

The proof of the pudding is...



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

AS A lawyer, I understand that if two honourable judges speak for the Court, it is the Supreme Court of India (SC) which speaks. The Supreme Court is a Constitutional court, it is also the final appellate court, it has original jurisdiction in some matters, it has superintendence over all courts, it can review and overrule its own judgments, it can take up a cause *suo motu*, it has the power to constitute a Special Investigation Team (SIT) or a Commission, it has the power to refer a matter for investigation to a police agency, it can refer a civil or commercial dispute to mediation or arbitration, it can transfer a matter from the jurisdiction of a High Court to the jurisdiction of another High Court, it can pronounce a man and a woman divorced, it has the power to punish a person for contempt of court, its interpretation of the Constitution of India is the final word, and it has the power to pass any order to "do complete justice". It is said that the SC is the most powerful court in the world.

Universal adult suffrage

Among its vast powers, one stands out.

In *State of Madras vs V G Row*, the Supreme Court described itself as the *sentinel qui vive*—a watchful guardian of the Constitution. What does the Constitution say about elections?

● Article 324 vests in the Election Commission of India (ECI) the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for...and the conduct of all elections to, Parliament and the Legislature of every State.

● Article 326 prescribes that elections to the House of the People and the Legislative Assemblies of States shall be on the basis of adult suffrage ("The right to vote is a constitutional right." — SC).

There is no conflict between the two Articles. The ECI is constitutionally obligated to prepare the electoral rolls including every adult in India. Obviously, there are other other qualifications, like citizenship and residence, imposed by the Constitution, the Citizenship Act, 1955 and the Representation of the People Act, 1950. Each of the laws prescribes an *authority* and a *procedure* to determine whether a person satisfies the qualifications under the law.

The fundamental basis of universal *adult franchise* is **inclusion**. **Exclusion** from the electoral rolls is an exception and must follow a laid-down procedure and a decision in writing that is subject to judicial review.

Interesting observations

In the course of the judgment in *Association for Democratic Reforms vs Election Commission* dated May 27, 2026 (in the context of the SIR exercise in Bihar), the Supreme Court observed:

The Supreme Court judgment noted that the outcome of the SIR exercise in Bihar was the net deletion of approximately 47,00,000 names from the electoral roll of 2003. Six persons out of every 100 adults in Bihar were excluded from the final electoral roll

● The commission decided to treat the 2003 electoral roll, with 01-01-2003 as the qualifying date, as probative evidence of eligibility, unless rebutted. Any person not included in the 2003 roll must produce one or more prescribed documents to establish his/her eligibility as an elector [In *Inderjit Barua (1985)* and *Lal Babu Hussein (1995)* the SC had affirmed that names included in the electoral roll are entitled to the presumption of citizenship].

● Upon scrutiny, where the eligibility of any person is found to be doubtful, the ERO/AERO is mandated to issue a show-cause notice setting out the grounds for the proposed exclusion and rendering a reasoned and speaking order. Any person aggrieved by a decision of the ERO shall be entitled to prefer an appeal before the District Magistrate under S.24(a) of the RP Act, 1969. A second appeal may be filed under S. 24(b) before the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) of the state.

● The Commission, in the course of preparing or revising electoral rolls, is undoubtedly empowered to examine questions bearing upon citizenship ("a limited enquiry"—SC)...Importantly, the entirety of this exercise remains amenable to judicial review.

The judgment noted that the outcome of the SIR exercise in Bihar was the *net deletion* of approximately 47,00,000 names from the electoral roll of 2003. *Six persons out of every 100 adults in Bihar were excluded from the final electoral roll.*

Proof of the pudding

Even before the judgment was delivered

in the Bihar SIR case, the SIR exercise was started and completed in West Bengal. Many lakh names were deleted. There was an SC-mandated judicial review by *ad hoc* judicial officers. According to the data released by the ECI and reports based on official figures from the West Bengal SIR exercise were:

First phase: removed on account of death, duplicate entries, shifted, absent, etc. 63.66 lakh
Deleted after summary review mainly on account of 'logical discrepancies': 27.16 lakh
Total deletions: 90.83 lakh

Appeals filed to ad hoc judicial officers: 25 lakh (approx)
Appeals heard and disposed of (until May 14, 2026): 6,581

Appeals accepted and names reinstated in the rolls: 4,043
Percentage of success 61.43%

West Bengal was the only state where an SC-mandated process of *judicial* review of the deletions was undertaken. Not in Bihar. Juxtapose the judgment and the results of the judicial review. If we apply the success rate of the West Bengal sample (61.43 per cent) to the deleted names in Bihar (47,00,000), it is a fair conclusion that approximately 28,87,210 persons — who did not vote — would be entitled to be reinstated in the Bihar electoral roll.

The conclusion exposes the hollowness of the ECI's claims and the inaccuracy, unreliability and lack of credibility of the SIR exercise. After ECI's blessings, will democracy survive?

Let us talk about education



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

IT IS astonishing that it has become fashionable to talk about education. For the wrong reasons maybe, but at least we are discussing the most undiscussed and, in my view, the most vital reform that India needs. So far, all talk has been about NEET and leaked papers and the venality that has been revealed in the CBSE exam system. Desperate young students have been driven to suicide because of these corrupt practices. This alone should shame those responsible. So, when the noise and drama of these events die, please, please let us continue talking about the rot in our education system.

Maybe this time we will talk about it a little longer because of India's newest political party making leaked papers their first cause. By the time you read this, the leader of the Cockroach Janata Party should have landed in Delhi and probably been arrested before he manages to hold a protest rally at Jantar Mantar. It is my fervent hope that even if the protest fails, the cause that he claims has brought him back home will not be forgotten. There must be accountability and heads must roll. He has demanded the resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan, and if this man had any self-respect, he would have already resigned, but this will solve nothing.

The rot goes deep and has spread from the top to the very bottom. The reason why our political leaders and high officials never send their children to government schools is because they know that they have built schools that offer not real learning but barest literacy. When Indian children from Tamil Nadu and Himachal competed in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009, they came second last. In this exam, 15-year-olds were tested for their skills in reading, mathematics and science. Alarm bells should have gone off across India but if our babus have one superpower, it is knowing how to keep bad news from reaching the ears of their political masters.

We did not need an international test to establish that schools run by the Indian state are abysmal. If our prime ministers have had one thing in common, it is their neglect of education. Jawaharlal Nehru built the IITs but appeared not to notice that the only children able to get into them were from upper caste, middle class families. He also did not notice that on his watch was created a higher education system that was so tightly controlled by the government that it killed all chances of excellence or research. One reason is meddling officials. If there is to be reform, then it should start with the abolition of the University Grants Commission. It is an unnecessary busybody that gives officials unneeded power.

Before writing this piece, I had a chat with Michel Danino who knows from the inside how the system works. He worked in the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and recently got into trouble with the Supreme Court for telling the truth about corruption in the judiciary in a school textbook. When I asked him what were the three most important reforms that needed to be made in the school system, he said that for a start, instead of students being treated as a 'passive sponge', they need to be encouraged to participate. In other words, less rote learning.

The second reform he recommends is the setting up of proper teacher training institutes. And third, that there be investment in school infrastructure. Government schools lack such basic things as libraries, playgrounds, clean water and toilets. I have visited village schools in many states and seen some that are just empty sheds. So, I could not agree more. The irony is that the one reform that has been made is for teachers to be paid hefty salaries. These are sometimes ten times higher than the paltry salaries teachers earn in the thousands of private schools that have sprouted across rural India.

It is heartbreaking to think of how disadvantaged Indian children will be when they go out into a world where the competition could be AI children. Already, we have 'graduates' who cannot find jobs because they have left college without being able to articulate an idea or solve a simple equation. It has been said more than once that the problem in India is not unemployment but unemployability.

In 2013, when I was a passionate Modi-*bhakt* and hoped with all my heart that he would be able to bring the changes India so desperately needs, I was once summoned to meet him. He was still Chief Minister of Gujarat but knew in his heart that when the general election came the following year, he would be prime minister. He asked me what I felt were the things that most urgently needed to be done. And, I said he needed to rectify the mistakes that Congress prime ministers had made, which was to neglect education and healthcare.

We talked uninterrupted for more than an hour at the end, of which I was convinced that I had made my point. Clearly, I had not or by now we should have seen a revolutionary improvement in government schools that are in states governed by BJP chief ministers. Today that includes all major Hindi-belt states, Maharashtra and now West Bengal. Will the Cockroach noises bring some urgency? It is my sincerest hope that this will happen.

Patriarchy & the mother-in-law trope in India



AUDREY DMELLO

THE DOMINATING mother-in-law occupies a prominent place in India's social imagination. She is the villain of television serials, the subject of jokes, and a recurring character in domestic violence cases. Giribala Singh's comments about Twisha Sharma's personal life — policing her body, sexuality, and behaviour — have reinforced the trope. There is an uncomfortable paradox at the heart of this stereotype: The mother-in-law who was once a young bride herself, subjected to control, humiliation, and violence, later inflicts the same on her daughters-in-law.

The television serial *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* popularised the constant battle between the *saas* (mother-in-law) and the *bahu* (daughter-in-law). While often exaggerated for entertainment, these narratives reflect tensions present in many households where women are pitted against one another as rivals competing for authority.

Real-life cases reveal a more troubling reality. In prosecutions involving dowry deaths and domestic violence, mothers-in-law frequently appear as accused. National crime data shows complaints often involve female relatives, too.

Public discourse treats this as evidence that women are "women's worst enemies". Such explanations obscure the larger patriarchal structure that produces such conflict. Women did not design the dowry system, create patrilocal marriage, or establish inheritance structures — systems that favour men. Yet women become agents through which these systems are maintained. Daughters/sisters, however loved, are taught to obey their fathers/brothers. Wives, however independent, are expected to defer to husbands. As women, their value rests on the extent to which they sacrifice for their male family members.

In a patriarchal society, women are subtly, but consistently, socialised and trained to police one another. *Saas over bahu*. *Jethani* (elder sister-in-law) over *devrani* (younger sister-in-law), *nanand* (husband's sister) over the *bhabhi* (brother's wife). The resentment is not personal rivalry but structural conditioning. It starts when little girls see female relationships steeped in jealousy, competition, and backbiting. They grow up believing that female relationships are fragile and shallow. When a paternal grandmother insults her mother, leaving her mother feeling isolated, the girl learns that women don't stand together.

Marriage involves a woman leaving her natal home and moving into her husband's family. Traditionally, she enters the household with little power, expected to serve elders, perform domestic labour, and conform to family expectations. A woman's social status improves with age, particularly after she becomes the mother of sons. The son becomes her source of security, influence, and identity in a society where women's access to property, income, and independent social status remains constrained. When the son marries, the daughter-in-law enters a structure in which authority has already been hard-won by older women. The arrival of a daughter-in-law is perceived as a threat to that authority and emotional security.

Turkish feminist scholar Deniz Kandiyoti described this phenomenon as the "patriarchal bargain". Women, oppressed by a system, participate in sustaining it because compliance offers social rewards and resistance carries significant costs. Thus, the abusive mother-in-law is not an exception to patriarchy but one of its products. Patriarchy does not survive solely because men enforce it. It survives because its values become internalised and reproduced within families. Women are its most effective gatekeepers. A young woman's clothing is scrutinised not by her father but by her grandmother. Her movements are restricted not by her husband but by her mother-in-law. Her choices about work, marriage, or motherhood are questioned by other women long before any man's voice is heard.

A revolution to dismantle patriarchy is possible when women stop seeing each other as rivals and start recognising each other as allies in the struggle for dignity, freedom, and equality.

The writer is the director of Majlis, a legal centre for women & children

How an IMD discovery in 1920s changed monsoon forecasts



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY AMITABH SINHA

THE EL NIÑO phenomenon is fairly well known in India, thanks to widespread discussion in the media in connection with its impact on the Indian monsoon. El Niño Southern Oscillation, or ENSO, is a large-scale ocean-atmosphere interaction playing out in the Pacific Ocean region that happens to be the biggest cause of year-on-year variations in global climate. It has profound impacts on weather events everywhere, including the Indian monsoon.

What is much less known is that this global phenomenon, at least the atmospheric component of this ocean-atmosphere interaction, was first discovered by the India Meteorological Department (IMD) in the early 1920s. It was British mathematician Sir Gilbert Walker, working as head of IMD, a position that was at that time described as Director General of Observatories, who had noticed the sea-saw behaviour of air pressure between the east and west Pacific Ocean, something that became known as the Southern Oscillation, or SO.

While working to develop a reliable forecast model for the Indian monsoon, Walker, who had a nearly 21-year tenure at IMD from 1904 to 1924, had decided to look at external influences, having realised that the monsoon was not an isolated phenomenon over the Indian region. Meticulously going through all the weather observation data that used to be collected at the time, Walker noticed three large systems, two in the Pacific and one in the Atlantic Ocean, in which the atmospheric pressures periodically oscillated between being very high



Sir Gilbert Walker, who headed IMD, found that the Southern Oscillation could have an impact on the Indian monsoon

and very low at the opposite ends. The Southern Oscillation was so named because it was relatively south of the other two, which were called the North Atlantic Oscillation and North Pacific Oscillation.

He found the Southern Oscillation to be the most persistent and also the most likely to have an impact on the Indian monsoon.

Decades later, Norwegian-American meteorologist Jacob Bjerknes linked the Southern Oscillation to the periodic warming and cooling of the equatorial Pacific Ocean, or El Niño. Natives of the western coastline of South America, in the countries of Peru and Ecuador, were aware of this periodic change in sea surface temperatures for centuries. But it was Bjerknes who showed in the late 1960s that the two processes, the ocean phenomenon of El Niño and the atmospheric phenomenon of Southern Oscillation, formed a feedback loop in which one reinforced the other.

This discovery gave the scientists their first understanding of this complete process. El Niño and La Niña, the two opposite phases of ENSO, are now known to in-

fluence every large-scale weather phenomenon in the world. In the El Niño phase, the equatorial Pacific Ocean, off the coast of South America, gets warmer than normal, while in the La Niña phase, it gets cooler. El Niño has a general warming impact on the planet. It is known to suppress rainfall over the Indian and Australian region, including southeast Asia, but causes bountiful rains to happen over the North Americas. La Niña has opposing impacts.

Walker's discovery of the southern oscillation marked a major improvement in the scientific understanding of monsoon and resulted in greater scientific grounding of its forecasts. Before that, forecasts, issued since the establishment of IMD in the 1870s, relied heavily on statistical correlations.

However, monsoon forecasts did not suddenly become accurate. Even decades after discovering the ENSO link, IMD struggled to provide reliable forecasts. That is because the monsoon is a highly complex system, and its relationship with ENSO is not causal. In fact, because of the lack of reliable predictors, the IMD, for a very long time, between 1932 and 1988, had stopped providing monsoon forecasts for the entire country. Its forecasts used to be limited only to northwest India and the peninsular region. And even this was not quantitative. Instead of mentioning the percentage of normal rainfall expected during the season, as it does now, IMD then used terms like "slightly above normal" or "not far from normal".

It was only in 1988 that IMD restarted all-India forecasts and reintroduced the quantitative element into its predictions. Over the years, IMD has significantly upgraded its computational abilities, observational network, and prediction models, resulting in remarkable improvements in long-range forecasts. But new challenges have arisen, particularly those related to extreme weather events.

The writer is Deputy Editor, Climate & Science, The Indian Express

What the witch couldn't eat



SHE SAID
BY AARUSHEE SHUKLA

For a woman who had spent years believing that the lack of education explained everything, this experience was a recalibration. She learned something else, too: she had rights. If work was not provided within 15 days of a demand, she was entitled to an unemployment allowance. That the state could owe her something was new information, and she filed it carefully in her mind.

In 2018, when the work stopped coming, she used it. Four hundred women, seventeen panchayats, one courtyard, one demand. The BDO ran. The work came back. "I felt proud," she says. This is what pride looks like when it has been earned. The pride of a woman who was told a witch would eat her if she went to school, who saved five rupees and a fistful of rice at a time, who stood in a government courtyard with hundreds of others, watching the men run.

Anju now works at a Haldiram's factory. Twelve hours a day, making a meagre Rs 400. She does not know about the Union Budget this year, or the proposal to replace MGNREGA with the VB-G GRAMG, or the debate about shifting the pro-

gramme from demand-driven to supply-driven. She has not had time to meet anyone or get information since she started at the factory. When told that MGNREGA had been effectively discontinued, she went quiet.

This is the silence policymakers should sit with and deconstruct. The shift from a demand-driven to a supply-driven employment is, in the language of policy, a technical adjustment. On the ground, it means that women like Anju, who learned slowly and at great cost that they had the right to demand work, no longer have that right. The legal entitlement that gave her the language for the gherao, the grounds to stand in that courtyard and shout, is quietly being retired.

MGNREGA was not perfect. But for Anju, it was three hours in the morning, cash in hand, forty women laughing in a field, and the knowledge that if the work didn't come, the state owed her an answer.

Aarushee Shukla is PhD scholar at JNU

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

SUPPLY SECURITY PRIORITISED OVER PRICE CONCERNS AMID HIGH GAS DEMAND

US tops India's LNG basket in May, imports recover to pre-war levels

Sukalp Sharma
New Delhi, June 6

WITH THE heavy disruption in liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports from key suppliers Qatar and the UAE, the US emerged as India's largest source of super-chilled gas in May, followed by Nigeria, Oman, and Angola, as New Delhi's LNG imports recovered to pre-war levels despite the surge in international LNG prices.

While some major LNG importing countries reduced imports amid sky-high prices, India prioritised supplies over price amid demand from various sectors, which include city gas distribution, fertiliser, power, and ceramics.

The effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz has upended the regular flow of LNG to India from key suppliers Qatar and the UAE, leading to a scramble for LNG cargoes from alternate geographies. The supply disruption has not been as severe as initially anticipated due to a combination of alternative suppliers raising exports and demand curtailment in various parts of the world. India depends on LNG imports to meet about half of its natural gas requirement, and about 60% of those imports came through the critical maritime chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz, primarily from Qatar, and also the UAE. The two Gulf



India depends on LNG imports to meet about half of its natural gas requirement. REUTERS

nations are major LNG exporters. Ship tracking data from commodity market analytics firm Kpler shows that India imported 2.2 million tonnes of LNG in May, 13.5% higher over April, and 32% over March, which was the first month impacted by the West Asia war and the consequent closure of the Strait of Hormuz. LNG imports in May were, in fact, 6% higher over the corresponding month of last year, and 6.4% higher than the 2025 monthly average.

As no LNG volumes came to Indian shores from Qatar for the second month in a row, and just 0.1 million tonnes came from the UAE, LNG importers continued with their pivot to alternative suppliers—that don't depend on the Strait of Hormuz—to secure emergency spot cargoes.

Volumes from the US tripled to 0.9 million tonnes, accounting for about 41% of India's overall LNG imports for the month, as per Kpler data. In 2025, the average monthly LNG imports from the US were 0.2 million tonnes.

Nigeria was in the second spot with 0.5 million tonnes—flat on a month-on-month basis—followed by Oman and Angola at 0.3 million tonnes each. In April, LNG imports from Oman were 0.6 million tonnes, while supplies from Angola stood at 0.3 million tonnes. Although Oman is located in West Asia, it has a sizable coastline facing the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman, and doesn't depend on the Strait of Hormuz for the transit of its cargoes. Last year, the average monthly LNG imports from Nigeria, Oman,

and Angola were 0.1 million tonnes, 0.2 million tonnes, and 0.1 million tonnes, respectively.

In 2025, the average monthly LNG import volumes from Qatar stood at 1 million tonnes, followed by imports from the UAE at 0.3 million tonnes. In March-April, the Strait of Hormuz closure meant that just 0.06 million tonnes came from Qatar and 0.13 million tonnes from the UAE during the two months.

"This (recovery in India's LNG imports) is notable given Asian spot LNG spiked to peak of \$25/mBtu in late Mar '26 after Qatar's production halt and Hormuz closure, before easing to around \$17-18/mBtu in May, still about 70% above pre-crisis (level of) about \$10/mBtu. While South Korea and Japan cut imports, India moved in the opposite di-

INDIA'S LNG IMPORT (million tonnes)

SUPPLIER	MAY 2026	MONTHLY AVERAGE IN 2025
US	0.9	0.2
Nigeria	0.5	0.1
Oman	0.3	0.2
Angola	0.3	0.1
UAE	0.1	0.3
Qatar	0	1
Others	0.1	0.2

SOURCE: KPLER

rection, absorbing cost premium to keep volumes flowing," Equirus Securities said in a note.

While high and largely inelastic demand from critical sectors like CGD and fertilisers has ensured that LNG imports remain strong, a few other sectors have added to the demand for LNG due to the prevailing weather and fuel supply situation. "India's power consumption surged over 11% yoy in May '26. Peak demand hit an all-time high of over 270 GW. With coal carrying about 70% of load and hydro 10%, Ministry of Power directed all gas-based plants on standby for heatwave shortfall coverage, turning high-cost LNG into a non-negotiable grid necessity," Equirus said.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

India-Oman trade

YEAR	EXPORTS (\$BN)	IMPORTS (\$BN)	TRADE BALANCE (\$BN)	TOTAL TRADE
2024-25	4.06	6.54	2.48	10.60
2023-24	4.42	4.52	0.10	8.94
2022-23	4.47	7.91	3.44	12.38
2021-22	3.14	6.84	3.70	9.98
2020-21	2.3	3.08	0.78	5.38

SOURCE: COMMERCE & INDUSTRY MINISTRY

West Asia Conflict: How pact with Oman cushions India's trade

Ravi Dutta Mishra
New Delhi, June 6

THE INDIA-Oman free trade agreement (FTA), which was signed in December last year, entered into force on June 1, at a time when the sustained blockade of the Strait of Hormuz has begun to translate into wider macroeconomic worry for the country due to high dependence on costly imported fuel, fertilisers, and key industrial input items.

While higher freight costs continue to be a major impediment to trade flows with the West Asia region, the trade deal with Oman could offer a breather for India due to its geographical location, which sits outside the Strait of Hormuz. The country is increasingly seen as a critical gateway to the region if the ongoing US-Iran conflict continues.

Trade experts pointed out that, unlike most Gulf countries, which rely on shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, much of Oman's coastline is located outside the strait, directly on the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. This allows major ports such as the Port of Salalah and Port of Duqm to remain accessible even when traffic through the strait is disrupted.

Ties with Oman would be important for India as its trade with the UAE has taken a big hit due to the West Asia crisis. After signing a trade deal with the UAE in 2022, Abu Dhabi emerged as one of the largest trade partners in the Gulf region, with overall trade crossing \$100 billion during the last financial year.

However, overall trade with the UAE has declined by 35% in April. This is primarily because only two UAE ports, Khor Fakkan and Fujairah, have managed to avoid operational difficulties amid the blockade.

Trade data also showed that while commerce with West Asian countries has come under pressure since the Strait of Hor-

muz was closed on March 2, trade with Oman has picked up. Energy imports from Iraq, Qatar and the UAE declined sharply in April, but shipments from Oman jumped 246.42% to \$1.48 billion last month, compared to \$429.58 million in April last year.

Before the war, India's trade had been heavily dependent on the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The two countries accounted for 8.4% and 2.7% of India's total exports, respectively, in FY25, while Oman's share stood at just 0.9%. On the import side, the UAE and Saudi Arabia com-

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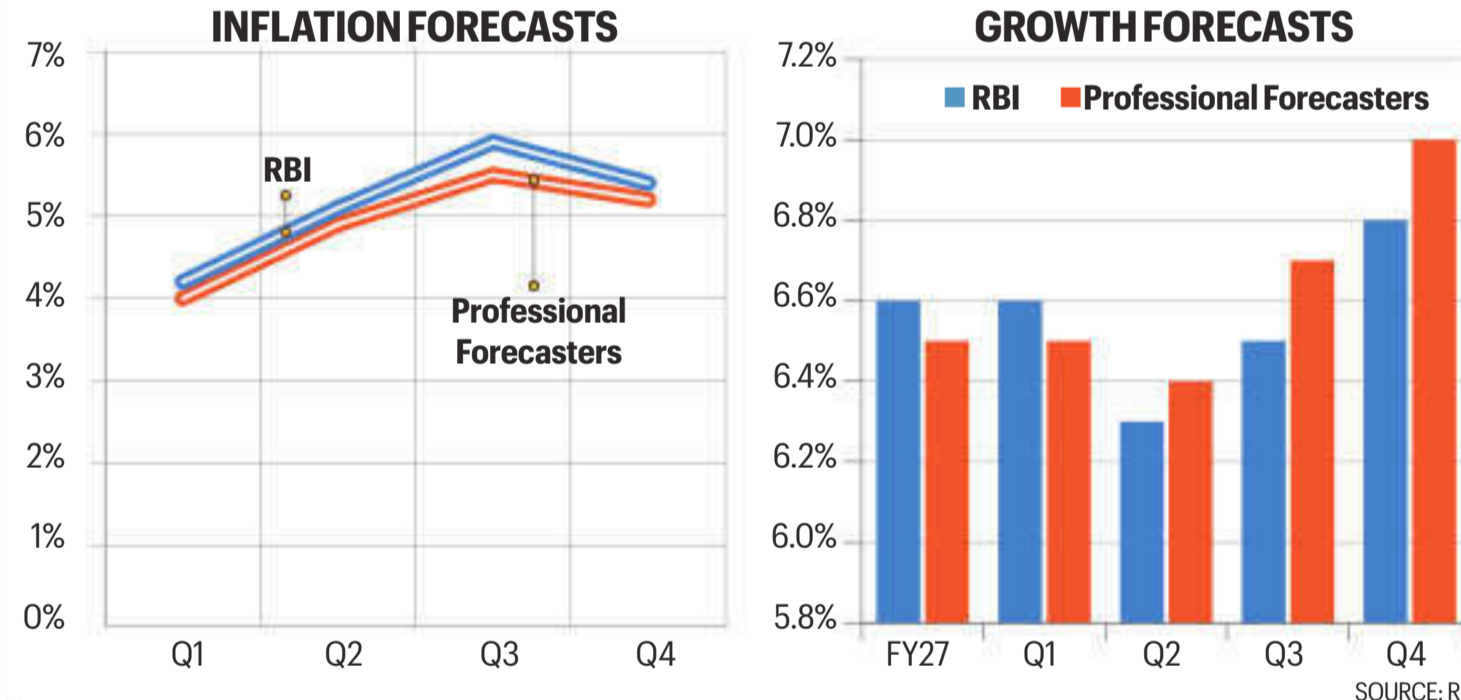
prised 8.8% and 4.2% of India's total imports, with Oman again at 0.9%. Commerce Ministry data showed. Under the deal, Oman has granted zero-duty access on 98% of tariff lines covering 99% of India's exports, boosting prospects for products ranging from petroleum goods to machinery and steel. "The agreement deepens India's energy security by ensuring access to Omani crude oil, LNG, fertilisers, methanol and ammonia, worth over \$7.2 billion in imports in FY2026," former trade officer and founder of think tank Global Trade and Research Initiative (GTRI), Ajay Srivastava said.

Although over 80% of Indian exports already entered Oman at relatively low average tariffs of around 5%, duties on certain products reached as high as 100%, he said, adding that their elimination is expected to improve the competitiveness of Indian goods in the Omani market, though export growth will inevitably be constrained by the country's relatively small market size. The pact with Oman also assumes significance given its role in the ongoing West Asia conflict. Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi has said that Tehran is working on arrangements to determine what services "Iran and Oman are providing in the Strait of Hormuz".

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Is the RBI pessimistic on inflation?

With the West Asia war dragging on, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday raised its headline retail inflation forecast for 2026-27 by 50 basis points to 5.1%, with the average for October-December 2026 at 5.9% — almost touching the upper bound of the central bank's 2%-6% mandate. Meanwhile, the median estimate for the same quarter of 40 economists from outside the RBI was a significantly lower 5.5%, as per the central bank's Survey of Professional Forecasters. Forecasts — by both the RBI and external economists — for the other three quarters of the current financial year were all within 20 bps of each other, although it was the central bank's numbers which were higher in every instance. Even when it comes to underlying price pressures, the professional forecasters see core inflation — or inflation excluding food and fuel — averaging 4.4% in 2026-27 as against the RBI's latest projection of 4.7%. On the growth front, views are more closely aligned: 6.6% by the RBI as against 6.5% by the forecasters. But the quarterly numbers revealed the central bank to be more cautious.



Meta plans mega fundraise for AI plans

Reuters
Bengaluru, June 6

META IS considering raising tens of billions of dollars in a stock offering as it seeks new sources of capital to fund the company's AI ambitions, the Financial Times reported on Friday. The report comes after Alphabet moved to raise \$84.75 billion in upsized equity offerings, as Big Tech competes to build data centers and capital-

ize on growing demand for AI. Meta executives have been exploring "creative" ways to raise cash as it prepares to sharply boost its AI-related expenses, the FT report said, citing three people familiar with the plans.

After the success of Alphabet's equity raising this week, the discussions have intensified, as per the report.

Meta did not immediately respond to Reuters' request for

comment. Shares of the social media company were down 6.6% following the report.

The world's largest tech companies are increasingly turning to debt and equity markets to fund AI infrastructure investments, marking a shift from their longstanding practice of funding investments largely with cash.

Meta in October filed for its largest bond offering ever of up to \$30 billion.

IT'S A NOTABLE SHIFT FOR AN ADMINISTRATION THAT FAVOURED A HANDS-OFF APPROACH TO THE POWERFUL TECHNOLOGY

Why Trump wants to screen AI models before their release

Soumyarendra Barik
New Delhi, June 6

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump recently signed an executive order creating a voluntary mechanism under which developers of the most advanced AI models can give the US government early access to their systems before public release.

The move marks a notable shift for an administration that has generally favoured a hands-off approach to the powerful technology.

Under the executive order, titled 'Promoting Advanced Artificial Intelligence Innovation and Security', federal agencies are directed to establish a framework through which AI developers can determine whether their systems qualify as "covered frontier models" and, if they choose to partici-

pate, provide government agencies access to those models for security testing before wider deployment.

The White House said the objective is to strengthen cybersecurity and help protect critical infrastructure from vulnerabilities that increasingly capable AI systems may uncover or exploit.

An earlier draft of the executive order had proposed giving federal agencies up to 90 days to evaluate frontier AI models before their public release, but the final version signed by Trump reduced the review window to 30 days following concerns from industry and administration officials that a three-month process could slow innovation and weaken the competitiveness of US AI companies.

The executive order comes



One of the key provisions is a 30-day review period. REUTERS

as powerful AI models like Anthropic's Myths become capable of exploiting cyber vulnerabilities at an unprecedented scale, and as the Pentagon pushes to integrate frontier AI into military operations.

Former White House AI and cryptocurrency czar David

WEST ASIA CONFLICT

Spot market gas purchases by power plants jump over 300%

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, June 6

WITH IRAN war hitting the imports under long-term contracts, gas-based power generators in India have sharply jacked up natural gas purchases from the spot-market this summer to fill the void.

Between April 1 and May 26, power-sector entities purchased 44,67,850 million Metric Million British Thermal Units (MMBtu) of natural gas from the spot market.

This was 336.5% higher than the corresponding period in 2025, more than double the volume purchased in 2024, and nearly 140 times the level recorded in 2023.

Data released by the Central Electricity Authority (CEA) shows that none of the country's 16 gigawatts (GW) of gas-grid connected capacity received imported LNG under long-term arrangements in April. Domestic gas availability also remained constrained.

Although 30.18 million standard cubic metres per day (MMSCMD) of domestic gas was allotted to this 16 GW of gas-grid connected capacity, actual supply in April stood at just 4.33 MMSCMD.

Most of this was supplied to state government owned generating stations, while private-sector plants received only 1.07 MMSCMD, all of it supplied to a single gas-based power station. Conflict in West Asia has cast a shadow over availability of gas for the country's gas-based power plants with the government deciding to prioritise certain sectors during the shortage.

While gas accounts for only a small share in India's overall generation mix, it plays a crucial rebalancing role during evening peak hours, especially during summer, when solar

POWER WOES

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However, the utilisation of India's gas-based power plants has been steadily declining, largely due to high fuel costs.

output drops. Typically, around 10 GW of gas-fired capacity is relied upon during peak summer — making any disruption a significant gap that needs to be filled.

Heavy reliance on spot purchase

Despite a sharp rise in imported LNG prices, spot-market purchases by gas-based generators reached the highest levels in recent years during April and May, data provided by Indian Gas Exchange (IGX) — the country's leading gas-trading bourse — shows.

The surge was evident in both April and May.

In April, power sector companies purchased 15,67,950 MMBtu of natural gas, a year-on-year increase of 260.5% from 435,000 MMBtu in April 2025. The sharp increase came against the backdrop of a significant shift in fuel sourcing.

In April 2025, gas-based power plants met nearly 38% of their LNG requirement through imports under long-term

contracts, alongside spot-market purchases.

The absence of imported LNG under long term contracts was also reflected in lower utilisation levels.

The Plant Load Factor (PLF) — a measure of actual generation as a percentage of installed capacity — of the country's 16 GW of gas-grid connected capacity stood at 11% in April, down from 15.3% in the same month last year.

The purchase from the spot market further increased to 28,99,900 MMBtu from May 1 to May 26, compared with 5,88,550 MMBtu during the corresponding period last year, marking a nearly five-fold increase of 392.7%.

The rise in purchases came despite a sharp increase in spot-market gas prices amid supply disruptions due to the conflict in West Asia. The average spot gas price stood at Rs 1,606 per MMBtu in April, up 43.5% from Rs 1,119 per MMBtu a year earlier. Prices rose further to Rs 1,856 per MMBtu in May, a jump of 77.4% over Rs 1,046 per MMBtu in May last year.

Struggling gas plants

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FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Govt mandates standard edible oil packaging sizes

Press Trust of India
New Delhi, June 6

THE DEPARTMENT of Consumer Affairs has prescribed standard pack sizes for edible oils under the Legal Metrology framework, a move aimed at helping consumers compare prices across brands and make informed purchasing decisions.

The department has amended its Standard Operating Procedure (SoP) for determination of net quantity and standard pack sizes of edible oils and fats, giving manufacturers, packers and importers a three-month transition period to comply with the new norms, an official statement said.

The revised SoP prescribes nine standard pack sizes - 200 ml/g, 500 ml/g, 1 litre/kg, 2 litre/kg, 3 litre/kg, 4 litre/kg, 5 litre/kg, 15 litre/kg and 20 litre/kg-for major edible oils including palm, soybean, sunflower, mustard, groundnut, sesame, rice bran, cottonseed and corn oil, as well as blended edible oils.

The decision follows extensive consultations with major edible oil industry associations representing nearly 90% of the country's edible oil sector.

Under the new norms, if the quantity of edible oil is shown in volume, the package must also clearly mention the equivalent weight as per the Legal Metrology (Packaged Commodities) Rules, 2011.

The provisions will apply to both domestically manufactured and imported edible oils. Packages below 200 ml or 200 grams and minor edible oils have been exempted from the standard pack size requirement to ensure continued availability of affordable small packs.

Businesses wishing to adopt the standard pack sizes ahead of the deadline may do so immediately, the department said.

Sudhakar Desai, President of the Indian Vegetable Oil Producers' Association (IVPA) welcomed the move and said, "This move will restore structural sanity to retail shelves and level the playing field."

Nestle India pays Rs 1,024.5 crore licence fee in FY26 to Swiss parent

New Delhi: General licence fees (royalty) paid by FMCG major Nestle India to its Switzerland-based group entity Societe des Produits Nestle SA were up 13.91% to Rs 1,024.5 crore in FY26, according to the company's latest annual report.

Besides, Nestle India also paid a 'withholding tax on general licence fees' of 102.47 crore for the financial year ended March 2026.

In the preceding year of FY25, Nestle India paid a general licence fee of Rs 899.41 crore and Rs 89.71 crore as 'withholding tax on general licence fees'. Nestle India obtains access to the Nestle Group's technology and intellectual property through General Licence Agreements for manufacturing and marketing its products, while continuously benefiting from technological advancements and innovations across the product categories it produces and sells. It pays a royalty of 4.5% of net sales to its parent firm. PTI

What does Trump's AI executive order say? One of the key provisions is a 30-day review period. Participating developers would allow designated government agencies to test advanced models for up to a month before they are released outside government circles. Agencies including the Departments of Defense, Commerce, Homeland Security and Treasury are expected to be involved in the process. The order also calls for stronger cyber defences across government systems and greater coordination with industry on identifying software vulnerabilities.

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

DECCAN Chronicle

7 JUNE 2026



Shashi Warriar

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"Very good!" I said. "He's as much a part of our group as you are." Raghavan was on time, and we arrived a few minutes early at the restaurant. Murthy was already there when the steward showed us to our table, and he had a drink in front of him. "Sorry about this," he said, pointing to his drink. "I just finished off something I had to do on my social media group and felt like a drink."

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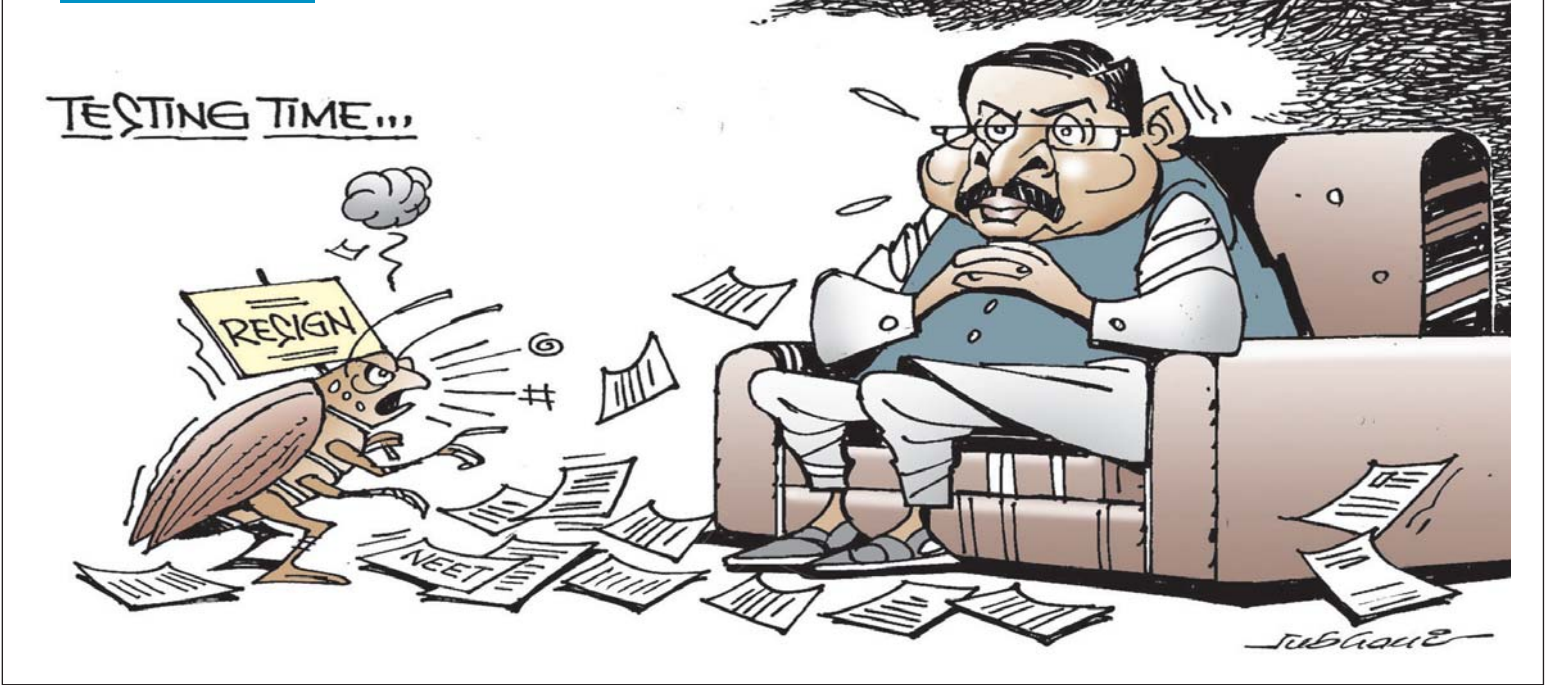
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Shashi Warriar is an author and a columnist

Subhani



Why India must resolve not to give up on Saarc!



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya's View

India's rise as a major power requires a stable and cooperative neighbourhood. No country can aspire to global influence without optimally managing its immediate strategic environment. That was the logic behind the creation of Saarc in 1985, although since the cancelled 19th summit in Islamabad in 2016 due to Pakistan sponsored terrorism, it seems to have almost become extinct.

Saarc was established in 1985 at the first summit in Dhaka. Its founding members were India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives. Later, Afghanistan joined in 2007. Its philosophy was simple but important. South Asia contained nearly a quarter of humanity, shared centuries of civilisational interaction, and yet remained one of the least integrated regions in the world. The founders believed that cooperation in non-contentious areas could build trust and improve the lives of ordinary people.

The charter consciously excluded bilateral disputes from discussion. This provision was inserted largely because of India's concerns that Pakistan would seek to internationalise the Kashmir issue. The declared goals included economic cooperation, poverty alleviation, cultural exchanges, educational collaboration, scientific cooperation, environmental protection and regional connectivity.

History has many examples of nations overcoming deep-seated rivalries to create institutions of regional cooperation. These institutions emerged because leaders recognised that geography is a permanent reality, while conflict is a choice. The challenge was to convert proximity from a source of tension into an instrument of collective progress.

The most striking example is the European Union. Britain and France were rivals for centuries. Germany fought devastating wars

against both. National identities were fiercely protected. Yet, after the catastrophe of two World Wars, Europe gradually realized that prosperity and security required cooperation rather than confrontation. The result was a process that eventually culminated in the European Union, one of the most successful examples of regional integration in modern history.

The same pattern can be seen elsewhere. The African Union emerged despite borders arbitrarily drawn by colonial powers, and despite ethnic conflicts and interstate disputes. Asean brought together countries that had experienced mutual suspicion and conflict. Indonesia and Malaysia were embroiled in the Konfrontasi of the 1960s. Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965 was acrimonious. Thailand and Cambodia had longstanding border disputes. Yet Asean evolved into a remarkably effective regional forum because its members understood that economic growth and strategic stability were best pursued collectively.

Similarly, the Organisation of American States was built among countries with long histories of territorial disputes, ideological divisions, and political instability. In all these cases, an important factor was the existence of shared cultural and civilisational linkages. This logic is equally applicable to South Asia. Despite political differences, South Asia possesses immense civilisational cohesion. The region's peoples are linked by history, language, religion, cuisine, culture, literature, music, and kinship networks that have long predated modern nation-states.

Although many people think that Saarc was essentially a 'talking shop' only — and that perception is perhaps not entirely unfounded — it is not as if when it functioned nothing was achieved. During its more active years, Saarc achieved — or attempt-

ed to achieve — several useful outcomes: creation of a framework for regular interaction among South Asian leaders; establishment of regional institutions dealing with agriculture, meteorology, public health and development; expansion of educational and cultural exchanges; launch of the South Asian Free Trade Area agreement; development of regional cooperation in disaster management and poverty reduction. Perhaps its greatest achievement was psychological rather than institutional. It provided smaller countries with a forum in which they could engage India collectively and where India could demonstrate regional leadership without overt dominance.

