

India’s research economy has quietly changed hands

PRAVIN KAUSHAL

Buried in a slim government publication released last month is a number that deserves more attention than it has received. In 2023/24, private industry accounted for 45.2 per cent of India's gross expenditure on research and development. Three years earlier, it was 32.2 per cent. Over the same period, the government's share fell from 54.5 per cent to 48.2 per cent, below half for the first time in the history of the measurement.

For a country whose research effort has been carried on the state's shoulders since Independence, through the atomic energy establishment, the space programme, the defence laboratories and the agricultural research system, this is not a rounding error. It is a change in who pays for Indian science.

The aggregate has moved with it. National R&D spending has more than tripled in a decade, from Rs 79,356 crore in 2013/14 to Rs 2.45 lakh crore in 2023/24, and is projected to reach Rs 3.13 lakh crore in the current year. As a share of GDP, R&D intensity has climbed from 0.64 per cent in 2020/21 to 0.84 per cent, an all-time high, with 0.90 per cent projected for 2025/26. In purchasing power terms, India's research spending has roughly doubled in three years, to about \$120 billion.

The output figures point the same way. India's scientific publications grew from 78,135 in 2012 to 2,07,390 in 2022, a compound rate of 10.25 per cent against a world average of 4.74 per cent, placing the country third globally behind China and the United States. Of the 1,10,375 patent applications filed in India in 2024/25, 62 per cent came from Indian residents. The resident share of patents actually granted has risen from 15 per cent in 2013/14 to

32 per cent. There are now 5.07 lakh full-time equivalent researchers in the country, 354 per million people, up from 262 three years ago, and 1.47 lakh of them, 29 per cent, are women, against 18.6 per cent in 2020/21.

This is a real ascent, and it should be said plainly before the qualifications begin. Now the qualifications. At 0.84 per cent of GDP, India still spends less than a third of what Korea, Israel or the United States commit, and roughly a third of China's 2.58 per cent. Even the projected 0.90 per cent leaves us below Brazil. The 2 per cent mark, which is the floor for countries that intend to compete at the technological frontier, is not reachable by government budgets alone. It requires the private share to keep compounding at something close to the 20 per cent annual growth of the last three years.

The composition of that private spending also merits scrutiny. Multinationals now account for 71.3 per cent of business R&D in India, up from 49.9 per cent in 2020/21, a category that includes 252 Indian private sector multinationals alongside 124 foreign ones, so it is not simply a story of offshored back-office research. But the sectoral spread is narrow. Transportation absorbs 32.6 per cent of industrial R&D and drugs and pharmaceuticals 21.4 per cent, with biotechnology at 8.6 per cent and information technology at 7.9 per cent. These are mature industries doing mostly incremental work. Frontier bets, whether semiconductors, quantum, advanced materials or foundational AI, barely register in the numbers yet.

And then there is the gap that has defined Indian research for thirty years: the distance between a patent and a product. We file at scale. We commercialise at a fraction of that scale. The reason is well understood and rarely fixed. Basic research is funded by grants; scaled

products are funded by venture capital and revenue. In between sits the stretch where a laboratory result becomes a working prototype, the phase engineers call technology readiness levels four to six, where nobody wants to write the cheque. The risk is too high for a commercial fund and the work is too applied for a research grant. Extramural project funding across all central agencies came to Rs 3,356 crore in 2023/24: 1.4 per cent of national R&D, with 73 per cent of it going to academic institutions. That is a thin bridge over a wide valley.

This is what makes the Rs 1 lakh crore Research, Development and Innovation scheme consequential, and why it should be judged on execution rather than announcement. For the first time, public money is being routed into private sector deep tech rather than only into government laboratories. The design is deliberately arm's length. The state will not pick companies, but will capitalise second level fund managers, including SEBI registered alternative investment funds, development finance institutions and research park vehicles at the IITs, who will. The intent is patient capital, on timelines that suit a quantum sensor or a new molecule rather than a consumer app.

The scarce input here is not money. It is fund managers who can underwrite science. Indian venture capital has served the country well for two decades, but its instincts were trained on a different asset class: fund lives of eight to ten years, product market fit within a year, scale by year three. Those clocks do not fit deep tech, and the mindset behind them is not something a corpus can purchase. Building that underwriting capability, people who can read a physics paper and a cap table with equal fluency, is the quiet, unglamorous work on which the whole scheme rests.

Two other conditions matter as



much. Infrastructure and talent must be accessible to a start-up that cannot build its own fabrication line or characterisation facility. And there must be a buyer. In defence, space, health and energy, the government is the market, and procurement that favours a domestic prototype over a proven import is often worth more to a deep tech firm than another funding round.

Some of this is already being assembled. The Anusandhan National Research Foundation has begun organising mission mode, outcome-oriented programmes with industry participation. The National Quantum Mission runs four hubs, covering computing, communication, sensing, and materials and devices, with fourteen technical groups drawing on 43 institutions. A publicly backed consortium is building a sovereign large language model trained for Indian languages and contexts, on the reasonable view that a country which is among the world's largest users of foreign AI systems, and whose data trains them, should own at least one of its own. Thirteen scientific ministries now convene on a shared annual platform rather than operating in parallel.

The underlying shift is cultural, and it is worth naming. India spent decades taking pride in jugaad, the improvised fix that worked around scarcity. Jugaad was a rational response to constraint. The constraint is easing, and the improvisation should ease with it. Structured innovation, defensible intellectual property and technology built to be owned rather than borrowed are what a country of this size and ambition should now expect of itself.

Which brings me to the least discussed achievement in all of this. The survey behind these figures covered more than 8,000 research performing institutions and was revived after a gap of nearly three years. Numbers of this kind are not merely descriptive. They let policymakers, investors and industry look at the same picture, argue from the same baseline, and hold the system to targets it has publicly accepted. That is how a research economy becomes accountable rather than aspirational.

The flywheel is turning. It now needs to turn considerably faster.

The writer is an entrepreneur and columnist, and tweets as @pravinikaushal.

RBI’s neutrality is not passive

SANKALPA BHATTACHARJEE

On 5 August 2026, the Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) unanimously decided to keep the repo rate unchanged at 5.25 per cent and retain its neutral stance. The decision extends a policy pause that has been in place since December 2025. Yet to interpret it as policy inertia would be a mistake. At a time when the global economy is navigating geopolitical conflict, volatile energy markets, and shifting trade patterns, the RBI has chosen strategic patience over premature activism.

At first glance, the decision appears paradoxical. The central bank simultaneously raised its FY27 GDP growth forecast to 6.7 per cent from 6.6 per cent and lowered its inflation projection to 5 per cent from 5.1 per cent. Conventional monetary logic would suggest that stronger growth accompanied by a softer inflation outlook creates room for rate cuts. However, far from being contradictory, the decision reflects a forward-looking assessment that monetary policy must respond not merely to current outcomes, but to the balance of risks embedded in an uncertain future.

The rationale for a neutral stance rests on three considerations.

First, there is no compelling case for emergency policy support.

Domestic demand remains resilient, supported by buoyant private consumption and robust manufacturing activity. High-frequency indicators continue to suggest growth momentum, with the RBI projecting output growth of 7 per cent in the first quarter of FY27 and robust expansion over the remainder of the year. In such circumstances, a rate cut would do little to accelerate activity while potentially risking unnecessary macroeconomic vulnerabilities.

Second, inflation risks remain predominantly supply-driven. While core inflation (excluding precious metals) remains broadly contained, CPI inflation is expected to average 5 per cent during FY27, rise through the third quarter, and moderate only thereafter. The principal threats originate outside the conventional demand cycle: geopolitical tensions in West Asia, volatile crude oil prices, and weather-related disruptions linked to El Niño. These are not shocks that monetary easing can address. Lower interest rates cannot produce crude oil, repair disrupted shipping routes or offset adverse weather. What they can do is weaken inflation expectations if introduced prematurely. A neutral stance, therefore, is not indecision; it is an appropriate response to supply-side uncertainty.

