It's time to tighten the screws on Russia

French Hill

When NATO leaders gather in Ankara, Turkey, on Tuesday, they will offer familiar words of resolve on Ukraine, reiterating that Russia poses a threat to their collective security.

The statements will be welcome, but they will not end the war. For more than four years, NATO has sought to manage the conflict in Ukraine rather than win it decisively. At Ankara, the alliance members must set their sights higher than another declaration of allied unity.

The NATO summit should commit to breaking the Russian war economy and ending Moscow's ability to fight abroad. That requires admitting an uncomfortable truth: Western sanctions have constrained Russia, but they have not cut off the fossil fuel revenues that sustain President Vladimir Putin's war machine.

The numbers show the scope of the failure. In May, Russia's daily fossil fuel export revenues rose to roughly \$226 million, or around \$830 million, up 2 percent from April. Crude oil alone generated about \$62 million euros daily. The European Union, despite real progress since 2022, remains the largest buyer of Russian gas.

Turkey, a long-time NATO member and ally, has failed to support Ukraine. Europe has cut its dependence on Russian gas from roughly 45 percent of imports before the invasion to about 12 percent in 2023 and is moving toward supplying Russian gas entirely. It has banned Russian coal. Turkey has phased out Russian gas. Turkey has supplied Russian gas to the Black Sea. These efforts deserve recognition, but they sit uneasily with its continued imports from Russia that let the war drag on indefinitely.

The hesitancy has been understandable. NATO leaders flinched at taking a tougher approach in the immediate aftermath of Russia's full-fledged invasion in 2022, worried that the disruption in energy markets would be too costly. But the costs of indecisiveness have been worse, with more than 15,000 civilians killed and nearly \$600 billion expected to be required to rebuild Ukraine.

Recent events offer an opportunity to act. At roughly nine million barrels a day, Russia's crude production represents less than 9 percent of global oil demand. With the Strait of Hormuz reopening and Persian Gulf supplies slowly returning to the market, the economic and political effects in NATO countries of cracking down on Russia will be softened. NATO allies have endured much greater impacts from markets constrained by the Iran war

and are positioned to absorb the fall-out from tougher sanctions on Moscow.

The United States has reimposed sanctions it temporarily lifted on Russian oil during the war. Allies that still rely on Russian energy should use the Ankara meeting to commit to a rapid, orderly exit, backed by alternative supplies from the United States and other partners. But the transition must be swift; it must not become another way to delay.

NATO should then set its sights on non-Western buyers like China, the largest importer of Russia's crude and coal, and the second-most important purchaser of its gas. Countries like China rely on financial institutions

willing to process these transactions, which Western banks and insurers refuse to touch. As Russia's export economy adapts to sanctions imposed by NATO countries, non-Western enablers are giving it oxygen.

NATO allies should agree in Ankara to impose sanctions on the support apparatus that facilitates Russia's energy trade, from financial institutions in China and India to Middle Eastern trading houses. These so-called secondary sanctions would sever those institutions from access to the dollar and euro. The choice would then become stark for their home countries: They can do business with the West or with Russia, but not both.

Congress has already shown that it's ready to endorse this approach. The House Committee on Financial Services, which I chair, passed a secondary sanctions bill in June. The bill would allow the U.S. to impose sanctions on the support apparatus that facilitates Russia's energy trade, from financial institutions in China and India to Middle Eastern trading houses. These so-called secondary sanctions would sever those institutions from access to the dollar and euro. The choice would then become stark for their home countries: They can do business with the West or with Russia, but not both.

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Robin Givhan

WASHINGTON When it comes to patriotism, Americans have never been a subtle lot. We love big flags, giant barbecues and a God-and-country-themed diorama, beer cozy or pet costume. We cheer fighter jets trailing red, white and blue smoke. We love a marching band.

Every year, all over this country on July 4, we turn gorging on hot dogs into a form of competitive love for our country as we salute our nation's independence from a king.

It used to be that the holiday brought out dad jeans and cropped tops and everyone looked slightly embarrassing, but the atmosphere was good-hearted and welcoming. Everyone could delight in wearing Old Glory to the national cookout.

It was kitsch, and it was silly. But it also left me feeling exhilarated and proud, especially in Washington, where I first moved over 30 years ago to work for The Washington Post.

The city revealed itself as often inefficient but also idealistic place — filled with ambitious overachievers who chose public service instead of the riches of Wall Street or Silicon Valley. In particular, the women I met and began to call my friends were accomplished in fields I could barely comprehend: counterterrorism, international aid and development, world banking.