Unfortunately, Saarc's progress became hostage to the troubled relationship between India and Pakistan. Decades of mistrust repeatedly paralysed collective initiatives. Smaller neighbours often feared being overwhelmed by India's size and influence. External powers, particularly China, saw opportunities to advance their own strategic interests by exploiting regional divisions. Yet the logic of Saarc remains as relevant today. India possesses one significant advantage that China does not. Its relationship with South Asia is not merely geographical. It is civilisational. Sri Lanka's links with India through Buddhism are profound. Nepal's cultural and religious connections with India are ancient and enduring. Bangladesh shares deep linguistic, historical, and emotional bonds. Even with Pakistan, despite political hostility, centuries of shared history, culture, language, literature, and music continue to provide a reservoir of human connection.

Moreover, India is a democ-

cracy. Whatever its imperfections, it is not perceived as an authoritarian power projecting influence through economic leverage alone. This gives India the opportunity to build relationships on a more consensual and participatory basis, without, of course, compromising on basic issues like terrorism and sovereignty.

The answer, therefore, is not to abandon Saarc but to revive it patiently and pragmatically. Grand declarations should be avoided. The agenda should not be overloaded. India must proceed incrementally through practical and mutually beneficial measures. It should consciously give more than it takes. It should display generosity without condescension, leadership without dominance, and strength without intimidation.

Trust cannot be manufactured overnight, but when people experience the advantages of cooperation — through trade, tourism, educational exchanges, cultural programmes, greater people to people contacts, energy cooperation, climate resilience, disaster management, and infrastructure links — they become stakeholders in cooperation which can yield enormous benefits regardless of political disagreements.

Of course, legitimate Indian concerns about terrorism and security cannot be sacrificed on the altar of any forum for regional cooperation. These issues are non-negotiable. Yet, while accepting this premise, it is instructive to recognise that in South Asia no alternative framework currently includes all its principal actors, despite deep economic, historic and cultural linkages. Even if Saarc, as it originally existed and was conceived of is not revived because of the memories of its past failure, some forum of regional cooperation in South Asia needs to come up.

For India, as an emerging major power, a first priority must be to consolidate its immediate neighbourhood. In South Asia, geography has made us neighbours. Wisdom should now make us partners.

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

LETTERS

SETBACK FOR DKS

The two-day-old government led by D.K. Shivakumar suffered a setback on Friday with the resignation of an eight-time MLA Ramalinga Reddy after being denied Bengaluru Development portfolio (Reddy quits DKS team for portfolio, June 6). Meanwhile it is reported that seven-time MP and two-time MLA K.H. Muniyappa is also sulking on portfolio issues but has not submitted his resignation. The development marks the first major challenge to the new government. It is reported that Ramalinga Reddy is keen to get Bengaluru development ministry as it gets huge funds for urban development and so the person who is holding that ministry has more influence.

Pratapa Reddy Yaramala
Tiruvuru

ANNAMALAI

Voters do not elect leaders based on qualifications, honesty, integrity and lofty ideals for a bright future (Annamalai to start a new party, June 6). Annamalai (former IPS officer) has realised that being in BJP he has no future in TN state politics as well as chances at the Centre. For Annamalai to be relevant in TN politics he must latch up with DMK or AIADMK or join actor Vijay's new party.

Parthasarathy Mandadi
Tirupati

BARTON FOR SUBHANI

It is indeed heartening news that Subhani Shaik has been selected for the prestigious Barton Award (DC cartoonist Subhani to get Barton Award, June 6). His cartoons are thought-provoking, pragmatic, and relevant to contemporary issues. His contribution to the field is a masterclass in visual storytelling. Having followed DC, I have found his cartoons to be insightful and engaging. The cartoon published on the occasion of World Environment Day is a fine example of his talent, conveying a powerful message with remarkable clarity and creativity.

Chaitanya Susarla
Visakhapatnam

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

Anita Katyal Political Gup-Shup



Rijiju likely new Arunachal CM... What's the name of Rajasthan 'PM'?

Now that a set of key Assembly polls are over, both the BJP and the Congress are focusing on organisational changes before they plunge into another round of electioneering. The two parties have started with the appointment of new state party presidents, which is expected to conclude with an organisational reshuffle and, in the case of the BJP, the process will also be tied to a much-anticipated Cabinet reshuffle. Besides other key appointments, the BJP has to decide if it is advisable to continue with Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu after the Supreme Court directed that the CBI should probe allegations of financial irregularities against him. The BJP is not known to give in to such pressure but party insiders said the RSS and the Ramakrishna Mission which holds considerable influence in Arunachal Pradesh are keen that parliamentary affairs minister Kiren Rijiju replace Mr Khandu. Meanwhile, the Congress has just concluded the tough task of picking a new Chief Minister in Kerala and going in for a leadership change in

Karnataka. The party has now turned its attention to the states. It is speculated that Sachin Pilot could return to Rajasthan as the president of the party's state unit. Similarly, the party's Jammu and Kashmir unit is hoping the Congress leadership will take heed of its longstanding complaints and replace current state president Tariq Hamid Karra as, they believe, he has proved to be an ineffective leader. Those pressing for a change have even given a "Dilli Chalo" call to register their grievance with the Congress bosses.

Though Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the Bharatiya Janata Party's undisputed leader, Union home minister Amit Shah is not far behind given the immense influence he yields in government and organisational affairs. For most Central and state leaders, Mr Shah is the go-to person for both policy matters as well as party-related issues. At least, the desert state of Rajasthan has informally named Mr Shah as its Prime Minister since Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma has not got a grip on the administration or the

party's state unit. The bureaucracy and party leaders openly maintain that the state is being virtually managed by Shah. Rajasthan's BJP leaders point out that every time Mr Shah travels to Rajasthan, his visit is invariably followed with the announcement of policy decisions. It is for this reason that they refer to Mr Shah as the PM of Rajasthan.

Last week, the Congress sent a letter to its Haryana unit instructing state leaders that they refrain from organising political programmes like a yatra, dharna or any form of protest in their individual capacity. It also said that leaders will first have to share details of their proposed programme with the Haryana Congress and can only proceed after it has been approved by the state unit, or else it will not be considered a party event and could attract disciplinary action. It is a no-brainer that this advisory was issued, apparently at former Haryana chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda's behest, after former Haryana MP Brijendra Singh undertook a successful

six-month Sadbhav Yatra through the state, ostensibly to focus on national issues but essentially aimed at raising his political profile. Predictably, this did not go down well with Mr Hooda whose rivalry with Brijendra Singh's father Birendra Singh is well known. It is ironic that this latest missive was issued to Haryana Congress after Rahul Gandhi attended Brijendra Singh's concluding rally at Gurgaon where he urged party workers across states to emulate the Haryana leader and launch similar programmes. It is obvious that Mr Hooda's clout in the party remains undiminished even after he led the Congress to defeat in the last Assembly election.

There appears to be no end to discussions and debates over the Modi government's decision to take over the 113-year-old Delhi Gymkhana Club even two weeks after the notice was issued. The matter is now in court but there are a number of stories doing the rounds regarding the Centre's move, asking the club to vacate the premises. The official reason

given is that the 27-acre land parcel, currently occupied by the club, is needed for defence infrastructure and "vital public security purposes". But there are few takers for this ambiguous explanation. There is a growing section in Delhi which is convinced that the Gymkhana takeover is only a cover and that the Indira Gandhi Memorial, located across the road from the club on Safdarjung Road, is the real target. This is where Indira Gandhi was assassinated in 1984 after which the premises were converted into a memorial. The place has drawn huge crowds over the years and continues to be a popular halt for tourists. It is being speculated that the Modi government will take over the memorial or maybe even raze it on the plea that the stretch of land is required in national interest. As long as there is lack of clarity about the government's real intentions, the future of the Delhi Gymkhana Club will remain a subject of animated conversation in the Capital.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

THE ASIAN AGE

7 JUNE 2026



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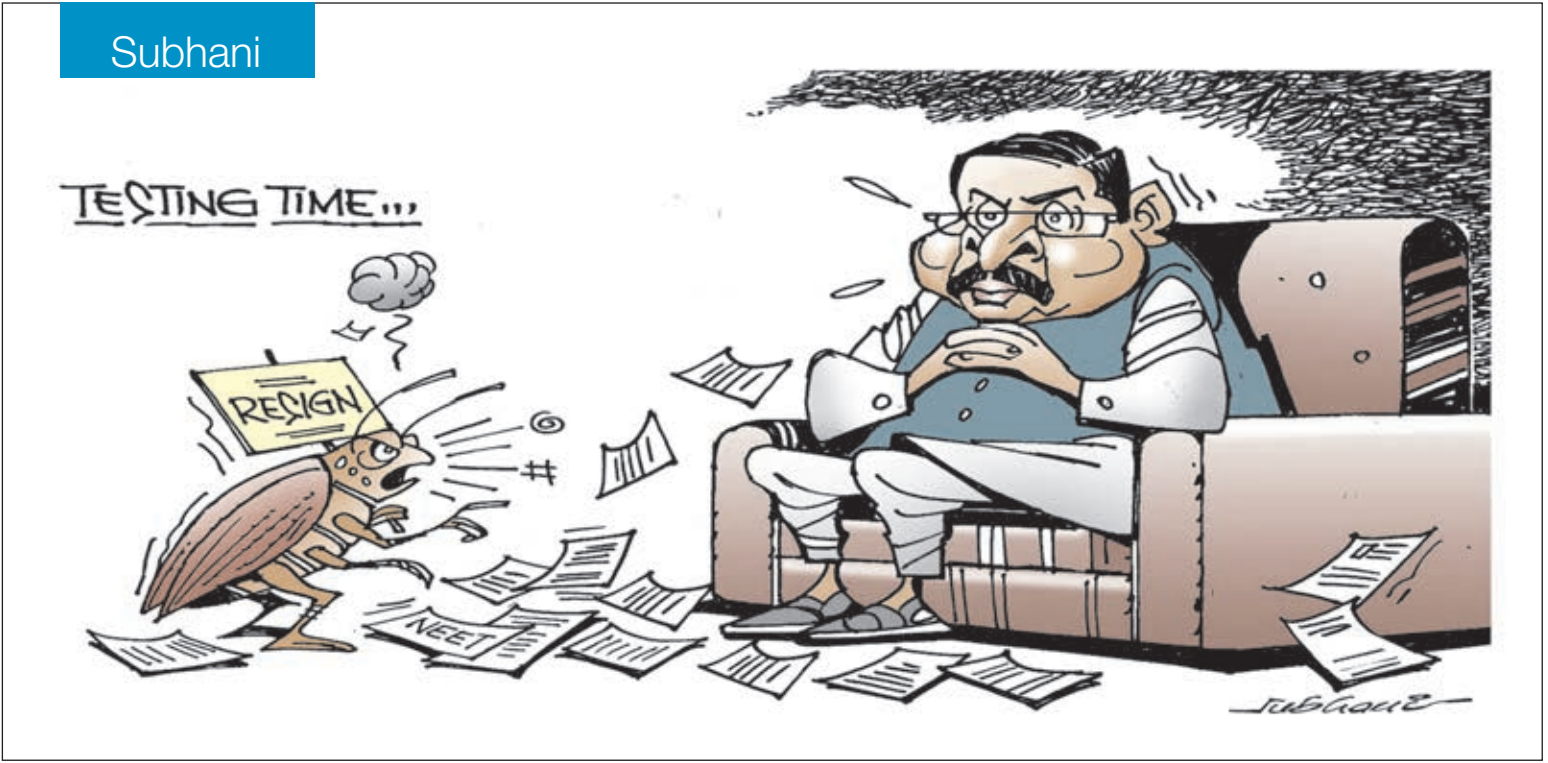
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Pavan K. Varna

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against both. National identities were fiercely protected. Yet, after the catastrophe of two World Wars, Europe gradually realized that prosperity and security required cooperation rather than confrontation. The result was a process that eventually culminated in the European Union, one of the most successful examples of regional integration in modern history.

The same pattern can be seen elsewhere. The African Union emerged despite borders arbitrarily drawn by colonial powers, and despite ethnic conflicts and interstate disputes. Asean brought together countries that had experienced mutual suspicion and conflict. Indonesia and Malaysia were embroiled in the Konfrontasi of the 1960s. Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965 was acrimonious. Thailand and Cambodia had longstanding border disputes. Yet Asean evolved into a remarkably effective regional forum because its members understood that economic growth and strategic stability were best pursued collectively. Similarly, the Organisation of American States was built among countries with long histories of territorial disputes, ideological divisions, and political instability.

In all these cases, an important factor was the existence of shared cultural and civilisational linkages. This logic is equally applicable to South Asia. Despite political differences, South Asia possesses immense civilisational cohesion. The region's peoples are linked by history, language, religion, cuisine, culture, literature, music, and kinship networks that have long predated modern nation-states.

Although many people think that Saarc was essentially a 'talking shop' only — and that perception is perhaps not entirely unfounded — it is not as if when it functioned nothing was achieved. During its more active years, Saarc achieved — or attempt-

ed to achieve — several useful outcomes: creation of a framework for regular interaction among South Asian leaders; establishment of regional institutions dealing with agriculture, meteorology, public health and development; expansion of educational and cultural exchanges; launch of the South Asian University in New Delhi; negotiation of the South Asian Free Trade Area agreement; development of regional cooperation in disaster management and poverty reduction. Perhaps its greatest achievement was psychological rather than institutional. It provided smaller countries with a forum in which they could engage India collectively and where India could demonstrate regional leadership without overt dominance.

Unfortunately, Saarc's progress became hostage to the troubled relationship between India and Pakistan. Decades of mistrust repeatedly paralysed collective initiatives. Smaller neighbours of ten feared being overwhelmed by India's size and influence. External powers, particularly China, saw opportunities to advance their own strategic interests by exploiting regional divisions.

Yet the logic of Saarc remains as relevant today. India possesses one significant advantage that China does not. Its relationship with South Asia is not merely geographical. It is civilisational. Sri Lanka's links with India through Buddhism are profound. Nepal's cultural and religious connections with India are ancient and enduring. Bangladesh shares deep linguistic, historical, and emotional bonds. Even with Pakistan, despite political hostility, centuries of shared history, culture, language, literature, and music continue to provide a reservoir of human connection. Moreover, India is a democ-

racy. Whatever its imperfections, it is not perceived as an authoritarian power projecting influence through economic leverage alone. This gives India the opportunity to build relationships on a more consensual and participatory basis, without, of course, compromising on basic issues like terrorism and sovereignty.

The answer, therefore, is not to abandon Saarc but to revive it patiently and pragmatically. Grand declarations should be avoided. The agenda should not be overloaded. India must proceed incrementally through practical and mutually beneficial measures. It should consciously give more than it takes. It should display generosity without condescension, leadership without dominance, and strength without intimidation.

Trust cannot be manufactured overnight, but when people experience the advantages of cooperation — through trade, tourism, educational exchanges, cultural programmes, greater people to people contacts, energy cooperation, climate resilience, disaster management, and infrastructure links — they become stakeholders in cooperation which can yield enormous benefits regardless of political disagreements.

Of course, legitimate Indian concerns about terrorism and security cannot be sacrificed on the altar of any forum for regional cooperation. These issues are non-negotiable. Yet, while accepting this premise, it is instructive to recognise that in South Asia no alternative framework currently includes all its principal actors, despite deep economic, historic and cultural linkages. Even if Saarc, as it originally existed and was conceived of is not revived because of the memories of its past failure, some forum of regional cooperation in South Asia needs to come up.

For India, as an emerging major power, a first priority must be to consolidate its immediate neighbourhood. In South Asia, geography has made us neighbours. Wisdom should now make us partners.

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

LETTERS WISE ANNAMALAI

K. Annamalai's exit reflects a deeper shift in Tamil Nadu's politics. After failing to win an MLA seat and seeing the BJP secure only one of 234 Assembly seats, his choice to start a new party is less about personal ambition and more about reading the ground. TVK's swift rise shows youth seek fresh voices over old banners. At 42, with an IPS background and strong support from Annamalai Narpani Mandrams, he understands that credibility now comes from service, not slogans. National parties cannot assume past wins will work here. When voters reward new ideas, even a former state chief must adapt. Democracy gains when leaders test themselves, not when they cling to fading structures.

K. Chidanand Kumar
Bengaluru

RBI'S BEST BET

ALTHOUGH THE RBI has flagged a lower growth rate of 6.6 per cent for June 2026 and high rate of inflation at 5.3 per cent, its main worry is foreign exchange and increasing current account deficit. That is now at minus 1.3% of the GDP. Forex reserves have decreased from \$697 billion to \$687 billion in the last six months. Foreign portfolio investors have been pulling out of India and direct remittances are decreasing. Hence the RBI's worry is real. And its measure to exempt FIs from capital gain tax may be a correct step. Indeed, more such measures are required. It is hoped that India will not see a redux of 1991 where it had to pledge gold to Bank of Japan to avert a foreign exchange crisis.

D.B. Madan
New Delhi

LPG CHALLENGE

THE RELENTLESS RISE in LPG cylinder prices has become a pressing concern for millions of households across India. For the common man, cooking gas is not a luxury but a daily necessity. Yet its steadily increasing cost is placing an unbearable strain on already stretched household budgets, forcing families to rethink even basic kitchen expenses. The impact of this surge extends far beyond individual homes. Small businesses, street vendors, and local industries are equally affected, as higher fuel costs drive up production and operational expenses. These increased costs are inevitably passed on to consumers. Transparent pricing policies, targeted subsidies for vulnerable sections and regulatory measures are urgently needed.

Jubel D'Cruz
Mumbai

Anita Katyal

Political Gup-Shup



Rijiju likely new Arunachal CM... What's the name of Rajasthan 'PM'?

Now that a set of key Assembly polls are over, both the BJP and the Congress are focusing on organisational changes before they plunge into another round of electioneering. The two parties have started with the appointment of new state party presidents, which is expected to conclude with an organisational reshuffle and, in the case of the BJP, the process will also be tied to a much-anticipated Cabinet reshuffle. Besides other key appointments, the BJP has to decide if it is advisable to continue with Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu after the Supreme Court directed that the CBI should probe allegations of financial irregularities against him. The BJP is not known to give in to such pressure but party insiders said the RSS and the Ramakrishna Mission which holds considerable influence in Arunachal Pradesh are keen that parliamentary affairs minister Kiren Rijiju replace Mr Khandu. Meanwhile, the Congress has just concluded the tough task of picking a new chief minister in Kerala and going in for a leadership change in

Karnataka. The party has now turned its attention to the states. It is speculated that Sachin Pilot could return to Rajasthan as the president of the party's state unit. Similarly, the party's Jammu and Kashmir unit is hoping the Congress leadership will take heed of its longstanding complaints and replace current state president Tariq Hamid Karra as, they believe, he has proved to be an ineffective leader. Those pressing for a change have even given a 'Dilli Chalo' call to register their grievance with the Congress bosses.

Though Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the Bharatiya Janata Party's undisputed leader, Union home minister Amit Shah is not far behind given the immense influence he yields in government and organisational affairs. For most Central and state leaders, Mr Shah is the go-to person for both policy matters as well as party-related issues. At least, the desert state of Rajasthan has informally named Mr Shah as its Prime Minister since chief minister Bhajan Lal Sharma has not got a grip on the administration or the

party's state unit. The bureaucracy and party leaders openly maintain that the state is being virtually managed by Shah. Rajasthan's BJP leaders point out that every time Mr Shah travels to Rajasthan, his visit is invariably followed with the announcement of policy decisions. It is for this reason that they refer to Mr Shah as the PM of Rajasthan.

Last week, the Congress sent a letter to its Haryana unit instructing state leaders that they refrain from organising political programmes like a yatra, dharna or any form of protest in their individual capacity. It also said that leaders will first have to share details of their proposed programme with the Haryana Congress and can only proceed after it has been approved by the state unit, or else it will not be considered a party event and could attract disciplinary action. It is a no-brainer that this advisory was issued, apparently at former Haryana chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda's behest, after former Haryana MP Brijendra Singh undertook a successful

six-month Sadbhav Yatra through the state, ostensibly to focus on national issues but essentially aimed at raising his political profile. Predictably, this did not go down well with Mr Hooda whose rivalry with Brijendra Singh's father Birendra Singh is well known. It is ironic that this latest missive was issued to Haryana Congress after Rahul Gandhi attended Brijendra Singh's concluding rally at Gurgaon where he urged party workers across states to emulate the Haryana leader and launch similar programmes. It is obvious that Mr Hooda's clout in the party remains undiminished even after he led the Congress to defeat in the last Assembly election.

There appears to be no end to discussions and debates over the Modi government's decision to take over the 113-year-old Delhi Gymkhana Club even two weeks after the notice was issued. The matter is now in court but there are a number of stories doing the rounds regarding the Centre's move, asking the club to vacate the premises. The official reason

given is that the 27-acre land parcel, currently occupied by the club, is needed for defence infrastructure and "vital public security purposes". But there are few takers for this ambiguous explanation. There is a growing section in Delhi which is convinced that the Gymkhana takeover is only a cover and that the Indira Gandhi Memorial, located across the road from the club on Safdarjung Road, is the real target. This is where Indira Gandhi was assassinated in 1984 after which the premises were converted into a memorial. The place has drawn huge crowds over the years and continues to be a popular halt for tourists. It is being speculated that the Modi government will take over the memorial or maybe even raze it on the plea that the stretch of land is required in national interest. As long as there is lack of clarity about the government's real intentions, the future of the Delhi Gymkhana Club will remain a subject of animated conversation in the Capital.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

PROFILES

The Gen Z trio that took on the CBSE

Vedant Shrivastava, Nisarga Adhikary and Sarthak Sidhant

The three students who were viciously trolled for raising their voice on public platforms against the CBSE's On-Screen Marking system stand vindicated after the Board admitted to flaws in the system

Maitri Porecha

Vedant Shrivastava (17), Nisarga Adhikary (19) and Sarthak Sidhant (18) were ordinary teenagers until two weeks ago, before they raised their voice on public platforms against the Central Board of Secondary Education's (CBSE) botched up On-Screen Marking system. After the board admitted to flaws in the system, the Gen Z trio stood vindicated.

Class 12 student Vedant was in for a rude shock when he got called 'anti-national,' on X, as he flagged receiving a stranger's answer sheet instead of his own to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE).

One of the first students to raise his voice against the On-Screen Marking system deployed by the CBSE, Vedant, who is now being referred to as 'the primary whistleblower,' says that since he went public on X, what has ensued is utter 'chaos.' The trolling did not stop at being called an 'anti-national,' or 'Pakistani'. "People went on to comment about my physical appearance and my speech," he says. After pointing out the botch-up, senior officials at the CBSE admitted their mistake and traced his original physics answer sheet.

"I took to X to voice my concerns as CBSE was not replying to my distress calls. Because I am a minor, X does not specifically mention country or location but highlights the larger region to which the account belongs. In my case, this was South Asia, and I was brutally trolled and called a 'Pakistani,'" Vedant says.

After the CBSE portal for re-evaluation opened on June 2, Vedant applied to get 13 questions re-evaluated in four subjects – Computer Science, English, Mathematics and Physics.

An East Delhi resident, Vedant observes that the CBSE implemented On-Screen Marking in a hasty manner. "In my school, some teachers are very aged and they are used to checking answer copies by hand. They are not well versed with using computers. If the CBSE wants to implement the OSM system in 2027 they should give



Nisarga Adhikary, an 'ethical hacker', Vedant Shrivastava, and Sarthak Sidhant have exposed flaws in the CBSE's marking system.

teachers proper training," he says.

It has been two weeks since Vedant's post on X, which blew the lid off a massive evaluation fiasco in the CBSE, but the media attention over the teenager has not died down.

"The controversy started affecting me but my family was very supportive," he says adding that he got 'distracted,' by the CBSE upheaval for the last two weeks but is now re-starting his preparation for the National Defence Academy entrance exams. "I aspire to be a fighter pilot with the Indian Air Force."

'Ethical hacker'

Nisarga Adhikary, a West Bengal-based "ethical hacker", exposed "critical vulnerabilities" in the CBSE's OSM portal, including leaking sensitive student information.

The CBSE immediately slipped into denial after Nisarga went public with his posts on X, and nearly after two weeks, it admitted to the flaws. "It was really frustrating for me that the CBSE and the Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) took three months (since he first raised

complaints in February) to admit the flaws in their portal," Nisarga told *The Hindu*. Between 2023 and 2025, Nisarga found himself embroiled in the Joint Entrance Exams (JEE) race, which he said was 'pretty depressing.' "I don't see a point in putting effort for an institute (Indian Institutes of Technology) when they are not even in top 100 ranking institutes across the world," he told *The Hindu*. Life came full circle for Nisarga when an expert IIT team invited him to fix the vulnerabilities in the CBSE's IT ecosystem. Asked why the students have been forced to take matters into their own hands, Nisarga says: "Gen Z holding people accountable is the way to go as some people in high places are full of ego."

At age 19, when most students are busy with regular schooling, Nisarga had already started interning in tech companies. He primarily identifies as a software engineer and has worked on digitising restaurant menus for a Mumbai-based tech company Skann before dabbling into an internship with Singapore-based crypto giant Cypherock and then interning with

Bengaluru-based tech company Wavelength. Hacking into CBSE portals was his first brush with social activism, he says.

Nisarga says he has multiple job offers from Silicon Valley in California, and he does not want to 'waste his time going to college'. "In case I take up an offer in the U.S., I will aim to apply for an extraordinary talent visa [U.S. O-1 nonimmigrant visa], which allows individuals who have reached the top of their fields to live and work in the U.S.," he says. "However, I will stay back in India if I get a good research opportunity to work in IITs."

Nisarga believes in combining computer programming with activism to champion public rights causes around data privacy. The teen 'ethical hacker' has also publicly stated that he is 'queer,' and is concerned about the LGBTQ rights in India.

"I want to build an inclusive society where people are more accepting of each other. Religion is a coping mechanism whereas we need more scientific thought over religion to build an inclusive society," he says.

Ranchi-based Sarthak Sidhant is

being chased by journalists since he alleged through comparison of public documents that the CBSE had diluted requirements to favour technology vendor COEMPT Eduteck in the OSM portal issue. Sarthak became what is likely the youngest person to depose in front of a Parliamentary Panel. After his deposition on June 2, he has not been able to return home, because he says he feels 'unsafe'. He felt compelled to shift to an undisclosed location after journalists reached his accommodation in New Delhi. "In Ranchi, I gather there are journalists waiting for me outside my house. I don't want to go back home, so I am staying put at an undisclosed location," he says.

Seeds of rationality

Sarthak says he is of a curious nature and he likes spending most of his time on his computer "digging into new things". "I do not like watching movies or web shows. What I like, however, is old songs with meaningful lyrics playing in the background while I work on my computer." Sarthak is a fan of progressive Indian poet Sahir Ludhianvi and when asked what his favourite works are, without hesitation, he immediately cites lyrics – *Tu Hindu banega na Musalman banegaa, Insaan ki aulaad hai, Insaan banega* (You will neither be a Hindu or Muslim, you are humanity's child you will be a human).

Sarthak says his parents had an intercaste marriage and they have an evolutionary and pragmatic perspective, which sowed seeds of rationality and logic in him since a young age. "After my father passed away due to cardiac arrest two years ago, I started questioning concepts like religion, philosophy and faith."

Sarthak wants to pursue engineering and go on to blend technology with social welfare for bettering lives. He looks up to Dinkar's poetry and cites the poet's famous work: *Lohe ke ped hare hongee*; (Dried out trees will become green). "The sole message of this poetry is that one should keep asking questions and put in constant efforts to seek answers," he says.

THE GIST

▼ Vedant Shrivastava, one of the first students to raise his voice against the On-Screen Marking system deployed by the CBSE, is now being referred to as 'the primary whistleblower'

▼ Nisarga Adhikary, a 19-year-old cybersecurity researcher, exposed "critical vulnerabilities" in the CBSE's OSM portal, including leaking sensitive student information

▼ Ranchi-based Sarthak Sidhant has alleged through comparison of public documents that the CBSE had diluted requirements to favour technology vendor COEMPT Eduteck in the OSM portal issue

New chapter

K. Annamalai

The former BJP Tamil Nadu president has quit the party and launched a new 'movement', promising to bring 'constructive' and 'clean' politics

M. Soundariya Preetha

On June 5, 2026, Kuppusamy Annamalai, the 42-year-old former Indian Police Service officer, announced the launch of a "movement" that he envisages to become a regional political party eventually. The movement saw more than 10 lakh registrations on the first day. On the same day, the BJP announced that it had accepted Mr. Annamalai's resignation from the party.

Reports that Mr. Annamalai would quit the BJP and start a new party was doing the rounds since January. In Tiruppur and Coimbatore districts, Annamalai's posters came up in the last week of May, indicating an announcement from him soon. He was also not present at a post-election meeting the BJP held in Coimbatore.

In a letter to the BJP leadership on June 2, Mr. Annamalai said his views do not align with BJP leaders regarding Tamil Nadu. He had had multiple conversations and disagreements with them for 18 months regarding the State. "I firmly believe that a strong and united India is built upon the strength, dignity and aspirations of its many regions and communities," he wrote in the letter to BJP president Nitin Nabin.

Mr. Annamalai's political journey began in 2020



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH RAVIKUMAR

when he was identified by B.L. Santhosh, general secretary of the BJP as a potential leader. He quit as the Deputy Commissioner of Police (South), Bengaluru, and joined the BJP in 2020. He was appointed vice president of the party for Tamil Nadu in a few weeks and contested the 2021 Assembly elections from Aravankurichi in Karur district.

He lost to R. Elango of the DMK. In July 2021, he took over as the BJP's Tamil Nadu State president. At the age of 37, he became the youngest leader to head the BJP State unit, from July 16, 2021 to April 11, 2025.

Crowd puller

His *'En Mann, En Makkal'* padayatra started in July 2023 was a crowd puller in many parts of the State, and attracted several youngsters to the party. However, his remarks against the AIADMK ideology and some of its leaders that year led to the AIADMK severing its ties

with the BJP and exiting the National Democratic Alliance.

Mr. Annamalai had vociferously pushed for the BJP contesting the elections in Tamil Nadu without an alliance with the AIADMK. For the 2024 Parliamentary elections, Mr. Annamalai brought the Pattali Makkal Katchi, Tamil Maanila Congress, and the Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam to the Tamil Nadu NDA. He contested from Coimbatore and lost to Ganapathi P. Rajkumar of the DMK.

It is said that AIADMK General Secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami wanted Mr. Annamalai to be removed from the post of the State president for the AIADMK to ally with the BJP for the 2026 Assembly elections.

Born in an agrarian family at Thoppampatti in Karur district on June 4, 1984, Mr. Annamalai graduated in Mechanical Engineering from the PSG College of Technology in Coimbatore and went on to

do his MBA at the Indian Institute of Management-Lucknow. He joined the Indian Police Service (IPS) in the 2011 batch under the Karnataka cadre and served in Karnataka till 2020.

He launched 'We the Leaders' as a foundation in 2019-20, even before he joined active politics, and it focuses on organic farming, grassroot leadership, skilling and empowering through sports. With Mr. Annamalai inviting those interested in his movement to register with 'We the Leaders', there were 13,17,808 registrations as of the afternoon of June 6.

In an address to the public on June 5, after quitting the BJP, Mr. Annamalai said he was inspired by the policies of former President of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. He said he would bring constructive politics that would be clean and no "permanent chair" for anyone, including him. "We will have to come out of cult politics. This will be common man politics," he said in an address on social media platforms.

He also announced the establishment of APJ Abdul Kalam Centre for Ethics and Politics in Coimbatore to train and prepare people for political leadership. Mr. Annamalai is expected to field candidates in the local body elections in Tamil Nadu and participate in the 2029 general elections.

Besieged history

Beaufort Castle

A 12th-century hilltop castle has emerged as a key strategic flashpoint in Israel's war with Hezbollah in occupied southern Lebanon

Akul Baiju

The Beaufort Castle sits right beside the Litani River in southern Lebanon, with an unobstructed view of northern Israel and the sweeping Beqaa valley. The 900-year-old structure, which literally means "beautiful fort" in Old French, has come under renewed spotlight after the Israeli military invasion on June 1.

Originally called Qalaat al-Shaqif, or the "Castle of the High Rock," Beaufort was built by European crusaders atop older fortifications in 1139. Invaded and besieged multiple times throughout its long history, the bastion has been at the centre of the Israel-Lebanon conflict and a pain point in the fragile ceasefire, announced by U.S. President Donald Trump on April 17.

In 1190, the stately structure was captured by Saladin, the first Sultan of Egypt and Syria, who used it as an important border outpost to strengthen his reign. Due to its military importance, the castle has changed hands frequently, with Crusaders (most famously the Knights Templar), Egyptian Mamluks, Ottomans, and the French all leaving their marks on it.

The Frankish Crusaders created its two-storey keep with an entry through the



REUTERS

ground floor, unlike other forts of its time. Exposed stone staircases cut directly into the rock were built, forcing visitors and attackers to ascend in a single file on the highly exposed path.

The Mamluks added curved towers to defend against the firing of spherical stones. They inscribed Arabic victory messages into the front gates of the castle. The Ottoman takeover saw the repartitioning of the 15,000-square-metre area for logistical and residential usage. They built barracks and added slits in the fort walls for precise firing.

Internal politics led to many of the early constructions being mined and later restored using crude stone.

The French period saw the stripping away of Ottoman influence and attempts at restoring Crusader architecture. Beaufort has a sharp 300m drop on one side and the valley on the other, protecting it from enemy attacks. This

vantage point is still used for military strikes, surveillance, and the deployment of weaponry.

The natural trench between the fortress and the fast-flowing Litani leads to the city of Nabatieh, an ancient centre for the trade of precious spices and commodities like Myrrh and Frankincense in its historical Souk el-Tanen market.

Caught in the war

The sand-battered behemoth is on track to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site and has been included on the country's 'tentative list'. November 2024 saw the global body granting it provisional enhanced protection under the 1954 Hague Convention.

During the 1970s, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) attacked Israel from the fort's ramparts. Underground bunkers and command centres were constructed, with some going as deep as 65m underground.

In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon, seized the for-

gress from the PLO, and raised the 'blue and white' for the first time. This was a significant moment. Then Israeli Defence Minister Ariel Sharon called the taking of Beirut a war that was "worth it" and rejected the allegations of it being "immoral."

The banner of Israel came down in 2000 when the Israelis blew up their bunkers and abandoned the castle, when they withdrew from Lebanon after 18 years of occupation. What followed was its opening to the public and years of restoration, with a brief pause in 2006 due to another Israeli invasion.

The 2026 invasion by Israel marks one of the most significant escalations in the conflict since the dawn of the millennium.

In March this year, Hezbollah fired rockets at Israel in retaliation for the U.S.-Israeli assassination of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In response, Israel launched massive air strikes which were followed by a ground invasion.

The U.S.-backed ceasefire is functionally defunct, with both sides launching attacks against each other. Israel wants to push Hezbollah out of southern Lebanon and keep the territory it has captured. Hezbollah says it would continue to fight as long as Israel continues the occupation of Lebanese land.

Opinion

SUNDAY, JUNE 7, 2026



Professional league concepts like the Professional Golf Tour of India's '72 The League' are creating new opportunities for participation and engagement

League of legends

FAIRWAY FILES

Rahil Gangjee

THERE WAS a time when golf clubs in India followed a fairly predictable rhythm. Saturday morning medal rounds. A monthly mug. The occasional club championship. A few die-hards practicing every evening. The rest of the members mostly treating the golf course as a scenic route between breakfast and lunch. Then somebody had the bright idea of introducing leagues.

And suddenly, golf clubs across the country became battlegrounds. I have seen friendships strained over missed three-foot putts. I have witnessed grown men studying spreadsheets with the seriousness of stockbrokers during a market crash. I have seen golfers who hadn't visited the practice range in six months suddenly hitting balls every evening because their team captain was breathing down their neck.

The rise of golf leagues in India has been one of the most significant developments in the game over the last few years. From Gurgaon to Bengaluru, Pune to Hyderabad, Kolkata to Chennai, almost every major golf club now has some version of a league competition. Some are sprawling affairs involving player auctions, team owners, sponsors and uniforms. Others are simpler club-based competitions. But they all have one thing in common. They have made golf fun again.

Golf, by its very nature, is an individual sport. You make your birdies. You make your doubles. You suffer alone. You celebrate alone. Even when you are playing with friends, the scorecard ultimately belongs to you.

Leagues changed that equation. Suddenly, your score mattered to somebody else. That harmless double bogey on the 16th wasn't just your problem anymore. It was costing your team points. That extra half-hour at the range wasn't just about improving your handicap. It was about helping your teammates. The moment golfers start feeling accountable to a team, something magical happens. They start practicing. I know several golfers who spent years telling themselves they would "start working on their short game next month." Then they got drafted into a league team.

Within a week, they were spending evenings on the putting green. Somebody discovered a bunker shot. Somebody else suddenly cared about course management. Players who previously walked straight from the car park to the first tee began arriving early for warm-ups.

It sounds simple, but getting people to practice is one of the hardest challenges in golf. Leagues have solved that problem better than any coaching programme ever could. The impact extends far beyond the players. Talk to any golf professional at a busy club and they will tell you the same story. Lesson bookings increase before and during league season. Golf academies become busier. Practice ranges stay full well into the evening.

The local coach wins. The caddy wins. The club fitter wins. The pro shop wins. The club wins. The entire ecosystem wins. A golfer who suddenly wants to improve becomes a dangerous economic force. He buys new wedges because the old grooves are clearly responsible for his poor spin rates. He upgrades his driver because his teammate claims to have gained ten yards with a new shaft. He purchases range balls, books lessons, enters competitions and spends more time at the club.

Whether the improvement actually comes from the equipment is a discussion best left for another day.

The important thing is that everybody

benefits. Golf clubs, in particular, have discovered that leagues create something administrators dream about — engagement. Members who previously visited once every fortnight are now showing up twice a week. Teams stay back after rounds. Families come to support players. Prize presentations become social occasions.

The clubhouse becomes lively. And golf clubs were always meant to be social places.

One of the biggest misconceptions about golf is that it is only about playing. In reality, clubs thrive on community. The conversations after the round are often as important as the round itself.

Leagues have brought that sense of community back. You now see WhatsApp groups buzzing with team banter. Rivalries developing between friends. Captains plotting strategies. Players discussing pairings like international selectors.

For a few weeks every year, members become deeply invested in their clubs. That is invaluable.

Some of the larger leagues have taken things even further by introducing auctions, team owners and branding. Suddenly, amateur golfers who have never earned a rupee from the game are being bid for at auctions.

The first time this happened, I laughed. Now I look forward to the stories.

The 18-handicapper who was accidentally bought for too much money. The scratch golfer carrying unrealistic expectations. The captain who believes every auction strategy is a masterpiece.

The beauty is that nobody really takes it too seriously. Well, almost nobody.

The larger point is that leagues have made golf relevant to a much wider audience. They have created narratives. People now follow results. They discuss standings.

They know which teams are performing well. Every successful sport needs stories. Leagues create stories. Globally, team formats have become increasingly popular in golf. From franchise competitions to team-based events, administrators have recognised that spectators and participants enjoy having something larger than individual performance to follow. The growth of team-oriented golf events worldwide reflects this trend.

India's golf industry is benefiting from exactly the same phenomenon. Club leagues, amateur leagues and even emerging professional league concepts are creating new opportunities for participation and engagement. The recent launch of professional league formats and the growth of club-based competitions reflect how strongly the model has resonated with golfers. Perhaps the greatest achievement of these leagues is that they have broken down barriers. Golf can sometimes feel intimidating, particularly for newer players. Walking into a club full of experienced golfers is not always easy. A team changes that. You immediately blend in somewhere.

Your teammates encourage you. They help you. They cheer your occasional miracle birdie and politely ignore your quadruple bogey. Everybody remembers being the weak link once. That sense of inclusion keeps people playing. And in a sport where retention is often more important than recruitment, that matters enormously.

I still believe the purest form of golf is an individual stroke-play competition on a difficult golf course, where the only person you can blame is the one staring back at you from the mirror. But I also recognise that the future of golf depends on participation, engagement and community. Leagues deliver all three.

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

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



The Supreme Court judgment noted that the outcome of the SIR exercise in Bihar was the net deletion of approximately 47,00,000 names from the electoral roll of 2003. Six persons out of every 100 adults in Bihar were excluded from the final electoral roll

AS A LAWYER, I understand that if two honourable judges speak for the Court, it is the Supreme Court of India (SC) which speaks. The Supreme Court is a Constitutional court, it is also the final appellate court, it has original jurisdiction in some matters, it has superintendence over all courts, it can review and overrule its own judgments, it can take up a cause *suo motu*, it has the power to constitute a Special Investigation Team (SIT) or a Commission, it has the power to refer a matter for investigation to a police agency, it can refer a civil or commercial dispute to mediation or arbitration, it can transfer a matter from the jurisdiction of a High Court to the jurisdiction of another High Court, it can pronounce a man and a woman divorced, it has the power to punish a person for contempt of court, its interpretation of the Constitution of India is the final word, and it has the power to pass any order to "do complete justice". It is said that the SC is the most powerful court in the world.

Universal adult suffrage

Among its vast powers, one stands out. In *State of Madras vs VG Row*, the Supreme Court described itself as the *sentinel qui vive*—a watchful guardian of the Constitution. What does the Constitution say about elections?

Article 324 vests in the Election Commission of India (ECI) the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for...and the



Voters queue outside a polling station in West Bengal's Diamond Harbour constituency

EXPRESS PHOTO

The proof of the pudding is...

conduct of all elections to, Parliament and the Legislature of every State.

Article 326 prescribes that elections to the House of the People and the Legislative Assemblies of States shall be on the basis of adult suffrage ("The right to vote is a constitutional right"—SC).

There is no conflict between the two Articles. The ECI is constitutionally obligated to prepare the electoral rolls including every adult in India. Obviously, there are other qualifications, like citizenship and residence, imposed by the Constitution, the Citizenship Act, 1955 and the Representation of the People Act, 1950. Each of the laws prescribes an *authority* and a *procedure* to determine whether a person satisfies the qualifications under the law.

The fundamental basis of universal adult franchise is inclusion. Exclusion from the electoral rolls is an exception and must follow a laid-down procedure and a decision in writing that is subject to judicial review.

Interesting observations

In the course of the judgment in *Association for Democratic Reforms vs Election Commission* dated May 27, 2026 (in the context of the SIR exercise in Bihar), the Supreme Court observed:

The commission decided to treat the 2003 electoral roll, with 01-01-2003 as the qualifying date, as probative evidence of eligibility, unless rebutted. Any person not included in the 2003 roll must produce one or more prescribed documents to establish

his/her eligibility as an elector [In *Inderjit Barua (1985)* and *Lal Babu Hussein (1995)* the SC had affirmed that names included in the electoral roll are entitled to the presumption of citizenship].

Upon scrutiny, where the eligibility of any person is found to be doubtful, the ERO/AERO is mandated to issue a show-cause notice setting out the grounds for the proposed exclusion and rendering a reasoned and speaking order. Any person aggrieved by a decision of the ERO shall be entitled to prefer an appeal before the District Magistrate under S.24(a) of the RP Act, 1969. A second appeal may be filed under S.24(b) before the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) of the state.

The Commission, in the course of preparing or revising electoral rolls, is undoubtedly empowered to examine questions bearing upon citizenship ("a limited enquiry"—SC)...Importantly, the entirety of this exercise remains amenable to judicial review.