Third, the external sector reinforces the case for restraint. India's macroeconomic stability remains structurally sensitive to global energy markets. A sustained rise in crude oil prices feeds imported inflation, widens the trade deficit, strains the current account, and weakens the rupee. Recent trade data illustrate this vulnerability. In June 2026, exports of goods and services rose by 9.48 per cent year-on-year to \$73.45 billion, but imports surged by 26.84 per cent to \$88.76 billion, widening the overall trade deficit more than fivefold, to \$15.32 billion from just \$2.89 billion a year earlier.

The rupee, which traded around 95.20 to the dollar on August 6, and is still close to its record low of Rs 96.84 struck in May 20, has borne much of that pressure. Reserves, at a near four-month high of \$692.9 billion as of July 31, boosted by a June-launched scheme drawing foreign-currency deposits from non-resident Indians, which has already mobilised around \$40 billion, comfortably cover more than ten months of imports and 90.8 per cent of external debt.

However, this comfort has been actively purchased through sustained intervention rather than the currency finding its own level. This reinforces rather than complicates the case for holding: a weaker rupee itself



feeds the same food-and-fuel pressures the MPC expects to prove transient, arguing against any haste to ease, while a currency propped up mainly through intervention leaves little room for a future cut either, since narrowing the India-US rate gap would test the reserve cushion just when external risk is elevated. Neutral, therefore, does double duty: anchoring inflation expectations and preserving room for currency defence at once.

What can neutrality not deliver? A repo rate of 5.25 per cent against a 5.9 per cent Q3 CPI inflation forecast implies real rates turn meaningfully negative by the December quarter – a real loosening of effective policy without a nominal cut, testing the MPC's 4 per cent (±2 point) mandate for a sustained stretch, not one quarter. More importantly, holding rates does nothing to shield households from food and fuel inflation, whose burden falls disproportionately on lower-income families where the stakes are the highest.

On balance, the MPC's arithmetic is sound. An immediate rate cut would have delivered limited gains for growth while increasing risks to inflation expectations, exchange-rate stability and external balances. Yet neutrality should not be mistaken for passivity. With inflation set to breach 5.5 per cent by Q4 FY27, real rates turning negative, and the rupee held near record lows only through active intervention, the RBI has a narrower corridor than the calm tone of the policy statement suggests.

The real test comes not in August but in December, when the MPC must show inflation is truly moderating, and that the rupee's defence can hold without recourse to the policy rate. For now, the RBI has chosen prudence over activism, which, under the current circumstances, seems more valuable than a premature display of policy activism.

The writer is a faculty member in the Economics & Public Policy Area at the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Ranchi. Views are personal.

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On rural jobs, the 60:40 dilemma



OFF THE RECORD
BY P VAIDYANATHAN IYER

NO STATE likes it when the Centre asks it to share a burden it never did in the past. More so in these times, when political parties have, in a race to the bottom, made fiscally unsustainable promises to win Assembly elections.

Naturally then, states, particularly those ruled by the Opposition, threw a fit after the Centre suddenly changed the rules of the game and asked them this year to partly provide for the big-ticket National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. For 20 long years, all states were happy when it was fully funded by the Centre — in the first 10 years by the UPA government after it launched the scheme in 2006, and later by the NDA government.

Under the scheme, now rechristened as Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) or VB-G RAM-G, if a state requires Rs 100 crore in a year, the Centre will give Rs 60 crore from the Union Budget, and the state will give Rs 40 crore

from the state Budget. For Himalayan and Northeastern states, the Centre-state split is 90:10; for Union Territories without legislatures, the Centre will fully fund the scheme. Earlier, the Centre provided the entire amount of wages for all states.

It is not just the Opposition, but also those where the BJP is in power, which feel the fiscal stress of the change in rules. They, too, complain, but in private, because the resource kitty is limited, significant expenditure remains sticky and inflexible, and they, too, have to make tough choices on how and where to spend the scarce revenues they earn.

The opposition to the Centre's move is not just political, but social, economic and fiscal too. Political, understandably, because this was a flagship scheme introduced by the Congress but never seen as transformative by the BJP. Social, since it offered livelihood and a minimum income security to poor farmers and labourers who could not get any other job. Economic, because the NREGA wage acted like a floor, and NREGA job card holders leveraged it to deny work offers with wages lower than this. Fiscal, because states are perpetually strapped for cash.

While the Finance Ministers of BJP states have little choice but to toe the national party line, those of Opposition states — Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and Jharkhand — spoke out. In Budget speech after speech, they condemned the Centre for requiring them to take care of 40% expendi-

Given the states' opposition to the funding pattern of VB-G RAM-G, why would they make budget allocations? One, they have little choice. But more importantly, it is true the scheme has transformed the way the rural economy works

ture. Some wanted the Centre to uphold the principles of decentralised governance and rights of rural workers, others demanded restoration of 100% funding, and yet others threatened legal recourse.

In his March 20 Budget speech, Telangana Finance Minister Bhatti Vikramarka Mallu said: "This is not just a scheme; it is an 'employment right' provided to the common person. Over the past two decades, this scheme has brought about a silent revolution in villages." Then Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah, who also held the Finance portfolio, was more frontal in his attack. "Our Government remains committed to pursuing all appropriate recourse, including legal measures, to safeguard the rights of rural workers and uphold the principles of decentralised governance," he said in his March 6 Budget speech. Every other Opposition state i.e., Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Punjab and Kerala, said the rule change is not right, and hurts rural worker's interests.

All this makes for good optics in the political theatre. But despite the restrictions and new funding pattern, Opposition states have embraced realpolitik, and for good reasons. This shows in their budget allocation for VB-G RAM-G scheme in this financial year. In his Budget speech on August 5, Tamil Nadu Finance Minister N Marie Wilson said the state has made an "unprecedented" contribution of Rs 5,057 crore. This translates to exactly 40% of the total VB-G

RAM-G budget of Rs 12,642 crore for the state in 2026-27. Three other states provided 40% of their share: Karnataka Rs 3,806.61 crore (40% of Rs 9,516 crore), Telangana Rs 2,550.21 crore (40% of Rs 6,375 crore) and Jharkhand Rs 1,853 crore (40% of Rs 4,558 crore). Tamil Nadu, in fact, went a step ahead and said it will provide 150 days employment (25 days more than the VB-G RAM-G scheme) by bearing an extra expenditure of Rs 100 crore.

Kerala Chief Minister VD Satheesan said he has allocated Rs 1,422 crore; this is just 27% of the Rs 5,226 crore VB-G RAM-G total estimated budget for the state) in the first phase, Punjab Rs 608 crore (27% of Rs 2,218 crore total estimated budget), and Himachal Rs 50.94 crore (4% of Rs 1,337 crore as against the required 10%). It is pretty certain states will provide fully for it during the course of the year.

Given such strident opposition, why would all states do it? One, they have little choice. But more importantly, it is true the scheme has transformed the way the rural economy works, providing not just employment security, but wage security too. Nobody quite bothers about the Minimum Wages Act. But for this scheme, rural wages in states will collapse. States are, at the end of the day, putting their money where their mouth is.

The writer is Managing Editor, The Indian Express.
Off the Record is a fortnightly column

An ill wind blows



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

IF I were young and Indian, I would be in the Cockroach Janta Party. Ironically, for the same reasons that I once became a Modi Bhakt. Having spent my entire life in the shabby, squalid, socialist country that was created under successive Congress prime ministers, I supported Modi because I thought he would bring radical changes to rectify what had gone wrong. Among the things that had gone most wrong was the inexplicable lack of investment in the human capital of this ancient land.