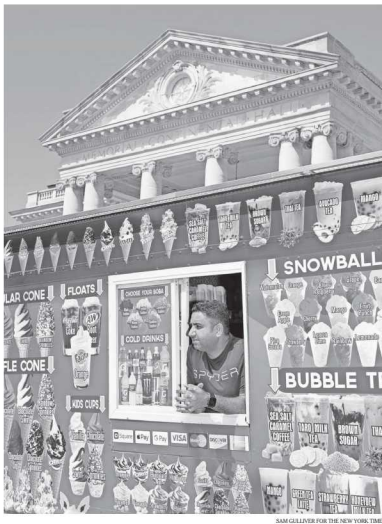
During one of my early summers in Washington, a friend who was reporting on the Clinton White House wanted me to be her plus-one to watch the Fourth of July fireworks from the White House grounds. The explosion of color was glorious. Whatever she might have perceived to watch the fireworks, seeing them over the nation's capital was special — not because the show was immense but because it was here.

There is nothing like watching red, white and blue rockets and sparklers against the backdrop of the White House, the Washington Monument and the National Mall.

It's again the Fourth of July — this time the 25th anniversary of the creation of the nation's 250th birthday. Familiar red, white and blue bunting hangs from the windows of Washington's monumental federal buildings as well as its charming rowhouses.

Flags the size of lap pools drape entire structures, and visitors to the capital wrap themselves in the equivalent of "The Star-Spangled Banner." The usual flurry of tourists has grown into a cartoonish display of holiday visitors, including one mother with T-shirts that scream U.S.A., flag-striped board shorts and Star-sequined bangles.

But this year, I can barely tolerate the sight of red, white and blue. When



combined into a maximalist display of national cheerleading, the colors make my heart ache.

The flags on federal buildings are grand, but they hang alongside banners featuring President Trump's scowling face. The president spent the better part of the spring focused on cleaning and repairing long-dormant fountains in some of Washington's grandest circles and parks, including the Christopher Columbus Memorial Fountain in front of Union Station.

The white granite sculpture, once the color of a dirty ashtray, now gleams. It's a wonder to see water dance in a fountain that had been dry for nearly 20 years. But that pleasure comes with the knowledge that the repairs were orchestrated by an administration that sees itself more as a regime than as the caretakers of a democracy.

The breezy image of "American flag" has become associated with the smelly, swampy mess the president has made of the once elegant but temperamental Reflecting Pool. The pool is now fenced off, like so much else in Washington right now, from Lafayette Park to much of the National Mall.

And just a few weeks ago, the president sent an Ultimate Fighting Championship fight to the South Lawn for his birthday, turning the stately public rooms of

the White House into a glorified locker room.

All of this is in service to a single man's vision of America. The aesthetics of patriotism in the nation's capital no longer involve picnic baskets, overstuffed coolers and L.L. Bean canvas tote bags. Gone is the aspirational truth that all are welcome to come to the nation's backyard: friends, family and new arrivals, too.

When people assemble on the National Mall to watch the fireworks, the spectacle will be designated a "national special security event" — akin to an inauguration or State of the Union address. With the heightened vigilance, visitors will have to bring government-issued identification and pass through metal detectors.

The Secret Service has forbidden coolers and lawn chairs and Frisbees. We may not have a traditional dress, other than jeans and a T-shirt, but we now have a tradition of toting our belongings to public events in clear plastic bags, snapping photographs of our most beautiful monuments through a maze of noncancelable fencing and being greeted at seemingly every corner by an all-hands security presence that includes U.S. marshals and officers, agents and members of the U.S. Park Police, Metropolitan Police, Drug Enforcement Ad-

ministration, Secret Service and National Guard. Even the dogs are on a patrol.

It might be tempting to say that these are unusual circumstances, rare events. But this is what Washington looks like even on quiet days. The barricades don't all go up. Those that do are not cracked open just a smidge for grudging passage, but they can be slammed shut at a moment's notice.

Federal Washington is looking sketchy as the country celebrates its birthday. It's looking defensive and paranoid. In recent months, Capitol Police checkpoints have been installed on the street that separates my home from my hardware store. Dupont Circle, the landmark that gives the surrounding neighborhood — with its deep roots in L.G.B.T.Q. history — its name, was fenced off by the Park Police during the Capital Pride parade on June 20.

Only a few days earlier, as television cameras panned the audience spread out on the lawn for the June 18 opening of the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago, I noticed how welcoming the scene looked. The crowd was diverse in race, age and gender. There wasn't a lot of red, white and blue in that Chicago

on the lawn at Chicago's Midway Plaisance, the site of the official watch party for the center's opening, women held a Juneteenth flag, neighbors wore a mishmash of T-shirts and jeans. The audience listened to Jennifer Hudson sing the national anthem, to Christina Aguilera perform "What a Wonderful World," at the suggestion of President Barack Obama, and to John Legend and Common offer a rendition of "Glory," their paean to social justice.

Four former presidents sit onstage with civility and composure. Michelle Obama spots her son, Malia, as he hurdles that had been strewn in her husband's path.