The judgment noted that the outcome of the SIR exercise in Bihar was the net deletion of approximately 47,00,000 names from the electoral roll of 2003. Six persons out of every 100 adults in Bihar were excluded from the final electoral roll.

Proof of the pudding

Even before the judgment was delivered in the Bihar SIR case, the SIR exercise was started and completed in West Bengal. Many lakh names were deleted. There was an SC

mandated judicial review by *ad hoc* judicial officers. According to the data released by the ECI and reports based on official figures from the West Bengal SIR exercise were:

First phase: removed on account of death, duplicate entries, shifted, absent, etc. 65.66 lakh

Deleted after summary review mainly on account of 'logical discrepancies': 27.16 lakh

Total deletions: 90.83 lakh

Appeals filed to *ad hoc* judicial officers: 25 lakh (approx)

Appeals heard and disposed of (until May 14, 2026): 6,581

Appeals accepted and names reinstated in the rolls: 4,043

Percentage of success 61.43%

West Bengal was the only state where an SC-mandated process of *judicial review* of the deletions was undertaken. Not in Bihar. Juxtapose the judgment and the results of the judicial review. If we apply the success rate of the West Bengal sample (61.43 per cent) to the deleted names in Bihar (47,00,000), it is a fair conclusion that approximately 28,87,210 persons — who did not vote — would be entitled to be reinstated in the Bihar electoral roll. The conclusion exposes the hollowness of the ECI's claims and the inaccuracy, unreliability and lack of credibility of the SIR exercise. After ECI's blessings, will democracy survive?

Website: pchidambaram.in
X: @Pchidambaram_IN



FIFTH COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

IT IS ASTONISHING that it has become fashionable to talk about education. For the wrong reasons maybe, but at least we are discussing the most undiscussed and, in my view, the most vital reform that India needs. So far, all talk has been about NEET and leaked papers and the venality that has been revealed in the CBSE exam system. Desperate young students have been driven to suicide because of these corrupt practices. This alone should shame those responsible. So, when the noise and drama of these events die, please, please let us continue talking about the rot in our education system.

Maybe this time we will talk about it a little longer because of India's newest political party making leaked papers their first cause. By the time you read this, the leader of the Cockroach Janata Party should have landed in Delhi and probably been arrested before he manages to hold a protest rally at Jantar-Mantra. It is my fervent hope that even if the protest fails, the cause that he claims has brought him back home will not be forgotten. There must be accountability and heads must roll. He has demanded the resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan, and if this man had any self-respect, he would have already resigned, but this

Let us talk about education

will solve nothing.

The rot goes deep and has spread from the top to the very bottom. The reason why our political leaders and high officials never send their children to government schools is because they know that they have built schools that offer not real learning but barest literacy. When Indian children from Tamil Nadu and Himachal competed in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009, they came second last. In this exam, 15-year olds were tested for their skills in reading, mathematics and science. Alarm bells should have gone off across India but if our babus have one superpower, it is knowing how to keep bad news from reaching the ears of their political masters.

We did not need an international test to establish that schools run by the Indian state are abysmal. If our prime ministers have had one thing in common, it is their neglect of education. Jawaharlal Nehru built the IITs but appeared not to notice that the only children able to get into them were from upper caste, middle class families. He also did not notice that on his watch was created a higher education system that was so tightly controlled by the government that it killed all chances of excellence or research. One reason is meddling officials. If there is to be reform, then it should start with the abolition of

the University Grants Commission. It is an unneeded busybody that gives officials unneeded power.

Before writing this piece, I had a chat with Michel Danino who knows from the inside how the system works. He worked in the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and recently got into trouble with the Supreme Court for telling the truth about corruption in the judiciary in a school textbook. When I asked him what were the three most important reforms that needed to be made in the school system, he said that for a start, instead of students being treated as a "passive sponge", they need to be encouraged to participate. In other words, less rote learning.

The second reform he recommends is the setting up of proper teacher training institutes. And third, that there be investment in school infrastructure. Government schools lack such basic things as libraries, playgrounds, clean water and toilets. I have visited village schools in many states and seen some that are just empty sheds. So, I could not agree more. The irony is that the one reform that has been made is for teachers to be paid hefty salaries. These are sometimes ten times higher than the paltry salaries teachers earn in the thousands of private schools that have sprouted across rural India.

It is heartbreaking to think of how disadvantaged Indian children will be

when they go out into a world where the competition could be AI children. Already, we have 'graduates' who cannot find jobs because they have left college without being able to articulate an idea or solve a simple equation. It has been said more than once that the problem in India is not unemployment but unemployability.

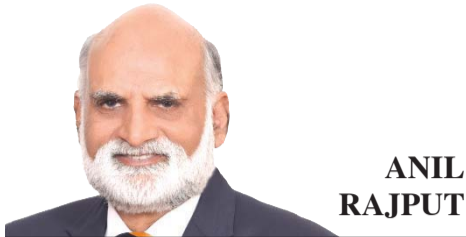
In 2013, when I was a passionate Modi-bhakt and hoped with all my heart that he would be able to bring the changes India so desperately needs, I was once summoned to meet him. He was still Chief Minister of Gujarat but knew in his heart that when the general election came the following year, he would be prime minister. He asked me what I felt were the things that most urgently needed to be done. And, I said he needed to rectify the mistakes that Congress prime ministers had made, which was to neglect education and healthcare.

We talked uninterrupted for more than an hour at the end, of which I was convinced that I had made my point. Clearly, I had not or by now we should have seen a revolutionary improvement in government schools that are in states governed by BJP chief ministers. Today that includes all major Hindi-belt states, Maharashtra and now West Bengal. Will the Cockroach noises bring some urgency? It is my sincerest hope that this will happen.

"OUR BODIES ARE OUR GARDENS; OUR
WILLS ARE OUR GARDENERS"
— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

MASIK KARTHIGAI

Renewing faith under the Krittika Star



ANIL
RAJPUT

Masik Karthigai, especially revered in Tamil religious tradition, is a monthly Hindu observance dedicated primarily to Lord Murugan, also known as Kartikeya, the deity of courage, wisdom and spiritual attainment. Observed each month on the day when the Krittika, or Karthigai, Nakshatra prevails, the occasion is regarded as an auspicious time for offering prayers and seeking divine guidance. Devotees visit Murugan temples, offer prayers, light lamps, recite sacred hymns and observe fasting or dietary restrictions according to local customs. While less elaborate than the annual Karthigai Deepam festival, Masik Karthigai serves as a recurring spiritual reminder of the triumph of wisdom over ignorance, devotion over ego and righteous conduct over dishonesty.

The significance of Masik Karthigai is rooted in ancient Hindu traditions surrounding the Krittika constellation, which occupies a special place in the mythology of Lord Murugan. According to sacred narratives, the divine child born from the fiery energy of Lord Shiva was nurtured by the six Krittika maidens, with whom the name Kartikeya is traditionally associated. Over time, the Krittika star became closely associated with Murugan worship, particularly in South India, where monthly observances developed alongside temple traditions and devotional practices. The recurring appearance of the Krittika star each month came to be regarded as an auspicious occasion for renewing one's spiritual discipline, expressing gratitude and seeking strength to overcome obstacles.

This is why the cuisine of Masik Karthigai assumes civilisational significance even though there is no single rigid menu that every family follows each month. While Karthigai Deepam carries a larger and more elaborate culinary tradition, Masik Karthigai is inspired by the same devotional heritage in a quieter and simpler form. Some homes prepare only one offering, some add a small sweet, others include a light tiffin meal after worship, while a few prepare several dishes connected with Tamil festive cooking. What remains common is the intention. Food is freshly prepared, vegetarian, often sattvic, and offered first in prayer before being shared. As the evening approaches, the kitchen itself becomes an extension of the ceremony. Rice is washed, jaggery is melted, coconut is grated, ghee is warmed, lentils are soaked, sesame is roasted, curry leaves crackle in hot oil, and ordinary ingredients are transformed into nourishment rooted in inherited recipes.

Among the most loved offerings associated with the Karthigai tradition is poru urundai, a sweet made from puffed rice and jaggery syrup. Its beauty lies not only in its simplicity, but also in the skill required to prepare it well. Light and airy puffed rice is folded into dark, hot jaggery syrup and shaped quickly by hand before the mixture cools. It is a dish of timing, touch and inherited instinct, where an ordinary grain becomes a firm,



glossy and deeply satisfying round of prasadam. The syrup must reach the right consistency so that the balls retain their shape without becoming hard. Cardamom may be added, and in some homes small coconut pieces or roasted gram are mixed in for texture. Its presence near the lamp feels natural, since it is humble, golden, sweet and easy to distribute after worship.

Closely related to it are aval poru urundai and nel poru urundai, both of which reflect the agricultural imagination of Tamil homes. Aval poru urundai uses puffed flattened rice, while nel poru urundai uses puffed paddy, giving it a distinct texture and a deeper connection with harvest and grain. Alongside them, families often prepare kadalai urundai, made with roasted peanuts and jaggery, bringing nuttiness and strength, or ellu urundai, made with sesame seeds and jaggery, carrying the traditional association of sesame with purity and ritual offering. Together, these urundais show how a small handful of ingredients can become devotional food. They are not elaborate in appearance, yet they carry the warmth of the hand that shaped them and the memory of homes where such recipes are learnt by watching elders rather than by reading measurements.

The appam family gives Masik Karthigai another layer of sweetness. Nei appam, made with rice flour or soaked and ground rice, jaggery, banana, coconut and ghee, is soft at the centre and gently crisp at the edges when prepared in an appam pan. The ghee gives aroma, the banana gives body, and the jaggery lends depth rather than sharp sweetness. Sweet appam may be made in slightly different ways across households, sometimes with wheat flour, sometimes with rice flour, and sometimes with an added touch of cardamom or dry



ginger. Vellai appam, though milder and often less sweet, holds its own place in the wider Karthigai spread. In these appams, the fragrance of ghee, jaggery and rice flour fills the house even before the lamps are lit, making the act of cooking itself part of the evening's devotion.

Another cherished preparation is adhirasam, one of Tamil cuisine's most respected traditional sweets. Made from rice flour and jaggery, its preparation requires patience and experience. The rice is soaked, dried and powdered, the jaggery is melted into syrup of the desired consistency, and the dough is rested to give the sweet the right texture. When flattened and fried, adhirasam becomes dark, fragrant and slightly chewy, with a taste that belongs unmistakably to religious events, weddings and household festivals. It may not be made every month for Masik Karthigai, but when it appears, it brings the weight of tradition with it. A simpler but equally symbolic offering is maa vilakku maavu, a sweet flour mixture made from rice flour and jaggery, shaped into a lamp with a hollow centre. Ghee is poured into it, a cotton wick is placed within it, and the lamp is lit for prayer. In this striking preparation, food and flame become one. After worship, the sweetened flour is broken and shared as prasadam, turning the lamp itself into nourishment.

The sweet offerings are extended through payasam, paal payasam and sakkaraai pongal, each carrying a different mood of abundance. Payasam may be made with rice, moong dal, vermicelli or aval, simmered with milk or coconut milk, sweetened with sugar or jaggery, and finished with cardamom, cashews and raisins fried in ghee. Paal payasam is gentler, made with milk and rice slowly cooked until creamy, with sweetness kept soft and devotional. Sakkaraai pongal, prepared

with rice, moong dal, jaggery and ghee, is richer and more festive. The dal gives body, the jaggery gives warmth, and the ghee carries the aroma of cashews, raisins and cardamom through the dish. In the context of Masik Karthigai, these dishes remind us that sweetness in Indian ritual food is rarely only indulgence. It signifies auspiciousness, gratitude, and the wish that the household remain nourished in both body and spirit.

Yet the cuisine of the day should not be seen only through sweets. Savoury preparations are equally important, as prayer is often followed by an evening meal. Milagu adai is one of the most distinctive savoury dishes associated with Karthigai cooking. Made with rice, lentils, black pepper, cumin, curry leaves and sometimes coconut, it is thicker than dosa and more rustic in character. The pepper gives heat, the lentils provide strength, and the crisp edges contrast with the softer centre. It is often eaten with butter, jaggery, coconut chutney or a simple accompaniment. In a spread otherwise rich with jaggery, rice flour and ghee, milagu adai brings balance. Its peppery warmth gives the meal depth and reminds us that sacred food is not always soft or sweet. It can also be robust, grounding and deeply satisfying.

Other savoury dishes bring variety to the table. Thattai, a crisp rice flour snack seasoned with urad dal flour, sesame seeds, curry leaves, asafoetida and sometimes chana dal, is fried until golden and brittle. Its sharp crackle offers contrast to the softness of appam and the chewiness of adhirasam. Vadai, especially ulundu vadai, is also prepared in some homes as an offering or as part of the evening meal. Made from urad dal batter, shaped with a hole in the centre and fried until crisp outside and soft within, it carries the familiar taste of Tamil temple prasadam and household celebration. Sundal adds a healthier and simpler savoury note. Chickpeas, black chana, green gram or cowpeas are soaked, cooked and tempered with mustard seeds, curry leaves, asafoetida, green chilli and grated coconut. It is light, protein-rich and easy to offer, making it well suited to a monthly observance.

Rice preparations complete the meal in many households, especially when the family prefers a proper dinner after prayers. Ven pongal, made with rice and moong dal, tempered with black pepper, cumin, ginger, curry leaves, cashews and ghee, brings warmth and comfort. Lemon rice offers brightness through turmeric, lemon juice, mustard seeds, curry leaves, peanuts and chillies, while coconut rice brings a gentler flavour through fresh grated coconut, cashews, urad dal, chana dal and curry leaves. Curd rice, cooled with yogurt and tempered lightly with mustard, ginger and curry leaves, often becomes the final dish, calming the palate after sweets and fried snacks. These rice dishes show how the meal moves from offering to nourishment, from the sweetness of prasadam to the fulfilment of an everyday meal made special to honour the occasion.

To this repertoire are added dishes that sit comfortably between sacred offering and familiar Tamil home food. Puliodarai, or tamarind rice, may be prepared in some homes, carrying a deep tangy flavour created from tamarind, sesame oil, roasted spices, peanuts and curry leaves. Kozhukattai, though more strongly associated with Ganesha worship, may still appear in Tamil homes as a steamed rice flour dumpling

filled with coconut and jaggery or with a savoury lentil mixture, depending on family tradition. Paniyaram, made from fermented batter and cooked in small moulds, may be prepared sweet with jaggery or savoury with chillies and curry leaves, though onion is avoided in stricter ritual homes. Vella seedai, small jaggery-sweetened rice flour balls, and uppu seedai, their savoury counterpart, can also be part of the festive kitchen when families want crisp offerings that can be stored and shared. Through these dishes, Masik Karthigai becomes not a fixed menu but a living tradition that adapts to region, household memory and the degree of observance.

Beverages on such days are usually simple, cooling, warming or gently restorative. Panakam, made with jaggery, water, dry ginger, cardamom and sometimes lemon, is valued for its ability to refresh while retaining sacred simplicity. Neer moru, or spiced buttermilk, prepared with diluted curd, curry leaves, ginger, green chilli, asafoetida and coriander, balances the fried and sweet elements of the meal. In some homes, warm paal, or milk, may be offered and later served, especially to children and elders. Sukku coffee, made with dry ginger, black pepper, coriander seeds and palm jaggery, brings warmth to the body and is popular in Tamil households as a traditional digestive drink. The day may also end with South Indian filter coffee, not necessarily as a ritual beverage, but as part of Tamil hospitality, offered after the lamps have burned steadily and the family has gathered around the evening meal.

What makes the cuisine of Masik Karthigai meaningful is not the number of preparations alone, but the way each dish forms part of a larger discipline. Lamps are cleaned, wicks are prepared, rice flour is measured, jaggery is melted, and offerings are arranged with care before they are tasted. Children learn that food is not always consumed immediately, that it can first be offered to the divine in thanksgiving and gratitude. Elders remember recipes passed down through generations, and the act of sharing prasadam after prayer creates a bond between age groups. Taste becomes memory, and memory is transformed into living culture.

Masik Karthigai ultimately reminds us that heritage survives when it is practised, not merely remembered. The lamp may be small, the offering may be simple, and the meal may be prepared within the quiet space of a home, but together they carry the weight of an ancient cultural inheritance. Through poru urundai, adhirasam, maa vilakku maavu, milagu adai, sundal, ven pongal, payasam and the many dishes prepared with devotion, families pass on more than recipes. They pass on discipline, gratitude, faith, memory and identity through taste. It is my belief that these traditions must be consciously preserved by cooking them, explaining them and sharing them with the next generation. A child who tastes prasadam, watches a lamp being lit, and learns why food is first offered before it is eaten receives a living lesson in culture. If we wish our civilisational heritage to endure, we must keep it alive not only in temples and texts, but in kitchens, dining spaces and family conversations. Masik Karthigai calls upon us to preserve this sacred continuity, so that the light of devotion and the taste of tradition continue to guide generations yet to come.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)

Pamper the southern-side of your soul



GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Atmanam's newest outpost at Galleria Market, Sector 28, Gurugram, arrives with quiet confidence, and rightfully so. Already beloved across its Sector 84 and Sector 65 locations, this pure vegetarian South Indian restaurant has earned its growing reputation one perfectly fermented batter at a time.

The name itself sets the tone. Drawn from Sanskrit and the Bhagavad Gita, Atmanam translates to "the self" or "the soul," and the restaurant wears this identity earnestly. Nothing here feels performative. The ambience is warm and unhurried, the kind of space that invites you to slow down, breathe, and actually taste your food.

And the food genuinely deserves that attention. The menu is a thoughtful celebration of South Indian classics, executed with care and technical respect. The Benne Dosas arrive crisp



WHETHER YOU'RE A
SOUTH INDIAN FOOD
PURIST OR SIMPLY
CRAVING SOMETHING
WHOLESOME AND HONEST,
ATMANAM IS WORTH IT



and buttery, their edges golden and irresistible. Mini Podidlis tossed in ghee are dangerously moreish, while the Dal Vada delivers a satisfying crunch that holds up beautifully against a cup of filter coffee. For something sweet, the Payasam is a gentle, fragrant finish that lingers pleasantly.

What distinguishes Atmanam from the growing crowd of South Indian restaurants is its philosophical consistency. Naturally fermented batters, balanced spicing, and time-honoured cooking techniques aren't marketing language here — they're evident on the plate. There's a sincerity to the cooking that's increasingly rare. The restaurant's commitment to sustainability, including eco-friendly plates that convert to manure, adds another layer of intentionality to the experience.

Whether you're a South Indian food purist or simply craving something wholesome and honest, Atmanam at Galleria Market is worth your time.

Recommended dishes: Benne Dosa, Mini Podidli, Payasam.

FOOD TRIPPING BIHAR When a cuisine comes of age

TEAM AGENDA

Regional cuisine has always had a flair for the theatrical, but its latest venture, Food Tripping at Le Meridien New Delhi, elevates that instinct into something genuinely compelling. This exclusive pop-up dining series launched in May 2026 with an ambitious promise: to transform dinner into a cultural odyssey. Having followed the inaugural chapter closely, one can say the hotel largely delivers on that lofty ambition.

The concept is elegantly simple yet richly layered. Each chapter of the series is conceived as an intimate, reservation-only evening where food, music, visual art, and storytelling converge to evoke a specific place and its culinary soul. Rather than merely plating "regional cuisine," the team at Le Meridien has deliberately chosen

authentic voices - home chefs rooted in their native traditions - to anchor the Indian chapters, lending each menu a credibility that hotel dining rarely achieves.

The inaugural chapter, Soul of Bihar, ran in May at Eau de Monsoon, and it set a remarkably high bar. Curated in collaboration with Shacchi Anand, founder of Baghar-e-Magadh, the menu was a confident, deeply personal exploration of Bihar cuisine - a culinary tradition too often overlooked on the national fine-dining circuit. Ancestral recipes were presented with quiet elegance,

never losing their soul to unnecessary modernisation. Dishes arrived carrying layers of memory and regional identity, the kind of cooking that makes you pause mid-bite and reconsider your assumptions about

a cuisine.

What distinguishes Food Tripping from similar hotel pop-ups is its insistence on atmosphere as an equal partner to the food. Regional music drifted through the space, visual storytelling framed the walls, and the overall sensory design felt considered rather than decorative. You weren't merely eating Bihar food - you were, however briefly, inhabiting a version of Bihar itself. Meena Bhatia's vision for the series - that every flavour should carry a memory and every evening should feel like a journey - is no mere marketing language. The execution reflects genuine curatorial intent. That said, the true test of any dining series lies in its consistency across chapters. The format, however polished, must keep reinventing itself to sustain anticipation. With plans to span Indian regional cuisines alongside international editions, Food Tripping has real potential to become one of Delhi's most distinctive dining destinations. For now, on the strength of Soul of Bihar alone, it earns a warm thumbs up!



Why Does Beauty Make You Close Your Eyes

Love addresses the deepest human loneliness. The purpose of companionship is to rejoice and share life. It is to have someone you can truly depend on

GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

Think of the last time something totally made you stop in your tracks. It may have been music, a fragrance, or a texture. Something so great, so wonderful, and so beautiful that it automatically shut your eyes, and you sank into that ocean of beauty.

This is not something small or incidental. It is through the five senses that you experience something beyond the five senses. Deep inside you, what gets created in that moment is a wave of beauty. And when that wave arrives, you are not in form any more. You dissolve into the formless and come back to your nature.

The senses brought you to the door and then stepped aside. The power, the energy inside you, starts moving in a new direction. Like in meditation, there is a feeling of elevation that gives you more energy and long-lasting joy and bliss. Like in spring, the entire creation just comes alive. The birds sing, the trees blossom, and when energy is kindled in you, it creates awe. You spring out of dullness and routine, and new life springs up in you.

Behind every love, there is something greater, something total. We tend to think beauty is decoration and love is emotion. But what if both are pointing at something much larger than we have imagined? Behind every love, every small beauty and joy, there is the Divine. This is a revolutionary thought, a revolutionary idea.

Love, when it is genuine and full of energy, is total and complete. And this completeness expresses itself in stages, each one deeper than the last.

The first sign that love has arrived is that you cannot stop talking about it. Have you noticed when someone is crazy about something? They talk about it and talk about it, and it never tires them. No amount of praise feels sufficient. Just a mild interest cannot evoke such depth of expression. That is the first sign of divine love. One would go on praising continuously and still feel, "Oh, it's not sufficient. I have to do it more, more, and more."

The second sign is to express love in all forms. Although there is no form of divinity, the Divine loves to express itself in forms, and that is why millions and millions of forms are present in this creation. You deal with forms all your life, whether in the waking state or the dreaming state. Except for deep sleep and meditation, forms appear in your mind. And so, even while knowing that divinity is formless, a form makes it more interesting. The form kindles love in your heart.

Then love wants to honour and offer itself to whatever has kindled it. Whatever you appreciate or adore, you feel the urge to worship it. And worshipping is just the opposite of wanting to possess. When you try to possess something beautiful, you actually bring ugliness to it. Worship is offering yourself instead of reaching out to possess. A sense of giving, or offering oneself, is one of the truest expressions of love.

Then comes something subtler still, and that is memory. It is not that you make any effort to remember. As soon as you wake up, the first thought that comes is of the loved one, of the Divine. You do not make any effort to think about that person. But the thought



"LOVE IS A HAPPENING. LOVE IS A GIFT TO YOU. DO NOT GO OUT SEEKING LOVE. SIMPLY RELAX AND BE AT EASE" — GURUDEV



BEHIND EVERY LOVE, THERE IS SOMETHING GREATER, SOMETHING TOTAL. WE TEND TO THINK BEAUTY IS DECORATION AND LOVE IS EMOTION. BUT WHAT IF BOTH ARE POINTING AT SOMETHING MUCH LARGER THAN WE HAVE IMAGINED? BEHIND EVERY LOVE, EVERY SMALL BEAUTY AND JOY, THERE IS THE DIVINE. THIS IS A REVOLUTIONARY THOUGHT, A REVOLUTIONARY IDEA

constantly comes, and you find yourself remembering. You go deeper and deeper into the silence within you. That very remembrance becomes meditation.

And then love deepens into something that most people find surprising. One form of the expression of love is great humility and service as one's very nature. There is not even a thought of, "I am doing some service." You cannot help but serve. Even if one tries to abstain from it, it does not happen. One finds oneself back in it. Love gets expressed as service.

Here is where something remarkable happens. Do you know what actually

brings authority? A caretaker, a servant, has full authority in the home. If the master is away, he acts as the master. A perfect servant or disciple has total authority and total responsibility. A servant is one in whom the master has bestowed his trust. Being a servant means acknowledging that the Divine has given you this task and that it belongs to you.

Love expresses itself as friendship. Towards someone who is your superior, you may have a lot of respect. But there may not be any love. You may honour them, but your heart may not start speaking. In such cases, the Master will say, "Come on, what is it? What is the matter? How are you doing? What is happening?" That is love expressed in the form of a friend, where wisdom is shared not in a serious manner but in a playful one.

Love addresses the deepest human loneliness. The purpose of companionship is to rejoice and share life. It is to have someone you can truly depend on. But human relationships keep changing. The Divine is the only truly dependable relationship, never changing and total. When the Divine becomes the companion you turn to, you become more centred. Otherwise, you keep hanging on to whoever happens to be near. Love at this depth becomes your anchor.

And then there is the supreme form, and that is longing. Not the frustration of longing, but the strange beauty that longing carries. Longing gives you the power to bless. The very longing in you is itself a form of love. As the longing grows more and more intense, it flips over. It becomes bliss, and you become totally immersed. Many have experienced intense longing and reached that turning point. At some point, that longing itself becomes a joy.

The fire of love creates a sense of longing in the beginning. But it moves on to the blossoming of bliss and fullness. This longing should never end. If longing ends, love also ends. That is why longing and love are infinite.

Love is a happening. Love is a gift to you. Do not go out seeking love. Simply relax and be at ease. Only when you are free from tension, free from confusion, can you truly experience love.

When Leaders Become Pilgrims

Across the years, presidents, prime ministers and distinguished leaders from across the world have been drawn to Swaminarayan Akshardham. Beyond its awe-inspiring architecture lies a deeper attraction: a timeless vision of peace, spirituality and universal values that continues to inspire visitors from around the world



DR SWAMI GYANANANDDAS

In ancient India, the sages spoke of sacred spaces where the mind finds peace, the heart awakens to higher ideals, and the soul glimpses the divine. Such places stand as living bridges between earth and eternity, inspiring generations through their beauty, wisdom and spiritual presence.

Today, that timeless divinity finds magnificent expression in Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi, a landmark that has captivated millions of visitors, including presidents, prime ministers, diplomats and dignitaries from across the world.

September 2023 was one of the most consequential moments in India's recent diplomatic history. New Delhi had become the centre of the world's attention as heads of state, presidents and prime ministers from across the globe gathered for the G20 Summit. Every minute of their schedules was meticulously planned. Every movement was watched. Every engagement carried diplomatic significance.

Yet amid the intensity of global discussions and high-level negotiations, one destination found a place on the itinerary of the United Kingdom's Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, and his wife, Akshata Murty. It was neither a government building nor a state banquet, but a mandir.

Despite the demanding schedule of the summit and the persistent rain, Prime Minister Sunak and Mrs Murty chose to walk barefoot along the 150-metre

pathway leading towards the mandir. To everybody's surprise, one of the world's most powerful political leaders, accustomed to red carpets and official ceremonies, walked humbly upon the rain-soaked pathway as a devotee.

It was not an act of protocol. It was an expression of faith and devotion. As the magnificent stone mandir gradually emerged before them, its intricately carved pinnacles rising against the cloudy sky, the atmosphere seemed to shift. The noise of politics gave way to serenity. The urgency of international affairs yielded to a sense of peace.

Within the sacred precincts of Akshardham, the Prime Minister and his wife offered prayers, performed puja and had darshan. For a brief period, they were not global figures carrying immense responsibilities; they were simply pilgrims standing before the Divine.

In this way, leaders arriving at Akshardham as distinguished statesmen leave touched by something deeper than its architectural splendour. The mandir's rare ability to blend timeless spirituality with universal human values has resonated with visitors from across the world.

Across the Atlantic, American leaders, too, have been deeply moved by the Akshardham experience. US Vice President JD Vance's visit to Akshardham in April 2025 revealed once again the temple's extraordinary ability to touch hearts beyond borders. Accompanied by his wife, Usha Vance, the first Hindu Second Lady of the United States, and their children, Vance began his India visit in the serene precincts of Akshardham. As the family stood before the mandir's majestic façade, dressed in traditional Indian attire, they appeared deeply immersed in its beauty and spiritual atmosphere.

Most recently, on 29 May 2026, Tiffany Trump, daughter of US President Donald Trump, visited Akshardham along with her husband, businessman Michael Boulos, and close friends. Their visit further reflected

Akshardham's growing appeal among prominent American public figures and dignitaries. Amid a period marked by global uncertainty, conflict and war, Tiffany chose to begin her private visit to India with a journey into the heart of the nation's spiritual and cultural heritage. As she explored the world-renowned monument's breathtaking architecture, timeless artistry and profound spiritual message, her visit carried a significance beyond tourism.

Deeply moved by the experience, Tiffany Trump penned a heartfelt note in the temple's guest book: "This was such an amazing visit. The beauty is out of this world. Thank you for such a perfect visit!"

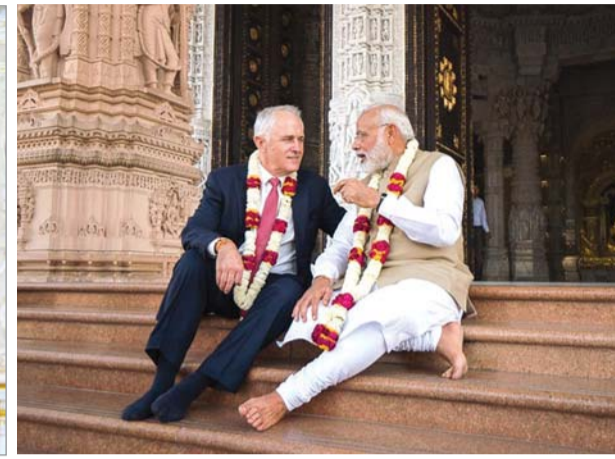
She later shared her admiration with millions of followers on social media, describing her experience at Akshardham simply as "incredible".

Thus, from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, and from New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon to Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, Akshardham's appeal continues to transcend nations and cultures.

During his second visit to Akshardham, President Kalam remarked, "I saw the movie of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the exhibition. So beautiful. What a creation! What a creation! I believe Akshardham is really going to make a great influence on human life. Not only in India, but whoever sees it, it is going to have an impact on human life. How a good human life will emanate from Akshardham. That is my belief."

This was the vision of Brahmawarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the creator and inspirer of Akshardham. He dreamed of a place where people from every background would encounter the best of Indian culture, faith and love, and leave inspired to become better human beings. Today, as world leaders, dignitaries and millions of visitors continue to walk through its sacred precincts, that vision stands beautifully fulfilled, transforming admiration into inspiration and visitors into ambassadors of universal values.

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



Weekly Overview

The week begins under the Aquarius Moon, encouraging observation, planning and a wider perspective. As the Moon moves into Pisces, emotions, intuition and inner reflection become stronger. By the weekend, Aries energy brings fresh momentum, quicker decisions and a desire to move forward.



Aries (Mesh): The opening days may encourage you to step back from situations that have been demanding too much attention. Not every matter requires an immediate response. As the week progresses, you may find yourself reflecting more deeply on unfinished concerns or delayed decisions. By the weekend, the Moon enters Aries, bringing renewed energy and a stronger desire to act. This is a good time to restart something that has lost momentum, but avoid rushing simply because enthusiasm has returned.



Taurus (Vrishabh): Group activities, professional networks or discussions with like-minded people may play a bigger role early in the week. Some useful advice could come from an unexpected source. Midweek may feel quieter, with attention turning toward personal hopes, emotional expectations or long-term plans. By the weekend, you may prefer reflection over visibility. Trust your pace rather than comparing your progress with that of others.



Gemini (Mithun): Responsibilities may demand attention from the very beginning of the week. While others may appear uncertain, your ability to adapt can become an advantage. Midweek encourages a softer approach, especially in professional interactions where diplomacy may achieve more than argument. As the weekend approaches, fresh

WEEKLY MOON SIGN FORECAST | 7-13 JUNE

Quiet Reflections, New Perspectives and a Fresh Push Forward

Dr Shanker Adawal
Astrologer, Author & Researcher

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

opportunities for discussion, networking or future planning may begin to emerge. Remain open to different view points.



Cancer (Karka): The week begins with a desire to understand the bigger picture rather than focusing only on immediate concerns. Travel plans, learning opportunities or meaningful conversations may attract attention. Midweek brings a more emotional atmosphere, and intuition becomes a useful guide.



Family matters or personal relationships may require patience. By the weekend, practical responsibilities return to the forefront, making organisation more important than mood.



Leo (Simha): Some situations may require deeper understanding before you decide how to proceed. The early part of the week supports observation rather than direct action. Midweek may bring stronger emotional awareness, helping you recognise what truly matters and what can be left behind. By the weekend, confidence gradually returns and communication becomes more direct. A thoughtful decision made now may carry more value than a quick reaction earlier in the week.

Virgo (Kanya): Relationships and partnerships may occupy your attention during the opening phase of the week.



Listening carefully will be just as important as expressing your own views. Midweek brings emotional depth and greater sensitivity to the needs of others. Some matters may require compromise rather than analysis. By the weekend, financial planning or practical decisions become easier to handle. Focus on what is workable rather than what is perfect.



Libra (Tula): Routine matters, work responsibilities and daily commitments may shape the first half of the week. A practical approach will help prevent small issues from becoming larger ones. Midweek encourages greater emotional awareness, especially in close relationships where understanding may be needed more than advice. By the weekend, the Moon's movement into Aries places attention on partnerships and interactions. Patience will help maintain harmony.



Scorpio (Vrishchik): The week opens on a comparatively lighter note, encouraging creativity, personal interests and meaningful conversations. Midweek, however, emotions may run deeper than expected, particularly where personal attachments are involved. This is not a negative phase, but it may encourage reflection. By the weekend, attention turns toward practical matters, health routines or unfinished responsibilities. Small improvements can produce noticeable results.



Sagittarius (Dhanu): Home, family matters or personal comfort may become important themes during the opening days. There may be a desire to simplify things rather than chase constant activity. Midweek brings a reflective

mood, making it easier to understand emotional patterns that have been repeating themselves. By the weekend, energy improves considerably, supporting creativity, social interaction and fresh enthusiasm. Use that momentum wisely.



Capricorn (Makar): Communication becomes a key theme at the beginning of the week. Discussions, paperwork or short-term plans may move faster than expected. Midweek encourages a more thoughtful pace, and important information could emerge through casual conversations. By the weekend, attention shifts toward home matters, family responsibilities or personal priorities. Practical decisions taken now may prove useful over the coming weeks.



Aquarius (Kumbh): With the Moon beginning the week in Aquarius, there is an opportunity to view situations with greater objectivity. Others may seek your advice or perspective. Midweek shifts focus toward financial matters, personal values and emotional security. Some decisions may require patience rather than immediate action. By the weekend, communication improves and confidence grows. Expressing your thoughts clearly will help avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.



Pisces (Meen): The opening phase of the week may feel quieter than usual, encouraging observation and inner reflection. Once the Moon enters Pisces, intuition becomes stronger and emotional awareness deepens. This is a good period for understanding motivations, both your own and those of others. By the weekend, practical matters, finances and future planning require attention. Trust your instincts, but support them with realistic action.



REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Pope, AI, and the many meanings of godhead

The question of morality among AI agents has been a matter of intense speculation. The Pope adds to this discussion by locating the absence of a moral conscience as the fundamental problem of AI

Perhaps the greatest benefit of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is that it has provoked a much needed public discussion on technology. The unquestioned growth of technology is driven by the belief that technology is nothing more than a collection of gadgets that are acultural and ahistorical. Gadgets are only defined by their use value and are presumably under the control of humans. The fear about what AI can do is now forcing us to pay attention to such naive assumptions about technology that have led us to this stage.

The latest to wade into this debate is Pope Leo XIV, the current spiritual leader of millions of Catholics as the head of the Vatican. In a timely and much-needed document, the Encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* released on May 15, 2026, the Pope sets out a clear argument about the dangers of AI, as well as some ways to respond to them.

He begins by pointing out that AI is challenging our basic ideas of humanity and this has serious implications for the future of the human race. The future cannot be decided by a few technologists who control today's technology. He is not taking an anti-technology

position, for right in the beginning, he notes that technology is needed. But echoing what many scholars have argued, he emphasises that technology is 'never neutral', since it takes on the qualities of 'those who devise, finance, regulate and use it'. The consequence of this is that when we buy a technological product, we are actually buying into the worldviews and belief systems of those who produce these technologies. We should see technologies as Trojan horses for cultural invasion.

There is a fundamental difference between digital and AI technologies as compared to traditional technologies. The Encyclical identifies one such difference, which is that AI technologies are privately governed and controlled, unlike earlier technologies which had a stronger relation to governments and the public. Bus and train are not personal gadgets but socially shared technologies unlike laptops and smartphones.

Along with these qualities, the use of AI poses another profound problem. The question of morality among AI agents has been a matter of intense speculation. The Pope adds to this discussion by locating the absence of a moral conscience as the fundamental problem of AI. His argument begins from the important observation that AI agents do not possess bodies and cannot construct their world from bodily experiences. They cannot 'feel joy or pain', and cannot come to know what it means to be in a human relationship that is the basis of love and friendship. They cannot take responsibility for their actions. They are based on a logic that only privileges 'efficiency, control and profit', thereby restricting the meaning

of humans to functional entities. Such a framework will work against the poor and the marginalised, as they will always be seen to be expendable in an 'efficient' and profit-oriented system.

Why is the Church taking this position? There is a long history to the Church's engagement with social processes. The encyclical letter by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 set out principles that are now accepted as the 'Social Doctrine of the Church'. This was a call for the Church to move away from an internal, religious-based focus to acknowledging their social responsibility. It is this spirit that Pope Leo XIV invokes to critique AI. The principles of the Social Doctrine are primarily those of the common good, of equal rights to all for the use of earth's resources, of subsidiarity, of solidarity, and that of social justice (as a concrete way of following Jesus). By highlighting the dangers of AI, the Pope is equally alerting us to reflect on our own social doctrines that will

guide our responses to evil and injustice around us. *The way forward:* The Pope suggests that a humanistic response to AI is by rediscovering 'truth as a common good', protecting the dignity of all work, and valuing freedom since there are now new forms of servitude and slavery to AI. The way to achieve this is by placing importance on education and schooling. The Pope also emphasises the importance of family as a 'social good'. Repeatedly, the need for collective action is emphasised. Unless we all come together to collectively think and act, it is not possible to resist this takeover of human societies by a few technologists. Underlying these ways of



Sundar Sarukkai



The Pope suggests that a humanistic response to AI is by rediscovering 'truth as a common good', protecting the dignity of all work, and valuing freedom. The way to achieve this is by placing importance on education and schooling.

AFP/VATICAN MEDIA

recovering the human is a deep commitment to faith, in particular Christian faith.

The document is a powerful statement of intent and vision. However, can it make a meaningful change to the hegemony of modern technology? First, it is based on the idea of technology as has been defined by a particular history of Europe and the West. We now have rich histories of various forms of technology across Asia and Africa. Modern, western technology is not the only mode of doing, intervening and co-existing in the world. Every culture produces its form of tools based on their view of nature and society. Many of these are fundamentally ethical in character since technology for them was to be understood through an ethical relation to humans and society.

Second, the principles of the Social Doctrine are important but they are not enough to make any significant change in the world of AI unless they explicitly engage with the nature of scientific and technological knowledge. Modern technologies have a deep relation to scientific knowledge. Modern science

begins with the dissociation of the ethical and the spiritual from knowledge. While it is a good idea to suggest, as the document does, that the developers of these technologies should take some ethical responsibility, it is not feasible because of the way science views ethics. Science students do not learn about humans, societies or morality, nor do they think that scientific knowledge should be answerable to ethical concerns. How can they suddenly become morally conscious?

Third, the difficult question of religion in this context. How does one place the truth of God within the narrative of the scientific community? The Pope calls for a 'civilisation of love', and invokes the 'body of the Christ', both of which might seem quite alien to the function of technology. The Pope's critique of AI cannot be divorced from the religious foundation of his argument. Faith, spirituality and the notion of a higher being are essential components to this resistance to AI. Given its explicit Christian position, how can we reconcile different religious communities to produce a global collective response

against AI?

However, this is an extremely important document for there is enough in it to catalyse an urgent global debate on AI. Should other religious leaders too clarify their stand on AI and digital technology? The silence from the many gurus in India is troubling in this context. The religious communities should be particularly wary of AI. It is often said that in the ultimate analysis, AI will replace humans. However, we are missing the point. The ultimate goal of AI is not to be humans but to be gods. AI agents are already behaving like demigods. They are invisible, powerful agents who fulfil human desires, act as protectors, and are omnipresent and omniscient! Much more than the meaning of humanity being at stake, it is the meaning of gods that will be rewritten in the days to come.

Sundar Sarukkai is the author of the forthcoming book *Homo Philosophicus: Discovering the Spirit of Philosophy in Everyday Life* (Westland, July 2026). The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



From Delhi to Lahore, what's in a name?

Last month, a headline in this newspaper caught my attention and captured my imagination. It read: "Pakistan to restore original names of Lahore streets". What a wonderful idea! Why don't we do something similar in Delhi? I'm sure the denizens of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, as those cities were originally called, could be tempted to follow suit.

Maryam Nawaz, the Chief Minister (CM) of Pakistan's Punjab province, has approved a plan to restore the original historical names of streets in Lahore. The idea is to revive the city's pre-Partition heritage. Apparently, the inspiration comes from her father, the former prime minister (PM) Nawaz Sharif, who is the head of the Lahore Heritage Area Revival Project.

Soon names like Queen's Road, Davies Road, Lawrence Road and Empress Road will be restored to new life. So too – and this is the marvel of it – will be names like

Ram Gali, Laxmi Chowk, Jain Mandir Road, Mohanlal Bazar, Sundar Das Road, Bhagwan Pura and Shanti Nagar.

With this one incredible step, Lahore is embracing its history. More importantly, it's remembered a truth about cities we've forgotten. They have their own spirit and culture. Their own identity and ambience. Each is different from the other because each is unique and particular. And each is grounded in its past, which is its character and, even, its *raison d'être*.

When I last visited Lahore, ten years ago, I was delighted to find Egerton Road, where my mother's grandparents lived, survives. So too Golf Road, where my paternal grandparents stayed. Even Fall-ei's Hotel, which had fallen into rack and ruin, had been immaculately restored to the glory it once was.

Jugnu Mohsin tells me that in 2005 the Lahore government tried to change the name of Mela Ram Road, named after my grandmother's grandfather. Her uncle

Babar advised the CM not to do it. Mela Ram Road survived.

Maryam Nawaz has sensibly realised that it's foolish to efface history and alter the spirit of a city. That's the mistake we keep making in Delhi.

What was the need to rechristen Aurangzeb Road APJ Abdul Kalam Marg? I dare say the former president will soon fade from memory whilst the Mughal emperor – even if he was a bigot and tyrant – will continue to arouse curiosity. My friends who live there still refer to it as Aurangzeb Road.

Who's heard of Rajiv Gandhi Chowk or Indira Gandhi Chowk? And does anyone know which is which? Yet, that's the new name of Connaught Place. The young call it CP and we all know what that stands for.