It should surprise no political pundit that the cockroaches made education their first cause. The trigger was the leak of NEET exam papers, but it was only a trigger. The condition of ordinary government schools across India is truly awful. Last week, if you were watching the news channels, you would have seen children in Madhya Pradesh leaping from one pillar to the next to cross a raging dam while going to school. This state has been governed by a 'double-engine' government for more than a decade.

After the Jantar Mantar protest, schoolgirls in another BJP state took to the streets to say that their school had neither teachers, toilets or drinking water. I have seen rural schools where barefoot children come and sit in classrooms bereft of desks, chairs and textbooks. They come just to eat the mid-day meal. These meals are often cooked on primitive mud stoves in hovel-like, rodent-infested kitchens and many children get very sick from eating their midday meal, but for millions of Indian schoolchildren, this is the only real meal they get to eat.

Modi and his ministers like to boast about the millions of Indians they have freed from poverty in the past twelve years. But keep in mind that 800 million Indians receive free government foodgrain rations, and you will remember that there are millions more still shackled by poverty and degradation. When they come to the cities in search of jobs, they are forced to live in shacks in squalid shanties. The jobs they manage to get are usually of a menial kind, even if they have learned to read and write. But life is better here because little girls do not have to spend their mornings searching for water for the family.

When none of these ugly realities changed under Modi, I stopped being a devotee. From the recent protests, it is evident that millions of young Indians have also lost hope. Many would have come from homes where parents placed their own hopes in Modi and voted for him in three general elections. But older Indians seem able to absorb despair. Not so, the young. So, if I had been an Indian between the ages of eighteen and thirty, I would have been marching in step with the protesters.

It now seems the RSS is also marching in step. It came as a pleasant surprise last week when its chief, Mohan Bhagwat, spoke out in open support of the protesters. He said, 'If Gen-Z and Gen-Alpha are protesting, it does not make them anti-national. They are more honest than older generations.' I am always wary of the RSS, but Bhagwat made an important speech. And the Prime Minister would do well to call him for chai and a private chat to seek his advice on how to move forward.

In his own attempts to sound sympathetic to the protesters, Modi has ended up saying too many things the wrong way and has inspired many memes of much higher quality than anything produced by the BJP's IT cell. The result is that the young people he is trying to reach continue to mock him with songs that are irreverent and hilarious. Nobody has laughed at Modi ever, so he has shown himself incapable of dealing with what is going on. His minions in the media are trying to help as best they can by mocking the Cockroach leaders on their nightly TV shows but to little effect. When minion anchor 'numero uno' screeched last week that he was proud of Modi's 'Indian accent', he just ended up looking like a goof.

Then, as if the times were not bad enough, arrived that result from Bihar in which Prashant Kishor (PK), a hero of mine, ended up trashing the BJP in a constituency that was considered the impregnable fortress of the man who is now national president of the party. In the speeches he made after winning, PK talked of the need to improve education in Bihar. And he talked of the rampant corruption in our poorest state. The things he said could apply to most states in our proud and ancient land.

There is no question that for Modi, there is an ill wind blowing, but there is no sign yet that this will benefit the opposition parties when the next round of elections happens a few months from now. Every so-called leader in the INDIA bloc comes from privilege and entitlement, and every political party in it is little more than a private limited company.

If there is any hope in this dismal time, it comes from young people who are unafraid to publicly declare that they are sick to death of what their country has become and they are there to change it. Modi's minions can screech about the cockroaches being funded by anti-India agents, but this rant is stale and old.



INSIDE TRACK | BY COOMI KAPOOR

LAMPPOSTS LEAVE LACUNAS

The education ministry will be under intense scrutiny in the wake of student protests, but Dharmendra Pradhan's successor, Pralhad Joshi, already has his plate full. He holds the portfolios for consumer affairs, public distribution, and new and renewable energy. There have now been 5 education ministers and 7 ministers of information and broadcasting under Prime Minister Modi, compared to relative continuity in other ministries, such as finance, defence and home. One reason for Joshi's hasty selection is his proximity to the RSS, which constantly interferes in the ministry, whether on curricula, appointments or educational institutes.

Many apprehend that the BJP high command's cavalier, unilateral selection of senior positions has harmed the party's public perception. The surprisingly unsuitable CM picks in states such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Bihar without democratic discussion, sometimes largely on caste calculations and electoral strategies, have begun to backfire. Prashant Kishor's spectacular win in BJP's Bankipur assembly bastion was a referendum against both Bihar Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary and BJP President Nitin Nabin, both considered unsuitable choices. When an untested Nabin was named the president, many wondered whether senior experienced party organisers would be willing to work under him. Nabin failed in his first test as president — selecting the BJP candidate for his former constituency. Some compare the party's recent appointments to Indira Gandhi's hubris in the 1970s when she assumed that even a lamppost could win if propelled by her own popularity.

DIVIDED HOUSE

Also disturbing are the visible cracks in a party, which takes pride in its cadres' discipline. Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari's followers suspect he was deliberately targeted on the government's ethanol policy, even though it was not his decision, by enemies within, backed by the petroleum lobby. Influencers active in the anti-Gadkari campaign have earlier worked on some BJP election campaigns. Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde has complained repeatedly to the PM that Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis does not keep him in the loop. The universally respected Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav was taken aback to find that most of his personal staff had been replaced overnight. After his resignation, Dharmendra Pradhan was pointedly felicitated by senior colleagues, and he also met RSS General Secretary Dattatreya Hosabale. Some disgruntled BJP members felt UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath acted with unseemly haste in ordering an SIT to investigate the 'chanda chori' allegations at Ayodhya, without an FIR. In fact, the CM was conscious that his political opponents would try to gain mileage from the scandal in next year's assembly elections.

SUDDEN VULNERABILITY

The BJP government's sudden vulnerability after its brush with Generation Z is compared to the moment of truth during the 2024 poll results, when it found itself 32 MPs short of a majority. The ruling party made up lost ground and defied the odds to win a string of uncertain assembly elections, with Bengal its crowning triumph. But now the wheel of fortune appears to have turned against it, and there are signs of a more accommodating government outreach.

It is not the traditional opposition parties that pose the real challenge, but a restless, aspirational young India. The BJP has lost ground in two spheres once considered its core strengths — youth leadership and communication. Potential BJP youth leaders have either been sidelined or have lost their fire after being co-opted into the system. After 12 years in power, the party's narrative builders appear arrogant and intimidating; their messages do not click with Gen Z. Pertinently, 52 per cent of our population is under 30. Caste and religious divides or direct doles may not be the magic mantra for future elections. Government accountability may matter most.

ART OF SPEAKING SOFTLY

Sunil Kanugolu, the McKinsey-trained poll analyst, usually accompanies Congress general secretary KC Venugopal for discussions on election strategy. A recent meeting with Punjab Congress leaders Charanjit Channi and Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa in Delhi did not go well. Venugopal, armed with the statistics supplied by Kanugo, rudely ticked off the two Punjab strongmen, claiming they overestimated their electoral clout. Such blunt speaking may work in South India, but the two proud Punjabis, one a former CM and the other a deputy CM, took offence and walked out of the room.

CLUBBED DOWN?

Delhi's hallowed Gymkhana Club has virtually stopped taking bookings for its premises for September. Shaken members fear their worst nightmare — the club's actual closure.

Sabiha Khanum

WHEN THE first copies of *Fractured Communities, Adivasi Histories and Power* arrived at our home, my husband and I opened the parcel together. We looked at the cover for a long time. It should have been a happy afternoon. Our son should have been there, signing a copy for us, smiling at our excitement. Instead, he remains in prison under UAPA, where he has spent nearly six years without his trial even beginning.