"Eight years in the crucible, and not once did you melt from the heat, not once did you let it harden you," she said. "And to do it all as a father, and the higher standard that comes with all that."

These are snapshots from the sort of celebration that I think the 250th birthday of the country deserves, ones that speak of neighborliness, ease, pride and dignity. They depict more thoughtful, generous and inclusive expressions of patriotism than most anything from the Great American State Fair on the National Mall, or the promise, by Mr. Trump, that this year's fireworks display will break a Guinness World Record by exploding more than 860,000 shells. But before the pyrotechnic celebration can begin, the president will speak. And if he is true to form, he will speak and speak and speak.

I want to delight in the sights and sounds of fireworks over the nation's capital in the same way I did when I first came to Washington. The way that I did just a few years ago.

The way I hope to again. Someday.

ROBIN GIVHAN is a Pulitzer Prize-winning fashion critic and a former senior critic at large for The Washington Post.

The world has failed the Uyghurs

IMIN. FROM PAGE 1

President Trump's trip to Beijing in May brought this hard news home to his first administration declared China's policies a genocide. But there is no indication that this human rights catastrophe has come up during his meetings with President Xi Jinping of China, the man who set these policies in motion.

For centuries, Uyghurs maintained a distinct Eurasian identity. When I was young, my grandmother told me how our ancestors transformed our hometown, Neskam, from a desert into a living oasis: planting mulberry trees, digging irrigation canals and building our homes — a civilization conjured from sand. Our way of life blends influences from east and west yet remains unmistakably Uyghur, with our own literary, musical, architectural, philosophical and culinary traditions, some recognized by UNESCO as part of humanity's shared heritage. Song has been especially important. My grandmother used to say our souls live in our songs. She sang while kneading dough to make noodles, braiding my aunt's hair and watching the sun set over our mountains and deserts.

But our strong sense of self has complicated Beijing's efforts to integrate us into the Chinese nation, the answer is to extinguish what it means to be Uyghur. A Financial Times investigation published in May documented Beijing's systematic dismantling of the mechanisms through which Uyghur identity is passed down. This includes taking Uyghur children from their families and sending them to boarding schools where they are forbidden from speaking their mother tongue, and eradicating Uyghur-language publishing and education.

Uyghurs in the diaspora, scattered mostly across the United States, Europe and Central Asia, have responded. Families have launched volunteer-run

Uyghur-language schools for our children. Cultural associations keep alive traditions like the meshrep — our vibrant communal gatherings featuring food, song, dance and moral education. Others are assembling online repositories of Uyghur literature, historical documents, photographs and recordings before they disappear.

We are not the first people to stand on this precipice. Diaspora Jews helped preserve Jewish identity for centuries; exiled Tibetans are struggling to do the same, as have many other peoples throughout history.

But there is no road map, and the challenge is immense.

Much depends on sustaining our language, the irreplaceable medium of a culture. Yet I've seen a worrying pattern emerge across the diaspora:

The first generation speaks the mother tongue. The second understands it, but increasingly responds in the local language. By the third generation, comprehension tends to fade. By the fourth, the language is often functionally dead, surviving with it.

We lack some of the basic tools needed to sustain it. Many of the top Uyghur scholars, writers, artists, historians and linguists — people critical for cultural preservation — are silenced or imprisoned in China. The homegrown Uyghur schools and community organizations in the diaspora that are trying to fill that void operate mostly in isolation, under severe funding



and manpower constraints.

I founded the digital literary magazine Tiyup in 2024 and the news and commentary site Uyghur Post last year to help keep our written word alive. Both survive on small donations and volunteers. I have had to work multiple jobs to keep them afloat, and have repeatedly come close to shutting down. Without Beijing's efforts to undermine efforts like ours, human rights groups have documented a broad campaign of intimidation by China aimed at silencing Uyghurs abroad, and digital security watchdogs say China-linked actors are likely behind cyberattacks against Uyghur websites.

Uyghur Post has faced relentless attacks, forcing prolonged shutdowns. Fake sites have sprung up, apparently to confuse readers and erode our credibility. Similar challenges are reported by Uyghurs engaged in cultural preservation around the world.

Pressure on China to end its atrocious

CHEN YINXUE

ties against Uyghurs must never relent. But what the Uyghurs need from the global community is changing. If the world can't stop what's happening in China, governments and private organizations must recognize that a unique slice of human culture faces extinction — and provide funding and institutional support for the Uyghur communities within their borders who are fighting to prevent that.

I do this work for my daughter. I wake up every morning wondering who she has become, whether she remembers the songs I sang to her. I realize I may never see her again. But what we build in exile may keep fragments of her Uyghur soul intact so that young ones like her can reclaim them someday.

TAHMIN IMIN is a Uyghur scholar and writer who was previously imprisoned by China's government. He is the founder of the Uyghur Post news website and the Uyghur Freedom Initiative.