In Delhi we've even gone to the extent of changing names several times. Kingsway became Rajpath and I concede it was a well-chosen alternative. But now that's the given way to Kartavya Path, which sounds as flat as stale coca-cola. Race Course Road, where the PM lives, has become Lok Kalyan Marg. The former had a ring to it. The latter sounds leaden and heavy.

The important point is a road name is not just the name of a road. It's a bit like your own name. It's part of your identity and one gets attached to it. So, when it's needlessly and abruptly changed it can be wrenching.

Second, a road name is not the property of the government. It belongs to all of

us. Just as Delhi doesn't belong to the NDMC or the CM but its residents, regardless of whether they cherish or despoil it, so too the names of its roads, parks, colonies, crossings or squares. It is, after all, our city and we don't like artificial changes enforced dictatorially.

So, what do you think of my idea of restoring to the bits of Delhi that existed prior to 1947 the names they originally had? After all, the city is considerably bigger than what it was at Independence and the new parts can have whatever moniker the authorities wish. But let there be a core that stays true to history and reminds us of the past that made Delhi the city it is today.

If Pakistan can do it, why can't we?

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

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare



How women experience summers in the city

Gulshan wraps herself in a wet dupatta and tries to sleep.

It is sizzling in the roughly 25-square foot room where she lives with her husband and four children. A tiny fan circulates hot air in the still room on the topmost floor of a ramshackle narrow building in Sunder Nagari in north-east Delhi. There's a small open terrace where Gulshan cooks – on firewood since gas cylinders are both unavailable and unaffordable. She asks me to touch a steel utensil. It feels as hot as if she has just taken it off a flame.

Like many women in the locality, Gulshan, whose husband drives a rented autorickshaw, takes on poorly-paid piecemeal work. Every extra bit counts. But her work – sewing pockets on cosmetic pouches for ₹5 per pouch, each with six pockets – has dried up. She had bought a sewing machine when there was work in the winter months. Now, monthly instalments to pay off the machine are accumulating.

With schools shut, the children are at home and Gulshan would rather have them indoors than run around in the lanes below. She believes she can get a job since she has studied up to the 10th grade but her husband won't give her permission saying she will get 'spoilt'.

Stuck at home in the claustrophobic heat, everything stresses her, she breaks down in tears: "I feel so anxious all the time."

Urban heat has emerged as an unequal climate challenge with women, particularly those on the margins, bearing the heaviest load. In places like Sunder Nagari there is no escape from the open drains buzzing with flies that run alongside tiny, densely packed dwellings with no ventilation, windows or green spaces. At night, fear of petty crime means doors remain shut to both thieves and the stray breeze. And with temperatures hovering at 45 degrees Celsius at

the end of May, night temperatures too remain around 39 – not enough for human bodies to cool down.

Global warming, we say. But warming at roughly 0.5 degrees Celsius per decade doesn't tell you the whole story or account for the heat stress in our cities.

Close to 76% of Delhi is persistently heat stressed and this includes newer showcase constructions such as Bharat Mandapam, states a report, *Making Delhi Heat-Resilient* by the Centre for Science and Environment. Green cover has fallen to 14.14% in 2024 from 25.36% in 2014; trees being planted in the name of beautification include palms that have almost no shade. And an IIT Delhi study finds 67% of Delhi streets lack adequate shade. Building material includes tin roofs commonly used in slum clusters. Even bus shelters use metal roofs that turn them into literal ovens.

The crisis isn't heat. It's design that has exacerbated heat.

Unlike its other seasonal affliction, pollution, Delhi's heat doesn't get as much media or public attention. To document what citizens undergo, Greenpeace this year launched a *garmi khaata* or heat diary, asking a group of around 50 women to document their experience. "It's to collect evidence based on the lived experiences of households and an attempt to get the perspective of women into policy," says Avinash Chanchal, deputy programme director, Greenpeace South Asia that is piloting the project.

Maybe it will tell the story of 17-year-old Arshi who dreams of becoming a civil servant. But with nine people sleeping in the tiny room she calls home, it's tough to find the space, or inclination, to study even at night when the others are asleep. "It's too hot to even light a candle," she says.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

The fatal sadness of Marjane Satrapi

When people are fighting for democracy, we should support them.' Marjane Satrapi wrote in a letter to the French government in January 2025, barely six months before Israel bombed her birthplace, Rasht, a city in northern Iran. The US joined Israel's attacks six months later, on the pretext of ushering

democracy, killing Ayatollah Khamenei on February 28, 2026. Iran and the larger West Asia region continues to bleed since then.

And Marjane Satrapi has "died of sadness". The celebrated French-Iranian novelist and filmmaker was a hero to at least two generations of women, and not just in Iran. It was easy to relate to her dark but delightfully illustrated coming-of-age tale, *Persepolis*.

Sure, not all of us wear *hijab* or grew up in the fear of being caught by the religious police for doing normal things in normal times, but all of us have certainly felt, at least once in our lives, being treated as worth just half a man.

Almost all non-Iranians, whether living under democracies or dictatorships, have understood Iran and the Ayatollah regime intellectually. Never has this been more glaringly obvious than in the present moment. When the US launched its military action against Iran, the lines of public

opinion were drawn along the tedious binaries of the good and bad, emancipated and oppressed, West and East, et cetera. People outside Iran raged on public platforms and those within, in whose name these 'freedom' attacks started, kept getting killed by the US, Israel, and Iran governments.

Marjane Satrapi embodied this dichotomy. The Iranian regime hated her for exemplifying a freedom they have been most scared of in women. Unfortunately, many of her compatriots, including women whose cause she had been championing through her work, decried her ideas of freedom as belonging to a tone deaf urban elite. And this, in essence, problematises the very ideas of freedom and feminism not just in Iran but also in Turkey, Afghanistan, Egypt, Pakistan, Bangladesh and, of course, India.

There are no clear answers to how freedom ought to be defined and understood. Marjane Satrapi, and women like her achieving an almost iconic stature in the intellectual spaces, bear the burden of being scrutinised more closely than their male counterparts. The charge of letting the principles of intersectionality down hounded her. The bubbles of liberalism in Tehran, Istanbul, Kabul and Delhi have the luxury of not being bothered in their everyday lives by the conservatism of the hinterland. The extremism of Konya



The urban elite, displaying the arrogance of minor differences, often implodes over figures like Marjane Satrapi.

AFP

rarely contaminates the water supply of Istanbul until an Erdogan becomes the mayor of the latter.

The urban elite, displaying the arrogance of minor differences, often implodes over figures like Marjane Satrapi. The uneasy feeling over her turning into a cliched emancipated Iranian woman in the West was almost an inevitability. The West used her in self-congratulatory tomes about the virtues of occidental liberalism while the East cast her as the civilisational enemy. In between these extremes sat those who found problems with these 'reception' and 'perceptions' of her life and works. In a quest to intellectualise her, most forgot her corporeal realities. Marjane Satrapi kept reminding us of this in her various interviews. She admitted to not being the cute Marji, the protagonist of *Persepolis*, anymore. She made it clear, "I'm not in the head of someone who is religious, and I do not, I

cannot, judge, and I do not want to give others the permission to judge either." She declared, "...the people that I like are Iranians. My affection is Iranian. And it will always be Iranian. My affection will never become Western." Yet, even the most well-intentioned intellectuals have picked the aspects of her that suits their own attitudes towards Iran and its people. Intersectionality ought to be the strength of any liberal movement, and Marjane Satrapi understood it well while admitting to her limitations. Many of those picking her apart weaponised intersectionality in doing so.

Is Marjane dying "of sadness," one year after losing her husband, actor Mattias Ripa, therefore, her final bid to reclaim her personhood at least in death?

Nishtha Gautam is editor (views), *Hindustan Times*. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Politicians and their public connect

This is with reference to "In Britain, the widening gap between the PM and people" by Avinash Paliwal (May 31). Politicians need to interact and walk in the shoes of the public at all times, to understand the life of the citizen. This will undoubtedly help instil confidence in the public, while also ensuring politics works for the common man.

Abhilash Vadgaonkar

Make girls proactive and strong to fight

This is with reference to "India's fight against dowry must continue" by Lalita Panicker (May 31). Parents of girls should stop giving dowries and holding lavish weddings to save their daughters. They should make their daughters strong, self-reliant, and aware to raise their voice, in case of harassment and dowry demands, and support them.

Abhilasha Gupta

Despite strict laws and increasing awareness, thousands of women still face harassment, violence and even death due to dowry demands. Eradicating dowry requires collective action, social reform and strict enforcement of laws.

Sanjay Chopra

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

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Beyond Signatures

India's recent trade diplomacy has produced an unusual paradox. New Delhi is negotiating or concluding trade agreements with a range of partners even as questions persist about what earlier agreements have actually delivered. For years, the debate centred on whether India should sign more free trade agreements. Today, the more important question may be how those agreements should be judged once they come into force. The shift is significant because India is no longer approaching trade agreements from a position of hesitation. Having concluded deals with major partners and as it pursues others, New Delhi has clearly decided that greater engagement with global markets forms part of its economic strategy. Yet the enthusiasm surrounding new agreements has revived an older debate about whether previous pacts generated the export growth, investment inflows and manufacturing gains that were originally anticipated.

The world confronting Indian policymakers is also very different from the one in which many earlier agreements were negotiated. Trade now sits at the intersection of economics, geopolitics and national security. The return of tariffs, growing strategic rivalry between major powers and concerns over supply-chain resilience have transformed trade policy from a largely commercial exercise into an instrument of economic statecraft. For India, this creates both opportunities and dilemmas. Global companies seeking alternatives to China present a chance to expand manufacturing and attract investment. At the same time, policymakers must weigh the interests of exporters, domestic industry, consumers and strategic planners. Market access abroad often requires concessions at home. Greater integration can strengthen competitiveness but may also expose vulnerable sectors to new pressures. The challenge is compounded by the fact that modern trade agreements increasingly extend beyond tariffs. They encompass investment rules, digital commerce, intellectual property, supply-chain cooperation and regulatory standards. Their impact therefore reaches deep into domestic economic policy, making careful evaluation far more important than in earlier decades.

The politics of trade liberalisation are therefore becoming more complex. Governments increasingly need to reconcile external economic commitments with domestic political constraints. In India, where agriculture, manufacturing and small enterprises remain politically sensitive, trade policy cannot be assessed solely through diplomatic announcements or headline trade figures. Agreements that look successful on paper must ultimately prove their worth through tangible economic outcomes.

That is why the debate is gradually shifting from signing agreements to evaluating them. The relevant question is no longer how many FTAs India can conclude, but whether they strengthen exports, improve competitiveness, attract investment and support long-term economic development. A mature trade policy requires a framework that measures results rather than intentions. India's ambitions as a major economic power will depend not only on its ability to negotiate agreements but also on its willingness to assess them honestly. In a world where trade has become inseparable from geopolitics, counting signatures may generate headlines. Counting outcomes is what will determine success.

Beyond Hormuz

The geopolitical shock created by the Iran conflict is forcing countries far beyond West Asia to confront an uncomfortable reality: energy security can no longer be built around a single region, a single route or a single set of political assumptions. For India, the renewed importance of Venezuela is less a story about one oil supplier and more a reflection of a changing global energy map.

For decades, India's economic growth has depended on a steady flow of imported crude. That dependence has become increasingly vulnerable to events beyond its control. The Strait of Hormuz, through which a substantial portion of India's oil imports pass, has long been recognised as a strategic chokepoint. Yet policymakers and markets alike often treated disruption there as a theoretical risk. The present crisis has transformed that risk into a practical concern.

Against this backdrop, Venezuela's acting President Delcy Rodríguez arrived in India at a moment when energy security is reshaping global diplomacy. This is why India's engagement with Venezuela deserves attention. The relationship is not driven by ideology, nor by any sudden diplomatic realignment. It is rooted in a basic principle of statecraft: diversification. A country that imports the overwhelming majority of its energy needs cannot afford excessive dependence on any one geography, regardless of how reliable that geography may appear during normal times.

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Years of Grace

'Under her loving care and able leadership, the National Museum acquired international recognition as one of the most important institutions of its kind not only in India but also in Asia. Because of her persistent efforts and forethought the Museum Movement in India gained in strength and fillip and the museums in India came to be recognised not only as the abodes of the cultural objects and research but also as disseminators of knowledge'



president's palace, the Rashtrapati Bhavan, in the great audience hall and in smaller rooms adjacent.

Said Dr Grace, "my first task as the new director was to supervise the transfer of material from Rashtrapati Bhavan to the first unit of the new building and to arrange for its installation in the contemporary pattern of a museum intended for the instruction of the public as well as for its enjoyment. These aims represented quite a challenge to me as a new director. After all, I knew quite a bit about Indian art, and had long been interested and had seen a great many exhibitions in various parts of the world. However, I was by no means an expert. But I did have the advantage of having eminent scholars as heads of the various departments of the museum, and they were able to give me the expert advice that I needed, and did so with great willingness and helpfulness." It is professionals and their dedication that go in building institutions like the National Museum. In the three-hour long oral history interview with Porter McCray, Dr Grace spoke at length about the contributions of Dr Sivaramamurti, Mrs Smita Baxi, Dr P Banerjee and her interactions with the Minister of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs Humayun Kabir and Prime Minister Pt Jawaharlal Nehru. "Mr Sivaramamurti was an eminent scholar in Sanskrit as well as in art history, a specialist in iconography. He later became assistant director and eventually he was my successor in 1966. Also, I recall the very great help that Mrs. Smita Baxi was to me in my task. She was trained as an architect and had received her architectural degree in India, but afterwards went for post-graduate architectural studies to the Netherlands. She had been recruited as head of the Exhibition Department, with the title of Keeper. Under her were also the workshops with the large staff of carpenters and cabinet makers required to manufacture the gallery furniture, that is to say, pedestals and built-in wall cases of different types," she said.

"Another staff member I cannot forget is Dr Priyatosh Banerjee. He was Keeper in Charge of Publications and his task was to print labels, especially the introductory labels that were used at the beginning of each gallery to give some background and to help the public, the visitor, understand

what he was going to see and its significance. These labels had to be in English, of course, for the international visitor, but also in Hindi for those of the country. He took charge of publishing the small introductory booklet that we prepared for the opening, giving a little about the history of the museum, the importance of the collections, and listing the staff members," Dr Grace said in her gracious style.

Dr Banerjee, recounting Dr Morley's years as Director from 1960-1966, wrote in www.ibiblio.org, "her regime was a glorious one and saw an all-round development of the Museum. Under her loving care and able leadership, the National Museum acquired international recognition as one of the most important institutions of its kind not only in India but also in Asia. Because of her persistent efforts and forethought, the Museum Movement in India gained in strength and fillip and the museums in India came to be recognised not only as the abodes of the cultural objects and research but also as disseminators of knowledge."

For Dr Banerjee it was a proud moment when the Museum was opened on 18 December 1960 with most of the art and archaeological galleries beautifully set up. "The exhibition was a model of precision, combining historical considerations and aesthetic taste. Of the triple functions of the museum, namely the collection, the preservation and the display Dr Grace rightly emphasised the importance of the exhibition as it provided the best link between the museum and the public. Her exhibitions provided a beautiful harmony between the contents and their style. Further, all the exhibits were provided with brief but suitable captions and also big descriptive labels, charts and diagrams to help the visitors to understand the significance of the objects exhibited. She believed that a hospital and a museum should look like a mirror as they are important public institutions. Her attention was equally bestowed on public amenities. A museum is to attract the visitors. If it is not neat and clean, it is not only bad for the objects, but

the visitors would also not feel attracted to come to it," he wrote, glowingly about his former Director.

Both Dr Grace and Dr Banerjee remember the inauguration of the National Museum with utmost clarity and delight. "The Vice President Dr S Radhakrishnan presided, and at the function were gathered all the political and cultural leaders in Delhi at that time. It was held in a 'shamiana', that is to say, a brilliantly colored tent outside the museum entrance where the formal speeches were delivered. There followed, of course, the visit to the museum galleries," said Dr Grace. The museum had been prepared in the Indian fashion for its opening.

A curtain of marigolds was stretched across the entrance, and in the entrance hall, in the centre, there was a lamp of the traditional kind used always to open events in India, especially cultural events, dance recitals and the like. There was also a floor decoration in colours traditional in many parts of the country.

"Mr Nehru, then Prime Minister, had been a leader in the planning for the National Museum, in urging that the materials which had come back from London should be shown there in the capital, and Dr Radhakrishnan had been a great supporter of the museum in its slow progress as the building was constructed. They both took a deep interest during this first visit and asked many questions of the respective keepers, who stood in their galleries to help in interpreting the great treasures that the museum already possessed," she said.

Very soon after the opening, development of educational activities began. The National Museum had several guides and lecturers and they offered guided tours of the galleries. Soon, the National Museum added an innovation: regular film shows on archaeological or historical subjects, monuments and sculptures in the galleries.

With International Museum Day commemorated last month, we paid our homage to Dr Grace Morley, Dr C Sivaramamurti, Dr Moti Chandra, Amalananda Ghosh among several pioneers of the Archaeological Survey of India, National Museum and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, (CSMVS) formerly Prince of Wales Museum of Western India. Their visionary work gave our India a new sense of identity through our rich history.



RAJU MANSUKHANI

The writer is a researcher-author on history and heritage issues, and a former deputy curator of Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya

The geopolitical shock created by the Iran conflict is forcing countries far beyond West Asia to confront an uncomfortable reality: energy security can no longer be built around a single region, a single route or a single set of political assumptions. For India, the renewed importance of Venezuela is less a story about one oil supplier and more a reflection of a changing global energy map.

For decades, India's economic growth has depended on a steady flow of imported crude. That dependence has become increasingly vulnerable to events beyond its control. The Strait of Hormuz, through which a substantial portion of India's oil imports pass, has long been recognised as a strategic chokepoint. Yet policymakers and markets alike often treated disruption there as a theoretical risk. The present crisis has transformed that risk into a practical concern.

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In the coming years, New Delhi will likely pursue a broader portfolio of suppliers while simultaneously expanding strategic reserves, renewable energy capacity and domestic energy infrastructure. Such an approach will not eliminate vulnerability, but it can reduce it. The significance of India's renewed engagement with Venezuela, therefore, extends beyond trade figures and oil cargoes. It signals the emergence of a more pragmatic energy doctrine - one shaped not by traditional alliances but by the imperative of resilience in an increasingly fragmented and unpredictable world.

The Daily Star

Can we ever have safe travels?

Every Eid in Bangladesh turns into an unhappy memory for those who lose their loved ones in transportation-related incidents. According to the Road Safety Foundation's (RSF) latest calculations, at least 131 people were reportedly killed in road crashes across the country between May 24 and 30 of the Eid-ul-Azha holidays.

On Eid day alone, around 300 injured people were admitted to the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (Nitor). Going through the news, one feels overwhelmed by reports of not only road crashes, but also of deaths and injuries caused by other transport-related incidents. On May 25, a trawler capsized

and sank in the Meghna River, resulting in the deaths of three people, including a son and father. On May 27, three people died in two separate incidents when riding on the roofs of trains while travelling home for Eid. While there is always an uptick in road crashes during the country's two biggest festivals, with millions leaving and returning to a heavily centralised Dhaka, transport-related deaths and injuries have been the norm in Bangladesh for a long time.

At the beginning of the year, the RSF revealed that at least 7,359 people were killed in road crashes in 2025, while another 16,476 were injured.

Waterway and railway incidents amounted to 627 deaths collectively. It is never a surprise for the authorities that roads will be heavily occupied during Eid. It is also not a surprise why hundreds of people die on our roads each year. Should we pretend that it is not the authorities and their own

system which allow unfit vehicles, unqualified drivers, and unmonitored highways to take the lives of so many? What keeps the BRTA from ensuring that old, broken vehicles are not allowed to ply the roads? What stops the authorities from ensuring that trains are not overloaded? How are unfit water vehicles allowed to operate until they eventually cause innocent citizens

to drown? Why is it that going from point A to point B in this country is a life-threatening venture? When talking to this newspaper, the additional inspector general of police (highway) said, "If we could enforce stricter control over vehicle speeds, road safety would improve further."

We must ask why someone in a position of authority to enforce stricter control over vehicle speeds feels powerless to actually do so. Any person with an ounce of empathy would say that our transport sector needs a complete overhaul. We urge the government to reach this conclusion too, and soon. It is abnormal for any country to be so unresponsive year on year to thousands of preventable deaths.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Melodious grace

Sir, There is a poignant irony in the world of music that some lives, lived with immense grace and artistic brilliance, remain partially eclipsed by the dazzling aura of towering legends.

Every golden age produces its celebrated icons, but it is also sustained by artists whose contributions are no less profound, even if history remembers them more quietly. The passing of Suman Kalyanpur marks the end of one such luminous chapter in Indian music.

For decades, her name was invoked in comparison with Lata Mangeshkar because of the remarkable similarity in their vocal timbre. Yet such comparisons, while inevitable, frequently obscured the uniqueness of her own artistry.

Kalyanpur possessed a voice of extraordinary delicacy - crystalline in texture, disciplined in expression and capable of conveying deep emotion without resorting to vocal excess.



At a time when playback singing was reaching its artistic zenith, she emerged as a singer whose understated elegance became her greatest strength.

Rather than being overwhelmed by competition, she quietly built an enviable repertoire of songs that continue to enchant listeners. Melodies such as *Na Tum Hamen Jano, Dil Ek Mandir Hai, Aaj Kal Tere Mere Pyar Ke Charche, Tumhe Pukara Aur Hum Chale Aaye* - many of them duets with Mohammed Rafi remain cherished for their emotional sincerity and melodic sophistication. Her collaborations with Rafi, in particular, produced some of the most graceful and enduring songs

of Hindi cinema's golden age.

With her passing, Indian music loses one of its most refined custodians of melody. Yet death can claim only the singer, not the songs. Her voice continues to drift through radio waves, digital playlists and personal memories, carrying with it the gentleness, dignity and grace that defined both the artist and her art. In the vast symphony of Indian music, Suman Kalyanpur may never have been the loudest note, but she remains among its most enduringly beautiful ones.

Yours, etc., Vijay Singh Adhikari, Nainital, 4 June.

Tedious

Sir, Apropos "Across Bengal, women line up for Annapurna Yojana forms, KYC updating", published today, the previous Mamata Banerjee Ministry had gained widespread popularity for its women-centric welfare schemes and their ease of access, offering financial assistance to girls,

women and widows.

Such schemes enabled her to retain the reins of power for three consecutive terms. In contrast, the new government in Bengal is struggling to meet expectations and has altered the lives of women with complex paperwork and unnecessary declarations.

The Annapurna Bhandar scheme, which replaced the Lakshmi Bhandar, promised monthly allowance of Rs 3,000 to women through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT). Beneficiaries who previously received Lakshmi Bhandar are now forced to wait in long queues and complete tedious form fill up to avail a basic scheme.

The fact that the government released a 12-page form as a reliable measure to weed out infiltrators from consideration sums up the fate of the scheme. Such complexity affects applicants hailing from marginalized families who lack proper education and adequate documents.

Yours, etc., Aayman Anwar Ali, Kolkata, 2 June.

Layered approach needed for pristine examinations

O. PRASADA RAO

The present trend in examinations reflects a shift toward digital platforms and computerised evaluation. Online tests are increasingly preferred for their speed, scalability, and transparency. Automated systems allow instant scoring, reduce human bias, and make re-evaluation easier. Yet, this very convenient method introduces several vulnerabilities for hacking, question paper leaks, and manipulation.

Question Bank Security: The most vulnerable stage is not the exam hall but the storage of question banks. Secure servers, restricted access, and last-minute randomisation of questions are critical.

Logistics and Human Factor: Many leaks occur due to insider collusion - printing staff, transport handlers, or evaluators. Strong background checks, rotation of duties, and strict accountability reduce this risk.

Regional Distribution: Simultaneous nationwide exams should avoid staggered timings, as early leaks can spread rapidly through digital channels. Synchronisation across centres is essential.

Candidate Devices: Even if papers are secure, unauthorised gadgets (smartwatches, hidden earpieces) can compromise fairness. Strict frisking and digital jammers in exam halls help.

Computerised evaluation raises concerns about fairness. Algorithms may misinterpret unconventional but valid answers, requiring human oversight. While re-evaluation is facilitated by digital records, it can also be misused if access protocols to them are weak. The challenges lie

in balancing efficiency with integrity. Both NEET-UG 2026 and CBSE exams recently faced paper leak controversies, leading to cancellation, re-tests, and a CBI probe. The NEET exam held on May 3 was scrapped after evidence of a leaked "guess paper," while CBSE faced criticism over evaluation irregularities. Lakhs of students have suffered very badly. Stronger safeguards - such as multi-layer encryption, biometric authentication, unalterable activity records and independent oversight boards - are essential to prevent leaks and manipulation.

Multi-layer encryption protects question papers and answer scripts by several layers of cryptographic coding. Even if one layer is breached, others remain intact, making unauthorised access extremely difficult. Access to exam systems or storage areas through Biometric Authentication requires fingerprint, iris, or facial recognition, ensuring only authorised personnel have access to handle sensitive material.

Tamper-proof audit trails or unalterable activity records are secure digital records that capture every action taken with exam materials - such as printing, uploading, downloading, or evaluation - and store them in a way that cannot be altered or erased. They work like a digital CCTV system, continuously monitoring and documenting each step in the process. This creates a transparent chain of custody and helps trace if irregularities occur.

Independent oversight boards (external committees) monitor the entire process, from paper generation to evaluation. Their independence ensures accountability and reduces the chance of collusion or manipulation.

Together, these measures strengthen examination integrity by combining technology with strict accountability, making leaks and misuse far less likely. Ultimately, technology should not replace trust but reinforce it. Examinations must combine digital



innovation with strict accountability measures. Only then can online testing and computerised evaluation deliver both speed and credibility, ensuring that merit remains the cornerstone of academic selection.

Reverting to a manual examination process followed for decades, is a way to restore integrity and reduce risks of leaks or manipulation. Unlike online systems, manual methods keep question papers, answer scripts, and evaluation records physically controlled, limiting exposure to hacking or unauthorised digital access. Printing, transporting, and storing papers under strict supervision, with sealed packets and layered audits, can make leaks difficult. Manual evaluation also ensures that human judgment, not algorithms, decides ambiguous answers, reducing disputes over fairness.

However, manual systems demand enormous logistics: secure printing presses, guarded transport, and thousands of evaluators. While slower, they create a tangible chain of custody that is easier to monitor. Re-evaluation, though time-consuming, is transparent when done by independent examiners. In essence, reverting to manual processes prioritises security over speed, reinforcing public trust in examinations. A hybrid model may be ideal - manual handling for

sensitive examinations, digital tools for efficiency where risks are lower - ensuring both credibility and practicality.

When considering exam formats, objective (tick-mark/MCQ) and long-form descriptive answers have different implications for leakage risks. The former are easier to store digitally and can be auto-evaluated quickly. However, because the entire paper is a fixed set of questions with predetermined answers, a leak of even a portion can compromise the whole exam. Their standardised nature makes them more vulnerable if question banks are not adequately randomised or encrypted.

Long-form descriptive questions require manual or semi-automated evaluation. Even if leaked, they demand deeper understanding and articulation, so rote memorisation of leaked answers is less effective. The subjective nature of evaluation also reduces the impact of partial leaks, though it introduces challenges of consistency and bias.

The best practice would use a hybrid model combining objective questions for wide coverage with descriptive ones for detailed assessment. Maintain large, randomised pools of questions, with final papers generated close to exam time. Employ secure printing or encrypted online delivery with tamper-proof audit trails. For high-stakes exams, emphasise on analytical/descriptive questions, as they are less vulnerable to leaks and assess genuine understanding effectively. In short, while objective formats are efficient, descriptive questions provide stronger resilience against leakage and uphold exam credibility.

Combining manual custody (sealed packets, physical investigation) with digital checks (audit trails, encryption) creates layered protection. Neither

system alone is foolproof. Clear laws and swift penalties for those involved in leaks - whether insiders or candidates - act as a deterrent. A multi-layered approach - technical, logistical, and legal - offers the strongest shield to leakages.

The duration of an examination itself does not directly cause paper leaks. Leakage usually occurs much earlier - during paper setting, printing, storage, or digital transmission - before candidates even sit for the test. However, exam duration can indirectly influence the impact of a leak. In short-duration exams (like MCQ tests), if the paper is leaked even briefly before the exam, candidates can quickly memorise answers, making the leak highly damaging. In long-duration descriptive exams, even if leaked, candidates must still write detailed answers. This reduces the advantage of having prior access, though it still undermines fairness. What matters most is when and how the paper is exposed. If question papers are generated close to exam time, securely transmitted, and monitored with tamper-proof protocols, duration becomes irrelevant to leakage.

In practice, exam security depends on safeguards, not length. Multi-layer encryption, biometric access, audit trails, and independent oversight are far more decisive in preventing leaks than whether an exam lasts two hours or three.

Paper leakage is not simply a technological flaw but a failure of custody, oversight, and accountability. Whether examinations are conducted online or manually, integrity depends on secure handling, transparent monitoring, and strict deterrents against malpractice. A layered approach - combining technical safeguards, logistical discipline, and legal enforcement - remains the most effective way to protect merit and restore public trust in the examination system.

(The writer is a retired Scientist of CSIR.)

NOW AND AGAIN

THE LONGEST DRINK

HARSH PAWARIA

It was sometime in early May 2023. A cousin's wedding had brought relatives from across continents together, including family from Australia. As happens at such gatherings, one celebration flowed into another, culminating in a bachelor's party where alcohol occupied centre stage.

Someone handed me a drink. I accepted it politely. And then I held it.

For the next several hours, the glass remained in my hand like a stage prop. Conversations came and went. Music grew louder and then softer. Groups formed and dissolved. The night slipped into morning. The drink remained untouched.

At first, people assumed I was merely pacing myself. Then they wondered whether I was waiting for a toast. Eventually curiosity gave way to understanding. By dawn, everyone had received the message without my having to announce it. I was not going to drink, come what may.

What surprised me was how effective silence proved to be. Arguments invite counterarguments. Declarations invite challenges. A simple act, repeated consistently, settles the matter more decisively than a hundred explanations.

I was reminded of a scene from House of Cards involving Doug Stamper, an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Recovery, he suggests, is not won through grand speeches. It is secured through a series of ordinary decisions made day after day. The drama lies not in a spectacular victory but in persistence.

Milestones are curious things. One thousand days sounds impressive because the number is large and neatly rounded. Yet nobody lives sobriety in blocks of a thousand days. One lives it in units of twenty-four hours, sometimes less. The arithmetic is performed backward. The accumulation becomes visible only after the fact.

Over time, the absence of alcohol ceases to feel like deprivation. It simply becomes part of one's identity, as unremarkable as preferring tea to coffee or walking instead of taking a lift. The world continues much as before. Weddings remain joyous. Friendships endure. Laughter survives perfectly well without chemical assistance.

That untouched drink from three years ago has long since vanished. The glass was washed, returned to service and forgotten by everyone present.

Yet the memory remains with me because it marked a quiet turning point. Some decisions are announced with fanfare. Others reveal their significance only in retrospect. A thousand days later, I still think that was the longest drink I ever held.

The lesson was simple: conviction needs no audience; consistency quietly performs the work of persuasion every day.

Why no one can own history

HITENDRA PATEL

In order to narrate and organize the past in a systematic manner, a discipline emerged that came to be known as history. Once constituted as an academic subject, it acquired a curriculum, textbooks, pedagogical methods, and institutional structures. Yet a fundamental question remains: what exactly is the nature of the past?

The past is not a physical territory that can be surveyed, measured, enclosed, and assigned an owner. Nor is it an object that can be fully quantified and catalogued. One may collect water in a bucket, store it in a tank, or even contain it within a reservoir. But what of a river? Can that which is perpetually flowing ever truly be possessed? How can ownership be established over something whose very essence lies in movement?

Ideas are like flowing water, and so too is the past.

One way of imagining the past is as the sky itself. If that metaphor appears excessive, then let us think of it as an ocean. Even if modern technology allows us to calculate its dimensions, what of its depths, its mysteries, and the vast biological and non-biological worlds that inhabit

it? Can these be completely measured? And even if some divine power made such total measurement possible, would that necessarily be desirable? Would it not be preferable instead to cultivate a comprehensive intellectual sensibility that enables us to revisit the past from ever-new perspectives?

Human beings approach reality through multiple modes of understanding. Alongside the poetic and philosophical stand religious, scientific, and historical perspectives, each possessing its own assumptions, methods, and limitations. To bind the past, to measure it exhaustively, or to claim proprietary authority over it - such ambitions appear fundamentally misguided.

There are, and ought to be, multiple ways of understanding the past. Historical inquiry constitutes one such approach. It seeks to construct interpretations on the basis of evidence. Yet even here, no single interpretation can claim finality. Historical understanding requires continual revision, reorganization, and recontextualization of evidence. The possibility of multiple interpretations is not a weakness of historical knowledge but one of its defining characteristics.

Over roughly the last century and a half, however, a powerful

myth has gained currency: the belief that history can provide a complete and scientifically definitive understanding of the past in much the same way that the natural sciences explain physical objects. This belief, I would argue, is itself a myth.

History is a form of discourse about the past - an important form, but only one among many. It does not possess the aesthetic richness of literature, nor the conceptual rigor and systematicity often associated with disciplines such as linguistics or philosophy. Yet the prestige attached to the scientific claims of history has made it an attractive instrument for particular ideological projects. Consequently, history has frequently been employed as a political tool.

The instrumentalization of the past is a distinctly modern phenomenon.

Attempts to resolve contemporary political disputes through historical narratives are fraught with danger. One group constructs a history that establishes its superiority while relegating another to inferiority. Inevitably, the latter responds by producing a counter-history that reverses the hierarchy. The result is an endless cycle of conflict in

which competing historical claims become weapons in political struggle.

How societies ought to remember the past is therefore a question that will continue to arise in every age and every civilization. What should be remembered, and what should be forgotten?

Perhaps what deserves remembrance is that which serves a meaningful purpose and contributes to the creation of a better society.

The poetic imagination possesses fluidity absent from many historical narratives. In poetry, figures from distant epochs may suddenly appear before us; listeners become emotionally moved; collective memories are awakened. The power of verse can be so profound that heroic ballads may inspire audiences to draw their swords, while revolutionary songs may stir entire societies into action. Poetry can provoke upheaval, but it can also transcend it.

By contrast, formal education often seeks to transmit approved interpretations of the past through textbooks. Just as a medicinal preparation may be administered to cattle through a bamboo tube, so too students are sometimes expected to absorb prescribed historical narratives designed to make them "correct" citizens. The

image is telling; the learner tethered like an animal to a post, while imagination itself yearns to fly free.

The past cannot be reduced to such disciplinary exercises. Discussion of the past remains indispensable. It offers lessons, warnings, and possibilities for reflection. Above all, it can contribute to the cultivation of ethical values, without which no genuinely better society can be built. Yet such engagement should not devolve into disputes over ownership - questions of whose history is legitimate and whose is not. The more important question is: how might history become a shared human inheritance?

The conversation about the past must be expanded rather than restricted. No individual, community, ideology, or institution can legitimately claim exclusive ownership over it. The historian is not a land surveyor or revenue official empowered to issue title deeds over the past. Historical writing cannot become a proprietary document that grants possession of collective memory.

The past belongs to no one because it belongs, in different ways, to everyone.

No one can own history.

(The writer is Professor of History, Rabindra Bharati University.)

100 Years Ago

News Items

MONSOON FORECAST

DEFINITE INFORMATION NOT YET AVAILABLE

(From Our Correspondent.)
Simla, June.

June 3 is the normal date of appearance of the monsoon on the West Coast, but there is no news yet regarding this from Colombo or Trivandrum. On the other hand, till last evening, there was bright weather at both these stations. No steamer from the south-west side of Colombo has indicated conditions that are generally the harbingers of the monsoon. Until definite information is available from Socotra and Zanzibar about the progress of the monsoon it is very difficult to forecast the exact date of its appearance in the south of the Peninsula.

GURDWARA ELECTIONS

(From Our Correspondent.)
Simla, June.

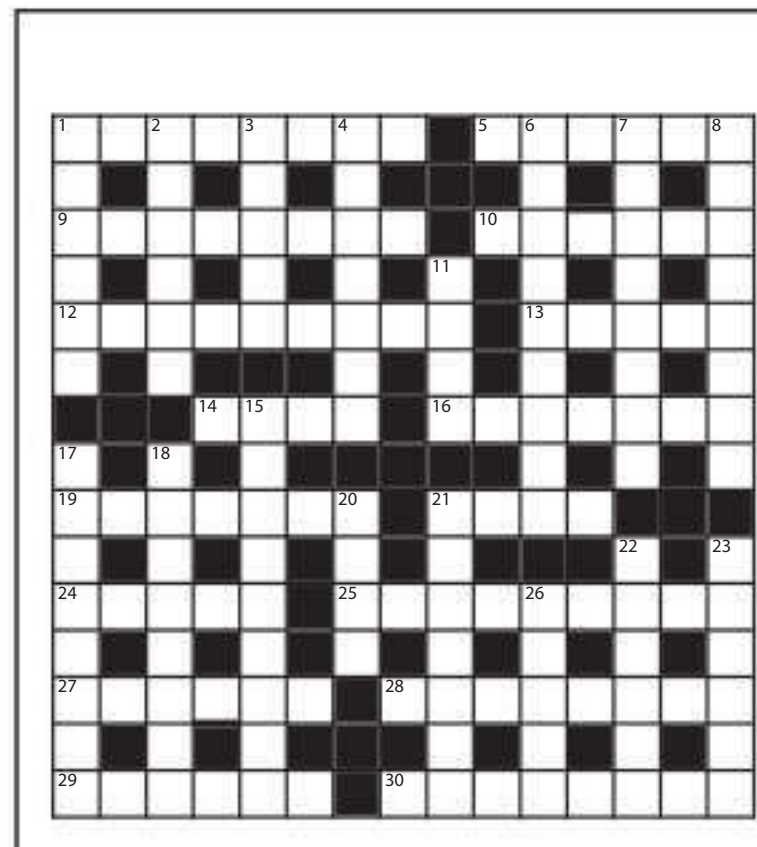
The elections under the Gurdwara Act are now approaching and will be held towards the end of June. Both parties are making up strenuous plans to capture the central board and the local committees. The Government is watching this contest with amused interest, as it is not concerned with the result so long as peace and order is not disturbed by the militant section among oppositionists. The Government does not expect untoward happenings during the Gurdwara election.

DIAMOND SMUGGLING

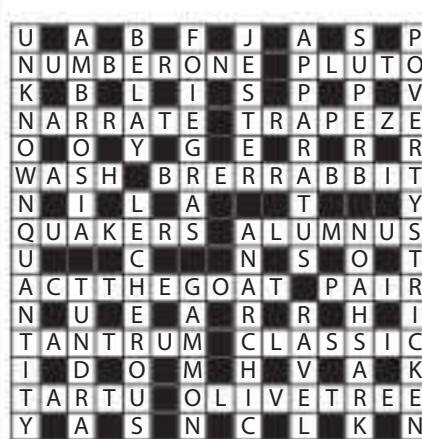
Madras, June.

A seizure of diamonds worth Rs. 30,000 smuggled from Pondicherry into British India, has been effected by a customs inspector. Diamond smuggling has been going on for years, and it seems that every month about a lakh of rupees worth of diamonds are smuggled into British India. Smugglers have so far evaded the vigilance of the Customs patrol and the present seizure, which is said to have been effected with great difficulty, between Tanjoro and Pudukkottah, appears to be the first made for some years.

Crossword | No. 293483



Last Sunday's Solution



ACROSS

- 1 Qualify to get drink producing ID (8)
- 5 Black king you're initially finding dull (6)
- 9 Expert is broadcast live before now (5-5)
- 10 One taking advantage of a vehicle ferry regularly (6)
- 12 Candidate in sandwich shop having goal to meet the Queen (9)
- 13 Treatment facility in pub holding male back (5)

- 14 Confront exterior features (4)
- 16 Vagrant putting newspaper in towel? (7)
- 19 Sister almost trips avoiding duke in shades (7)
- 21 Way to record pace (4)
- 24 Artist finally sculpted two bones (5)
- 25 Carry out utensil (9)
- 27 Measure jade green boxes (6)
- 28 Female embracing crew in lift (8)

- 29 Special educational needs bothered governing body (6)
- 30 Clergyman trailing king is always close (8)
- DOWN
- 1 Temporary retail outlets in post offices enthralling youngster (3-3)
- 2 Inquirer ekes out sign of hesitation (6)
- 3 Selects note in audition as fairy (5)
- 4 Remains in lodge outside university (7)

- 6 Reprobate tribe disbanded during occupation (9)
- 7 Article and note supporting main upset for art lover (8)
- 8 American convict in square with chick (8)
- 11 Set foot in gastro diner
- 15 Designer in the Arctic collapsed (6)
- 17 Gatecrashes popular, authentic society holding first of dances (8)

- 18 Funny person I scold about clothing (8)
- 20 Soloist not even opening (4)
- 21 Presume dancing is best (7)
- 22 John or Paul perhaps got the best of the French (6)
- 23 High Street I deserted (6)
- 26 Raptor starts to eat allosaurus, gauging left eyeball (5)

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

Banquet for the President

HARPAL SINGH SOKHI

RECENTLY, the state banquet for President Droupadi Murmu in honour of the Vietnam President, Tô Lâm, featured many North Indian dishes, which I had the honour to curate. For me, this wasn't simply about cooking for a prestigious occasion, it was also about carrying my roots, and the stories that shaped my journey.

The specially curated menu had both special Punjabi and Haryanvi flavours. Punjabi cuisine is known for its bold flavours, aromatic spices, and traditional cooking methods. In contrast, Haryanvi cuisine embodies rustic simplicity, with wholesome ingredients and balanced seasoning.

Among the dishes I created with my team, there was one recipe that was especially close to my heart — 'bagocha', one of Punjab's forgotten, fading recipes. My mother would make bagocha on days when

Serving bagocha, one of Punjab's forgotten recipes

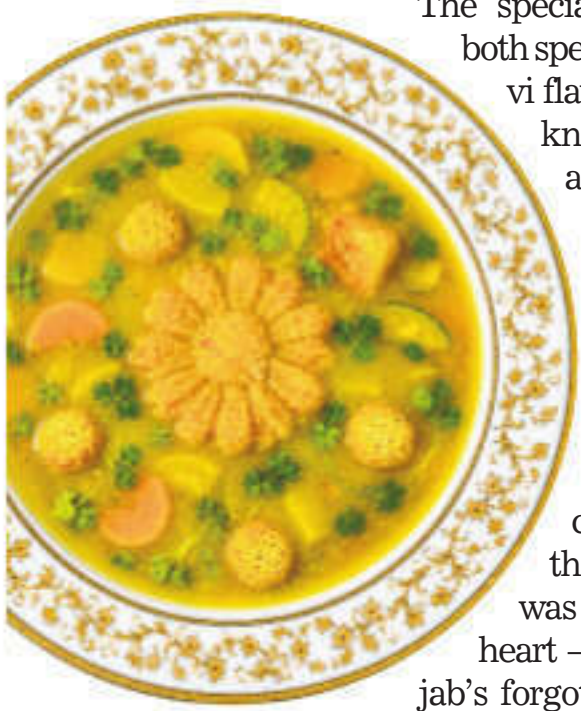
there weren't many vegetables at home, or when she simply wanted to create something simple and nourishing. I still remember the taste and the aromas — wadis fried in ghee with ginger, garlic and green chillies, and then cooked with rice and water into a comforting dish. We called it 'tariwale wadi chawal' — nothing extravagant but it had taste and comfort.