Umar's book grew out of his doctoral research at Jawaharlal Nehru University. He submitted his thesis in July 2018. By then, he had already been charged with sedition, had already spent time in prison, and had been rusticated from the university he spent years at. I remember him writing whenever he could, fitting it around his arrest, vicious media trial, risks to his physical safety, and court hearings. Some people imagine a thesis as something produced in the comfort of libraries. His was written in the shadow of uncertainty, and the constant knowledge that his freedom is now conditional for life.

In the book, Umar looks at the Adivasi communities of Singhbhum during British rule. He argues that they were never a single, unified group, but communities who responded to colonial rule in different ways; that their histories cannot be reduced to one narrative. Reading it now, I find myself thinking that this is true far beyond the history of Adivasi communities. For years, I have seen people reduce my son to whatever version of him suits them. Those who support him often see only one part of him. Those who oppose him see even less. This book, however, asks us to listen, and to allow complexity over binary and certainty.

Ramachandra Guha, who wrote the foreword, describes it as one of the finest doctoral dissertations by an Indian scholar that he has read. As Umar's mother, I felt proud reading this. I wonder if I am proud of him for surviving these years in unlawful incarceration with such grace and courage or I am more proud of him for the words in front of me. No parent expects to measure their child's achievements against the passing years of incarceration. Yet that is what these years have become.

It makes me sad that Umar cannot step into a bookshop and see his own book. He



In his book, Umar Khalid looks at the Adivasi communities of Singhbhum during British rule

cannot attend its launch or speak to its readers. But I am also happy to see that the book has begun its own journey. It can travel freely in ways its author cannot. I do not know what it means for a democracy when a man's scholarship can be published, praised, and read widely while the state that holds him has still not managed, after six years, to bring the case against him to trial. The waiting itself has become the punishment, regardless of what a court eventually decides.

Not long ago, the Delhi High Court granted bail to a Kashmiri human rights activist, Parvez Khurram, who had spent four-and-a-half years in prison under the UAPA. The court said that the long period spent in custody, and the fact that his trial was unlikely to end soon, were important reasons to grant him bail. The bench was headed by the same judge who, only a few months earlier, had refused Umar bail. By then, Umar had already spent five years in prison without trial. Sharjeel Imam had spent even longer. In that order, the court said that the delay in trial was not enough to justify bail. How can the same law, before the same judge, lead to such different conclusions?

The Supreme Court's own benches have disagreed with each other on this. One judgment questioned how a later ruling could be allowed to override the precedent set by KA Najeeb, which had held that when a person has already spent years in custody with no trial in sight, the harsher

provisions of the UAPA ought to give way, and the constitutional promise of liberty should take precedence. For those watching from outside, these may appear to be legal questions. For families like ours, they are measured in parents who grow frailer with every passing year, sisters who have celebrated one festival after another without their brother, nieces and nephews who have grown from toddlers into schoolchildren without ever knowing what it is like to have their uncle at home, and years that cannot be returned.

I have come to believe that a democracy is judged not only by the laws it makes, but by how it treats those who live under them. It is judged by whether people are given a fair chance to defend themselves, by how long they are made to wait, and whether justice can still be served before a life has passed by.

If you choose to read *Fractured Communities*, read it not only because its author is in prison, but because it is a serious work of scholarship. The conversation it begins about history, power and the lives of people we simplify too easily is enough for you to ask what kind of power structure keeps the author in jail for years without trial. Perhaps, in reading it, you may also come a little closer to the person who has so long been spoken about, by others in the ways they perceive him. By reading his book, you will get to listen to him in his own voice.

The writer is an entrepreneur

Before I do: What private eyes reveal about marriage

NOT ALL that long ago, arranging a marriage involved merely matching janampatris and horoscopes, gotras and castes. Families depended on relatives and chit-chat from their communities to veto a prospective spouse. Some amount of premarital due diligence is not new, but private investigators across India have reported a huge jump in enquiries for background checks post the Lohagad Fort tragedy. It turns out people are spooked by the story of 20-something Siya Goyal who allegedly pushed her fiancé Ketan Agarwal into a gorge. Today, the first question raised by either side is: has the bride or groom been verified?

Fresh data reveals a profound sociological shift in that signs of dissipation are no longer presumed to be the sole preserve of men; women are being thoroughly scrutinised as well. Post Siya, a respectable family name is no longer a guarantee of having raised an innocent damsel of stellar character.

A quick Google search revealed the exhausting checklist agencies suggest in the age of online matrimony, beginning with identity fraud. This cynical approach may be the need of the hour, but I can't help but wonder how the young and hopeful wrap their heads around such depressing protocols. Should someone even be in the reckoning as a life partner if you can't be sure their Aadhaar and PAN Card are genuine? The agencies sternly warn against precisely this kind of starry-eyed sentimentality by stressing that verification isn't about suspicion — rather about making an informed decision, knowing the facts on hand. After perusing a private eye's financial and legal background questionnaire, I noticed with some alarm that I would have totally failed this test. Who, in their mispent youth, hasn't defaulted on a few credit card bills? Or, not got along with a boss? Maybe, even two-timed a bit. Goof-ups are part of growing up, and there's the thought that not everybody is super enthused by the pillar-of-society type.



ON THE LOOSE
BY LEHER KALA

If you really want to dig up dirt on somebody, it's not that difficult. Considering how normalised surreptitiously delving into potential partners' histories is, it's clear that it's only in our imaginations we believe that marriages are made in heaven. On earth, a canny instinct kicks in, telling us a background check will stand us in good stead. It's also true that for most of history, people have viewed marriage as a financial arrangement rather than a romantic ideal. As Jane Austen observed wryly in *Pride and Prejudice*, happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. Deep knowledge of a partner's flaws does not necessarily guarantee a happy union; at best it makes for fewer unpleasant surprises. In a modern scenario, the saying 'forewarned is forearmed' has taken hold of our psyche. Today's young move in pursuit of careers, marry later and lead lives invisible to parents back home. It's the lifestyle between college and marriage that these agencies investigate for red flags, mainly to see whether someone's personality aligns with their claims.

No doubt, this determined quest for transparency stems from a place of existential self-protection; indeed, everyone needs to safeguard themselves from getting embroiled in the horrors of India's divorce courts. Risk mitigation — the process of planning and taking action to reduce potential threats — when applied to marriage sounds clinical and unromantic, maybe even wrong. It's saying, before a relationship has even begun, that emotions alone don't sustain anything. While that's true, as thinking, feeling human beings, it's hard to acknowledge that a new journey must begin with a deficit of trust, but that if one is willing to adjust the framing, it's possible to create something real. We tend to believe that the future of marriage will be more civilised than the past, having ironed out so many imperfections along the way. Much as we try to gather truths and reason our way through life, it's anybody's guess how things work out.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

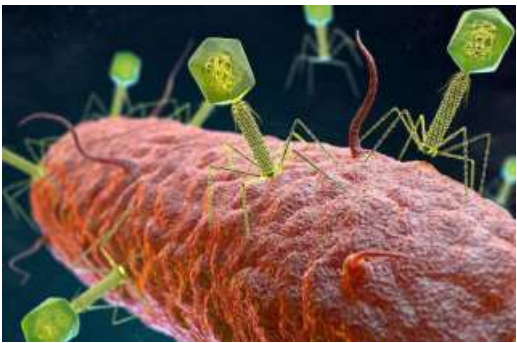
SCIENCE

Hold tight: how two hurricanes forced a lizard to change its grip

D.P. Kasbekar

Picture a lizard the length of your finger clinging to a tree branch. The cause of its desperation is a 265 km/hr wind threatening to peel it off like a sticker. This happened twice to a population of anoles in the Turks and Caicos Islands in September 2017. So since then, these lizards have evolved to cling harder. Four days before Hurricane Irma made landfall, scientists from Princeton and Harvard Universities had wrapped up a routine survey of the Turks and Caicos anole (*Anolis scriptus*) on two islands, Pine Cay and Water Cay. They studied the limbs, toes, and toepads, collected tissue samples, and went home. They'd had no idea a hurricane was coming, let alone two. Irma arrived on September 8 with sustained winds of 265 km/hr. Maria followed on September 22 at 200 km/hr. The storms flattened vegetation and a great many lizards. Six weeks later, the team returned to the islands and found something peculiar about the lizards that were around. Compared to before the storm, the anoles had longer forelimbs, shorter hind legs, shorter toes on those hind legs, and larger front and back toepads. They reported these changes in *Nature* in 2018, describing them as the handiwork of evolution. But one detail from that survey nagged at them: the fourth hind toe, the longest one, had actually become shorter. If longer toes mean better grip, why would evolution shorten one? The answer has finally been reported in a new study in *Current Biology*. On a more recent trip to Pine Cay and Water Cay, the researchers found five genes had independently – over the two islands – become more frequent after the storms. All five genes are known to be involved in muscle and skeletal development. One in particular, *hs6stl*, seemed to be responsible for the shorter fourth toe in the surviving Turks and Caicos anoles. To confirm, the team turned to brown anoles (*Anolis sagrei*). Using CRISPR, they knocked out *hs6stl* in brown anole embryos, which were born with shorter fourth toes. Next, they built a wind tunnel, placed brown anoles on a wooden dowel, and subjected them to winds of 118 km/hr. The footage revealed that the lizards held on with their front legs twice as long as with their back legs, on average. Thus, two hurricanes 14 days apart had managed to rewire the lizards' genome – an example of evolutionary biology on steroids. (The author is a retired scientist)

SNAPSHOTS



Scientists use AI to design viruses to kill hardy bacteria

Scientists have used AI to design entire genomes for bacteriophages, viruses that infect and kill bacteria. Using 'genome language models', they generated thousands of new DNA sequences, then used them with a well-studied virus called X174 as a template to yield 16 functional viruses. These phages were different from any found in nature, and could together successfully kill bacteria known to resist natural viruses. The work offers a path to create treatments to fight drug-resistant bacteria.



Snails tweak one ingredient for five mucus recipes

Cepaea nemoralis snails produce five types of mucus for different tasks, such as crawling, sticking to surfaces, and defence, 'tuning' the properties using calcium. Most animal mucus is slippery but snail mucus is versatile. Scientists found that it contains collagen VI as the building block, with the snails secreting calcium carbonate granules to adjust thickness and stickiness. This simple adjustment creates anything from a lubricant to a protective barrier, and could inspire new materials in medicine.



Records reveal engineering's effect on Yangtze floods

Human engineering and land-use changes have intensified flood risks on the Yangtze river in the last 500 years. Scientists found that while flood frequency peaked during the Little Ice Age (1500-1850), human interventions have made recent floods more severe. Embankments increased the intensity of "100-year floods" by 18% and lake reclamation by 8%. The findings show how engineering projects intended to control floods have worsened their impact.

Traditional diets shape unique gut microbes of Indian tribes

Research on Indian tribal populations shows that traditional diets foster unique gut bacteria; the findings show an urgent need for biobanking to preserve microbial diversity and develop region-specific probiotic therapies as required

Rohini Karandikar

The gut microbiomes of eight tribal populations across India have a unique diversity shaped by their traditional diets and are distinct from those observed in industrialised settings, researchers have reported in *Gut Microbes*. The effects of probiotics depend on a population's diet and gut composition, and the study offers a baseline for India's tribal communities. It also points to the research still needed before such interventions can be tailored effectively. The study's authors have also stressed a need to preserve these microbiomes in biobanks before the diversity disappears. India has a large indigenous population that follows diverse diets based on location and culture. However, they are also under-represented in global human microbiome studies, making up less than 1% of the human microbiome samples. "The Indian microbiome is very different compared to the Western population, with an enormous diversity within India," said Dhiraj Dhotre, a scientist at the National Centre for Cell Science (NCCS), Pune, and the study's co-corresponding author. "Secondly, the entire microbiome is shaped by our long-term dietary habits."

The study was led by researchers from NCCS in collaboration with scientists from other institutions in India, Finland, and the U.S. In the study, the team investigated the effects of dietary variation across eight tribal cultures on their gut microbiomes. These communities were from four regions: Warli from the western coast, Madiya and Gond from the northeastern Deccan plateau, Kabui from northeast India, and Brokpa, Purigpa, Balti, and Boto from the trans-Himalayas. Of these, 76 healthy adults contributed dietary data and faecal samples for study. The team's analysis revealed that the diet of the trans-Himalayan communities mainly included a variety of grains and dairy while those of the other four tribes significantly differed, as they included home-brewed alcoholic beverages, fish, fruits, and/or greens and stems. The gut microbiota of the trans-Himalayan population was also more diverse and included a distinct strain of the bacterium *Bifidobacterium adolescentis*. The researchers associated this pattern with high dairy consumption. "The dairy component in the diet has [exerted] an evolutionary selection pressure, due to which specific microbes have been established," Abhijit Kulkarni, lead co-author of the study and former PhD student at NCCS, said. *Bifidobacterium* bacteria are known to improve gut health and are a major component of commercial probiotics. However, Dr. Dhotre cautioned against considering it to be a universal marker of a healthy microbiome. "It is not that only healthy individuals have *Bifidobacterium* and others do not. Those consuming diets other than dairy and grains may harbour different organisms that can provide similar health benefits," he said. Among other species, *Bifidobacterium* bacteria convert dietary carbohydrates into short-chain fatty acids. In infants, the enzyme lactase converts lactose in milk to glucose and galactose. However, in adults, bacteria like *Bifidobacterium* take over and help ferment lactose. The trans-Himalayan population's microbiome showed enriched pathways of lactose and galactose metabolism and plant-degrading carbohydrate-active enzymes. The researchers also compared the microbial diversity from tribal communities with that from previously described samples from California, an industrialised setting, and found that the tribal gut microbiome was distinct. "It becomes interesting to see how your human biological evolution, microbial presence, and cultural trait of having dairy or milk in your diet all go hand in hand to create not only human diversity but also affect the microbial diversity," Dr. Shantanu Ozarkar, a co-author and a biological anthropologist from Savitribai Phule Pune University, said. Researchers did note that the study's sample size was small – yet they were able to identify 14 putatively novel bacterial taxa from 76 participants. The work in this study led to the conceptualisation of the Indian Human Microbiome Initiative, which concluded recently with the goal of "sampling more than 3,400 individuals across [India] from 10 endogenous and 7 tribal communities."

Microbial riches

New research offers a baseline to understand the effects of probiotics in India's tribal communities

■ A study of eight Indian tribal populations reveals unique microbial diversity shaped by their traditional dietary habits

■ Indian populations remain under-represented in microbiome research, making up less than 1% of samples in international studies

■ High dairy consumption in trans-Himalayan tribes is linked to unique bacterial strains that improve gut health

■ Tribal microbiomes differ from industrialised datasets, although globalisation is beginning to influence some specific microbial profiles

■ Scientists emphasise the importance of using biobanks to preserve indigenous microbiomes before urbanisation destroys them

■ The study also highlights the need for regional studies to develop diet-specific probiotic interventions for India



A group of Balti children in 2008. MARIA LY (CC BY)

Staying curious can help preserve vitality in old age



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE
D. Balasubramanian

It is estimated that in India on an average day, about 19,500 people celebrate their 60th birthday. The size of India's population aged 60 and above is expected to surpass the population aged 0-14 years by 2046. Accompanying this 'silver tsunami' is the dizzying pace of new technologies, which go from being useful to becoming indispensable. And there is so much more available for you to learn. Learning, before 60 or long after, is no longer about stepping out of retirement. It is a lifelong process that can keep us connected, sharp, and thriving. In India, learning in the later years of life has largely been focused on imparting basic skills to the rural elderly, who have not benefited from formal education. But this is transitioning towards lifelong learning for educated seniors and requires an eager willingness and discipline.