Bagocha is a traditional recipe which is slowly disappearing from Punjab's kitchens. So, when the opportunity came to curate a menu for the state banquet, we reimagined bagocha while preserving its soul. Boiled rice was delicately shaped into a flower. A refined vegetable broth carried notes of ginger, garlic, green chillies, whole spices, and black pepper.

In place of the traditional dry wadi, we created fresh urad dal dumplings, fried gently.

Serving bagocha was never about presenting a recipe, but about carrying my childhood and the lost culinary stories of Punjab into a room where nations gathered.

— The writer is a chef and entrepreneur



BAGOCHA SOUP

STOCK	
INGREDIENTS	
Oil	25 g
Onions (sliced)	50 g
Coriander roots	20 g
Ginger (crushed)	25 g
Garlic (crushed)	10 g
Green chilli (crushed)	10 g
Cloves	4
Cinnamon stick	4 g
Fresh turmeric (kachhi haldi)	20 g
Vegetables (carrot, green & yellow zucchini, broccoli)	500 g
Water	2 L
Aromatic powder	6 g

METHOD: Heat oil in a stock pot, add cloves, cinnamon, onion, coriander roots, fresh turmeric, crushed ginger, crushed garlic, and crushed green chilli. Then add vegetables and sauté for 5-7 minutes. Add water and aromatic powder and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for approximately 3 hours, or until the liquid reduces to half. Strain the stock and keep aside for service.

MANGODI WADI

INGREDIENTS	
Urad dal (soaked for 30 minutes)	100 g
Black pepper (crushed)	2 g
Cumin	2 g
Green chilli (chopped)	5 g
Ginger (chopped)	5 g
Salt to taste	
Oil for frying	

METHOD: Coarsely grind urad dal. Add black pepper, cumin, chopped green chilli, chopped ginger, and salt. Mix well and shape into small wadis. Deep-fry until golden brown and crisp. Drain excess oil and cut each wadi into half.

BARLEY

INGREDIENTS	
Barley	100 g
Salt to taste	
Turmeric powder as required	

METHOD: Soak the barley overnight in water. Drain and transfer to a pot. Add fresh water, turmeric powder, and salt. Boil until the barley is tender. Drain and keep aside. Use 20 g boiled barley per portion.

RICE DUMPLING	
INGREDIENTS	
Boiled rice	100 g
Rice flour	10 g
Onion-tomato masala	20 g
Veg aromatic powder	2 g
Green chilli (chopped)	2 g
Ginger (chopped)	2 g
Garlic (chopped)	2 g
Kashmiri chilli powder	1 g
Turmeric powder	0.5 g
Cumin powder	1 g
Garam masala powder	0.8 g
Butter	4 g
Hot water	20 ml
Salt to taste	
Oil as required	

METHOD: Heat a little oil in a pan and sauté ginger, garlic, and green chilli. Add boiled rice, mix well. Add rice flour, onion-tomato masala, Kashmiri chilli powder, turmeric powder, veg aromatic powder, garam masala powder, cumin powder, and salt. Add hot water and cook for 2-3 minutes. Add butter and mix well. Lightly mash the mixture to achieve binding but retain some texture. Fill flower-shaped silicone moulds and press firmly. Steam for 10-15 minutes. Demould and keep warm.

FINAL ASSEMBLY & PLATING

INGREDIENTS (PER PORTION)	
Stock	200 ml
Boiled barley	20 g
Carrot roundels	20 g
Green zucchini (sliced)	20 g
Yellow zucchini (sliced)	20 g
Broccoli florets	20 g
Button mushroom (diced)	20 g
Butter	10 g
Long pepper powder	1 g
Microgreens	10 g
Black pepper powder for garnish	

METHOD: Heat butter in a pan and sauté all vegetables until lightly cooked. Arrange the sautéed vegetables in a serving bowl. Place one flower-shaped rice dumpling in the centre. Pour stock into the bowl. Add boiled barley around the dumpling. Sprinkle long pepper powder. Arrange 6 pieces of halved mangodi wadi around the dumpling. Garnish with microgreens. Finish with black pepper powder and serve hot.

Dreamer and a builder

Manju Barua pioneered ecotourism in Northeast, nurtured self-reliance

SANJOY HAZARIKA

LAST month, we lost Achintya Barua, founder of Wild Grass, the first private resort to be established in the Kaziranga area. He passed away suddenly, after complaining of feeling unwell, as he was being taken to the government hospital at Bokakhat, a small town a short distance from his beloved space.

His son, Maan, who teaches at Cambridge University, responded succinctly to my words of consolation and shared grief: "...he signed off in his style, no fuss." To people like me and my brother, who were closely related to him, and countless others, he was simply Manju, a cousin — actually, given the complex inter-relationships that define large families in Assam and possibly elsewhere, he was my grandmother's nephew and technically our father's cousin. But in age, he and his elder brother Raj or Boi-jayanta were closer to us and my father was their local guardian in Shillong when they were at boarding in St Edmund's, at the time the premier public school in the region.

Post-school, Manju went off to St Stephen's in Delhi, the natural next stop for many Edmundians, where he became friends with a group that edged closer to the radical politics of the 1970s before disappearing overnight, as Ranjit Choudhury, his classmate from school and college, recalled. Ranjit had an interest in films though he was studying English Literature. As he opened his hostel room, he found a chit. Signed by Manju, it said in part: "Remember us when you make your films."

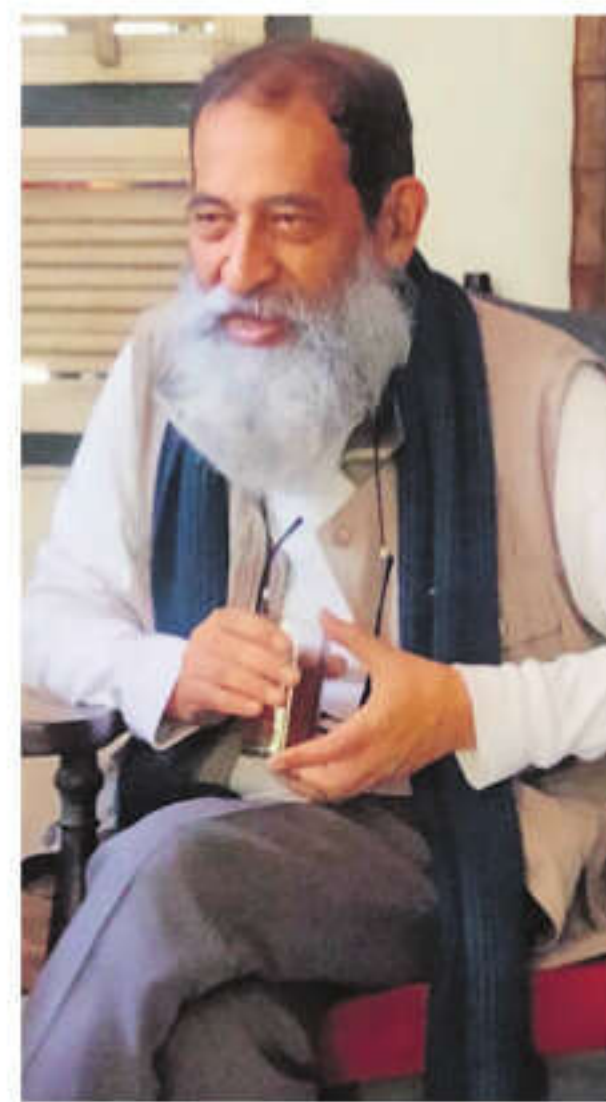
Before he slipped away, Manju used to be part of a small Wednesday group that used to meet in a fellow hosteller's room to discuss politics and other weighty matters. One day, they invited three titans of academia: Amartya Sen, Ranajit Guha and Amalendu Guha.

In his own words, "And that was one occasion that I forever cherish. Three chairs were placed for them while five-six of us sat on the floor. St Stephen's student residence rooms were large, especially the Rudra South rooms, even then it was not so roomy for 10 people to get together. I remember being huddled in one corner of the room..."

He added, "I don't remember what was discussed in that high funda intellectual session. Lesser mortals like me were incarnations of the Goan D'Souza in Gouriprasanna Majumdar's song 'Coffee houser sei adda ta' — sung by Manna Dey. We sat as voiceless listeners, but maybe like D'Souza our eyes too were full of unspoken thoughts."

That was a time when left radicalism had swept across parts of India and captured the minds of many youth. Manju later returned to "normal" life. However, the concepts of equality, the need to lift people out of grinding poverty, build and strengthen communities especially in rural spaces and ensure they had both dignity and livelihoods remained rooted in his mind.

He came upon the idea for a private resort in Kaziranga, supported by a loan from the Assam Industrial Development Corporation. I doubt if a loan given by



Achintya Barua

that organisation has gone longer and been better utilised. One person who was involved with Wild Grass from the very start was the mild-mannered and deeply loyal Kamani Prasad Barua, while entrepreneur Ranjit Barthakur was also associated at an earlier stage.

It was a time when Assam was going through a time of exceptional turmoil, violence and bloodshed with the rise of the insurgent United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and later other armed groups. The Indian State was in direct confrontation with the rebels and the media was filled with news of ambushes and attacks, extortion and raids, surrenders and recruitment to the cause.

At one point, Maan, his son, recalls that as a young boy, he was stunned by the sight of Army soldiers in camouflage surrounding their simple abode and whisking his father away. His mother, Moromi, read to him to assuage his anxiety. When Maan awoke, his father was there. The young Army officer who rode with him realised he was dealing with an uncommon and well-read person. Manju was produced before a senior officer who became apologetic within a few minutes — it turned out they had common friends. He sent Manju back and conveyed a deep apology to his wife.

There were many extraordinary things about Manju. One was the vast scale of his knowledge and the constant effort to learn more from the people who lived in the area and who loved the forests and their denizens, both wildlife and human. Yet, in all this, he remained modest, funny, an incredible host and teller of stories, with a flowing beard that turned from grey to white.

Stars of television and print, writers, authors and essayists as well as academics from across India and the world, beat a path to his door. You could walk through the large doors with their many glass panes into the high-ceilinged dining room, the most iconic building of Wild Grass, where everyone had to come for meals.

No exceptions were made, no matter

how well-heeled or powerful — there was no room service, no television and no air-conditioning. The dining room could be packed with hitch-hikers or tourists, friends of Manju and one could find BBC and National Geographic teams or a Mark Shand and Mike Palin in deep conversation.

Twice a year, he fed the trained elephants which ferried travellers tirelessly during the tourist season. And organised a mahout festival to celebrate those who 'drove' and cared for the great beasts, since 2014 in the memory of Shand, brother of the British Queen.

The resort's name itself was evocative: Wild Grass. Because he knew that it was the grasslands — not invasive species of shrubs and trees — that made Kaziranga unique and gave both shelter and succour to its thousands of rhinos, elephants, buffaloes and many species of deer apart from the birds, insect and aquatic life, tigers and other predators. In the early years, he had a sign pointing to the stony path leading to the resort and designed a T-shirt that proclaimed, 'Come, Get Lost'. He discontinued both of them, adding levels of adventure and exasperation to those seeking the place.

I remember wondering to him in the 1990s about the future of Wild Grass. A few years later, when it had become the go-to place, he turned to me, "Remember what you said — and look at how it's doing." I apologised for not believing.

Manju was extraordinarily knowledgeable not just about wildlife, but the depth of Axomiya culture and history. He published a range of Assamese songs, designed the striking architecture of the buildings that are home to guests, including Rang Ghar, built of split brick and timber, deliberately left incomplete where villagers and local organisations were invited to hold events free of charge.

He supervised the carving of doors, tables and chairs with traditional motifs that are slowly getting erased.

It was the village that came out for him when he left — they handled the ceremonies, the cooking, all aspects of arrangements. "The village took over," said his sister, Padmakshi.

And why not — he provided training and employment with dignity to scores of villagers, worked with banks to help them buy the first open jeeps and launch the jeep safaris for which Kaziranga is famous. He kept his staff on through the disaster of Covid-19 and found a new way to sustain livelihoods by making an arrangement with an oil drilling company in return for space.

Regular income again began to flow although the number of travellers fell. A surge of fancy new hotels and budget homestays now beckon visitors from the highway. Of course, that has impacted Wild Grass and Manju saw it coming.

I think of Manju not just as a pioneer of ecotourism in Assam and the Northeast but a dreamer and a builder — of a classless, cultured, kind, self-reliant and sustaining society in the village of Bochagaon, a society of which he had dreamed as a youth.

— The writer is an independent columnist

CAPTION CONTEST 1565

VISHAL KUMAR



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

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1564



SPECTRUM MAY 31 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

- Stocking up on liquid assets — Dharuv Patwari via epaper, Gurdaspur
- Thirst aid — Gurashish Kaur, Chandigarh
- Cool(ie) — Harneet Singh Anand via epaper, Gurugram
- Recharge break — Kulbir Singh Saggu via epaper, Batala
- The grind behind every grain — Sandip Kumar Sacher, Mohali

CLARIFICATION: Ashok Vajpeyi's article, 'The restless genius', which appeared on the Arts page on May 10, inadvertently mentioned that Pt Mukul Shivputra was drawn to drugs. The error is regretted.

ARCHIT WATTS

WITH its turquoise waters, white-sand beaches and relaxed lifestyle, Maldives is one of the most popular international holiday destinations for Indian travellers. What makes the island nation particularly appealing is the variety of experiences it offers.

Among the properties attracting visitors from around the world are Oblu Xperience Ailafushi and Oblu Nature Helengeli by Sentido. Located in the North Male Atoll, they cater to very different travel preferences.

For travellers who enjoy an active atmosphere, social spaces and family-friendly experiences, Oblu Xperience Ailafushi offers a refreshing take. Located just about a 20-minute speedboat ride from the Velana International Airport, the resort is designed around the idea of shared experiences and easy-going island living.

Aila and fushi are words from the Maldivian language, Dhivehi. Aila means family and fushi means island, translating to "family island".

Inspired by local culture and traditions, the resort focuses on bringing people together. Accommodation options range from ocean-view rooms and beach villas to two-bedroom ocean-view family rooms and water villas. While many Maldivian resorts emphasise privacy, Ailafushi embraces a more energetic character.

A big attraction is the resort's all-inclusive approach. Meals, beverages, themed parties and recreational activities are bundled into a single package. The resort offers a variety of culinary options that cater to international tastes while ensuring sufficient diversity for Indian guests. A standout feature is Only Blu, one of Maldives'



OBLU XPERIENCE AILAFUSHI RESORT, NORTH MALE ATOLL

largest underwater restaurants, where guests can enjoy a meal surrounded by marine life visible through panoramic glass walls.

The island also offers opportunities for kayaking, paddleboarding, snorkelling along the house reef, flyboarding and a range of other water-based activities. Oblu Select Lobigili, an adults-only resort located next door, is connected by a jetty. Designed for couples and honeymooners, it offers a more intimate atmosphere.

Oblu Nature Helengeli, meanwhile, offers an entirely different perspective on the Maldives. A 50-minute speedboat ride from the airport, Helengeli is best known for the rich marine ecosystem. It is particularly popular among snorkellers and divers. Helengeli provides direct

access to thriving marine habitats. Colourful fish, corals, rays and occasional reef shark sightings make every snorkelling session memorable. For travellers interested in activity-based tourism, this aspect of the resort holds a strong appeal.

Beach villas allow guests to step directly onto the sand, while water villas feature glass floor panels overlooking the water below.

During my visit, the resort hosted the 9 Hands Dinner, a special event featuring chefs from Egypt, Madeira and the Maldives. Wellness is another important element of the Helengeli experience. Ultimately, the choice comes down to the kind of holiday one is seeking.

— The writer was in the Maldives on a sponsored trip

The island nation offers a variety of experiences for tourists.

Revisiting the scarred history of '84

PARAMJIT S JUDGE

THE famous English poet HW Longfellow in his poem 'A Psalm of Life' advised: "Let the dead Past bury its dead!" However, history of memories informs us somewhat differently. Individuals, communities and nations never forget agony, tragedy and sufferings experienced in the course of their lives, and history.

In 1984, widely regarded as the Orwellian year, the Sikhs experienced humiliation and tragedy, which they were neither prepared for, nor foresaw. It was the year of the Army operation at the Golden Temple in Amritsar in the first week of June — an action that could have been avoided by choosing an alternative strategy — without any consideration for the fact that it was the holiest of places for the Sikh community. It was followed by the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, by her Sikh bodyguards and then widespread violence against the Sikhs in Delhi and many parts of North India.

Most of the victims were those who had migrated from western Punjab in 1947 and had already experienced uprooting, displacement and violence. 1984 seemed like the enactment of the same violence of a communal nature — the difference though lay in the fact that this time the actions of a few individuals made their community responsible for the crime.

Ishmeet Kaur Chaudhry's book is a collection of articles written by academicians



REMEMBERING THE PAST: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ANTI-SIKH VIOLENCE OF PUNJAB
Edited by Ishmeet Kaur Chaudhry.
Orient BlackSwan.
Pages 217.
₹1,285

belonging to different disciplines and social activists, making it an interdisciplinary work. Chaudhry takes up an interesting issue with regard to the characterisation of anti-Sikh violence in 1984 by referring to various terms, such as riot, pogrom, carnage, genocide or massacre. Obviously, subsequent articles have used one or the other term to study various aspects of the events of 1984. What had been happening before the assassination of Mrs Gandhi has been taken up by some articles, though it is part of Sikh memory.

The anti-Sikh violence turned into an organised pogrom within a few hours, duly led by some notable Congress leaders.

Nandita Haksar, human rights activist and lawyer, has underlined the organisa-

tional character of violence, but it should be remembered that had this kind of organised violence been planned much before the event, then it also implies that the assassination would have been planned much earlier. She has also pointed out that there were FIRs registered against 49 BJP-RSS leaders for their role in the violence.

Yasmeen Arif's ethnographic study of the widows of 1984, which recorded various narratives in 2004, uses the expression 'enduring exile' to signify the lasting loss endured by the women, offering a vivid analysis of the victims of violence who have largely remained invisible in various studies of the period. Uma Chakravarti, one of the most respected feminist writers and historians, has given a moving personal account of how she helped a Sikh family, underlining the fact that the offenders need to be understood and pinpointed by not giving them a blanket communal identity.

Anne Murphy focuses on how memorials of the 1984 violence in Delhi and Canada, with their museological elements, are commemoration of trauma of a shared past among the Sikhs and compares it with those of the Holocaust as well as First Nations.

Jasmine Anand's analysis of the film 'Chauthi Koot' (directed by Gurvinder Singh) is thought-provoking. She has used the metaphor of a 'dog's life' to characterise the period of militancy in Punjab. The film is based on two stories by Punjabi writer Waryam Sandhu. She comments: "The failure of the state to protect all its citizens equally and its complicity in the killings had

orphaned sections of it by denying them a basic requirement — safety."

Diamond Oberoi Vahali's psychoanalysis of the Malayalam film 'Kaya Taran' ('Chrysalis') is another notable contribution in this volume. The film is about the Christian nuns who gave protection to a Sikh woman and her son during the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in Meerut. The author points out that the universe of hatred and violence could be counteracted through kindness and compassion. A Malayalam movie conveying a message of the need to sustain one's identity even in an adverse situation may be an addition to the knowledge of many Punjabis.

The volume offers a new perspective on the events of 1984 through ethnographic accounts, literature, memories, cinema and the idea of commemoration. It also strongly reminds that people did not lose their identity as humans and stresses the need for compassion for others, irrespective of their identities. The work takes the reader back to the times when violence turned into a cult by losing its radical and positive dimension, as preached in history through movements like Ghadar and by icons like Bhagat Singh.

The book reminds that the politics of religion could be a danger to humanity in all situations, and cautions that there is a need to be aware of such possibilities as well as to counter them. It's a must-read work for anyone interested in contemporary history.

— *The reviewer taught sociology at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar*

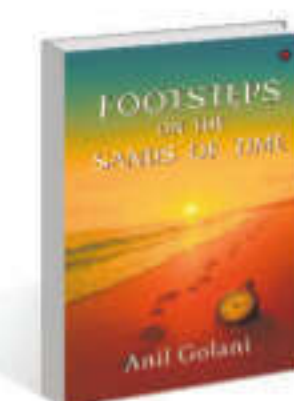


BACKFLAP



GUTS, GLORY AND EMPIRE
by Selma Carvalho.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 457. ₹999

Zanzibar, situated off the coast of East Africa, was for long a junction for monsoon-driven sea routes connecting Africa, Europe and Asia. Around the mid-19th century, Goans began settling in here and became influential figures. Their engagement with British arch-imperialists John Kirk and Gerald Portal set in motion a compelling challenge of the Empire's authority over ordinary lives. This book brings us the story of this community, and restores South Asian voices to Indian Ocean histories.



FOOTSTEPS ON THE SANDS OF TIME
by Anil Golani.
Notion Press.
Pages 196. ₹385

Spanning nearly five decades of writing and comprising 147 poems, this anthology by Air Vice Marshal Anil Golani (ret'd) is less a conventional collection than a reflective chronicle of a life lived with sensitivity, introspection and an abiding awareness of time's relentless movement. At the heart of the anthology lies a sustained meditation on life as a journey rather than a destination. Besides, he delves into themes such as love, solitude, nature, memory...



MAHARANI JINDAN
Edited by Gurdev Singh Sidhu.
Unistar Books.
Pages 144. ₹495

Colonial accounts have portrayed Maharani Jindan as volatile, impulsive or morally suspect. Historical documents, however, suggest her character had been sketched thus out of design. The British saw her as a threat as she represented dynastic continuity, constitutional legitimacy and the living memory of Khalsa rule. The book seeks to restore her political presence on the basis of documentary record, including political diaries, correspondence and parliamentary papers.

Memory, myth & humanity

RITU KAMRA KUMAR

THE short story collection, 'Has the Ganga Stopped Flowing?', is a rich tapestry of diverse and deeply human narratives that refuse to be confined to any single aspect of life. Across 18 stories, the author explores mortality, memory, faith, social customs, loneliness, love, regret, displacement, and resilience with remarkable sensitivity.

Neatly crafted plots, evocative flashbacks, open endings and unexpected twists lend a compelling texture. Moving effortlessly between villages, railway platforms, temples, courtyards, and domestic spaces, Sudhamahi Regunathan probes the complexities of human life.

'Has the Ganga Stopped Flowing?', the title story, employs the sacred river as a metaphor for life's continuity despite suffering and betrayal: "Stand on your feet and fight the world". In 'Undying Fire', Hariparshad Tiwari's obsession with securing the sabbath of Manikarnika Ghat becomes a meditation on mortality and mankind's longing for dignity beyond death. The story derives additional gravitas from its engagement with the legends of King Harishchandra, the Dom community, and the Aghoris of Banaras.

'The Village Hero' quietly subverts conventional notions of masculinity as Tashi tells Diskit, "I will not give you permission (to become a nun)." Set against the stark beauty of Ladakh, it reveals how public admiration often conceals private sorrow. Equally moving is 'A Heaven Out of Reach', where Cheemachimama's life of emotional deprivation culminates in a poignant gesture of compassion that arrives too late. The story transforms ordinary suffering into quiet tragedy.

The collection is particularly effective when exploring memory and human connection. 'What's in a Name' demonstrates how names become repositories of affection,

gratitude, and remembrance across generations. 'The Bejewelled Feet' achieves remarkable emotional subtlety through the image of a widowed daughter-in-law stepping barefoot through an open door, symbolising vulnerability, trust, and shared grief.

Similarly, 'Framed Picture' is a touching reflection on unfulfilled desire and filial devotion, where a son creates a treasured illusion to fulfil his mother's lifelong dream.

Regunathan also excels in stories that employ irony and surprise. 'Fated Strokes' examines guilt and missed opportunities through a chance reunion shadowed by illness and memory. The concluding line by Bindu — "I left him to be insane... to save my life" — is intriguingly ironic. 'Cheating Death' plays with expectations, transforming apparent tragedy into a meditation on hope. 'Once Upon a Flight' culminates in a startling revelation that forces readers to reconsider assumptions about victimhood and identity. 'The Appointed Hour' and 'Josiyyar Ayya' employ humour to reveal deeper truths about human impatience, superstition and self-deception.

One of the collection's strengths lies in its diction: direct, reader-friendly and deceptively unadorned. Yet beneath this apparent simplicity flows a rich current of cultural memory. Myths, folklore, ritual practices, and regional traditions are woven organically. Vishwamitra, Rama and Lakshmana, Manikarnika Ghat, Dom Raja, astrology, temple customs, Ladakhi rituals, and the sacred geography of Banaras and Kumbakonam enrich the stories without overwhelming them. The result is a body of work deeply rooted in Indian ethos while remaining universally accessible.

"As rivers flow into the sea, losing name and form, so the wise transcending the boundaries of self." Regunathan's stories similarly dissolve boundaries, between past and present, myth and reality, stranger and kin, leaving readers enriched by their quiet wisdom and enduring humanity.

— *The reviewer is former principal of Mukand Lal National College, Yamunanagar*

Football and Indian ways

VINAYAK PADMADEO

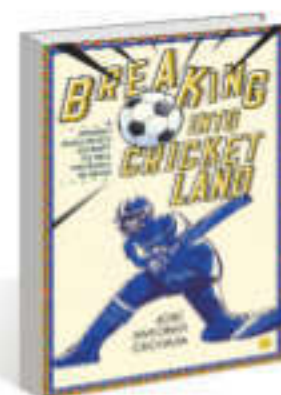
ONE would imagine that a book by José Antonio Cachaza, former director of La Liga's India operations, would focus on the difficulties of selling football in a country where two of the biggest "pagan religions" are cricket and Bollywood. Well, it does throw light on how difficult it is to conduct business in India, but 'Breaking Into Cricket Land' is much more than that. It is a handy guide for foreigners who wish to live and do business in India.

Throughout the book, José Antonio argues that an arrogant westerner — a know-it-all — is more likely to fail because India thinks and operates differently, and many age-old clichés do not necessarily prove true.

Summing up his three important principles of doing business, he says: "I believe that to do business in India, you need to be clear about a few key issues, which, in my opinion, can be summed up in three: First, as that friend told me, in India, you have to have a lot of patience. Second, you have to understand that you don't sell to an Indian; the Indian buys from you. It may seem the same, but it is not. And third, it is all about building and maintaining trusting relationships."

José Antonio, who was the face of Spain's premier football division La Liga in India for seven years, confesses that he was never drawn to the western notion of travelling to India in search of inner self. Yet, by the time one finishes the book, it is clear that the westerner who was initially reluctant to take up a job in India gradually figured out how the country works despite its daily chaos. In time, he became one with it. He quotes the *Bhagavadgita*: "You have only right to action but never to its results. Do not let the fruit of action be your motive and at the same time, do not abandon yourself to indolence."

Without dwelling into details, he also highlights instances where Indian executives displayed ignorance while negotiating with him. The reason, he suggests, was simple: La Liga had too much money. He recounts discussions with a group seeking to establish a



BREAKING INTO CRICKETLAND — A SPANISH EXECUTIVE'S ATTEMPT TO SELL FOOTBALL IN INDIA
by José Antonio Cachaza.
TWAGAA International.
Pages 241. ₹599

football academy in Kolkata. La Liga was expected to provide dieticians and coaches. When José Antonio asked who would foot the bill — estimated at around 300,000 euros — the discussions abruptly ended. The prospective partners had assumed that La Liga would bear the cost.

In another instance, La Liga's then Director of International Development, Vicente Casado, offered either to host an Indian women's team's training camp in Spain or to appoint a Spanish coach for the national side. The All India Football Federation accepted neither offer; it did not even respond.

José Antonio spent close to seven years in India. He knows the difference between a Safeda and an Alphonso mango. He knows where to buy fresh vegetables and has discovered places to eat, relax and enjoy. He has also come to understand Indian festivals and their relationship with the changing seasons.

The book contains humorous references to both the prestigious Gymkhana Club and the Delhi Golf Club, reminders of India's colonial past. He also uncovers the reasons behind the intermission in Indian cinema and why Indian audiences can become annoyingly noisy, especially during a film's climax.

José Antonio clearly loved his time in India, and that affection shows in the way he describes the chaos and celebrations around him.



HAS THE GANGA STOPPED FLOWING? LOVE, LONGING AND LIBERATION
by Sudhamahi Regunathan.
Konark Publishers.
Pages 188.
₹399

What it means to remain rooted in places that nourish & hurt

PARTH JOSHI

THERE is a silent cruelty to mountain life that outsiders often fail to grasp. Visitors arrive searching for beauty, silence and escape, but those who inhabit these landscapes often negotiate isolation, drudgery and loss, exacted in the currency of their daily lives.

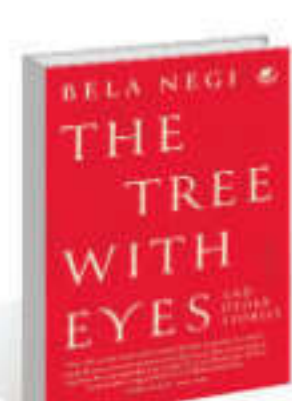
Bela Negi's 'The Tree With Eyes and Other Stories' gnaws at this paradox. In these stories set across rural Uttarakhand, the mountains are never mere postcard backdrops. They are living forces — beautiful, oppressive, hypnotic, and at times, unforgiving — mirroring the lives of people who often find themselves mired in misfortune. Women carry impossible physical and social burdens. Men drift between frustration, migration and wounded pride. Entire villages hang suspended between memory and abandonment.

The author writes with the observational patience of someone deeply rooted in the

social and emotional rhythms of the Himalayas. The narratives unfold slowly, almost deceptively so, before revealing emotional fractures underneath everyday life, steeped in melancholy, but never entirely stripped of tenderness or hope.

The title story, perhaps the most devastating in the collection, sets a haunting tone early. A young bride left behind in her husband's ancestral village navigates loneliness, desire, domestic labour, and the suffocating weight of social expectations. The jacaranda tree at the centre of the story becomes less a physical object and more an ominous observer of this buried grief and violence. The horror emerges not from spectacle, but from the normalcy of suppression.

Elsewhere, in 'Gangrene', ecological degradation intermingles with emotional decay. Forest loss, shrinking livelihoods, and the slow erosion of mountain ecosystems mirror the helplessness of the people who inhabit them. But the author resists romantic environmentalism. Her villages are not



THE TREE WITH EYES AND OTHER STORIES
by Bela Negi.
Tranquebar.
Pages 171. ₹499

idyllic ecological utopias but complex spaces marked by apathy, resilience, resignation.

In 'The Monkey Chaser', she sharply examines the resentment directed at "outsiders", even as local frustrations stem from deeper anxieties around unemployment, migration, and changing aspirations. 'Where the Road Ends' turns its gaze towards dubious "godmen" and the moral

ambiguities hidden beneath spiritual posturing. In 'Crazy Love', the folly of youth, greed and female vulnerability coexist with an almost philosophical acceptance of suffering. At times, dark humour punctures the gloom. 'The Man Who Refused to Die' stands out for its absurd yet deeply human portrayal of paranoia and self-fulfilling fear.

Migration, the defining modern reality of Uttarakhand's hills, underpins the collection. 'A Long Way Home' recalls the now-familiar phenomenon of "ghost villages", emptied by decades of outward movement towards cities and military service.

Some of the collection's finest moments belong to its matriarchs. In 'Amma's Keys' and 'Hishalu', elderly women are not just passive relics but repositories of memory, authority and emotional intelligence. They hold together fragile social worlds even as younger generations drift away. The women in these tales are shrewd, wounded, adaptable, and quietly formidable.

The emotional atmosphere of the book per-

haps reflects the period of the Covid-19 lockdown during which these stories were written. Yet it gradually moves, story by story, from despondency towards something like a gentle endurance. Not triumph, not redemption, but survival.

Negi's prose is restrained and cinematic. She is especially effective in rendering physical landscapes — terraced fields under harsh summer light, dark forests, distant roads, abandoned homes — without allowing the natural canvas to overwhelm the human narrative. The hills breathe and brood alongside the characters.

The anthology lays bare the harsh realities of mountain life. It asks what it means to remain rooted in places that simultaneously nourish and wound. There are no easy answers about migration or belonging. The reader is left with the unsettling feeling that the mountains exert their own pull, and despite the suffering, people remain bound to them by memory, duty, fear and love.

— *The reviewer is an outdoor enthusiast*

REFLECTIONS

CHANDIGARH | 7 JUNE 2026

Divisions of our own making

TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

I AM no historian, economist or social anthropologist. Let's get that out of the way at the very beginning so that I am not torn apart for being flippant or naive. However, I do have a great memory (even at 75) and can remember almost all that happened to fashion my life in these seven decades. My friends call me a storehouse of useless information and even if they have never always meant that as a compliment, I take it as one. What I enjoy is to document all the trivia that has a history of its own, and that links others of my generation to a galaxy that is light years away from the globalised world that has rendered faceless or useless all those who are not connected digitally.

The '50s and '60s were the foundational decades of our country as we know it now. Moreover, for those of us, like me, who were born then, it went along with a way of life and an upbringing that left a deep imprint on each one of us. Everything that is still good in this country dates to that time, but all that eventually derailed the innocent promises of that age can also be traced back to those decades. My birth in 1951 was also when India was given its Constitution. So I like to believe that the values that it was founded on were also the same we were given as my generation grew up. Today, when I look around, I find that all those who stand up for those eternal human values are mostly from our age group. You will find them in each public demonstration against the erosion of human rights, the division of this country along caste and creed, the centralisa-

tion of power and the snuffing of weak voices.

This is, of course, a romantic view and peculiar to a certain section of the upper middle class, who had a long history of a liberal education behind them but who lived modest lives. In the mofussil towns of UP, this meant that we were products of a mixed education. We went to missionary schools that still taught us British rather than Indian history, prayed in chapels and abided by the rules of a Christian way of life. Our 'home' lives were markedly different, yet I strongly believe that exposure to an education by Roman Catholic nuns made me a better Hindu and sharing my tiffin box with Farzana made me guilt-free about eating *halal* meat. I often joke that our exposure to the Avadhi culture of Lucknow made me a Shia Brahmin but the truth is deeper than that flippant remark.

Our ease with switching from one language

Enough of insider-outsider, Hindu-Muslim, my caste and not my caste!

to another as we spent the day was perhaps another seamless acceptance of different voices, views and sounds. And in case this makes our generation sound like a bunch of sanctimonious prigs, let me add that caste, religion and epithets were then not politically erased by any high-minded moral police. I remember a municipal sweeper (be-turbaned and attired in a khaki uniform) who came every day to clear the smelly stuff that our personal *mehtar* emptied into a tin shed, hidden in a *khet* far from the house and called a *bumpoliss* (don't ask why).

We would meet him again as we walked to school, carrying a headload of nightsoil on his

head, singing, '*Har phool main khusboo hai, har patta khoos-khoos hai*' (Every flower has a fragrance and each leaf looks happy). As soon as we saw him, we'd hold our noses and dart over to the other side of the road and cross our fingers (*antioli*, that our Brahmin *maliji* said would avert the sin of meeting a *mehtar*). I blush in shame as I remember this because the singing sweeper was the sweetest, most playful character and pretended to frighten us by coming towards us.

Today, children would be (rightfully) punished for this cruelty but we were innocent kids then and never questioned how we could hurt sentiments and human dignity by our behaviour. Servants were cared for by families and generations worked for the same family for years, yet they ate their food from china plates, while we ate from silver or steel *thalis*. Their tea was served in glass or chipped mugs while we drank milk or tea from steel, copper or brass.

There is much to be said for sanitising our everyday language from politically-loaded words and concepts but the muscle memory of those long-held beliefs remained embedded. To those who did not have the benefit of a liberal education or upbringing, these beliefs were waiting to be exploited by political parties that slyly made it 'kosher' to be proud of being a Hindu or Muslim instead of being proud to be an Indian. Added to this is the division of the country along linguistic lines that has resulted in a disturbing form of sub-nationalism. Many cannot read or write in their own mother tongues yet they insist on calling those who come from a different state 'outsiders'.

The recent political wars fought in Bengal over who could or could not belong there also exposed the harm that the champions of this chauvinism have done to the state.

Insider-outsider, Hindu-Muslim, my caste-not my caste — the list of separating us from each other is long and painful. Enough!

— The writer is a social commentator

Gymkhana Club and the power of myths



AVAY SHUKLA

DELHI'S chatterati, who always need something more than just fried peanuts with their gin and tonic, are abuzz these days with the latest canapes: the Modi government's hostile takeover of Gymkhana Club. It's not a done deal yet, but rest assured that our higher judiciary, with judgments like *Ram Mandir, SIR, Umar Khalid, Aravallis, Hindenburg/SEBI, Pegasus, etc.* under its belt, will finally approve non-passive euthanasia for this last watering hole for the drones of South Delhi.

No one, of course, believes the reason cited by the government itself for the action: that the 27 acres is needed for security/defence purposes. This is the default position for all decisions which push the boundaries of legality and/or good sense. Hence, there is much feverish speculation about the real motives for this surgical strike: the Club's administrative and financial mess, non-payment of dues to the government, turning the area into a semi-militarised zone so that a Bangladesh, Nepal or January 6 type of incident never happens, fear of the Cockroach Janta Party, a real estate operation which will ultimately benefit the Melody-loving leader's cronies. But all this assumes that this government acts rationally, which past decisions do not bear out. I have, therefore, a different take which matches the leopard's spots, as it were.

The BJP is a party which is founded on and which survives on myths — past, present and future. It originates from the myths of ancient India — our epics, Akhand Bharat, the existence of plastic surgery, aeroplanes, nuclear missiles thousands of years ago, etc. In the present, it rules on the strength of other myths — Vishwaguru, fastest growing economy, leader of the Global South, wolf warrior diplomacy, '*ghar me ghus ke maareng*', developed country by 2047, Net Zero emissions by 2075, and so on. None of these myths are based on facts or have a rational basis, but constant reiteration has converted them into legal fiction and kept the BJP in power for over a decade.

Gymkhana Club is a victim of two such myths — Lutyens' Delhi/Khan Market gang (which works actively against the BJP), and colonial legacy (which diminishes our own glorious culture). Both are fake, or at least selectively applied to suit the narrative.

The BJP believes that the privileged residents of Lutyens' Delhi are inimical to the party and conspire against it, and that Gymkhana Club is its hub. Wrong. There is no such thing as Lutyens' Delhi and the Khan Market gang became the Khanna Market gang in 2014. The 2,800 hectares known as Lutyens' Delhi is occupied by politicians, mostly of saffron hue, who subsist on subsidies many times those enjoyed by the members of Gymkhana: serving bureau-

crats who cannot even take a toilet break without written approval from their political masters; and industrialists fully house-trained by the ED, CBI and the Income Tax Department. They are the BJP!

The retired bureaucrats and defence forces officers who haunt the Gymkhana bar also did a '*ghar wapsi*' years ago. I am a member of various groups of retired officers, and I can confidently state that the vast majority of my brethren — 75-80 per cent — support the BJP ideology; 10-15 per cent may not but will not open their mouths for fear of jeopardising their pensions. The rest are so soaked in gin and tonic they can't press their own doorbell, let alone an EVM button.

Lutyens' Delhi (and the Gymkhana) are, therefore, BJP territory, as both Sanjay Jha and Vir Sanghvi have also pointed out, and the BJP knows it. So why take over the Club? Pause that question for the nonce, dear reader.

The "colonial mindset" myth is used as an alibi for this government's failures, to distract attention away from them, and to find a convenient whipping boy to rally the troops, or voters. Gymkhana is the whipping boy this time, to burnish the BJP's non-existent credentials as the champion of the poor; and to divert the voters' attention away from the goodies being gifted daily to the crony oligarchs. How can this bunch of effete elites and their colonial-era club (so goes the specious argument built on a false myth) be allowed to grab valuable land and live a subsidised life when 800 million have to be fed on doles? Such a narrative contains all the ingredients of the colonial myth — alibi, distraction and scapegoat. That it is patently false (like the Khan Market gang myth) is beside the point. Myths appeal to us precisely because they provide an escape from reality.

Myths are appealing as they provide an escape from reality

Gymkhana Club is a victim of these two myths. But it is just the beginning: this narrative, perhaps a counter to the cockroach movement, will be rolled out across the country. Maharashtra has already served notices on 16 prominent clubs in Mumbai. For what an authoritarian or fascist government needs at all times is an "enemy" to rally the nation behind it. Voltaire had said, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him." Replace "God" with "Enemy" and you have the reason why colonial-era clubs are the new enemy, and why 6,000 members of Gymkhana will now have to find another watering hole in this urban jungle. Never underestimate the power of myth-making.

Am I sad? I don't really know. I was not a member of Gymkhana — my application was rejected after a waiting period of 10 years without assigning any reason. But I shall miss its non-pareil mutton outlets. They probably were a colonial hand-down, but then not all legacies are bad, are they?

— The writer is a retired IAS officer

The teacher who unteaches

WHO is a Guru? Ah, a question born not out of curiosity but out of the soul's aching cry in the wilderness. When life bruises the heart and the mind stumbles in the fog of uncertainty, this question arises — soft but heavy with longing. And yet, to answer is like trying to describe the fragrance of rain to one who has never known the monsoon.

A Guru is a figure who stands above you, adorned in the pomp of divinity. No! He is the quiet traveller, walking beside you in the shades of your pain, unseen, unnoticed. He is not a rescuer descending from paradise; he is the mirror held up to your trembling face, reflecting not what you are but what you could become.

You cry, 'Show me the light!' but the Guru leads you into darkness. You beg for comfort, and he tears away the illusions that shield you. Is this cruelty? No, this is love — the kind that breaks before it mends. The type of love that leaves scars, not as reminders of pain, but as marks of transformation.

Love is soft, you say? Think again. The mother's hug protects, but the father's hand disciplines. The Guru is gentle as the moonbeam and fierce as the midday sun. Do you see rejection or learn to stand alone when the Guru turns away? Does the bird curse the wind when it no longer carries it, or does it find its wings? The Guru tells the disciple lost in illusions, 'Wake up!' But waking is bitter, for the dream was sweet. He is the fire that consumes your illusions.

A Guru appears when you are ready — not



UNIVERSE

SRI YOGI

when you seek or desire, but when the spirit can no longer bear the weight of ignorance. But beware, their arrival is not a celebration. It is a hurricane, a churning chaos that will strip you of every mask, every lie you have clung to. He does not come to soothe you but destroys your ego so you may finally meet the truth within.

Imagine a man drowning in a river, thrashing, screaming for help. What does the Guru do? He will not throw a rope. The Guru will push you deeper, holding you under until you stop fighting. 'Learn to float,' he says — not with words, but with his presence. And when you stop resisting, when the river no longer feels like an enemy, you rise — not because he saved you, but because he taught you to save yourself.

A Guru's compassion is a curious contradiction. He walks among mortals, carrying burdens not his own, yet remains untouched. He

takes on your poison, not to suffer for you but to show you that poison itself can be transmuted into nectar. Like Shiva, who swallowed Halahala, he does not fear the venom. He bears it with a quiet smile, his only reward being the joy of seeing you awaken.

But how strange, how bizarre! You look to the Guru as a master, a teacher, a guide. And yet, he is none of these. The Guru does not teach; he unteaches. The Guru does not lead; he compels you to walk alone.