Adding vitality

A narrow view of life is that you study when you are young, work for four decades, and then retire. Viewed this way, learning is merely training for a job – important when you are working but not in later years. However, learning is also about enriching our lives, and in the process keeping cognitive decline at bay. Thus, wanting to learn goes beyond workplace requirements. It adds enthusiasm and reduces anxieties and loneliness. When you compare 80-year-olds, women outnumber men by a ratio of 5:3. But late-life learning presents unique hurdles for women, who are more likely to be financially dependent and have more ongoing caregiving responsibilities. To balance these demands, women learners often thrive on flexible, bite-sized learning formats. Extending life without preserving health is not a worthwhile gain. In India, healthy life expectancy at birth lags behind overall life expectancy by nearly 11 years, meaning the average Indian spends their final decade battling chronic illness. Continuous learning offers a remarkably effective buffer against this decline. By building cognitive reserve and preserving functional independence, lifelong curiosity doesn't just add years to your life. It adds vitality to your years. Real-life learning Just as going to the gym builds physical stamina to comfortably climb extra flights of stairs when needed, cognitive reserve builds a functional safety net – a form of reserve strength you can draw on when needed. Cognitive reserve allows you to cope with the inevitable age-related damage to the brain. The neuronal connections made during learning new things help keep your brain functionally robust in attributes such as memory and conversational skills, even when your brain deteriorates to the same extent as a person with dementia. Staying curious in our later years also results in improved health literacy. We rarely worry about good nutritional choices or how much to sleep when we are young. Acquiring such practical knowledge, along with reduced stress and greater mental well-being, helps us live healthier, longer lives. The scope of learning can extend beyond courses to hands-on workshops and even travel. Online communities abound in this field. 'GetSetUp India' is one such example. You can practice skills such as creative writing, classical music or cooking, with the enthusiastic support of others. But then, quality of life thrives on human interaction, and real-life shared learning can be invaluable. Whether through university weekend programmes, community workshops or like-minded groups, find something that sparks your wonder today – even a new language – and never stop asking questions. (The article was written in collaboration with Sushil Chandani, who works in molecular modelling) sushilchandan@gmail.com dbala@lvpel.org



Ageing gracefully: Merely extending life without preserving mental and physical health is not a worthwhile gain. UNSPLASH

Real-life learning Just as going to the gym builds physical stamina to comfortably climb extra flights of stairs when needed, cognitive reserve builds a functional safety net – a form of reserve strength you can draw on when needed. Cognitive reserve allows you to cope with the inevitable age-related damage to the brain. The neuronal connections made during learning new things help keep your brain functionally robust in attributes such as memory and conversational skills, even when your brain deteriorates to the same extent as a person with dementia. Staying curious in our later years also results in improved health literacy. We rarely worry about good nutritional choices or how much to sleep when we are young. Acquiring such practical knowledge, along with reduced stress and greater mental well-being, helps us live healthier, longer lives. The scope of learning can extend beyond courses to hands-on workshops and even travel. Online communities abound in this field. 'GetSetUp India' is one such example. You can practice skills such as creative writing, classical music or cooking, with the enthusiastic support of others. But then, quality of life thrives on human interaction, and real-life shared learning can be invaluable. Whether through university weekend programmes, community workshops or like-minded groups, find something that sparks your wonder today – even a new language – and never stop asking questions. (The article was written in collaboration with Sushil Chandani, who works in molecular modelling) sushilchandan@gmail.com dbala@lvpel.org

There are a few reasons. First, sweet foods activate your sweet taste receptors but not your bitter taste receptors. But once the sweet food has passed, the sweetness receptors become less responsive for a short amount of time. However, your bitterness receptors are still sensitive, and the taste of the normally faint bitter compounds in your saliva or other lingering food particles can become more noticeable. Another reason is that many sugary foods also include ingredients with bitter notes. Next, oral bacteria may rapidly metabolise leftover sugars to produce acids. Acids are generally sour but they can interfere with how you perceive other tastes, which can also be accentuated by the dryness in your mouth after eating something sweet. Finally, some people are supertasters and perceive bitter compounds more intensely than others, so they will also be more likely to notice a bitter finish after sweet foods. This 'ability' depends on the TAS2R2 taste receptor genes. Readers may send their questions / answers to science@thehindu.co.in A ND-NDE



Question Corner

Bittersweet, literally

Why do we feel a slightly bitter aftertaste after having sugary foods? – Jessica Sandhu, New Delhi

There are a few reasons. First, sweet foods activate your sweet taste receptors but not your bitter taste receptors. But once the sweet food has passed, the sweetness receptors become less responsive for a short amount of time. However, your bitterness receptors are still sensitive, and the taste of the normally faint bitter compounds in your saliva or other lingering food particles can become more noticeable. Another reason is that many sugary foods also include ingredients with bitter notes. Next, oral bacteria may rapidly metabolise leftover sugars to produce acids. Acids are generally sour but they can interfere with how you perceive other tastes, which can also be accentuated by the dryness in your mouth after eating something sweet. Finally, some people are supertasters and perceive bitter compounds more intensely than others, so they will also be more likely to notice a bitter finish after sweet foods. This 'ability' depends on the TAS2R2 taste receptor genes. Readers may send their questions / answers to science@thehindu.co.in A ND-NDE

Why are users worried about UPI charges?

Who pays for UPI transactions? Will this change? What does a new Bill say?

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:
So far, payments made on the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) platform have been free. However, the Taxation and Other Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026 seeks to change this, by empowering the government to allow banks and UPI companies to charge merchants for certain UPI payments. There is fear that these merchants will, in turn, pass these charges on to customers.

What is the MDR charge?
A Merchant Discount Rate (MDR) is a fee that merchants have to pay banks and payment processors for the use of their networks. A typical MDR charge has four components – an interchange fee, processing charges, a network fee, and tax. The interchange fee is paid to the bank that has issued the credit or debit card. The processing charges are paid to the payment processor or gateway such as RazorPay, PayU, CCAvenue, and BillDesk. The network fee is paid to payment networks such as Visa, Mastercard, and the National Payments Corporation of India. The tax on these services – the Goods and Services Tax – is paid to the government. Since 2020, the government has mandated that transactions on UPI and RuPay debit cards will not attract any MDR charges. However, other card transactions do. The MDR varies by payment method: it is 0.4%-0.9% for non-RuPay debit cards, 1.5%-2.2% for domestic credit cards, 1%-1.5% for netbanking, and 3%-4.5% for international credit cards.

Who currently pays the cost of UPI transactions?
In a recent press conference, Reserve Bank of India Governor Sanjay Malhotra said “someone will have to pay the cost” of UPI transactions. At the moment, some of this cost is being absorbed by banks and payment processors, and some is being borne by taxpayers. In December 2021, the government launched the ‘Incentive Scheme for Promotion of Low-Value BHIM-UPI Transactions (Person-to-Merchant)’ under which it provides a subsidy to banks for UPI transactions of less than ₹2,000 in value done at small merchants. This is then shared among other stakeholders. According to the government, it paid ₹1,389 crore as this subsidy in 2021-22, which grew to ₹3,631 crore by 2023-24. Budget documents show that this figure has subsequently been falling, with the government budgeting ₹2,000 crore for the current financial year 2026-27. As for the MDR on other forms of electronic payments, the merchants are currently paying those charges. Some pass these charges on to customers, while others absorb them.