You may call him cruel, for he will not soothe your ego. You may call him heartless, for he will not indulge your desires. Yet, in the quietude of your soul, you will know: the Guru's love is like the love of the earth for the seed. The world does not coddle; it buries the seed in darkness, crushes it with soil and drowns it in the rain — only so it may sprout and touch the sky.

And yet, the most excellent satire of all: the Guru is not apart from you. He is the spark within, the voice you have long silenced. When you find the Guru, you are not meeting another — you are meeting yourself, the self you had forgotten.

So, tell me, O seeker — when the Guru's fire calls to you, will you step into its blaze? Will you let it burn away the chains that bind you, even if it leaves you raw and exposed? For the Guru does not offer peace; he provides freedom. And freedom is the greatest terror and the greatest gift of all.

— Excerpted from '*The Wanderer Who Owns the World*', with permission from Penguin Random House

India finds a new archetype, the corporate saas villain



MEGHNA PANT

EVERY generation of Indian women seems to inherit its own cultural villain. For our grandmothers, it was Lalita Pawar's cold glare. For the early 2000s, it was Ramola Sikand adjusting her *bindi* while psychologically terrorising daughters-in-law. And now, in 2026, thanks to social media, the kitchen villain is dead.

India has found a new archetype: the corporate *saas* villain. She is English-speaking. Educated. Accomplished. Financially independent. Legally savvy. She does not stir poison into *kheer*. Her power comes from respectability, social capital, and her ability to weaponise systems that were designed to protect families.

And no figure embodies this evolution more than Giribala Singh. If the *sari*-clad

saas was the villain of the television age, Giribala Singh represents the rise of the suit-clad *saas* — the modern matriarch whose violence is no longer loud, emotional, or obvious. It is strategic. Documented. Sanitised.

For decades, Indian popular culture portrayed the "evil *saas*" as a bitter, insecure woman guarding her domestic territory from a younger rival. She was controlling, manipulative, emotionally cruel, but ultimately confined to the private space of the home. Her weapons were guilt, taunts, emotional blackmail, and family politics. The damage she caused was intimate, invisible.

But the modern version is far more sophisticated. Today's powerful matriarch is often educated, articulate, and fully aware of how institutions work. She knows the language of legality, respectability, and public perception. She understands that power in the 21st century is not exercised through open confrontation. It is exercised through narrative.

And that changes the nature of control entirely. Because when legal knowledge, social status, and professional authority combine with patriarchal conditioning, oppression no longer looks loud or dramatic. It becomes procedural, strategic, sanitised.

That is what makes Giribala Singh so cul-

turally unsettling. She represents an evolution of a very old Indian archetype. That is why discussions surrounding her online are not merely outrage over allegations of cruelty. It is something deeper: Women recognise a familiar pattern: a type of power they have encountered in drawing rooms, family WhatsApp groups, wedding negotiations, and inheritance disputes.

The horror is not simply the possibility of wrongdoing. It is the perception that education and legal expertise are allegedly being used not to pursue truth but to shape narrative. To manage optics. To protect the son. To undermine the dead woman. To create enough doubt around her character that sympathy itself becomes negotiable.

The traditional mother-in-law stereotype was rooted in jealousy, insecurity, and domestic control. This newer version feels institutional. She is not merely controlling the kitchen anymore. She understands media language, strategic statements, antic-

ipatory bail, and the extraordinary power of appearing respectable while dismantling another woman's credibility piece by piece.

The victim-blaming. The character assassination. The sanctimony. The emotional manipulation wrapped in access, influence.

Women are increasingly realising that some of the harshest policing of female behaviour does not always come from men directly. Sometimes it comes from women who uphold patriarchal systems on men's behalf. That is what makes this moment culturally uncomfortable.

For years, Indian women have been told that education is liberation. And it is. But education alone does not guarantee empathy. Power without empathy simply creates more sophisticated forms of oppression. A woman with social capital, legal knowledge, and family influence can become extraordinarily effective at silencing another woman while still appearing reasonable, respectable, and even righteous to society.

Perhaps that is why the public conversation keeps returning to the same troubling pattern. Whenever a woman dies under suspicious or tragic circumstances, the spotlight quickly shifts away from the environment she inhabited and toward her own character:

Was she emotional? Unstable? Difficult? Was she modern? Ambitious? Dramatic?

Her personality becomes courtroom evidence. Her photographs become moral testimony. Her private life becomes public property. Meanwhile, the systems around her often escape the same level of scrutiny.

Indian television did not invent the evil *saas* trope out of thin air. It survived because it reflected something millions of women quietly experienced behind closed doors. What has changed is not the existence of that struggle. What has changed is its packaging.

The *sari* has been replaced by the power suit, the kitchen by institutions. The taunt has been replaced by the carefully crafted statement, the family whisper by narrative management. And perhaps that is why so many young women are watching these conversations with growing anxiety.

They are no longer asking only one question before marriage: '*Is he a good man?*' They are asking something much larger. *What kind of family am I marrying into? Will I be safe there, believed there? If something goes wrong, who will society protect? And perhaps most importantly: Who will control the story?*

That is not cynicism. That is survival.

— The writer is an acclaimed author



Naveen Mishra (in white shirt) with students of 'Haryana Super-100' scheme at Kurukshetra. This year, 226 appeared in JEE Advanced, and 100 qualified. PHOTO BY NITISH SHARMA

Haryana's Super performers

Under guidance of Bihar's Naveen Mishra, Super-100 scheme is helping govt school students crack JEE & NEET

NITISH SHARMA

THE Haryana Super-100 campus at Barna village in Kurukshetra is giving wings to the dreams of meritorious students belonging to the economically weaker sections and reserved categories, who may otherwise fall short of achieving their goals in the absence of quality coaching.

The 'Haryana Super-100' scheme, launched in 2018 as a collaborative effort between the Haryana Education Department and the Vikalp Foundation, offers free coaching, education, and residential facilities for Class XI and XII government school students in the state who wish to compete for the all-India JEE (engineering) and NEET (medical) entrance exams.

The Super-100 students are selected through a test. So far, over 300 students coached under this scheme have gained admission to IITs and other prestigious engineering institutes such as IIITs and NITs; as well as AIIMS and various other government medical colleges.

In the recent JEE Advanced results, of the 226 students who appeared, 100 qualified. Currently, there are 800 students at the Super-100 centre (in Class XI and XII).

THE JOURNEY

An alumnus of IIT-Delhi, Naveen Mishra (48), the president of Vikalp Foundation, is the driving force behind the programme.

"My father worked as a labourer at a factory. I did my schooling from a government school, then moved to Darbhanga, and later to Delhi for higher studies. I have experienced the struggles a student coming from a humble background faces in metropolitan cities. I worked in many companies but always found a conflict between my culture and the corporate lifestyle," says Mishra, who hails from Kaithahi village of Madhubani, Bihar.

He decided to join the civil services, but after reaching the UPSC interview stage twice, Mishra decided to dedicate himself to educational upliftment. He also joined Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement.

Mishra was also one of the founding members of the Aam Aadmi Party and worked for the party actively. But after internal conflicts in the party surfaced, he started Vikalp Foundation and began teaching children in parks at Rewari in 2013.

When these children did well in exams, more and more students started coming to him. Eventually, the Rewari district administration provided him space at Bal Bhawan. As the growing number of students demanded more of his time, he disassociated himself from AAP and started teaching full-time, free of cost. Till 2017, he was working with the Rewari administration.

"I proposed to the authorities to teach 100 students of government schools. Most of them have potential, but due to distractions, lack of guidance and the mindset of the students as well as parents, they lose track. The authorities agreed and I submitted a detailed proposal before the Education Department, outlining an annual cost of ₹1.35 crore. The department asked me to show at least ₹35 lakh in my account before I could go ahead with my proposal. I asked my friends and teachers and collected the amount. This is how, in 2018, the Super-100 was launched," recalls Mishra, who still teaches physics, chemistry and mathematics to the students.

He gives credit to former Chief Secretary Dharam Vir; IAS officer Rajnarayan Kaushik, who served as Director, Elementary Education; Rakesh Gupta, former Director, Secondary Education, and Pradeep Sansanwal for supporting the programme.

The primary objective of the programme, meant only for children studying in government schools, is to empower the meritorious students to achieve success in nation-



Aditya Kasnia from Sirsa: JEE Advanced rank 245 (EWS category)



Sakshi from Hisar: JEE Advanced rank 332 (EWS category)

level examinations by providing them with quality education, proper guidance, and a healthy academic environment.

But things didn't go as planned. "Some people were not happy with the initiative, which led to a series of false complaints and subsequently, in 2023, the centre was shifted to Kurukshetra," says Mishra.

EARLY STRUGGLE FOR CHILDREN

The students face many initial challenges, including the level of studies, limited contact with family as mobiles are not allowed at the centre, and restricted access to the outer world. A few fail to adjust and go back, but those who show dedication have been fulfilling their dreams. Besides classes and self-study, the children are engaged

in activities like music, drama, gardening, and other sports activities.

"The programme is giving confidence to the children of farmers, labourers, auto drivers, barbers, and many others to achieve their potential, compete with the privileged students and crack the JEE Advanced and NEET," says Mishra.

Garima, whose father runs a barber shop in Fatehabad, and Priya, whose father is an accountant in the Taraori grain market, are among the students preparing for JEE. They are confident that the Super-100 will change their lives, and are motivating their younger siblings to get ready for Super-100.

"We have studied in government schools, and hence find the level of education very high here. After the initial struggle, we are now settled and ready to crack JEE Advanced," says Garima. Similarly, for Hisar's Neha Lata, whose father works in a private firm after retiring from the Army, and Karnal's Mehak, whose father works as a labourer, Super-100 is not just a medium to crack the competitive examination, but also to support their family.

"I want to do something for my family. Being the eldest among three sisters and a brother, I have seen the struggle of my family and I want to support them," adds Mehak.

For Vinay, a Hisar bee farmer's son, who aims to clear the NEET, Super-100 is the only hope as the family is not in a position to pay the fee of a private coaching institute.

While a majority of students aim for higher packages after getting admission in IITs, two girls, who were students of the first batch of Super-100, came back after graduating to teach the underprivileged.

Rohtak's Anju (whose father drives a truck), an alumnus of IIT-Kharagpur, and Panchkula's Ritu (whose father drives an auto), an alumnus of IIT-Indore, have returned to Super-100 to teach chemistry and physics, respectively. They feel that without Super-100, they wouldn't have

made it to the IITs, and wanted to contribute and help other kids achieve their dreams.

THE CHALLENGES

Mishra says changing the mindset of parents and students is a major challenge. "People would rather attend weddings and social or religious events than focus on studying. The foundation of the children studying in government schools is very weak, especially in mathematics. Though the children come after passing Class X, many fail to do basic math equations. The first few weeks are spent improving their basics." Mishra believes that the children need more years to prepare for competitive exams. The students from private schools who compete in competitive exams start preparing from classes 6 or 7, but here the students start from Class XI.

"Recognising the success of the scheme, the state government has increased the seats from 400 to 500. If the Education Department starts taking the project more seriously and the Chief Minister's office starts monitoring it more closely, I am confident that the children who come from humble backgrounds and rural parts of Haryana can do wonders," Mishra says.

"I come from Bihar, but I've been working at the ground level for the children of Haryana, as my aim is to bring a revolution in education across the nation through Super-100," says Mishra.

Rajan Gundal, a resident of Panipat and an alumnus of IIT-Delhi and IIM-Lucknow, has also been playing a key role in the smooth functioning of Vikalp Foundation. "While working in MNCs and the banking sector, I always wanted to do something in the education sector. We should let kids do whatever they want to, but there must be complete dedication and hard work. After seeing these children doing well through Super-100, I feel satisfied now," he says.

Master a few key settings and turn ordinary snaps into scroll-stopping visual stories

Your smartphone camera is smarter than you think



GAGANDEEP ARORA

YOUR friend strikes a perfect pose or you point your smartphone at a gorgeous sunset, tap the shutter, but somehow the photo looks nothing like what your eyes saw. Meanwhile, someone on Instagram seems to be posting cinematic masterpieces captured with the same phone. The truth? Great mobile photography isn't just about having the latest phone. Whether you're using a Samsung Galaxy S26 Ultra, iPhone 17 Pro, Google Pixel 10 Pro, Xiaomi 15 Ultra or Vivo X300 Pro, a lot depends on how you use the camera settings hidden inside your phone.

Before your next vacation, cafe visit or random candid moments, here's a guide to the settings that can level up your photography game.

AI SCENE OPTIMISATION

Artificial intelligence has become the biggest photographer in your phone. Most flagship devices can recognise shots of food, pets, sunsets, portraits, etc, within seconds. The camera automatically tweaks colours, contrast, sharpness and exposure to make the image pop. For most users, keeping AI scene optimisation enabled is a no-brainer. But if your photos

start looking a little too extra, with colours cranked up to influencer levels, dial it back for a more natural vibe.

ASPECT RATIO: FRAME IT RIGHT

Most phones default to 4:3, which is great for general photography and captures the most image data. But if you want those insta-worthy shots, switch to 16:9. For Instagram stories or reels, go with 9:16 and save yourself awkward cropping later. And if you're planning to print photos or crop them heavily, stick to the camera's native full-resolution format.

ISO: BEAT THE NOISE

ISO controls how sensitive your camera is to light. Low ISO means cleaner, sharper images. High ISO brightens dark scenes but also introduces grain and noise. On Android flagships, you can manually adjust ISO in pro mode. iPhones mostly handle it automatically, though third-party apps offer manual control.

Either way, the rule stays the same. Keep ISO as low as possible.

PORTRAIT MODE: BEYOND SELFIES

Portrait mode creates professional-looking blurred background, often called bokeh. Most people use it only for selfies, but portrait mode works brilliantly for food photography, flowers, pets and even coffee cups for that premium Instagram aesthetic. Modern phones use depth sensors and



Great mobile photography isn't just about having the latest or high-end phones. A lot depends on how you use the camera settings. In the end, practice is the best 'tool'. ISTOCK

AI edge detection to separate subjects from the background. Just don't get too close. That's when the blur starts looking more AI-generated than artistic.

NIGHT MODE: LET THE DARKNESS COOK

In recent smartphones, night mode allows the camera to gather more light over several seconds, producing brighter and cleaner images. It's perfect for city lights, festivals, monuments and evening street photography. The biggest mistake people make? Moving the phone. Hold it steady, lean against a wall or use a tripod. The results can be surprisingly cinematic.

RESOLUTION: MEGAPIXELS NOT EVERYTHING

Many flagship phones today offer up to 200MP shooting modes. Sounds impressive, but more megapixels don't automatically mean better photos. For everyday social media posts, the standard camera mode is usually enough. Switch to full-resolution mode when shooting landscapes, travel scenes or anything you might crop later.

GRID LINES: WEAPON OF COMPOSITION

This might be the most underrated camera setting ever. Turning on grid lines divides your screen into sections, helping

you frame images using the well-known 'rule of thirds'. Place people slightly off-centre. Align horizons with the grid. Frame buildings more symmetrically. It's a tiny tweak, but it instantly makes photos look more polished.

EXPOSURE: CONTROL THE GLOW

Ever taken a photo that looked too bright or too dark? Before pressing the shutter, adjust the exposure slider. Most phones let you swipe up or down after tapping on the subject. Lower exposure for sunsets and neon-lit streets. Increase it slightly for portraits taken in the shade. A 2-second adjustment can turn an average snap into a genuine scroll-stopper.

HISTOGRAM: THE NERD TOOL

Available in the Pro modes of many Android flagships, the histogram is simply a graph showing how bright or dark your image is. If the graph is bunched up on one side, chances are your photo is either overexposed or underexposed. It is quite easy to use. A small tool, but a surprisingly useful one.

PRACTICE THAT SHOT

The best camera setting isn't AI optimisation, night mode or RAW. It's practice. Professional-looking smartphone photography rarely comes with luck. It comes from understanding when to use the right settings and experimenting with different scenes. So the next time your food arrives looking suspiciously photogenic or the sky starts serving sunset magic, don't just point and shoot. Dive into those camera settings.

Your phone is probably capable of far more than you think, and yes, your future Instagram page will thank you.

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



Opinion

The New York Times

Putin Has No Good Way Out of Ukraine

Michael Kimmage

The director of the Kennan Institute and the author, most recently, of "Collisions: The Origins of the War in Ukraine and the New Global Instability."

NO EXIT," Jean-Paul Sartre's one-act existential play on the hell of non-endings, was first performed in Paris in May 1944. World War II was about to enter its fifth year. In the play, three people, recently deceased and apparently locked in a drawing room of hell, face the bad choices of their lives, from which, in death, there is no escape.

If the Russian authorities allowed Sartre's play to be put on in Moscow in 2026, one wonders what President Vladimir Putin and ordinary Russians, more than four years into Mr. Putin's "special military operation" in Ukraine, would make of it.

Since the full invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Putinism — the hyperpersonalist system of rule that Mr. Putin has imposed on Russia for around a quarter century — has arrived at what might seem an eerie equilibrium, but on a closer reading is a trap for all involved. Mr. Putin has subordinated his state and his society to a war that is slowly sapping Russia's strength, depleting the nation's wealth and consuming the lives of its young people.

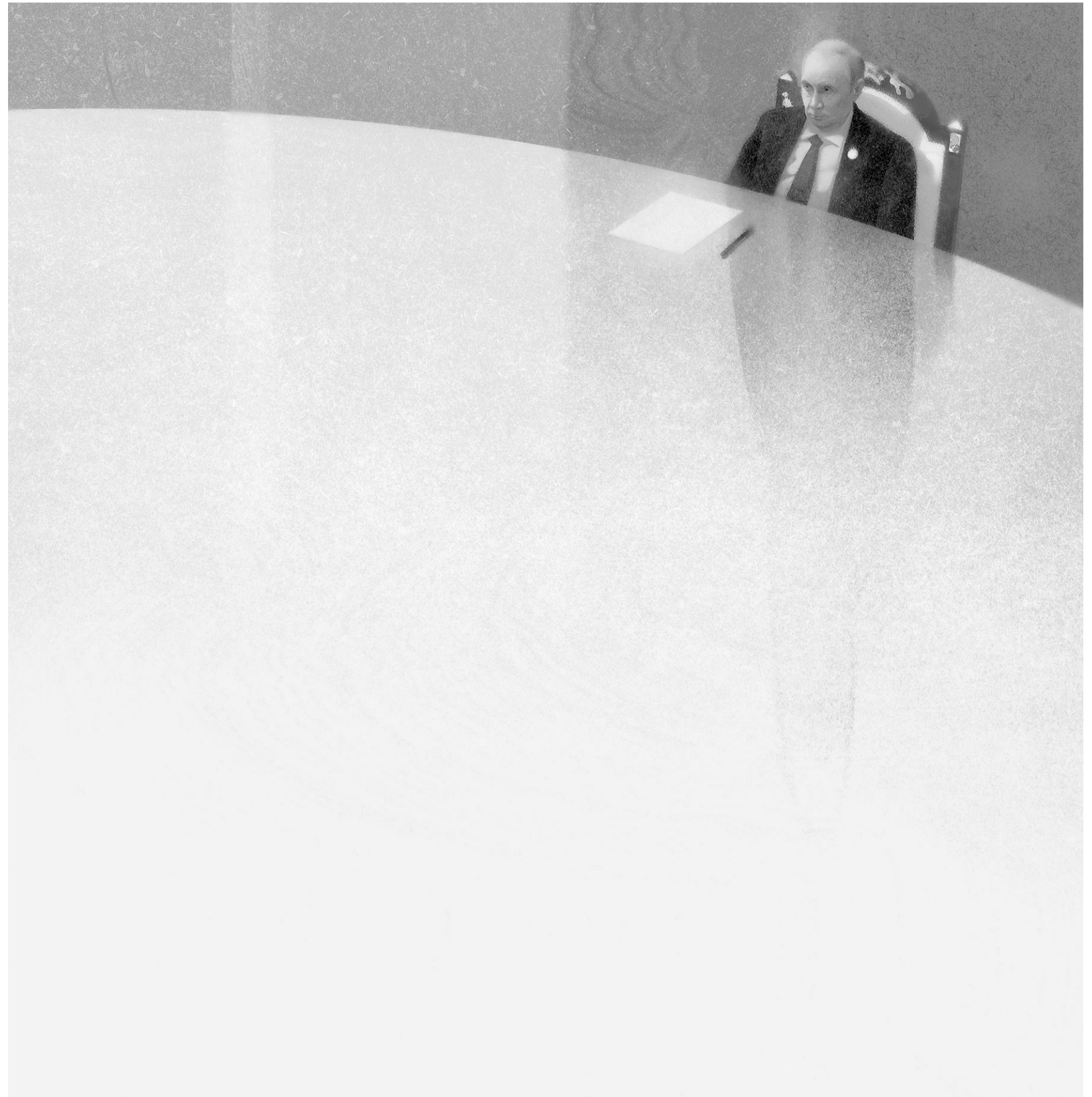
On the surface, calm prevails. Mr. Putin has found a way to fund his expensive war, staving off economic collapse and continuing to generate considerable numbers of military recruits, mostly through large cash bonuses. Russia, far from being isolated, interacts diplomatically and commercially with much of the world. Despite some recent signs of domestic discontent — as ordinary citizens have increasingly found themselves poorer, less insulated from the war and increasingly blocked on the internet — Mr. Putin can be confident that he remains in complete control.

But perpetuating a war is not the same as winning one. As his army ekes out gains on the front line, Mr. Putin has few escalatory tools left to change the dynamic. Involuntary mobilization would give Russia an advantage, but it would be acutely unpopular among Russians. Nuclear weapons, of any kind, would be a terrible option. Employing them would not guarantee victory, and would risk provoking a harsh military response from the United States and Europe or a rupture in Russia's relationship with China, its most important ally.

Nor can Mr. Putin simply withdraw from Ukraine. Were Russia to accept a settlement along the current line of contact, Mr. Putin would have little to show for his efforts other than a narrow strip of territory in southern Ukraine. Apart from the injury to his vanity, as a consummate political survivor he understands that if he were to present such a small prize to Russians who have lost family members, it would be an admission of the war's fundamental senselessness. The poor quality of his strategic thinking and his hubris could then become a pressing political factor within Russia.

Mr. Putin has maneuvered himself into a trap. But, beyond himself, he has burdened the whole project of Putinism, should it outlast his tenure, with some version of this war in perpetuity. Any future leader in Mr. Putin's mold would not be able to watch passively as a heavily armed and battle-hardened Ukraine integrates into Western security structures and a militarizing Europe.

IF MR. PUTIN does not have a way out of his war, ordinary Russians do not yet have a way out of Putinism. The recent public dissent in Russia has been misinterpreted. The discontent is absolutely real, but its essence is a frustration with the fact that Putinism,



KAROLIS STRAUTNIEKAS

Perpetuating a war is not the same as winning one.

despite its failures, seems interminable.

Today, the president faces no antiwar movement and no opposition party. He can repress Russian citizens at will. Even to go about their daily business is to enable and at times to administer the system that prosecutes the war and fosters repression. Most Russians work for the state in one way or another — the private sector being subordinate to the government — and yet have no say in how the state is run.

Finding a collective exit from this system is psychologically and politically impossible for the time being. There are no individuals or institutions that can unseat the president; there is no visible path toward terminating his rule or replacing it with something better. In these circumstances, we might see flickers of verbal opposition — like in response to the throttling of the inter-

net — but with nowhere to go, they are easily extinguished.

Theorists of 18th- and 19th-century revolutions emphasized the importance of rising expectations as a catalyst. When people sense that a better future is possible, they act to expedite the process — as in the Eastern European revolutions of 1989, which followed Gorbachev's promises of glasnost and perestroika.

Mr. Putin has been assiduous about ensuring Russians' low expectations. The promise of a modern Russia, prosperous and open to the world, has faded into complacency and numb acceptance of dictatorship and forever wars. This uncomfortable equilibrium cannot last forever. The early promise of Mr. Putin and Putinism, after what he saw as the catastrophe of the collapse of the Soviet Union, was a comfortable

predictability, an improved standard of living and efficient governance, if not freedom as such. But Russia's president, who has become a superlative authoritarian over time, has shown himself to be a mediocre head of state, a poor caretaker of the Russian economy and the agent of a regional disorder that is boomeranging back into Russia. With each Ukrainian strike on Russian territory, the war is eroding the well-being of Russian citizens.

The path to competent Russian leadership now appears to require an unraveling of Putinism, and the less legitimate and effective the current system becomes, the fiercer the post-Putin battle for position will be. When it comes, his exit could well shatter the stability he sought to impose when he became Russia's president more than 20 years ago.

The Boycott That Separated Me From My Neighbors

Rachel Timoner

The senior rabbi of Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn.

LAST week members of a hyperlocal community institution voted to boycott Israeli products.

"Big deal," I hear you saying. But it is, because the vote by members of the Park Slope Food Co-op in Brooklyn is a microcosm of what's happening all across our country.

We are fighting among ourselves based on interpretations of one another's words and actions that are often wrong. We are dividing our communities into two camps — pro-Israel versus pro-Palestine — when, I believe, the only hope for the over 14 million people who live in Israel and the occupied territories is a vision that is both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli.

Most people who support boycotts of Israel, like a majority of the members of my local food co-op who voted in favor of the boycott, don't mean to strengthen the Israeli government or the Israeli right. They don't intend to weaken the Israeli left or to boycott the very people who are trying to bring justice and peace to the region. Many may simply feel powerless in the face of profound injustice and want to register their protest.

I understand that. And, even so, I chose to resign my membership in the co-op after 11 years.

Here are some of the conditions, as I see them, that produced this vote. First of all,

there are the indefensible actions of the current Israeli government and the extreme suffering of the Palestinian people in both Gaza and the West Bank. Second, while it is not necessarily an antisemitic act to vote for the boycott, there is pervasive antisemitism running through the conversation about Israel that casts the nation as uniquely evil and that operates, like racism, Islamophobia and other forms of bias, often unconsciously. Third, there is the idea that the only way to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to end the existence of Israel as a Jewish state, instead of changing it.

While the group Park Slope Food Co-op Members for Palestine, which organized the boycott, is not formally affiliated with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, it described the vote as "echoing the demands of the nonviolent, Palestinian-led" B.D.S. movement. The measure says the co-op's boycott will end when "Israel complies with international law, including by ceasing unlawful discriminatory practices."

But a founder of the global B.D.S. movement, Omar Barghouti, has indicated that its longstanding campaign to boycott, divest and sanction will not end when there is a Palestinian state. This seems to mean, presumably, that even when there is a State of Palestine, the boycott will continue until every Palestinian who wants to move into Israel can do so, until there is no longer a majority Jewish state anywhere in the world.

B.D.S. differs from other boycott movements that have aimed to change countries rather than effectively eliminate them: In

its 25 years of existence, B.D.S. has done almost nothing to advance a Palestinian state. It has done little to weaken this Israeli government. Instead, B.D.S. strengthens the Israeli right, which clings to power with the claim that the world hates Jews and points to the singling out of Israel for boycotting as evidence.

B.D.S. weakens and undermines the fragile Israeli left, made up of people working for equality and justice for all in Israel and Palestine. And in addition to being ineffective and, in my opinion, counterproductive, the global B.D.S. movement divides local communities like ours in Park Slope.

Many Jews know about the global movement and experience boycott votes like the co-op's as endorsements of what I and many other Jews see as the campaign's eliminationist agenda. They misinterpret the motivations of those who voted for the co-op boycott, thinking that all of them are seeking to end the existence of the one place on earth that's supposed to be a safe haven for Jews, at a time when antisemitic violence is rising everywhere.

In the case of the Park Slope Food Co-op, a member was able to use the rules to block all discussion of the boycott proposal, so that no argument could be made during last week's meeting — not one word could be spoken — against the boycott before the vote.

So what can we do?

The single best thing we can do is break the binary. Stop seeing this conflict as Israeli versus Palestinian, and see it instead as

Supporting Palestinians and Israelis is the only way forward.

those who care about only one side versus those who care about both Palestinians and Israelis.

As a rabbi, I use my platform to speak out regularly against the occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people, against this Israeli government and the Israeli settler movement, and for safety, democracy and freedom for both Israelis and Palestinians. I speak out for the protection of innocent civilians in Israel, Iran, Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank.

Standing for all might sound weak or conciliatory. But, to the contrary, supporting Palestinians and Israelis is the only way forward.

Our congregation actively supports organizations in Israel and Palestine, such as Standing Together, whose membership of Israeli Jews and Palestinians is working for a shared and equal future, and activists like Aziz Abu Sarah and Maoz Inon, who are Palestinian and Israeli peacemakers.

You don't have to be a rabbi to do this. We can change the way we see this conflict and the people who live there, all of whom deserve safety, freedom and peace.

Upon reflection, I'm not sure that I did the right thing by leaving the Park Slope Food Co-op. The vote hurt, a lot. It hurts too much to be a member right now. But I don't think it's a good long-term strategy to walk away.

We're more likely to overcome our divisions if we turn toward each other. There are very brave people in Israel and in Palestine who do that every day.

If they can do it, we can, too.

Going to Europe This Summer? Good Luck.

**R. Michael Baiada
and Robert W. Mann Jr.**

Mr. Baiada is a former United Airlines pilot.
Mr. Mann is a former airline executive officer.

WHERE are you going on vacation this summer? A durable peace agreement in the Middle East might emerge soon, but flight schedules could remain disrupted through next winter. You probably won't be flying to Dubai or elsewhere in the United Arab Emirates anytime soon; the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran has made these previously popular destinations no-go areas. Maybe not to Canada, either. Citing higher fuel costs, Air Canada has cut flights between Kennedy International Airport in New York and Toronto, as well as Montreal. OK, there might be some hard feelings, too, as Canadian tourists, angered about President Trump's treatment of their nation, are avoiding the United States.

Even domestically, your flight choices are a bit more limited, because major airlines have reduced the number of available seats, according to Cirium, an aviation analytics company: United has slashed seats by 4.8 percent. The demise of the low-fare Spirit Airlines — a direct consequence of higher fuel costs — took an additional 2 to 3 percent of available seats with it.

Whatever flight you book, fares are going to be more expensive because airlines must recoup the higher fuel costs they've absorbed since the start of the war. Travelers may choose not to fly at all, leading the airlines to cut even more flights. Based on cur-

rent conditions, U.S. airlines will probably pay some \$25 billion more for jet fuel in 2026 than they expected to. That's more than what the industry earned in 2024 and 2025 combined.

It could be a bummer of a summer. And fall. And winter. Even if the oil starts flowing from the Middle East this month, jet fuel supply constraints and price increases will most likely extend into 2027.

What makes the situation worse is that airlines waste fuel every day, and they've been doing it for decades. They schedule flights in a way that adds time to flights and

Better airline service should be one goal that our divided Congress can share.

complexity to the air traffic control system. The Federal Aviation Administration has its own problems, thanks to a shortage of air traffic controllers and outdated technology. Well before the war with Iran started, Newark and LaGuardia airports had to reduce their summer schedules because they didn't have enough controllers; more recently the F.A.A. ordered carriers to eliminate more than 300 daily flights at O'Hare Airport in Chicago as a safety measure. Summer is also hurricane season, when storms regularly snarl the system.

Carriers in Europe are facing a different problem: fuel shortages on the order of about 500,000 barrels daily. Europe relies on

the Persian Gulf for roughly half of its jet fuel imports. Europe's remaining inventories, two to three weeks' worth, are well short of the norm for its summer flying needs. European carriers are reducing their flights by 5 percent to compensate. A number of low-fare, long-haul carriers such as Norse Atlantic have canceled some trans-Atlantic routes outright. Some Asia-Pacific carriers are making cuts, too.

U.S. airlines might be able to offset some of their higher fuel costs if they were more efficient, but airlines continue to schedule and fly more hours and use more fuel than necessary, every flight, every day. They continue to schedule flights using block time, which adds extra minutes to every flight, so that the carriers can claim to be more punctual than they really are. Using block time also means that air traffic control isn't adequately prepared for what's coming into airports at any given minute, leading to delays. Result? Even before the war, about one in every five flights arrived more than 15 minutes late.

The chaos of summer travel may at least provide cover for Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy to address the inadequacies of the entire airline system. Better airline service for voters should be one goal that our divided Congress can share. Making our airlines more punctual not only could save fuel and operating costs but also would deliver a better passenger experience.

We didn't need a foreign war — and more expensive fuel and fares — to demonstrate that our passenger airline operations are inefficient and unpleasant. But we can turn one part of this crisis into an opportunity to improve.

LETTERS

A Divide Over U.S. Support for Israel

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "The Hard Truth My Party Needs to Face," by Senator Chris Van Hollen (Opinion guest essay, May 30):

The senator's argument that Democrats should reconsider their longstanding support for Israel does not acknowledge the security and political realities on the ground today.

Mr. Van Hollen places the blame for the failure of a two-state solution on Israel, while minimizing the actions of Palestinian leaders, who have repeatedly undermined peace efforts. He calls on the United States to use its leverage to pressure Israel to enact a two-state solution. But for decades, Palestinian leaders have repeatedly rejected partition plans and statehood offers, and Hamas continues to reject Israel's right to exist while embracing terrorism.

The United States should absolutely use its leverage to advance peace. But that leverage should not be focused solely on Israel. President Trump should also use his diplomatic tools to pressure Hamas's backers, regional actors and Palestinian leaders to reject terrorism, support Hamas's disarmament and accept Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state.

BRIAN ROMICK, WASHINGTON

The writer is the chief executive of Democratic Majority for Israel.

TO THE EDITOR:

Senator Chris Van Hollen's core premise is summarized in two sentences: "For decades, we have called for a two-state solution, but we've failed to use our leverage to make it real. It's past time that we use that leverage to end the occupation and achieve two states with full political and legal rights for all."

What most Americans do not realize is that many of us in Israel are begging for the required tough love (leverage, if you like) that only the United States can exercise to achieve these ends. Without it, we will remain in an endless cycle of death and destruction.

One caveat: Maximum American leverage will not be sufficient as long as the present extremist government of Benjamin Netanyahu remains in power. It is driven by ideology, not rationality. Israeli elections, less than half a year away, could change that.

However, even a new Israeli government would need to be pressured by the United States to pursue a two-state solution.

JIM BELLIS
KFAR VRADIM, ISRAEL

TO THE EDITOR:

Senator Chris Van Hollen decries reflexive and unconditional support for Israel and outlines demands to be made of, and punitive measures to be deployed against, the Jewish state to force a two-state solution.

Notably absent are any corresponding conditions or threats addressed to the Pales-

tinian side. Support for a Palestinian state, without insisting on the renunciation of terrorism and antisemitism, will be no more successful and is no more consistent with American values.

DANIEL WOLF, TEANECK, N.J.

TO THE EDITOR:

Senator Chris Van Hollen has done what too few in Washington are willing to do: tell his own party the truth, plainly and without hedging.

For years, Democratic leaders took half measures — strongly worded letters, expressions of concern or the occasional threat to delay weapons shipments — that fell short of the sustained pressure needed to change the behavior of the Israeli government.

Mr. Van Hollen names the occupation for what it is. He acknowledges American complicity. He calls for concrete consequences and draws an important red line against displacement. These are not radical positions; rather, they reflect the values Democrats have long claimed to hold. And they are the policy positions that large numbers of American Jews are ready to embrace.

Mr. Van Hollen has shown what moral courage and strategic clarity look like. His colleagues would do well to follow his lead.

HADAR SUSSKIND, WASHINGTON

The writer is the president and chief executive of New Jewish Narrative.

Options for Mothers

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "If a Couple Splits, Who Controls the Embryos?" (front page, May 29):

I commend Erin Millender for doing everything she could to become pregnant through in vitro fertilization. It seems unethical that a partner can revoke consent after embryos have been created.

Like Ms. Millender, I went through I.V.F. at New York University. I created and froze embryos in my 30s and had the most positive experience imaginable, resulting in the birth of my daughter when I was 46.

A single woman then and now, I did not choose marriage to bring my daughter to life; I relied on a sperm donor whose identity I did not know, to whom I am grateful. Women do not need to place their hopes in an unknown future with a nonexistent or unreliable partner or wait for an arbitrary deadline to become a mother. If I had known one of my embryos would become my daughter — the curious, playful, affectionate, big-eyed wonder and joy of my life — I would not have waited a day.

To all the women out there yearning for a child: You have options, and you can do it.

CATHERINE ELIZABETH
DELAZZERO
NEW YORK



CARL GODFREY

It Shouldn't Be This Easy to Get High

German Lopez

A writer for the New York Times editorial board.

IT HAS never been easier to be intoxicated all day, every day in the United States.

Consider a few trends:

- In 1950 the typical American would have had to spend 75 percent of his or her daily pay (after taxes) to buy a bottle of vodka. Today that number is less than 5 percent. Atrophying alcohol taxes and growing incomes have effectively brought the cost down to one-fifteenth of what it once was.
- The legalization of marijuana made it much easier for anyone to buy the drug. It also has made the drug cheaper. In Oregon the average price of marijuana per gram is down more than 60 percent since legalization.
- Powerful synthetic drugs, such as fentanyl and meth, have taken over illegal drug markets. These drugs went from cheap to cheaper, with the price of fentanyl dropping by 50 percent over five years. They can also be much more potent than nonsynthetic drugs, meaning users have to buy less to obtain the same high.
- Other costs are lower, too. Drug use no longer carries the threat of incarceration that it once did. In some progressive cities, people often use drugs in public and face zero legal consequences. Some drug use has also become more culturally acceptable, including marijuana consumption and the microdosing of psychedelics.

Americans may be struggling to afford food, gas and a visit to the doctor, but drugs and alcohol are more affordable than ever.

The upshot is a society that can easily get drunk and high. That's a less healthy society: About 48 million Americans are addicted to some kind of drug, a statistic that includes alcohol. Roughly 70,000 a year die from overdoses. Despite a welcome dip in drinking, about 178,000 die each year from excessive alcohol consumption.

It's a less safe society, too, as intoxication and illegal drug markets so often fester into crime. And it's a less rational one; most people don't make their best decisions when stoned or drunk. It's even a less free society. Addicts often describe dependence on a drug as its own kind of prison.

For legal substances, there is a straightforward way to curb these trends. It doesn't require a return to Prohibition or to earlier forms of the war on drugs, both of which failed. Lawmakers can simply raise prices by increasing taxes. Alabama, Maryland and Utah have enacted such measures in recent years, showing it's politically possible.

Such taxes work. Raising the price of alcohol by 10 percent would reduce drinking by 5 percent and the death rate from alcohol-caused diseases by 9 to 25 percent, studies have found. Taxes on marijuana products are also associated with reduced demand.

One argument, often made by the alcohol industry, is that such taxes are regressive, and it's true that higher prices hit the poor harder. But with higher taxes, those communities would also reap the benefits of less drunken driving, violence and disorderly behavior.

Taxes would also cost problematic users more than casual consumers. If one drink of rum costs 10 cents more, you won't feel that as someone who has a couple of drinks with friends once or twice a week. If you drink heavily every day, the extra cost will



quickly add up — and maybe lead you to rethink your habit.

What about illegal drugs? Their users are also responsive to cost. A 10 percent increase in the price of illegal drugs leads to a 9 percent decrease in demand, a review from the Australian Institute of Criminology found.

One of the most promising treatments for meth and cocaine addiction is contingency management, which gives users cash or

other financial rewards to stop using drugs; it imposes a monetary cost on drug use, leading even addicts to cut back. Other kinds of costs can work as well: The threat of short but consistent jail sentences has been effective in curbing substance use among illegal drug users and those arrested or convicted of alcohol-related crimes.

Of course, lawmakers can't simply raise taxes on illegal drugs. For these substances, they will have to impose less direct costs. The country is right to move away from long prison sentences for drug use, but that doesn't mean it has to eliminate the social costs associated with illegal substances.

In Portugal, officials have used the threat of civil penalties — fines, community service, the revocation of professional licenses — to push people into addiction treatment. American drug courts follow a similar model with the threat of jail or prison, but they are notoriously underfunded and often steer people into the wrong kinds of treatment. Those are fixable problems.

The key point is that imposing at least some cost can help lead people away from using drugs. Policymakers should also reduce the cost of quitting drugs by making effective addiction treatment more affordable and available. The goal should be to make it easier and less costly to get help than to get high.

Friction matters. When you make something costlier or more difficult to obtain, people seek less of it. As much of the country dials back policies, like mass incarceration, that we've decided are too punitive, we should look for other ways to attach friction to substances that in abundance can hijack our minds and lead us to overuse, addiction or worse.

No one wants to be a buzzkill, but a nation awash with cheap drugs is a nation with more drug problems. It's time for an intervention.

Americans may be struggling to afford gas, but drugs are cheaper than ever.

Marjane Satrapi Is Dead at 56; Created the Series ‘Persepolis’

By AMELIA NIERENBERG and SÉGOLÈNE LE STRADIC

PARIS — Marjane Satrapi, the Iranian-French author whose graphic novel series “Persepolis” introduced millions of readers to the struggles of ordinary Iranians during the turbulent years around the Islamic Revolution, has died at 56.

The office of President Emmanuel Macron of France announced her death in a statement on Thursday, but did not specify where, when or how she died.

“Her passing marks the loss of a leading figure in French culture and a freedom-loving artist whose work carried a universal message and earned her immense international acclaim,” the statement said.

With the publication of “Persepolis” in the early 2000s, Ms. Satrapi became one of the best-known exponents of a form of graphic novel — influenced by Art Spiegelman’s “Maus” — that combined political history and memoir.

The protagonist, Marji, was depicted living through some of the most difficult years of Iranian history, closely mirroring Ms. Satrapi’s own life.

Both author and character were born in Iran in 1969. Both were about 10 when the Shah was overthrown. Both lived through the rise of the clerics and the horror of the Iran-Iraq War, and both left the country at 14 to study in Austria.

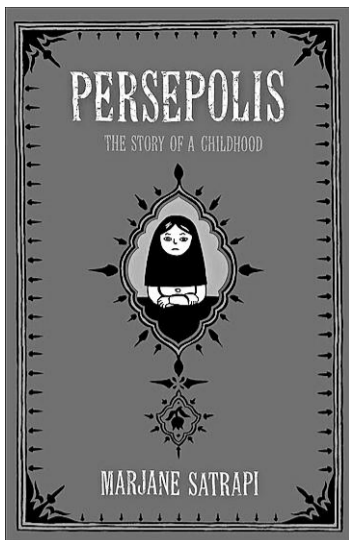
In 1994, Ms. Satrapi moved to Paris, where she wrote the “Persepolis” series. The books were published in France from 2000 to 2003; the first volume of an English translation was published in 2003, and the second volume was released a year later.

Millions of readers bought the books, which became a popular school assignment and among the widest-read works to explore the interior lives of modern Iranians. The series was adapted into a 2007 film that was nominated for an Academy Award for best animated feature.

“Persepolis,” the author Fernanda Eberstadt wrote in a New York Times review of the book, “dances with drama and insouciant wit,” its inky black-and-white drawings modeled on contemporary comics and Persian miniatures.

Not quite two decades later, Ms. Satrapi set to work documenting another tumultuous moment in Iranian history: the unrest in 2022 that followed the death, in police custody, of a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini, who had been detained and accused of violating a law requiring women to wear the hijab in public.

In protest, women across Iran tore off their veils, in one of the most significant cultural and political



TURTLEBACK BOOKS

The first volume of an English translation of “Persepolis” was published in 2003.



SEVEN STORIES PRESS

Unrest after the police-custody death of a Kurdish woman inspired her 2024 book.

ant wit,” its inky black-and-white drawings modeled on contemporary comics and Persian miniatures.

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In protest, women across Iran tore off their veils, in one of the most significant cultural and political

ical moments in the country since the 1979 revolution.

Ms. Satrapi’s work on the subject culminated in 2024 with the release of “Woman, Life, Freedom,” another work of graphic nonfiction. She contributed some drawings, but told The Times that she was more of a “director” of the project, which also featured work by other artists, activists, academics and journalists.

“Even basic human rights, they deny us,” she said of the Iranian government after the book was released. “You don’t have the right to dance, you don’t have the right to sing, you don’t have the right to do this, you don’t have the right to do that.”

Marjane Satrapi was born on Nov. 22, 1969, in Rasht, near the Caspian Sea, and grew up in Tehran. She had aristocratic ancestors, and her parents were cosmopolitan leftists; her father was an engineer and her mother designed dresses.

They opposed the Shah and protested against his government, but were disillusioned by the political and cultural crackdown that followed the revolution and the end of his rule. Marjane’s uncle was accused of being a Soviet spy, jailed and executed.

Marjane bridled against the new restrictions on dress and behavior. When she was 14, she hit a school principal who had tried to confiscate her jewelry, and her parents, worried for her safety, sent her to live with an Iranian family in Austria. There, she was overwhelmed by the experience of a very different world.

“At her nadir,” Simon Hattenstone wrote in The Guardian in 2008, “she was peddling drugs, homeless, and she almost died from bronchitis. After four years in Vienna, she admitted defeat, put on her veil and returned home.”

Back in Iran in 1989, she studied art in Tehran and had an early marriage that ended in divorce, then returned to Europe.

“Probably I left Iran because I was not brave enough,” she told The Seattle Post-Intelligencer in 2003. “I just needed to have more social freedom to be able to do my work.”

She got a second art degree in Strasbourg, France, before moving to Paris.



JOEL SAGET/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Marjane Satrapi in 2022. She was one of the best-known exponents of a form of graphic novel combining political history and memoir. Millions bought “Persepolis,” which was made into a 2007 film.

“I like living there because I can smoke everywhere, but it is going to change,” she said in 2007, around the time that smoking was banned in many public spaces in France. (Two years before, she had published an illustrated ode to smoking in The Times.)

Maybe, she mused, she would move to Greece, which had yet to introduce such stringent smoking restrictions.

Her husband, Mattias Ripa, who helped translate “Persepolis” into English, died last year. Information about her survivors was not immediately available.

Ms. Satrapi wrote several children’s books and other graphic novels, including “Chicken With Plums,” the story of the death of her great-uncle, which was also turned into a film. Another of her works, “Embroideries,” depicted

An Iranian girl living through some of the most difficult years of Iranian history.

Iranian women discussing love, sex and men over afternoon tea.

She directed several feature films, including “The Voices” (2014), with Ryan Reynolds, and “Radioactive” (2019), starring Rosamund Pike as Marie Curie.

She also won acclaim as a painter and was elected in 2024 to the Académie des Beaux-Arts, one of the highest honors in the French art world.

Though she created some of the best-known works in the graphic novel genre, Ms. Satrapi told The

Times in 2007 that she never liked the category’s name.

“I think they made up this term for the bourgeoisie not to be scared of comics,” she said. “Like, ‘Oh, this is the kind of comics you can read.’”

She wrote frequently about her perpetual sense of dislocation — living away from her home country, but thinking constantly of it.

“I call Iran home because no matter how long I live in France, and despite the fact that I feel also French after all these years, to me the word ‘home’ has only one meaning: Iran,” Ms. Satrapi wrote in a 2009 essay for The Times.

“No matter how much I am in love with Paris and its indescribable beauty,” she added, “Tehran with all its ugliness will in my eyes forever be the ‘bride’ of all cities around the world.”

Marcia Lucas, 80, Editor and Collaborator of Husband on ‘Star Wars’ Films

By ALEX TRAUB

Marcia Lucas, a film editor and important collaborator on the early movies of Martin Scorsese and George Lucas, her second husband, who won an Academy Award for her work on “Star Wars,” died on May 27 at her home in Rancho Mirage, Calif. She was 80.

The cause was cancer, Deidre Von Rock, the lawyer for her estate, said.

In the late 1960s, while working with the editor Verna Fields, Marcia Griffin, as she was known then, was assigned to train a newly hired film school graduate named George Lucas.

They fell in love and, in 1969, married. Ms. Lucas edited and influenced her husband’s early blockbusters, including “American Graffiti” (1973) and the first “Star Wars” movie (1977), for which she, Paul Hirsch and Richard Chew won the Oscar for best editing.

Ms. Lucas was the one who suggested to Mr. Lucas that, contrary to early drafts, Obi-Wan Kenobi should die in his dramatic lightsaber fight with Darth Vader.

She helped lend clarity and pacing to a climactic battle, and insisted on the inclusion of a kiss between Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia. The character of Chewbacca — the giant, hairy co-pilot of the Millennium Falcon alongside Han Solo — was inspired by Ms. Lucas’s habit of driving with the couple’s Alaskan malamute, Indiana, in the passenger seat.

Ms. Lucas was “the warmth and the heart” of Mr. Lucas’s first big movies, Mark Hamill, who played Luke Skywalker, said in a 2005 interview with Film Freak Central.

Yet after helping to edit the third “Star Wars” movie, “Return of the Jedi” (1983), she divorced Mr. Lucas and left the industry.

Marcia Lou Griffin was born on Oct. 4, 1945, in Modesto, Calif. Her father, Thomas, an Air Force officer, left the family when she was 2; her mother, Mae (Ebeling) Griffin, was a clerk at an insurance agency.

Marcia grew up mainly in North Hollywood, in the San Fernando Valley, and began working in the movies by chance, when an employment office directed her to a film library. She found that she liked the work so much that she



JULIAN WASSER

Marcia and George Lucas during the editing of the first “Star Wars” movie, released in 1977.



LUCASFILM, VIA MARY EVANS/RONALD GRANT — EVERETT COLLECTION

Mark Hamill, who played Luke Skywalker, said Ms. Lucas was “the warmth and the heart” of Mr. Lucas’s first big movies. Right, Ms. Lucas in 1978 with the Oscar she won for editing “Star Wars.”



ASSOCIATED PRESS

dience if he wanted to, Mr. Lucas shopped around a new screenplay. Studios weren’t interested, but offered him lucrative contracts to direct other people’s work. The couple were living mostly on what Ms. Lucas was earning as an editor, but she pressed him to hold out and wait until he got financing for his own film.

He finally wrangled a modest budget of \$750,000 to make that movie, “American Graffiti,” with Ms. Lucas as an editor alongside Ms. Fields, their old boss.

It earned a stunning \$177 million — making it, in the estimation of Dale Pollock, the author of “Skywalking: The Life and Films of George Lucas” (1983), the movie with the highest-ever profit per dollar invested. Ms. Lucas and Ms. Fields were nominated for an Academy Award.

The Lucases’ careers took off. Ms. Lucas worked on Mr. Scorsese’s “Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore” (1974), “Taxi Driver” (1976) and “New York, New York” (1977), which overlapped with “Star Wars.”

Mr. Lucas’s space fantasy earned more than \$400 million at the box office and won six Academy Awards. Hopeful after the smash, Ms. Lucas made a prediction to People magazine about the couple’s next project: “Getting our private life together.”

Instead, Mr. Lucas confronted a clause in his contract stipulating that he had to start a sequel within two years to retain his rights to the franchise.

“My wife likes to have vacations,” he told Starlog magazine at the time. “It always comes down to saying, ‘Next week. Just let me get past this thing . . .’ By the time you get past this thing, there’s always something else.”

Mr. Lucas conceived and produced the first Indiana Jones movie, “Raiders of the Lost Ark” (1981). Watching a cut late in the production process, Ms. Lucas noticed that the movie’s love affair had been left unresolved. The crew got back together to shoot a take that became the new penultimate scene.

After she finished her work on “Return of the Jedi,” Mr. Lucas told her that she was “a pretty good editor,” she recalled to Mr. Biskind. “I think that was the only time he ever complimented me.”

Ms. Lucas said she had believed

that they were partners in work and life — she “the more emotional person who came from the heart” and Mr. Lucas the visual thinker and intellect.

But “in his mind,” she added, “I always stayed the stupid Valley girl.”

The couple had bought an enormous ranch outside San Francisco. A young artist, Tom Rodrigues, was working on a stained-glass dome above the library, and he and Ms. Lucas became romantically involved. She asked for a divorce.

Mr. Jones, Mr. Lucas’s biographer, reported that Mr. Lucas agreed to give her around \$50 million so he could keep the ranch.

Matthew Robbins, a friend of Mr. Lucas’s, told Mr. Biskind that the director was crushed by the divorce. “It violated all of the small-

A key influence on George Lucas’s early-career run of successful movies.

town traditions and virtues, all his certainties about himself,” Mr. Robbins said.

Ms. Lucas and Mr. Rodrigues were married for several years before divorcing. Her first marriage, to George Michael Cooper, in the early 1960s, ended in divorce. Ms. Lucas is survived by her daughter with Mr. Rodrigues, Amy Soper; another daughter, Amanda Hallikainen, whom she and Mr. Lucas adopted; and three grandchildren.

Mr. Jones wrote in his biography that Ms. Lucas’s contributions to her husband’s films were “all but erased from most Lucas-film-sanctioned histories.” (The production company, which Mr. Lucas founded in 1971, said in a statement that it was “deeply saddened” by her death.)

“He wanted to stay on that workaholic track,” Ms. Lucas said of her husband. “The empire builder. The dynamo.”

Her idea of success was different. “I felt that we paid our dues, fought our battles,” she said. “I wanted to stop and smell the flowers. I wanted joy in my life.”

OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Beatrice de Graaf | By Barton Swaim

Why U.S. Presidents Misjudge Putin

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, a worry circulated among foreign-policy analysts that the aims and decision-making processes of Islamic jihadists confounded our attempts to penetrate them—unlike those of the Soviets, which, however perilous, we at least understood.

But did we? American commentators and policymakers have long assumed that they understood Russian strategic thinking better than they did. To this day, despite the temptation to assume the reasoning of Russian leaders more or less comports with Western norms, the Kremlin's intentions remain “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma,” as Winston Churchill memorably put it.

The habit lives on in the current U.S. administration. President Trump sagely dismisses the sincerity of Iran's jihadist regime. Talk of an impending “deal” aside, all my reporting suggests he has no regard for the words of Iran's leaders. Yet Mr. Trump persists in the belief that Vladimir Putin would negotiate in good faith, ac-

A scholar of the Russian dictator says he sees himself as his country's eschatological defender against Satan and evil.

According to Western notions of interest, if only he thought he could. Recall a social-media post in August of last year in which Mr. Trump said the war could end “almost immediately” if only Ukraine would relinquish its claims on Crimea and forswear its ambition to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Credulity about Russia is a bipartisan affair. Recall the preposterous “reset” button Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented to her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in 2009, or her successor John Kerry's expression of outrage after Mr. Putin annexed Crimea in 2014: “You just don't in the 21st century behave in 19th-century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped-up pretext.”

A book published last month in the Netherlands reminds us how vast is the difference between the West's conceptions of interest and Mr. Putin's. “Poetins Tsaristische Droom,” or “Putin's Czarist Dream,” contends that Mr. Putin's outlook has evolved, over the quarter-century in which he has ruled, into a spiritual amalgam every bit as eschatological as that of Iran's mullahs. The authors, Beatrice de Graaf and Niels Drost—a professor of history at Utrecht University and a research fellow at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague, respectively—think Western observers have missed a major component of the Russian dictator's worldview. In early May I connected by videolink to Ms. de

Graaf in her book-laden office in Utrecht.

The essential thing to understand about Mr. Putin, she begins, is that he isn't a Marxist or a communist or even a defender of Leninism or Stalinism. He has often made vaguely disparaging remarks about Bolshevism and Soviet command economics. Plainly, however, Mr. Putin hasn't abandoned the Soviet-era Kremlin's expansionist aims. Over the past quarter-century, Ms. de Graaf and Mr. Drost argue in their book, he has developed a view of himself as the latest, and perhaps greatest, in a centuries-long line of Russian autocrats.

Ms. de Graaf began following Russian politics in the early 2000s. What surprised her then about Mr. Putin's rule was the statues. When she visited St. Petersburg in 2006, “I was amazed by how many statues of Russian czars Putin had erected.” He had taken power on the last day of 1999, when Boris Yeltsin resigned. “Every year, one or two or three statues were erected. But they didn't honor Lenin or Stalin. The statues were of Alexander I, of Peter the Great, of Catherine, of Nicholas I.”

Any time Mr. Putin would dedicate one of these statues, Ms. de Graaf recalls observing, “he would do it in the company of an Orthodox priest, and the priest would sprinkle holy water and make an address, and both the priest and Putin speak of the ‘holiness of the moment’ or some language like that. . . . To me, it became obvious this wasn't only about history.”

The Kremlin publishes Mr. Putin's speeches on its website. Ms. de Graaf, employing her co-author's digital savvy and superior Russian fluency, managed to compile almost all of Mr. Putin's public statements from 1999 to 2024: some 11,000 of them, including formal speeches, addresses to staff and introductory remarks. She expected to find that the Russian president spoke of the czars “a couple of dozen times,” Ms. Graaf recalls; perhaps she could base an academic paper on it. In fact he refers substantively to the czars in more than 3,000 addresses. “Of course he also refers to the Second World War, and he does refer to Stalin—but not that much. Far more often he talks about the great Russian czars.”

The book plots the changes in how Mr. Putin draws on the czarist tradition. Early in his presidency, when relations between Russia and the West briefly thawed, Mr. Putin would speak of “Peter the Great and European interests, of Catherine the Great and literacy and the Enlightenment. He spoke of Alexander I and Europe joining to defeat Napoleon.”

That changed around 2004. After the chaos Russia sustained in the 1990s, Mr. Putin, having brought stability, expected to be heralded by the West the way Alexander I was after Waterloo. What Mr. Putin “didn't realize is that this was too big a cloak in which to clad Russia in the early



2000s.” The country's annual economic output was smaller than that of several European nations with considerably smaller populations. “He had nuked,” Ms. de Graaf says, “but he hadn't much in terms of export and import.”

His rhetoric took on elements of Eastern Orthodoxy and of darkness and light. “He began to speak often of ‘evil.’ Russia for him was a ‘beacon of light’ that would save the world from evil,” she recounts.

A crucial turn took place in 2011. That December, the Putin-linked United Russia party won an election credibly described as fraudulent by outside observers and Russian journalists. Mr. Putin, who had pretended for four years to take the lesser role of prime minister even as he continued running the country, returned to the presidency in that election. Tens of thousands protested on the streets of Moscow in what Western observers optimistically called the Snow Revolution.

From this point on, Ms. de Graaf contends, based on Mr. Putin's many public utterances, he “immersed himself in the triad of Russian state power: nationality, autocracy, Orthodoxy”—the three-part formulation most closely associated with the reign, often termed “reactionary,” of Czar Nicholas I, who ruled from 1825 to 1855. Mr. Putin and his immediate circle began to express, Ms. de Graaf says, “a more eschatological, a more apocalyptic and violent vision.” His inner circle began calling Moscow the “third Rome.”

Mr. Putin “allowed people—he didn't do it himself, he allowed others—to call him *katechon*.” This Greek word, usually defined as “restrainer” or “one who withholds,” appears in 2 Thessalonians 2, a mysterious chapter of the New Testament that speaks of a “man of lawlessness” and of one who will restrain him. Some early church fathers applied the term to the Roman Empire, which for all its faults constrained evildoers. The tradition mostly died when Napoleon defeated the last holy Roman emperor, Francis II, in 1805, although Russian Orthodox theology sometimes still casts the czars in the role of *katechon*.

For Mr. Putin's nationalist supporters, he fills the role anew. Which explains, Ms. de Graaf says, why his top aides and allies—Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, former President and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, presidential envoy Kirill Dmitriev, among others—justified the 2022 invasion in part by alleging “satanic” activity in Ukraine. To Western ears that sounded risible, but for Putinists attuned to Orthodox political theology—and for the Russian president himself—the idea is entirely valid.

On the religious question, Mr. Putin has, for example, made it a custom to participate in Kreshchenskiye Kupaniya, or epiphany bathing, every Jan. 19, commemorating Christ's baptism. Believers dip themselves three times in water, often outside during Russia's subzero weather. Mr. Putin does so in the company of cameras and priests.

“For him,” Ms. de Graaf says, “the war in Ukraine really is a holy war.” She also points out that while “in Western Christianity, St. Augustine formulated an influential theory of just war, nothing of the sort developed in Eastern Christianity. In the East, the emperor has the power to define what is evil and crush it.”

Nonreligious scholars and analysts in the secularized West tend to assume that because they don't take religion seriously, other important and accomplished people don't, either. This is very often a mistake, so I put it to Ms. de Graaf: How sincere is Mr. Putin about any of this? “I'm not”—she searches for the English word—“clairvoyant? I cannot read his mind. . . . People say to me, ‘Yeah, Beatrice, all those speeches, but do you really think he believes any of it?’” She acknowledges the possibility that it's all a cynical ploy, but doesn't accept it. “If someone aligns his deeds with his words for the past 26 years,” she says, “you may properly infer that he attaches some meaning to the words. I think Putin increasingly believes what he says. I cannot say more than that.”

American analysts sometimes debate whether this or that rogue regime or dictator—the supreme

leader in Iran, Mr. Putin in Russia—is a “rational” actor. Almost always the topic assumes a Western liberal-democratic definition of rational, which makes the question pointless. Ms. de Graaf is similarly skeptical of the question's usefulness and helpfully describes what she calls “epistemic” rationality: It involves “the way you appraise reality. Maybe you appraise it differently from other people.”

She applies this to Mr. Putin: “So if he sees the number of square kilometers, the outlines of his country, as something that has bearing on his status internationally, for him it's rational to expand his borders. And if he thinks that Kyiv belongs to Russia because St. Vladimir Christianized it around the year 1000 and he needs this story to give himself a kind of legitimacy as a ruler, then he's behaving in a way that is completely rational.”

I infer from Ms. de Graaf's observation that it's folly to call Mr. Putin a “rational” actor if one means he thinks about his own country's interests as the leader of a Western nation would think about his.

She agrees. For Mr. Putin, “the global order cannot be measured in units in the way we count them.” Western leaders and their citizens “divide the globe into autonomous nation-states, whereas he sees the world as a place of big empires,” and he sees empires as “vast cultural entities in search of identity, recognition, meaning in the world. America has an empire. So does India, so does China. Europe is what he would call a weak power, but it is still an empire.”

U.S. presidents have repeatedly misjudged Mr. Putin's intentions. Mr. Trump, despite Democratic accusations of “collusion” with the Russians in 2016, exhibited more shrewdness on Russian matters than his predecessors, by withdrawing from the 1988 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty on grounds that Russia had repeatedly broken it, by destroying Russian-backed mercenaries in Syria in 2018, and, of course, by sending weaponry to Ukraine. Yet Mr. Trump has just as frequently behaved as though the Russian tyrant desires “peace” as an end in itself.

Lately Russia has seemed to lose its way in the war—its front stalled if not regressing, its bases in the southwest under attack, its economy in shambles, its political elite soured on the immense cost. American leaders may expect Mr. Putin to respond to these circumstances in what they deem a “rational” way, by acknowledging battlefield realities and looking for ways to cut his losses and save face. But a reembodyed czar, a man empowered by God to restrain evil and protect Russia from satanic influence, probably won't conform to expectations.

Mr. Swaim is an editorial page writer for the Journal.

‘New Fish’ and ‘Old Fish’ Revive an Iconic Section of Philly

CROSS COUNTRY
By Noah Gould

Philadelphia Fishtown, once a poster child of working-class decline, is booming. Top-rated restaurants have opened in former factories, and more than a dozen trendy coffee shops dot the map. Gentrification comes with downsides, but Fishtowners tell a feel-good story about a neighborhood hit hard by economic shifts that is enjoying a comeback.

Much has changed. Today, the area reflects the resources and talents of “Old Fish,” the immigrants and their descendants who built the community, and “New Fish,” the arrivals who have transformed the place.

Charles Murray used Fishtown as his archetype for the decline of the working class in his 2012 book, “Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960-2010.” The median family income in ZIP Code 19125 (which includes Fishtown and adjacent East Kensington neighborhoods) was \$41,900 in 2000, and only 8% of adults held college degrees. Kensington shows what Fishtown could have become over the next quarter-century. The area has the largest open-air drug market on the East Coast, which Gov. Josh Shapiro called nearly “a billion-dollar enterprise.”

Fishtown took a different trajectory, trending toward the adjacent Northern Liberties area. Median in-

come for the two neighborhoods combined rose to \$133,300 by 2022. The neighborhood revival isn't only thanks to economics. What distinguishes Fishtown is that many longtime residents stayed even as property values soared. The area has one of the highest participation rates citywide in the Longtime Owner Occupants Program, which limits property-tax rate increases.

Maggie O'Brien, 69, who founded the Fishtown Neighbors Association, has lived here for four decades. In the old days, “everybody would know a family on the block that could use a hand, like they could use a Thanksgiving basket or some presents for their kids. Everybody knew somebody, but now that's changed.”

The stereotype of the millennial or Generation Z professional with at least one dog and a high-paying job is accurate, according to Ashlei Tracey, 32, a former president of the Fishtown Neighbors Association. She sees more young people getting involved, including herself, a serial joiner who has lived in the area for five years. Fishtown Beer Runners meets every Thursday to run a few miles and end at a pub for beer and conversation. “Over time that has evolved into a real family,” says Johanna Goode, 42, one of the group's leaders.

Ms. Tracey says, “There's a bunch of rich yuppie people here now, and we can actually get the city to do some of the things that [residents] have been trying to do for 20-plus years.” Last year, Fire Engine 6 finally returned to the station at 2601

Belgrade St., a longtime goal of residents. Almost every park in the area has a friends association in charge of gardening and cleanup. These community institutions address specific problems while fostering a sense of belonging.

Working-class Fishtown has been gentrifying, but a lot of old-timers have decided to stick around.

Churches help bridge divides between Old Fish and New Fish. Bedrock Church, a Baptist congregation that gathers in a mixed-use warehouse, largely draws newcomers.

Notable & Quotable: Colorblind Constitution

Josh Blackman writing at Reason.com, June 3:

As big as *Callais* [the recent Supreme Court voting-rights decision from Louisiana] was, I think *Allen v. Milligan* [in which the justices, in an unsigned order on Tuesday, stayed a district-court order that Alabama change its congressional map] may prove to be more significant. . . . The very first sentence of *Allen* dropped a bomb that most people may have missed:

“In *Louisiana v. Callais*, 608 U.S. — (2026), to resolve the tension

Pastor Drew Guensch estimates that 10% of regular attendees are longtime residents: “We've seen more and more people that are old Fishtown that have begun to participate, and it's kind of always our dream that we would be a place where they won't always feel like they're opposed to each other.”

If one building embodies Old Fish, it is Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Church, the brownstone edifice in the center of town and a symbol of the Irish and Polish immigrants who came here, starting in the 19th century. Weekly attendance suffered during the pandemic, but the congregation is seeing an uptick in young families, says the Rev. Alfred Bradley. A new energy is noticeable. The church bell, recently restored with a gift from a new parishioner, rings

out across the neighborhood.

Joe Beck, 43, who grew up in Fishtown and moved back in 2008, is raising his own children here. “I was kind of hoping for changes in this direction,” he says. Mr. Beck welcomes the new energy, but understands that some people might have reservations.

“We run the risk of things changing really rapidly and I think some people fear that and that's fair,” he adds. But the current community “reminds me of the vibe of when I was a kid. It's just families that want the best for their children. They want them to be involved with friends their age and want them to be involved in their neighborhood.”

Mr. Gould is alumni and student programs manager at the Acton Institute.

between vote-dilution claims under §2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and our colorblind Constitution, we updated the standards for §2 liability established by *Thornburg v. Gingles*, 478 U.S. 30 (1986).”

Did you see it? The Court referred to “our colorblind Constitution.” Of course, [the justices were] channelling Justice John Marshall Harlan's dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) . . . :

“But in view of the constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no

caste here. Our constitution is colorblind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful.”

These powerful words were read and re-read during the worst days of Jim Crow. Yet, the Supreme Court has never actually embraced Justice Harlan's conception of a color-blind constitution, not even in *Brown [v. Board of Education]*. To the contrary, the Court has often found the Constitution prohibits a color-blind approach to equal protection.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Road to AI State Socialism

Many of America's worst policy mistakes have been bipartisan mind melds. A new example comes this week from Bernie Sanders, who wants the feds to take ownership stakes in AI companies. Hmmm. Which Republican might have inspired this statist brainstorm?

Mr. Sanders teased his forthcoming legislation in a New York Times op-ed that pitched a U.S. AI sovereign wealth fund. "Even President Trump, in an executive order, has proposed establishing an American sovereign wealth fund," Mr. Sanders writes.

Yes, and we blasted the President's idea last year. Sovereign wealth funds typically enrich a country's rulers and friends far more than its citizens. Democrats criticize the Trump family businesses for profiting from the Presidency with crypto deals. Imagine the temptation for corruption if government owns stakes in America's wealthiest companies.

Most countries with sovereign wealth funds finance them with royalties on energy production. Mr. Sanders wants to force companies to hand over half of their equity to the government. He calls this a "one-time 50% tax" on company shares, but it isn't a tax as most economists would define the term, and certainly not how America's founders did.

For all intents and purposes, this would be a government expropriation. It would violate the Fifth Amendment's prohibition on government taking property without just compensation. To pay this tax, companies would have to issue new shares to the government diluting current shareholders. Or they could buy back half their shares from private investors and hand them to the government. Most AI companies couldn't afford to do this at their current ethereal market valuations.

Mr. Sanders doesn't conceal his aim for the government to use its ownership stake to boss around AI companies and redistribute the "investment" gains (if there are any) to voters. Progressives call this "universal basic capital" since citizens would supposedly get an indirect stake in companies, but it's socialism with a capitalist false front.

"The federal government would have the power, through its voting shares and an equal representation on each company's board, to block decisions that hurt our citizens and to push for policies that help them," the Senator writes. This means the federal government

The Jobs Apocalypse Will Have to Wait

What was that about labor market Armageddon? There's little evidence in the Labor Department's monthly jobs report on Friday that either artificial intelligence or the oil shock from the war in Iran is causing the unemployment that many have prophesied.

Employers added 172,000 jobs in May while the unemployment rate held steady at 4.3%. Job creation was also revised up for April and March by a combined 93,000. Job growth has averaged 188,000 over the last three months, compared to the disappointing 9,700 average last year.

Could this be a relief rally after the Supreme Court struck President Trump's emergency tariffs in February, or a mini-boom from last year's tax cuts kicking in? Hard to know, but it's good news about the underlying resilience of the American economy.

Job growth was somewhat uneven, with gains last month concentrated in leisure and hospitality (70,000), healthcare and social assistance (47,200), and local government (55,000). Information has shed 81,000 jobs over the past year, mostly in motion pictures (26,700), telecom (24,100), broadcasting (9,000) and publishing (6,500). The declining trend in these industries preceded the AI boom.

Meantime, this week's JOLTS report showed a 731,000 increase in job openings in April, almost

The Illinois Bar vs. Free Speech

Free speech is under assault in many places these days, but traffic court? Leave it to Illinois, where the state Supreme Court kicked a Cook County judge off the bench over an article he wrote while a private citizen.

That's the plight of retired Cook County Circuit Court Judge James R. Brown, who wrote an op-ed and appeared on a podcast after he resigned from the bench in 2020. When the state Supreme Court called retired judges to return to fill vacancies in 2025, Judge Brown returned to service at traffic court, only to be kicked out weeks later.

The offense was an opinion piece he wrote for John Kass's website that criticized Biden administration policies and anti-Trump lawfare. He wrote that "prosecutors engaging in lawfare sent shockwaves not only through the legal community but also through our system of justice." His bio noted that the judge, "now retired, worked for 30 years in the Cook County Criminal Justice System."

That was too much for the progressives of the Illinois bar. The Cook County Bar Association and the Chicago Council of Lawyers asked the Illinois Supreme Court in a letter to reverse its decision calling Judge Brown back to the

could direct how AI companies invest and whom they hire and fire.

One model is China's state-owned enterprises, which are an albatross on its economy. Political favoritism and government interventions have led to economic inefficiencies. Hence China's partially state-owned Semiconductor Manufacturing International trails TSMC and Samsung in chip fabrication.

The unhappy truth is that President Trump helped pave Mr. Sanders' road to AI socialism with his industrial policy. In return for approving Nippon Steel's acquisition of U.S. Steel, Mr. Trump demanded a "golden share" that gives the government veto power over major business decisions. He has already blocked the closure of an unproductive Illinois plant.

The U.S. took a 9.9% equity stake in Intel last summer as it floundered. Mr. Trump claims credit for the subsequent 300% surge in Intel's share price. He should really thank the business decisions of CEO Lip-Bu Tan—whom he had earlier called to resign—and insatiable demand for chips by AI hyperscalers.

The Administration has also taken equity stakes in critical mineral developers MP Materials, Lithium Americas, Vulcan Elements, Trilogy Metals and USA Rare Earth. There may be some cases when the feds need to invest for security or defense needs, but Mr. Trump is doing it with little restraint. This week he invested in coal plants, of all things.

Mr. Trump has even leveraged his regulatory power to extort companies. The White House let Nvidia and AMD export high-power computer chips to China on condition that they give the government a 15% cut of the revenue. And the Journal reports this week that Trump officials are also considering taking a Bernie-like stake in AI firms.

AI has so many implications for national security that government will inevitably be involved. But the U.S. has dealt with defense contractors for decades without taking ownership stakes.

The U.S. leads the world in AI because entrepreneurs and investors have combined to innovate and compete. Political control would stifle that growth and cede leadership to China. It would be a tragedy for the ages if AI became the road to American socialism.

all in professional and business services. That's another sign of labor-market strength.

It's hard to predict how AI will affect jobs over time. Workers no doubt will experience disruptions, but the impact so far looks small. The vast sums that AI hyperscalers are spending on data centers is probably helping lift the labor market.

Workers are needed to build the data centers, lay fiber to connect them, and make the electrical equipment to power them.

The biggest note of caution in the May report is that wages aren't keeping pace with inflation. Average hourly earnings ticked up 0.3% last month and only 0.2% for production-level workers. That's less than inflation in April, even excluding food and energy prices, and wages over the last 12 months rose 3.4%, not much above current inflation.

That could bear on consumer spending in the coming months if people don't feel they're getting ahead even if they have a job. Tech stocks took a header on Friday, with the Nasdaq falling nearly 4%, on fears of rising interest rates from the bullish jobs report. But a good jobs report isn't an inflationary signal that demands higher interest rates. We don't envy new Federal Reserve Chair Kevin Warsh as he tries to get inflation down while not overreacting to an oil shock that may be temporary.

bench. "Under the First Amendment, any private citizen is, of course, generally free to express their opinions," the lawyers wrote, but "members of the judiciary are held to a higher standard."

Judge Brown pushed back with the help of the Liberty Justice Center and filed a lawsuit charging that the state court vacated Judge Brown's appointment without "the process prescribed by the Constitution of the State of Illinois" and violated his First and Fourteenth Amendment rights. The suit says the complaint wasn't referred to the Illinois Court's Commission, and Judge Brown wasn't given notice of a hearing before removal.

Judge Brown's ouster also looks like viewpoint discrimination. The judge says the court hasn't removed Judge Ramon Ocasio, who has written on racial justice, the Civil Rights Act and mass deportations.

On June 1, a federal judge rejected the state Supreme Court's motion to dismiss the case and sent Judge Brown to seek relief in state court. The decision says Judge Brown is likely to succeed on his due process claim. Judges are expected to behave with decorum while on the bench, but the profession doesn't demand that they forfeit free-speech rights in retirement.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Republic of Korea Remains a 'Model Ally'

Nicholas Eberstadt and Lawrence Peck's op-ed "South Korea Takes a Hard Left Turn Against America" (June 2) presents a deeply misleading characterization of the Republic of Korea, its democratically elected government and the strength of the ROK-U.S. alliance.

The Republic of Korea is one of the world's most vibrant democracies. Our institutions are grounded in constitutional governance, the rule of law and the freely expressed will of our citizens. Korea's constitutional system, independent institutions and robust public discourse are sources of democratic resilience, not signs of democratic decline; they are hallmarks of a confident and open society.

The op-ed conflates political disagreements with institutional decline and routine diplomacy with a fundamental shift in Korea's alliance commitments. Such assertions do not reflect the realities of modern Korea and risk undermining confidence in one of America's closest allies.

The facts point in the opposite direction. Since taking office, the Lee Jae Myung administration has worked closely with the U.S. to strengthen and modernize our alliance, expand-

ing cooperation across security, economic resilience, advanced technologies and strategic industries. Far from signaling strategic realignment, recent bilateral initiatives demonstrate the breadth and depth of cooperation between our two countries.

Korea has emerged as what senior U.S. officials have described as a "model ally"—contributing to America's industrial revitalization through investment, strengthening shared technological competitiveness, and assuming greater responsibility for our shared defense.

The ROK-U.S. alliance remains strong and indispensable. There should be no ambiguity regarding Korea's commitment to its constitutional order, its alliance with America, and the values and interests that have sustained this partnership for generations. The alliance between our two nations continues to evolve to meet new challenges. Its future should be judged by facts and performance, not by ideological assumptions.

CHOI SOUNG-AH
Secretary to the president for foreign press affairs, Cheong Wa Dae, the Republic of Korea
Seoul

Remember, Never Let Them Keep You Down

Peggy Noonan's "Becoming Who You Are Ain't for Sissies" (Declarations, May 30) hit home. I grew up in a 1,400 sq. ft. row home in Bayside, Queens. My dad was a butcher, my mother a butcher's helper and then a junior-high-school teacher after my father died.

When I was in second grade, during a parent teacher conference, my teacher was pained to tell my mother that her son would never learn to read. As fast as she could, my mother went to the schoolbook section of Gimbel's department store and brought home teachers' reading books. Within a few weeks I was reading.

Long story short, working various jobs from the time I was 11, graduating from a New York City public high school, and then from Columbia University's School of Engineering and Applied Science, I enjoyed a wonderful career as a consulting engineer and raised two beautiful children with my wife of 56 years. Ms. Noonan was spot-on: Don't let the bull—beat you down.

STEVEN A. BACHENHEIMER
Scottsdale, Ariz.

Ms. Noonan's column offered the kind of generous, elevating message today's graduates deserve. It's a shame she wasn't the one addressing Harvard's class of 2026. Her reflections were hopeful, unifying and rooted in the idea that young people should rise above cynicism and help repair the country.

By contrast, Conan O'Brien's commencement remarks at Harvard leaned heavily on partisan jabs and easy shots at the Trump administration—more applause-line politics than guidance for students stepping into adult life. Commencements should lift people up, not divide them.

Harvard's graduates would have been far better served by Ms. Noonan's steady, encouraging voice.

E. SCOTT WINGERTER
Red Bank, N.J.

The beauty of Ms. Noonan's message is that it makes us realize we still are "becoming," no matter what our age—and we ain't done yet!

JO HERSHBERGER
Middleton, Wis.

No Road Representation Without Taxation

Kimberley A. Strassel misunderstands a recent proposal by the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee to levy a highway user charge on electric and hybrid vehicles ("The GOP Wants to Tax Your Car," Potomac Watch, May 29). The U.S. highway system is based on users-pay, users-say system through the fuel tax. But EVs currently pay nothing in fuel taxes to use our roadways, while hybrids pay only a fraction of what regular vehicles do. We can quibble over the amount they should pay, but the bill's numbers are in the right ballpark. The revenues would be sent to the federal Highway Trust Fund, just as gasoline and die-

sel tax revenues are. Moreover, the local Department of Motor Vehicles is the logical body to collect these new user fees, since all vehicle owners are already DMV customers so to speak.

I agree with Ms. Strassel on her closing point. The federal fuel taxes and the federal highway program should be devolved to the states—which own all major U.S. highways, including the interstates. And Congress should make this transition sooner rather than later, given the coming insolvency of Social Security, only six or seven years away. Better an orderly devolution of the highway program to the states, than one enacted in the midst of chaos.

ROBERT POOLE
Director of Transportation Policy
Reason Foundation
Plantation, Fla.

Common Sense Trump Card

Regarding Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.'s spot-on "Donald Trump, Climate Scientist" (Business World, May 30): A succinct rendering of Mr. Trump's penchant for stating the obvious would be that climate reality has a way of trumping climate fiction when it comes to accurate reporting.

ANTHONY J. SADAR
Certified consulting meteorologist
Pittsburgh

CORRECTION

Henry Nowak was 18 years old when he was killed. An early version of the June 4 editorial, "The Woke Murder of Henry Nowak," misstated his age.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Hang on, there's a lot to unpack there."

OPINION

A Visit to America in 1905



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

For a long time I have been interested in the stories of those who operated in the top tier of history but weren't themselves rulers. Many were diplomats whose careers, for all their brilliant efforts, ended in disappointment. One was Sergei Witte, the long-serving finance minister who spent six months as the first prime minister of Russia's last czar, Nicholas II. Witte's memoirs were published in America in 1921, five years after his death. They contain a brief but vivid portrait—at once sweet and grudging—of the America he encountered in August 1905.

In the memoir he is much like the man described in the history books—

Russian Sergei Witte came to New Hampshire to make peace with Japan. Here's what he saw of the U.S.

farsighted, insightful, peppery. His great gift was a penetrating mind that went quickly to the heart of the matter; he understood the *implication* of things. He was a man of great asperity, washish and blunt. Emphatic, he was accused of being alarmist. He had enemies in every camp; only his brilliance kept him afloat.

Witte's wife, in the foreword, says he was neither a courtier flattering a monarch nor a demagogue flattering a mob. She quotes him as telling friends, "I am neither a Liberal nor a Conservative. I am simply a man of culture."

But his overriding purpose couldn't have been greater—to save Russia, to save the czar and the aris-

tracy from themselves, to block the revolutionists of the left by giving Russia a true constitution, to liberalize, but not at a speed that was more than the nation could bear.

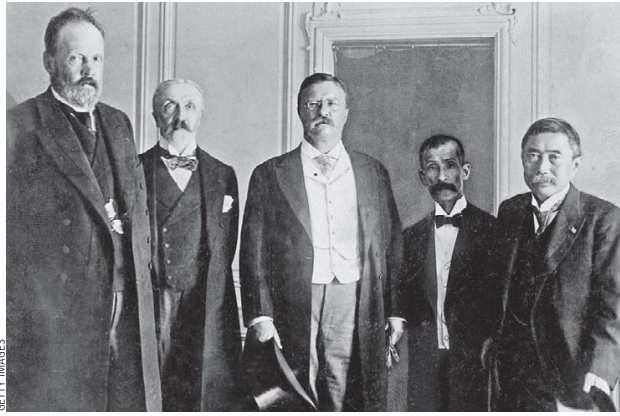
He opposed Russia's foreign policy of aggression and double-dealing in the East, and when this produced a war with Japan in 1904, he warned it would be a disaster and resigned. "Our entire fleet was buried in the Japanese waters," Witte writes. Russia lost every major land battle. Following the catastrophe a revolution almost toppled the czar.

Here enters America. President Theodore Roosevelt offered to host and mediate peace negotiations in Portsmouth, N.H. The czar brought Witte back as his chief representative.

And so Witte tells us what he saw of the U.S. From first steaming out of Cherbourg, France, he was shocked to realize the "tremendous influence of the press in America." It actually shaped public opinion. He was mobbed by reporters and apprehended his mission: spin them like a top. *No, Russia isn't desperate for a deal, it's here mostly to be polite. No, Russia isn't bankrupt.* He devised a strategy: to behave "without a shadow of snobbishness" and win over the American people. He would treat everyone "with the utmost simplicity," talk, shake hands—"in a word I treated everybody of whatever social position as an equal." He found this exhausting, "as all acting is to the unaccustomed."

As his ship approached New York, he found a prosperous country exploding with joy. "We were met by a whole flotilla of small vessels and motor boats." The Secret Service agents assigned to him shocked him with their dignity: they "looked, spoke and behaved like gentlemen, these American sleuths."

He visited "sky-scrapers," taking an elevator up 37 floors in one such "monster." "There was a light breeze blowing and I could feel the top room swaying." America was expensive: "You cannot give the elevator boy a



Representatives from Japan and Russia with Theodore Roosevelt.

tip less than a dollar." He couldn't believe most of the waiters in hotels and restaurants were university students who were "not ashamed of the menial duties." Russian youths would rather starve "than demean themselves by doing the work of a servant." Young women, even from good families, went strolling with young men unaccompanied on the streets and in the parks. This left him "shocked."

Wherever Witte and his entourage went, "our way was marked by continuous roaring and shrieking of sirens and factory whistles."

In Boston, authorities feared an attack. When Witte saw a crowd, he stepped among them and struck up a conversation. "They were Jews who had emigrated from Russia. We spoke Russian." Most had been in America only a few years and had fled Russian oppression. "I was anxious to know how they were getting on economically. They explained to me that in America they enjoyed full liberty and equal rights, and for that reason had no great difficulty in securing a more or less comfortable living." But they would always love Russia and didn't side with Japan. They wished him good fortune: "And we shall pray to God for you."

After each negotiation there were processions, the roads lined with spectators and saluting troops. As he rode past one detachment someone called out an old Russian military greeting, "I wish you good health, your excellency!" The soldier presented arms. Witte was shocked at this breach of discipline, but nobody minded.

A peace treaty was hammered out on Sept. 5, 1905.

Portsmouth exploded. It announced the signing by cannon shot. The town bedecked itself in flags. Witte was driven to a local church, the crowd so dense he could barely break through. "Many tried to shake hands with us—the usual expression of attention with Americans." In the church, "we beheld a wonderful spectacle: ministers of various creeds and faiths, including our Orthodox priest from New York and several rabbis, had formed a solemn procession." A choir sang a peace hymn. Thanksgiving prayers, sermons, more singing—"people wept."

Even Witte wept. "Never did I pray with more fire than at that moment." This was a unity of all churches, "which is the dream of all the truly enlightened followers of Christ." This

section is unlike any other part of the memoirs. Witte was moved. America moved him.

"I asked myself how it concerned them. The answer was: 'Are we not all Christians?' " The choir sang "God Save the Czar." As he left, people put gifts in his pocket "in accordance with a local custom." Many were trinkets, but some were of real value.

After Portsmouth, one remarkable interaction. He met with the wealthy banker J.P. Morgan on his yacht. Witte wanted his support of a loan for Russia, whose treasury had been emptied by war and revolution. Morgan said he'd help.

Witte then offered a service. "Morgan is afflicted with a nose disease which greatly disfigures him . . . a large growth resembling a beet." Witte told Morgan of a doctor in Berlin who surgically removes such growths and restores noses "to their normal state."

Morgan said he knew of the doctor but would be embarrassed to change how he looked. "If I come to New York with my nose cured, every street boy will point at me and split his sides laughing. Everybody knows my nose."

What he was saying was: It's part of my brand.

Witte portrays Morgan as gnat-natured during the exchange. Months later Morgan backed out of the loan.