What is the government’s proposal?
So far, the government has not made any official announcement regarding its plans to allow MDR charges on UPI. The only official move is in Parliament as part of a new law that allows the government to allow such charges to be levied. Currently, the Payment and Settlement Systems Act of 2007 instructs banks “not to impose a charge for using electronic modes of payment” if they are conducted using methods listed in Section 269SU of the Income Tax Act, 1961. Section 269SU lists debit cards powered by RuPay, and UPI and BHIM-UPI transactions, including those done by QR code. In simple terms, a combination of these two Acts has so far ensured that UPI and RuPay debit card transactions are free from MDR charges. This is set to change. The Taxation and Other Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026, passed by the Lok Sabha on August 6, modifies the provision in the Payment and Settlement Systems Act to say that the government can notify the kinds of transactions that can attract such a charge. Apart from this, sources in the government say that a possible MDR charge could be levied on large merchants – with an annual turnover of more than ₹1 crore-1.5 crore – and on transactions that exceed ₹2,000 in value. According to them, this would exclude about 95% of current UPI transactions from the charge. They also say that the government is considering an MDR charge on UPI transactions of 0.25-0.4% of the transaction value. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said that the final rates of the MDR have not yet been decided. She added that such a charge would “support banks and fintech to invest more on infrastructure, innovation, and security” and “all users of UPI will reap the benefits of this investment”.

What are the concerns?
The main concern among users is that UPI will no longer be free. It is, however, unlikely that the government would impose a charge on most UPI transactions. Digital and financial inclusion is an important pillar of its ongoing reform programme. One of the most attractive aspects of UPI is that it has been free. The government will likely not risk pushing users back to cash by making UPI transactions more expensive.

Why is Jantar Mantar in Delhi facing scrutiny?

Where were protests in Delhi held in the first few decades of independent India? How and when did Jantar Mantar become the designated protest site? Why has it become contentious and what have courts said? What are alternative sites for demonstrations in Delhi?

Shrimansi Kaushik

The story so far:
On August 7, the Delhi High Court raised concerns over the continued use of Jantar Mantar as the designated venue for protests in Delhi. Justice Amit Mahajan said that Delhi should not be “put to ransom unnecessarily” by demonstrations. The court said this while hearing a petition by the All India Dalit Christian Rights Protection Committee seeking a direction to Delhi Police to decide on its request for permission to protest at the site on August 10. This observation came on the heels of the Supreme Court directing the Centre earlier last week to consider a plea seeking to remove Jantar Mantar as a designated protest site and instead make Ramlila Maidan the principal venue. For more than three decades, Jantar Mantar, located in the heart of Delhi, has been the focal point of democratic dissent. But despite being referred to as the Jantar Mantar protest site, it is not the 18th-century astronomical observatories where protests are held; the designated site is on the road opposite the monument, at the intersection of Jantar Mantar Road and Sansad Marg (Parliament Street). This location allows protesters to carry out demonstrations within sight of the political establishment while remaining outside the high-security zones of Parliament. Its proximity to Parliament has also enabled political representatives to step out of Parliament and address protesters. **Why is the location of Jantar Mantar important for protesters?** Before the 1990s, Delhi’s principal venue for

While its central location has made Jantar Mantar a symbolic substitute for the erstwhile marches to Parliament, it has also been a source of contention for residents living nearby

demonstrations was the Boat Club lawns along Rajpath (now Kartavya Path). The site witnessed some of independent India’s largest political rallies. Om Prakash Mishra, a former IPS officer who served in various positions in the Delhi Police, said, “As part of crowd-control measures, it is important to have enough space for the movement of both protesters and policemen. In case of police action, protesters should have space to retreat. That kind of maneuvering was possible at the Boat Club lawns.” The turning point came in 1988 when a massive farmers’ rally, led by farm leader Mahendra Singh Tikait, drew lakhs of protesters to the Boat Club lawns. Multiple protests held by farmers between 1987 and 1989 led to the formation of the Bharatiya Kisan Union. “The scale of the gathering raised concerns about security and disruption in the capital’s administrative centre,” Mr. Mishra explained. Following the rally and the heightened security concerns during the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid movement, the Delhi administration discontinued large demonstrations at the Boat Club lawns. By 1993, the police had begun directing protests to Jantar Mantar, justifying the move on the grounds of traffic management and crowd control. However, there was no statute or formal government notification designating Jantar Mantar as Delhi’s official protest site. Instead, the venue acquired that status through consistent executive practice, before being formally regulated under Delhi Police Standing Orders in the following decade. In 2003, the Delhi Police issued Standing Order 309, mentioning Jantar Mantar and the 15-acre venue Ramlila Maidan as the official places for protests, rallies, and processions. Rajan Bhagat, former Deputy Commissioner of Police, said, “The number decided the protest site. If it was less than 5,000, Jantar Mantar could be the site. If it was more than 5,000 but less than 50,000, protesters had to be guided towards Ramlila Maidan for their demonstrations. If the footfall was to be greater than 50,000, Burari grounds was to be the site. If it was even bigger, protesters were guided towards Narela.” Mr. Bhagat said Jantar Mantar has, over the years, become synonymous with peaceful public demonstrations, including the Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption movement in 2011-12, the Nirbhaya protests in 2012, protests by ex-servicemen demanding One Rank One Pension, and by farmers’ groups, students, women’s rights groups, government employees, disability rights campaigners, and other civil society organisations. “For many organisations,

gathering at Jantar Mantar has become an established way of taking grievances directly to the nation’s policymakers,” Mr. Bhagat said. **Why did it become contentious?** While its central location – less than 3 kilometres from Parliament – has made Jantar Mantar a symbolic substitute for the erstwhile marches to Parliament (which were banned in 1966 following agitations against Indira Gandhi’s anti-cow slaughter law), it has also been a source of contention for residents living nearby. In 2017, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) directed that protests be stopped at Jantar Mantar after residents raised concerns over noise, traffic congestion, and prolonged sit-in demonstrations. Authorities have also cited security challenges arising from demonstrations near important government institutions. These competing interests have fuelled a long-running debate over how best to balance citizens’ constitutional right to peaceful protest with the need to maintain public order and minimise inconvenience to local residents. **What have the courts said?** In October 2017, the NGT suggested that demonstrations be shifted elsewhere. The tribunal cited three grounds while issuing these directions: there is no executive order that demarcates Jantar Mantar as a ‘protest site’; that it is marked as a ‘residential area’ in the Delhi Master Plan; and that protests cause noise pollution. The order triggered widespread criticism from activists and civil society groups, who argued that it restricted the right to protest. In July 2018, the Supreme Court held that public protests could not be completely banned at Jantar Mantar or the Boat Club. Instead, it directed authorities to frame guidelines that would balance the rights of protesters with those of residents. The Delhi Police then released Standing Order 10 in 2018, demarcating Jantar Mantar as a protest site for up to 1,000 people. For higher numbers, permission is to be given only for Ramlila Maidan, the order said. **What is the position today?** Jantar Mantar continues to function as Delhi’s principal protest venue, though demonstrations are regulated through permissions issued by Delhi Police. Organisers must give an undertaking of compliance to guidelines related to crowd size, duration, use of loudspeakers, and security arrangements. Mr. Mishra said Ramlila Maidan (run by the North Delhi Municipal Corporation) is an “ideal venue “as it has separate gates for VIP movement and for participants.” “It is an enclosed space which establishes an overall security architecture,” he said. Ramlila Maidan, continues to be available for protests or any large gatherings or events, but the cost is around ₹50,000 a day, while Jantar Mantar is available free of cost.