Surprisingly, Witte didn't sum up his thoughts on America. But between the lines it's clear: He knew he'd seen something big and new and real, something coming—a mighty locomotive bearing down history's tracks.

The next year Roosevelt received the Nobel Peace Prize. America had arrived.

Witte lived to see the start of World War I, which he'd warned against and prophesied would end in "catastrophe" for Russia. Nobody listened. Witte is so alarmist, people thought.

Write to peggy.noonan@wsj.com.

We're Preparing for the Wrong AI Labor Crisis

By Stephen Lewarne

On artificial intelligence, Sens. Josh Hawley (R., Mo.) and Bernie Sanders (I., Vt.) sound less like ideological opponents than participants in the same panic. Both warn that AI will significantly disrupt the white-collar workforce. Both support stronger federal intervention to monitor and manage the employment effects of automation. Both justify that intervention by framing AI as a destabilizing force.

Their concerns reflect real changes in the labor market. Entry-level hiring has weakened in white-collar industries. Internship competition has intensified. Corporate hierarchies are flattening. Firms are redirecting spending toward AI infra-

Mass unemployment is unlikely. AI will reorganize the white-collar corporate workforce, not destroy it.

structure and AI-specialized talent. Yet the notion that the economy faces mass technological unemployment doesn't fit the evidence and risks prompting legislation aimed at the wrong problem.

Recent corporate announcements explain why the political panic feels persuasive. Meta plans to reduce its workforce by roughly 10% while expanding investment in AI and scrapping plans to hire for thousands of positions. Amazon CEO Andy Jassy instructed senior leadership teams to increase the ratio of staff to managers by at least 15%, flattening organizational layers. Similar restructuring has appeared across technology, consulting and corporate service, especially in functions tied to routine reporting, coordination and standardized analytical production.

These developments appear to support fears of widespread labor displacement. But the broader market continues to show relatively sta-

ble aggregate demand for labor. In March, the unemployment rate stood at 4.3%, close to both the Federal Reserve's estimate of long-run normal unemployment and Congressional Budget Office projections for the coming decade. Total nonfarm payroll employment increased by 178,000 jobs during the month, while health-care added 76,000 jobs and averaged roughly 29,000 new jobs a month over the prior year.

The emerging pattern looks less like collapsing demand for labor than a reorganization of work. AI is disproportionately compressing the bottom layer of white-collar production: drafting, summarizing, coding, documentation, reporting and routine analytical work. These tasks historically absorbed large numbers of early-career workers because they were time-consuming and costly to perform. AI systems now execute many of them rapidly and at far lower cost.

Research from Revelio Labs found that U.S. entry-level job postings have fallen roughly 35% since January 2023, with highly AI-exposed entry-level postings declining more than 40%. Internship markets show similar pressure. Handshake data indicate that internship listings have softened while applications per posting have nearly doubled since 2023. Research conducted for Deel found that 66% of enterprises expect to slow entry-level hiring because of AI-related restructuring, while 91% report roles are already changing or disappearing because of AI.

Employers are also changing how they evaluate workers. Employer surveys indicate a substantial shift away from GPA-based screening and toward skills-based hiring. Employers increasingly emphasize demonstrated competencies, project-based experience and practical problem-solving abilities. More than one-third of entry-level positions now explicitly require AI-related skills.

These developments point to a labor-market transition more complicated than conventional automation narratives suggest. Historically,

businesses weren't only buying labor but also training junior employees over time to build good judgment by requiring them to perform repetitive, tedious tasks.

As AI replaces some of the lower rungs on the professional ladder, businesses lose the system that historically made inexperienced graduates into trusted professionals. The result isn't necessarily mass unemployment but different pathways for workers to gain competence.

Washington is nevertheless responding as if the country faces imminent occupational collapse. Congress debates AI-related reporting mandates, displacement-monitoring systems and workforce-transition programs built around assumptions of widespread technological unemployment. The bipartisan AI-Related Job Impacts Clarity Act would re-

quire firms to report layoffs "substantially due to" AI.

These approaches risk institutionalizing the wrong labor-market model precisely when flexibility and organizational adaptation matter most. Organizing workforce policy around displacement measures would likely expand bureaucracy and tie up resources in tracking layoffs, monitoring "AI risk" and subsidizing retraining.

Bad legislation could have serious consequences. Firms facing political scrutiny might become more reluctant to experiment with new organizational structures or productivity-enhancing workflows. Universities might redesign curricula around anticipated AI displacement rather than the skills employers actually demand. Workers might exit professions prematurely even where long-

run demand remains strong.

The central challenge posed by AI, then, likely isn't that it will cause mass unemployment but that it will force businesses and institutions to redesign the programs and mechanisms by which workers can gain skills and acquire good judgment.

AI poses labor-market risks. Entry-level compression is real, and transition costs for younger workers may prove substantial. But America is unlikely to face a future without work. The greater risk is that Washington, preparing for the wrong labor-market shock, enacts policies that make it more difficult to adapt.

Mr. Lewarne is a professor of economics and finance at Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio.

'60 Minutes' Becomes a Reality Show



BUSINESS
WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

that's fine.

That's what Scott Pelley did, the veteran "60 Minutes" correspondent noisily getting himself fired this week.

Or if you like your job and take a long view, you can suck it up and wait for the moment to pass. That's perfectly fine too, and might even be the better part of valor, not to say emotional maturity.

Mr. Pelley chose the former, more demonstrative course. At a staff meeting where the newly appointed executive editor Nick Bilton was trying to introduce himself, Mr. Pelley berated Mr. Bilton as unqualified (he's qualified). Mr. Pelley accused CBS News boss Bari Weiss of "murdering" the legendary newsmagazine. In a subsequent exchange, he further complained of management acts to curry favor with the Trump administration.

Mr. Pelley is now gone. Other remaining brand-name correspondents, including the ageless Lesley Stahl, for a while were feared to be fingering their rip cords.

"Sixty Minutes" is a rare network news show, all right. It makes money. How? Let's just say when there isn't a late afternoon NFL game on CBS, the audience disappears by half. This, sadly, is also the story of traditional TV writ large—kept afloat by football.

Not adding to the fun, the industry deals with a federal government run by Donald Trump to get its

mergers approved. That includes a pending \$110 billion acquisition by CBS's parent company of the equally struggling entertainment giant Warner Bros.

To push their deal through, the shot-calling Ellisons, Larry and David, have indeed curried favor with Mr. Trump. For instance, they hired the feisty and youthful Ms. Weiss to remake CBS News. This doesn't mean she isn't making her own editorial decisions. It doesn't mean she's taking direction from Mr. Trump. But you'd have to be nuts not to understand she was hired to help smooth regulatory passage. The world sees it. Everybody at CBS can see it. Welcome to the big city.

The reality, in this case, is the need of companies to survive and get deals done in Donald Trump's world.

Mr. Pelley is obviously miffed to exist in such a universe, but Mr. Trump won't be president forever. In fact, he's already leaking political capital at a frantic rate. Corporate managements may be the last, after Senate Republicans, to declare their independence. But they will. And much sooner, the CBS parent's merger will be finalized. Meanwhile, the strength of a brand like "60 Minutes" is its ability to plow through heavy seas emanating from corporate politics—that is, unless overly entitled employees miff it up.

Which brings us to executive editor Mr. Bilton's letter firing Mr. Pelley over what the letter calls his "performative display of hostility" at the staff meeting.

"Performative" is a loaded word

in journalism these days, resting uneasily with another word, "truthfulness." Last year, I congratulated "60 Minutes" for, without a hint of BS about UFOs and visiting aliens, dealing forthrightly with antagonistic foreign powers operating drones in the U.S. to spy on U.S. military sites. In the case of the drone story, I was naturally thinking of rival news outlets that keep dangling the alien-visitation red herring in front of their readers because it generates clicks.

A new biography of the influential Cold War columnist Walter Lippmann reminds us that the issues he dealt with, and what he said about them, are mostly a comprehensive bore to anyone today. It's a good thing to remember.

What holds up are his nuanced thoughts on the role of journalism in a modern society—"dragging the realities into the light"—as well as the complications that come with commercial ownership, such as the need for profits and the blowback owners fear from readers, advertisers and officials.

The business model of the mainstream press is under siege for reasons of technology and consumer preference. At the same time companies have to deal with Mr. Trump's regulatory chaos. Who knows? His ephemeral but cost-imposing arbitrariness perhaps will have some fans rethinking their devotion to an overbearing administrative state.

Still, Mr. Pelley didn't drag any realities into the light. His actions haven't changed anything for the better. The travails of CBS and Trumpdom, for instance, had already been heavily covered in this column. In talking himself out of a job, he may only have cost "60 Minutes" some of the sympathy and trust its 58-year history warrants from its audience.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

PUBLISHED SINCE 1889 BY DOW JONES & COMPANY

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FINANCIAL TIMES

“Without fear and without favour”

ft.com/opinion

The ethical dilemmas of artificial intelligence

How we address this revolution is a question of managing its uncertainties

Amid the many debates over AI, everyone can agree on one thing: this marvel of a technology throws up great and unprecedented uncertainties. The possible endgames put forward by serious observers range from a productivity utopia to the annihilation of humanity.

That uncertainty need not be paralyzing. Instead we can take it as a source of focus: it means that how we address the AI revolution should be seen as a question of how we choose to manage uncertainties, and what tools we adopt to harness risk for the best result.

Recently even Donald Trump's White House — hardly an AI-sceptic administration — has shifted towards putting at least some regulatory constraints on the most powerful models before they are let out in the wild. In contrast,

Argentina is trumpeting a different approach. Its president, Javier Milei, declared in the FT this week that his country would commit not to impose regulations on what AI algorithms will be permitted to do, and to introduce a legal category of “non-human corporation” — companies run entirely by AI.

The move may be a gamble to attract AI developers to a country in search of a more stable growth model. As Milei points out, the history of the limited liability company illustrates that encouraging capitalists to do risky things can bring about good outcomes. Peter Thiel, the billionaire tech investor, seems taken with Milei's approach; he has reportedly just moved his family to Buenos Aires.

A free-for-all for AI will be too much to stomach for most jurisdictions, however. In what can only be called the opposite corner from Thiel, given the investor's fascination with the anti-christ, Pope Leo offers an explanation why. His papal encyclical on AI is no

Luddite tract; Leo welcomes the potential of AI and other technologies to “serve integral human development and the care of our common home”. He insists, however, that risks pertain not only to the outcomes that technologies pursue, but the vision from which they do so, and what we humans become in the process — in other words not only the “what” but the “why” and “how”.

Leo reminds us while AI may surpass human intelligence, they are not the same thing. AIs “do not know from within what love, work, friendship or responsibility mean”. Machine learning “does not imply inner growth”. He warns in particular against so-called post- or transhumanist views, because these attempts to improve humanity see human limitations as flaws to get rid of.

The pope's counterpoint that humanity flourishes “not despite limitations but often through them” is one that many people are becoming more aware of in the case of “cognitive surrender”: the realisation that making things easier

Contrasting approaches — one chafing against limits, the other identifying humanity with them — can perhaps be reconciled

through AI can diminish rather than enhance our abilities. It is in a similar vein that the FT commits to always keeping human judgment at the centre of our journalism.

In some ways, these contrasting approaches — one chafing against limits, the other identifying humanity with them — can perhaps be reconciled. But that requires accountability to be located somewhere. From papal reflections to the sci-fi works so beloved by tech elites, the founts of human wisdom agree that humanity will not long tolerate a system producing injury without redress.

So one can envisage permissive legal forms if accountability is assumed by morally mature individuals, companies and governments. But then it is incumbent on us as individuals and collective cultures to retain our own judgment of how our society fares, and avoid the path of least resistance that leaves uncertainty to be managed by the machines.

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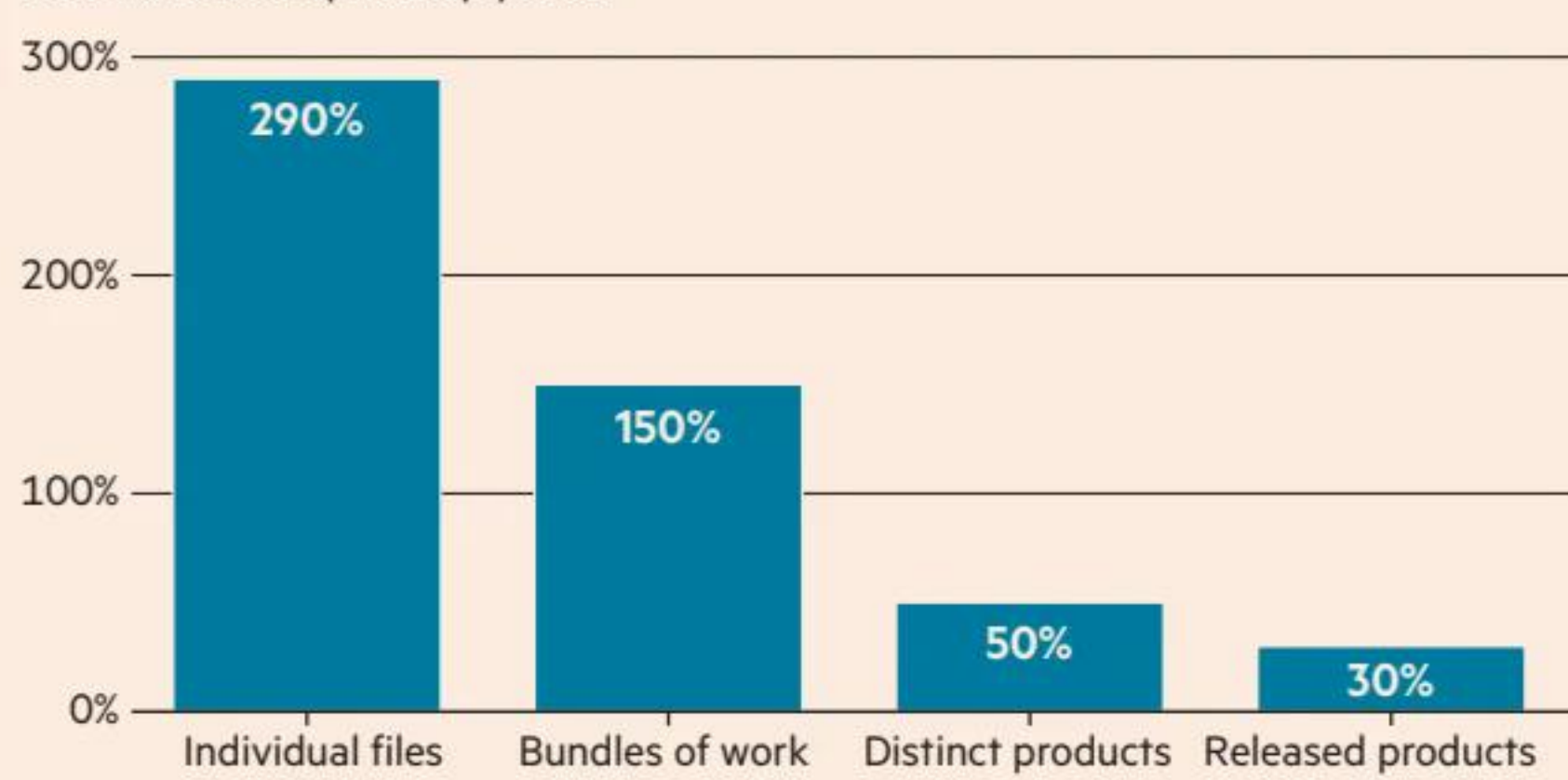
How much value is AI really creating?

John Burn-Murdoch



AI delivers big productivity boosts for low-level tasks, but these translate into much smaller gains for final products

Impact of adopting agentic AI tools on productivity at different stages of the software development pipeline



Source: Writing Code vs Shipping Code: Productivity Effects Across Generations of AI Coding Tools (Demirer et al, 2024)

The conversation about AI's usefulness has matured considerably over the past year. Outright denial of its capabilities has diminished as more people have seen for themselves what it can do in their line of work. The battle is now over exactly how much value it provides.

One particular point of tension between AI's boosters and detractors has been the disconnect between reported increases in coders' output and the apparent lack of a corresponding boom in product or value creation. A new paper leaves both sides able to claim vindication.

The study by MIT's Mert Demirer and co-authors tracked software developers' work before and after they adopted AI tools. Importantly, they measured this at several different levels, from the amount of code written, to the number of discrete files edited, to the number of projects or features worked on, to actual releases of new software.

They found an explosive impact at the top of this funnel — coders created or edited almost 300 per cent more files — but that boost was halved to 150 per cent by the time they got to the number of discrete pieces of work submitted for review, and that in turn shrunk fivefold to a roughly 30 per cent uplift in the number of full software releases.

A 30 per cent uplift in producing a company's core product is significant, but the findings nonetheless demonstrate how perceptions and even some direct measures of AI's impact on productivity can be far out of step with the value it ultimately adds. What feels like — and indeed measurably is — an explosive boost for a particular task often translates into a much more modest gain once that work has passed through all the human bottlenecks associated with reviewing and releasing production-grade work.

Moreover, when the researchers looked at whether AI-assisted increases in software production have led to increased consumption, they found little evidence. The marked increase in mobile app releases over the past year has not been accompanied by any increase in downloads — most of the new apps fail to capture even a modest audience.

Notably, the finding that productiv-

ity and value creation have been much weaker than some assumed landed at a time when Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi revealed the company had blown through its entire AI budget for 2026 in one quarter, and was planning to switch much of its AI use to lower-cost models, reserving frontier tools for special cases. Then came new research on AI use for legal work, which found that pairing cheap open-source AI agents with top-end models acting as sporadic “advisers” delivered better results at much lower cost.

It would not be unreasonable to see all of this as evidence that AI's capacity to deliver genuine value has been vastly exaggerated, or at least that splurging on the latest models is often unnecessary. But Demirer and his co-authors feel the more likely explanation is that current organisational structures and marketplaces are not set up to take advantage of real underlying gains. That view is supported by the evidence from past technological revolutions, where the real jumps in productivity and job displacement came from new companies and processes rather than incumbents grafting new technology on to existing workflows.

In the case of electricity in the late 19th and early 20th century, productivity gains were modest where factories simply replaced giant steam engines with giant electric motors but left the rest of the machinery and layout unchanged. The boom arrived decades later when engineers fitted individual workstations with their own small motors.

The fact that incumbent software and knowledge work companies are finding only modest productivity gains by incorporating AI into existing workflows and organisational structures, while usage, revenue and productivity explode at Anthropic and OpenAI — companies built around AI, with products written and reviewed by it — is perhaps early evidence of the same dynamic playing out here, only much faster.

I suspect both camps are correct. A lot of corporate AI use and spending today is inefficient. But realised productivity gains are capturing the interaction of powerful new tools with poorly suited structures and processes. Those frictions and bottlenecks will only ease over time.

john.burn-murdoch@ft.com

Letters

Battlefield decisions must keep humans in the loop

Your report about how the UK military is considering allowing machines to make lethal strikes without human approval highlights a shift in the ethics of warfare (FT Weekend, May 30).

Advocates argue that removing humans from the targeting loop may become necessary because adversaries are unlikely to observe the same constraints. Yet such logic risks creating a dangerous race to the bottom where ethical safeguards are dispensed with not because they have become obsolete but because

competitors may ignore them.

The issue extends beyond military effectiveness. Once machines are permitted to make life-and-death decisions independently, accountability becomes increasingly difficult to enforce. The distinction between human responsibility and algorithmic action grows blurred, particularly in contested environments where electronic interference, incomplete information and system errors can occur. Reports that autonomous systems may already

have contributed to unintended targeting incidents should reinforce, not weaken, the argument for meaningful human oversight.

The debate also reflects a broader trend in military AI development. As governments gain access to ever more powerful AI models and computational resources, the temptation to prioritise speed and operational advantage over restraint will intensify. Just as the EU AI Act imposes strict prohibitions on the use of AI in unacceptable-risk applications, we should consider the

establishment of a global AI safety governing body to enforce a similar framework for military AI applications, with lethal autonomous weapons prohibited.

Safeguards designed to preserve human judgment are not bureaucratic obstacles. They are essential protections against unintended escalation and irreversible mistakes.

Ekaterina Abramova
Adjunct Assistant Professor,
London Business School,
London NW1, UK

Where do Labour's faultlines actually lie?

Camilla Cavendish in her Opinion piece on Labour's faultlines (FT Weekend, May 16) presumes that by moving left, Labour is moving away from where the voters are. So where are the voters?

Received wisdom holds the British electorate to be broadly centrist — tilting to the right or left of centre from time to time. This was thrown out of the window by the vote in favour of Brexit, which was a strange amalgam of a populist right (Nigel Farage, Ukip, hard-right conservatives and those pretending to be so, such as Boris Johnson) and the populist left (the Red Wall in erstwhile staunch Labour voting areas). The Conservatives flirted with the right (Johnson and Liz Truss) before reverting to the centre ground (Rishi Sunak). Though Sunak lost, the right of centre was hammered by the left of centre in the form of Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party.

The recent local elections were clearly a vote against centrism and in favour of one extreme or another (Reform UK or Green). It would be too simplistic to presume, at this stage, that the broader electorate would be swayed by Reform or any other rightward lurch (eg, by the Tories) in a general election and thereby endanger the very things they have been crying out for in the northern red belt — community cohesion, jobs, housing, infrastructure and so on.

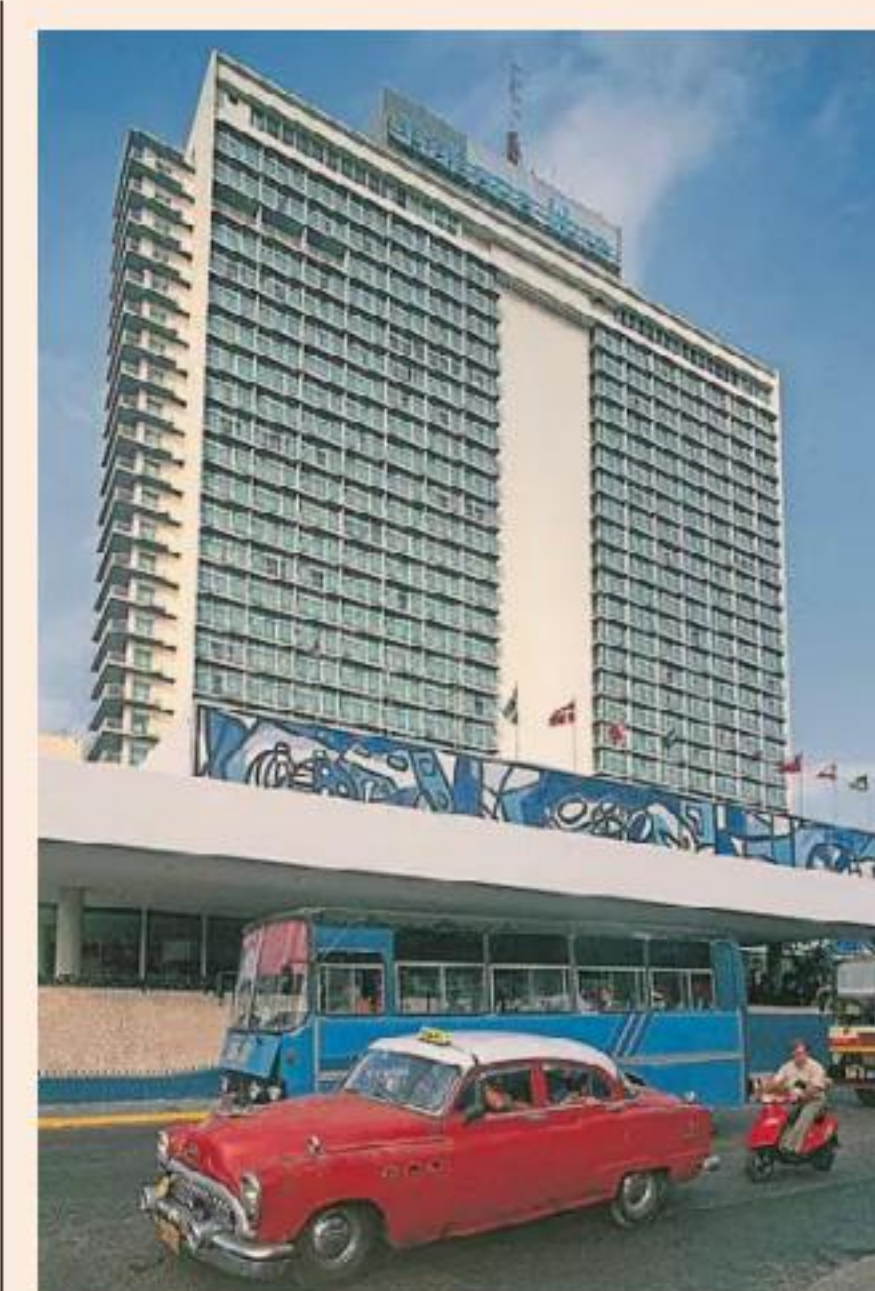
If anything, Labour's manoeuvres ought to be looked at as an attempt at internal adjustments in response to the call of the electorate. The outcome of the Makerfield by-election will reveal a great deal about that electorate. If Andy Burnham wins against a Reform tide, it would tilt Labour to the left, and not without reason or rationale. If Burnham loses, then faultlines may open up between centrists such as Wes Streeting and the “soft left”.

Sumit Guha
Woking, Surrey, UK

Look to rates, not remote work, to explain jobs crisis

The New York Fed's estimate that remote work explains 64 per cent of rising youth unemployment has circled the globe this week as established fact (Data Points, May 30). Its authors were more guarded, calling the figure a “back-of-the-envelope calculation”. The hedge is well placed because the explanation sits awkwardly with its own timeline.

If distance from colleagues were choking off entry-level hiring, the problem should be easing as workers return to the office. The opposite has happened. Even as return-to-office mandates have spread since 2022, unemployment among recent graduates in the US has kept climbing, reaching 5.6 per cent in



The former Havana Hilton was used as a headquarters by Fidel Castro

March. The supposed cause is receding while the symptom worsens.

A simpler explanation fits the dates. The “remotable” jobs that the study points to are concentrated in technology and finance, the sectors hit hardest when cheap money ended. The Fed began raising rates in March 2022, the very month the study starts measuring, leaving a labour market that protects those already employed and quietly shuts the door on newcomers. This alone would explain why unemployment among experienced graduates fell while that of new university leavers rose, without any need to blame the absent mentor.

The correlation is real. But before it hardens into received wisdom, the alternatives deserve the scrutiny the headline number has so far escaped.

Liam Johnston
New York, NY, US

Let's not penalise foreign visitors to our museums

The debate around the question of whether national museums in the UK should charge visiting tourists (Report, FT Weekend, May 2) ignores an argument against charges that was not articulated in Franklin Nelson's article. This is that visitors from abroad should be entitled to access museum collections derived from across the globe without discriminating between UK taxpayers and tourists.

Charging visitors access to collections containing acquisitions with controversial international provenance subverts the purpose and future of these museums of worldwide renown.

However, should our national museums be financially compelled to reinstate charges, the same rate should apply universally.

Claire Brisby
London SW7, UK

Ferrari's Luce — a bright idea with dim execution

After the Ferrari-themed online hysteria surrounding its new Luce electric vehicle, Nick Foulkes's open-minded assessment was refreshing (HTSI, FT Weekend, May 30).

As a professional car designer and creative director, I admire Ferrari chair John Elkann's observation that the Luce represented “a huge risk, in part unnecessary”. Unlike other apex brands, Ferrari built its reputation by embracing bold ideas rather than measured evolution, and ambitious experimentation should be welcomed.

The issue, however, is not with the ambition, but the execution. Good design requires both a compelling concept and the craft to realise it. Like artists, designers may disagree about taste but they generally recognise accomplished technique.

The Luce's technique is not convincing. Its silhouette feels awkward, with symmetrical overhangs and a wheelbase that appears short relative to its visual mass. Elements such as the glasshouse-like canopy and under-bonnet air passage have been explored more successfully elsewhere, while many of the car's identifying cues look backwards rather than forwards.

The interior is more successful, particularly in its physical-digital interactions. Yet even here a project that promises radical simplicity often falls back on automotive nostalgia, saved only by high-end materials.

Sir Jony Ive's design company LoveFrom deserves credit for taking an unconventional approach. But the result suggests that a stronger dialogue with automotive designers might have better translated its ambitious vision into a genuinely distinctive electric automobile, rather than implicitly proving the naysayers right.

Felix Kilbertus
Founder and Creative Director, The Ikari Institute, Turin, Italy

From one grammarian to another . . .

I appreciated the obituary of Colin Inman, a man who knew his words (FT Weekend, May 23).

But while we should recognise, as he says, that “fewer . . . refers to countable nouns” whereas “less . . . refers to uncountable nouns”, and I often wince at misuse, I disagree with his ban on “fewer than two years”.

Quite apart from questions of pedantry, there is a distinction worth preserving between “fewer than two years” and “less than two years”. Years are countable, and “fewer than two years” means one year or no years. But “two years” is also a chunk of time, and if something happened, say, 15 months or 18 months ago, it happened less than two years ago.

Hedley Stone
Southam, Warwickshire, UK

Faded 1950s glamour of a landmark Cuban hotel

The feature on the Hilton hotels in Istanbul and Athens (Travel, Life & Arts, May 30) reminded me of a stay at the former Hilton in Havana for a superb 20th Century Society visit to Cuba in 2007.

When it opened in 1958 it was the tallest hotel in Latin America. The partying didn't last for long; the following year Fidel Castro took over the Continental Suite and for three months the hotel was the headquarters for the revolutionary government. As relations with the US deteriorated, it was nationalised in 1960 and renamed the Habana Libre Hotel.

There was still a strong whiff of 1950s glamour in the foyer during our visit, although I imagine the US blockade is having an impact there, as it is elsewhere in the beleaguered country.

Stuart Tappin
London WCI, UK

Thucydides has further lessons for our statesmen

There has been discussion in your pages of late of the Thucydides trap (FT View, May 16): the threat posed to the incumbent hegemon Sparta by the rising power of Athens in the 5th century BC and the seeming inevitability of war.

What also may deserve attention in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* is the exhortation by the Spartan king Archidamus against a headlong rush into conflict: “Slowness and delay are nothing to be ashamed of. If you were to go to war unprepared, a hasty start could mean a drawn-out finish . . . your very slowness could be called intelligent restraint.” Archidamus warned his compatriots against “arrogance in success” and against being seduced by the “flattery of those who urge us to dangerous action against our judgment”.

As Mark Twain is reputed to have said: history does not repeat itself, but it sometimes rhymes. As to where the rhyme resides — choose your situation from our polycrisis-ridden world.

Professor Eugene Sadler-Smith
Surrey Business School
University of Surrey
Guildford, Surrey, UK

Come for the views, stay for the tap water

My sympathies and admiration are with the Italian woman cited in Henry Mance's Opinion piece who sued a five-star hotel in the Dolomites for its refusal to serve tap water (May 30). It will be small compensation for her to hear that south of those mountains, the town of Gargnano on Lake Garda has a water fountain dispensing tap, sparkling and chilled water, all for free.

Hugh Shanks
West Clandon, Surrey, UK

Opinion

Governments need to learn how to talk about debt

FINANCE

Gillian Tett



this week, average national debt burdens are forecast to hit a record 113 per cent of GDP next year – and this will worsen if a “dark scenario” of lower growth and rising rates emerges due to a long Iran war.

Some countries, such as Portugal, have managed to cut their own ratio recently. But most have not. And many are now trapped in a vicious spiral: rising populism and polarisation make it hard for politicians to impose unpopular reform. But those phenomena are surging in part because fiscal woes and economic pain are sapping public confidence. As a recent OECD report on fiscal communication noted: “Governments are being asked to manage long-term fiscal risks in an environment where public trust and people’s willingness to tolerate trade-offs are low.”

So what should governments do? I suspect that this trap is now so nasty that some will eventually decide that the solution is either to tolerate high inflation (to reduce nominal debt), impose selective defaults or embrace

“financial repression” (keeping bond interest rates below inflation to slowly cut debt at the expense of bondholders).

It was this latter route that helped the American and British governments to cut their vast debt mountains after the second world war, says the economist Carmen Reinhart. Repeating that trick today could be hard, given that repression can only work with capital and financial controls. But politicians might still want to try given that this approach would disperse the fiscal pain among bond investors – and thus be less visible to angry voters than, say, budget cuts.

Leaving aside the merits of repression, no central bank or establishment economist is likely to lobby for such policies right now. Instead the OECD is pressing governments to reduce debts in more orthodox ways, by embracing budget cuts, tax rises and growth-enhancing productivity reforms.

It is also urging them to acknowledge and address the political obstacles to dealing with debt by actively trying to win voter support and promote

understanding for the measures. “Well-designed rules and institutions remain essential for fiscal sustainability, but they are no longer sufficient.” Communication matters in a populist world.

In practical terms, the OECD argues governments need to take four steps: demystify the budget for politicians; communicate clearly with the public;

When voters understand the ways revenues are raised and spent, they tend to be more prudent

give citizens a voice in fiscal policy; and co-opt civic bodies to be fiscal advocates.

This is starting to happen. Economía para la Pipol is one example. And a non-profit called the International Budget Partnership is raising pressure on governments to be more accountable by releasing an index that scores them on transparency, mostly focused on the

global south. This shows that Brazil, say, is performing well – but Bolivia is not.

Other ideas also emerged at this week’s OECD brainstorming among finance ministers: using social media platforms, such as Instagram, to explain debt; embracing simple metaphors, such as a household budget, to explain fiscal choices. Margaret Thatcher famously deployed this analogy, and it was used again this week on the BBC by Sir Howard Davies, former chief UK financial regulator.

Andrew Dilnot, a former head of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, urged governments to spend less time pontificating about abstract issues like debt-to-GDP ratios and fiscal rules – and instead explain exactly how taxpayers’ money is spent, as a priority.

After all, most voters have no idea what a fiscal rule really is. But, as is shown by the experience of a country like Switzerland, with its canton-based fiscal system, when voters truly understand how revenues are raised and spent – and can vote on it – they tend to

become more prudent, fighting to keep debt in check. Accountability pays.

This is very sensible. But the sad reality is that humans are highly skilled at selectively ignoring bad news. So the OECD’s ideas seem unlikely to work without another ingredient: bond market pressure. After all, voters and politicians in Portugal, for example, only embraced radical debt-cutting measures after a market crisis.

So perhaps investors should now pray something like a “goldilocks” crunch emerges – a wave of bond market turmoil that is just big enough to show voters why fiscal consolidation is needed, but not so big that it craters the financial system and economy. With long-term rates now rising, it might yet arrive.

Is it cynical to wish for such a jolt? Yes. But unless initiatives like Economía para la Pipol are widely replicated, it will be the only way to concentrate minds – ideally before we face a truly devastating debt explosion.

gillian.tett@ft.com

UK political adviser seeks to follow Schwarzenegger in California, write *George Parker, Lauren Fedor and Jim Pickard*

Steve Hilton left London in 2012 for California, mocked as the Conservative “blue sky”, barefoot political adviser whose ill-fated ideas included buying cloudbusting technology to make Britain sunnier and blowing up the Foreign Office.

Almost 15 years later, to the astonishment of many in the UK, Hilton has suddenly emerged as a frontrunner to be governor of his adopted US state, hoping to follow in the Republican footsteps of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

“There was actually an immigrant who was the governor of California not that long ago,” the shaven-headed Hilton quipped, after he took the lead this week in the primary battle to be one of the final two candidates for governor.

“It is one of the most astonishing political accomplishments by any Brit,” says George Osborne, former Conservative chancellor, who worked with the idiosyncratic Hilton as he plotted the Tory election victory in 2010. “He started this campaign in California with nothing – he just had a station wagon, which he painted yellow . . . driving himself to events around the state. He demonstrated that he really wanted it.”

The Trump-supporting Hilton may not ultimately seize the prize in a state that still leans heavily Democratic. But his political reincarnation is still a remarkable plot twist. Hilton, after all, appeared to represent the antithesis of Maga when he was advising Osborne and David Cameron on how to reinvent the Tory party.

Born in 1969, Hilton grew up in a damp basement flat after the divorce of his Hungarian refugee parents, who had anglicised their surname Hircsák. His mother worked in a shoe shop and he says he felt like an “outsider”. But he excelled academically and worked his way to Oxford where he rubbed shoulders with “the elite”.

The path led him to the court of the fresh-faced Cameron, where Hilton brought a metropolitan vibe to the “nasty party”. He changed the Tory logo to a stylised green tree, sent Cameron to the melting polar ice cap, embraced gay marriage and adopted a socially liberal crime policy. It worked and Cameron became prime minister in 2010.

Hilton became the subject of fascination, padding around Number 10 barefoot and throwing out increasingly wacky ideas, such as scrapping maternity leave or replacing each department’s government press officers with a blogger.

Rory Stewart, a former Tory minister, recalled one typical encounter: “I saw him on the floor, staring at a map, saying: ‘Fuck me, look how big Scotland is. This is just fucking mad, man.’”

But Hilton quickly became frustrated with government and its stodgy civil service and in 2012 he packed it in to become a trailing spouse, joining his high-flying tech executive wife Rachel Whetstone in California. He quickly found his feet, launching a political crowdfunding start-up and spending time at Stanford University. Eventually in 2017 he began presenting a show, *The*



Person in the News | Steve Hilton

Tory aide turned would-be US governor

Next Revolution, at Fox News where he quickly became a Trump favourite. He became a US citizen in 2021.

“He just loves California,” says a friend. “He did a lot of outdoorsy stuff when he first moved out there. He kept pigs and chickens in his garden at one point.” Trump this week described Hilton as “a hard driving WINNER” and the candidate has vowed to make life easier for Californians by scrapping all state income tax on the first \$100,000 earned and freezing state university fees.

But friends of Hilton and Whetstone say that the candidate’s relentless Maga messaging – he scorned Covid lockdowns and denies Joe Biden won the 2020 election – has been awkward socially. “Their friends are tech bros. They hate this stuff,” said one friend.

Ameet Gill, a former Cameron speechwriter, says that Hilton has been “on a journey” since his tree-hugging years, but adds: “There’s a constant thread throughout: changing the status quo, shaking things up

and taking on establishment thinking.”

While Hilton was mocked in Britain for his offbeat ideas – he was parodied in the BBC show *The Thick of It* as the gobbledegook-spouting “knowledge is porridge” Stewart Pearson – on the west coast he appears to be among friends.

Lord Michael Gove, a longtime friend and former Tory minister, argues that

“There’s a thread: changing the status quo, shaking things up and taking on establishment thinking”

Hilton has found a perfect home in California. “He’s impatient, original, he’s pro-challenger, anti-elite.” Hilton blew up his bridges with Cameron by campaigning for Brexit in 2016, even though he knew a Leave vote would destroy his old friend’s premiership.

Hilton’s problem is that whatever his personal ambition or policy agenda,

party registration and recent voting data suggest that in November Californians will elect another Democratic governor to replace Gavin Newsom. Mike Madrid, former political director of California’s Republican Party, is doubtful of his chances of ultimate success in a reliably blue state.

But Hilton’s “start up” campaign has already proved a remarkable success, especially considering that one rival, Tom Steyer, a billionaire former hedge fund manager, spent \$200mn of his own money on his campaign and is only in a distant third place with 60 per cent of votes counted. Hilton’s career in front-line politics may only just be beginning.

Osborne says that Hilton’s friends in London got him wrong all along. “What was misunderstood at the time, including by people who knew him well, was that Steve didn’t want to be the adviser. He wanted to be the main man.”

george.parker@ft.com
lauren.fedor@ft.com
jim.pickard@ft.com

Wasting China’s solar panel surplus is madness

ENERGY

Adam Tooze



The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has roiled energy markets. Consumers are calling out for alternatives to unreliable fossil fuels. And yet we are in a world of surplus solar panels. Let that sink in.

After a huge surge in investment since 2020, Chinese companies have the capacity to produce a vast 1,000 gigawatts of panels per annum. The world cannot absorb the supply. More than 40 Chinese solar manufacturers have gone bust, been bought out or delisted. A third of the workforce at the top five survivors has been made redundant.

Clean power, on a scale that would have seemed utopian at the time of the Paris climate treaty in 2015, is now within reach. The price of solar panels has fallen to rock bottom. And yet factories are idling.

We have a variety of well-rehearsed arguments for discounting this dizzying state of affairs. It’s an engineering problem. Solar creates too much intermittency. Battery storage is still catching up. It’s a political economy problem. Incumbent baseload generators demand their pound of flesh. China’s own huge fleet of coal-fired power stations squeezes out demand for more solar and wind.

“It’s capitalism, innit.” All the way back in the 1850s, Karl Marx was telling us to expect giant productivity gains to go hand in hand with senseless waste. The “relations of production” – geopolitics, national security concerns, protectionism – obstruct the forward march of the green forces of production. *Quelle surprise*.

It’s China’s own fault. New research from the OECD shows that the solar industry is the most subsidised sector in the world. Once President Xi Jinping announced his commitment to decarbonisation in September 2020, overbuilding and involution were inevitable. In commodity sectors, the rush to seize market share through capacity expansion and price wars is both ruinous and par for the course. And once Beijing started cutting back on subsidies – first the feed-in tariffs and now the tax break for exports – there was bound to be fallout. If China does not absorb its own surplus production, don’t be surprised if the rest of the world cannot.

At this point, team “global imbalances” will probably chime in. If China had not been investing so much in new capacity and was instead consuming and importing more from other economies, sectors like solar would not be suffering from such overcapacity. China’s investment-driven, mercantilist model is its own worst enemy.

In general, these are fair arguments. If we were talking about steel or cement, one would nod and agree. But solar panels? Since when were solar panels just another commodity? They are a technological miracle. They make us into farmers of the sun.

For the past half century, research labs around the world, starting in the 1970s with Nasa spin-offs and the big US energy research push under Jimmy Carter, have been straining to reach this point. Together with batteries, which are also rapidly approaching the point of excess supply, they are the key to a sustainable future.

The real surprise from the OECD’s subsidy numbers is that it cost China less than \$18bn in sectoral support over 15 years to build an industry that can now provide more clean power than the world can readily absorb.

If industrial policy in the west had delivered this kind of bang for its buck, we would be patting ourselves on the back.

From the point of view of climate policy, what we are facing is a horrifying co-ordination failure – what John Maynard Keynes would have called a “muddle”. How can we be allowing a recession in the solar industry just as the renewable sector is reaching escape velocity?

But there is no need to panic. The solar industry is not an infant industry. China’s solar players, unlike their European counterparts in the early 2010s, are not in danger of withering away.

Clean power on a scale that once seemed utopian is now within reach – and yet factories are idling

China’s demand for renewable capacity will revive. Exports of Chinese solar tech to pretty much everywhere other than the US are booming. Chinese companies are constantly improving. Solar panel manufacturers are now integrating batteries to offer more stability to the grid.

Given the historic bargain of cheap clean power, at least some visionary policies are afoot. Most notable is the Mission 300 programme through which the World Bank and the African Development Bank hope to provide clean and reliable power to 300mn people in Africa.

Meanwhile, in Shanghai, a consortium of leading solar players has launched a quest to put hundreds of GW of solar in space to support orbital data centres. Their ultimate dream is a lunar AI base rated at 10,000GW.

The clean electro-tech revolution will triumph. Dirt-cheap solar panels and batteries are its shock troops. But mark 2026 as the moment when the world found itself with “more than enough” solar panels and we shrugged.

The writer is an FT contributing editor and writes the Chartbook newsletter

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