How does the SC handbook rethink gender sensitivity?

How does the 2026 handbook differ from the 2023 version on combating gender stereotypes? What does it say about the use of gender-senssitive language? In what ways does it go beyond language to talk about courtroom practices that judges should adopt proactively?

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:
Supreme Court report published on August 3 makes recommendations aimed at enhancing gender sensitivity in how judges write judgments and conduct proceedings in cases involving sexual offences and vulnerable persons. **Who prepared the new report?** Titled ‘Judgments and Gender: Sensitivity and Compassion in Writing Judgments’, the report was drafted by an expert committee headed by former Supreme Court judge and Director of the National Judicial Academy (NJA) in Bhopal, Justice Aniruddha Bose. It marks a shift from the court’s 2023 ‘Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes’, which focused primarily on helping judges identify and avoid gender stereotypes and patriarchal language. The new report, which will replace the earlier handbook, broadens that approach by recommending practical reforms spanning courtroom management, victim protection, judicial reasoning, and trauma-informed adjudication. Before formulating its recommendations, it examined 125 trial court judgments from across the country with the assistance of State Judicial Academies. **What prompted this intervention?** The need for a new handbook arose from the

The 2026 report focuses on problematic expressions that frequently appear in trial court judgments, particularly in sexual offence cases

Supreme Court’s February 10, 2026, judgment setting aside an Allahabad High Court ruling that had held that allegations of grabbing a 14-year-old girl’s breasts, dragging her towards a culvert, and breaking the string of her lower garment amounted only to “preparation” to commit rape, rather than an “attempt” to rape. The apex court had taken cognisance of the ruling on its own after the High Court’s distinction between preparation and attempt drew criticism for its apparent insensitivity. During the proceedings, questions were also raised about the effectiveness of the Supreme Court’s 2023 handbook, issued during the tenure of former Chief Justice of India (CJI) D.Y. Chandrachud, in preventing such flawed judicial reasoning. CJI Surya Kant remarked that the handbook was “too Harvard-oriented”, suggesting that it was overly theoretical and did not adequately reflect the realities of the Indian judicial system. Justice Kant instead called for practical training. The court consequently directed the NJA in Bhopal to constitute a committee of domain experts, academics, and lawyers to formulate fresh guidelines geared towards the practical training of judges.

What does it say about gender-sensitive judicial language? The new report cautions that judicial observations rooted in stereotypes can deter survivors from reporting offences, reinforce prejudices, and undermine confidence in the justice system. While both the 2023 handbook and the new report contain glossaries of terms that judges should avoid, they differ in focus. The 2023 handbook largely sought to replace stereotypical, colloquial, or outdated expressions with neutral and legally appropriate terminology. For instance, it recommended “street sexual harassment” instead of “eve teasing”, “homemaker” instead of “housewife”, and “woman who has engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage” instead of “adulteress”. It also challenged broader assumptions about women, including the stereotype that they are inherently emotional. The 2026 report, on the other hand, focuses on problematic expressions that frequently appear in trial court judgments, particularly in

sexual offence cases. It recommends replacing “prosecutrix” with “victim”, “survivor” or “complainant”, noting that the former is essentially a procedural label, while the alternatives better acknowledge the lived realities of those approaching the justice system. The report also seeks to move judicial writing away from language that views sexual violence through the prism of morality, chastity, or honour. Expressions suggesting that rape “destroyed the soul of a helpless woman”, “ruined her life”, or caused her to “lose her chastity” should be avoided. Instead, judges are encouraged to focus on the legal injury and its consequences – for instance, by stating that the survivor’s bodily autonomy was violated and that the offence caused severe trauma. The report further urges courts to use respectful and contemporary terminology when referring to people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, and recommends the globally recognised framework of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Expression and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC).

What changes does it recommend in courtroom practices? Beyond judicial language, the report sets out a series of “compassionate court practices” that judges should adopt proactively. It reiterates that trials involving rape and other sexual offences should ordinarily be held in camera (in private, closed-door proceedings), as mandated under the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023. It also calls for strict protection of survivors’ identities, including through the use of initials or pseudonyms in court proceedings and publications. Describing witnesses as “guests” who assist the court in arriving at the truth, the report cautions against repeated adjournments, prolonged waiting, and poor treatment. Judges are also urged to enforce provisions of the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam that prohibit indecent, scandalous, or offensive questions during cross-examination. In particular, the report reiterates that a survivor’s previous sexual history is immaterial in a rape trial. A trauma-informed approach is another recommendation. The report cautions judges against drawing adverse conclusions solely from delayed reporting, absence of physical injuries, inconsistencies in testimony, or a survivor’s demeanour, noting that people respond to trauma differently. It also encourages pre-trial counselling to reduce survivors’ anxiety.



The Supreme Court’s 2023 handbook faced questions about its effectiveness.

PROFILES

A new triple alliance in West Asia

Mecca Agreement

Confronting a diminished American strategic presence, oil-rich Saudi Arabia, nuclear-armed Pakistan and NATO-ally Turkiye have formally entered a trilateral framework promising ‘collective security’ and ‘collective deterrence’ amid growing regional instability

Stanly Johny

By the time Abdullah bin Saud succeeded his father as Emir of Diriyah (the first Saudi state) in 1814, Ottoman forces, under the command of Muhammad Ali Pasha, had already launched their military campaign against the al-Saud reign. The Ottomans sought to destroy the emirate and bring the Arabian Peninsula back under their control. They entered Hejaz by the sea and then marched into the heart of Nejd. In 1818, Ibrahim Pasha, Muhammad Ali’s son, reached Diriyah, the capital of the Emirate, and laid siege to the city until it surrendered. Abdullah, his three sons and two supporters were captured and taken to Cairo, before being transferred to Constantinople, where Sultan Mahmud II rejected a request for a pardon. In May 1819, the last Emir of the first Saudi state, along with his sons and supporters, was beheaded in a square near Hagia Sophia.

The Ottoman invasion, however, did not prevent the Saudis from rebuilding the state the Pashas had destroyed. They established the second Saudi state later in the 19th century and, after its defeat, founded a third in the early 20th century. The third state, with British support, expanded its authority across much of the Arabian Peninsula, eventually giving rise to modern Saudi Arabia. The Ottoman Empire collapsed after the First World War, with the Republic of Turkey emerging as its successor. After the Second World War, both Turkiye and Saudi Arabia became close allies of the U.S., but relations between the two remained strained. Their historical rivalry and contest for influence in West Asia kept them at odds.

Tensions deepened after Turkiye took an increasingly Islamist turn under Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the 21st century. When Turkiye supported the Arab Spring protests of 2010-2011, Saudi Arabia viewed the uprisings as a threat to political stability. Relations deteriorated further after Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi dissident, was killed inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018. The kingdom and the



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

republic also found themselves on opposing sides in several regional conflicts, most notably in Libya. But this rivalry has begun to melt away in recent years, as West Asia has witnessed a series of balance-shifting developments. On August 7, 2026, Saudi Arabia and Turkiye turned a page in their long and often fraught relationship by formally entering into a trilateral defence agreement with Pakistan. Under the Mecca Agreement, signed in the Saudi holy city by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Turkish President Erdogan and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, the three countries pledged to strengthen “collective defence” and “collective deterrence”, and to treat an armed attack against any one of them as an attack against all three.

In search of strategic depth
A NATO-style collective security alliance bringing together three major Muslim-majority countries – a nuclear-armed South Asian power, an oil-rich Persian Gulf monarchy and a NATO ally that straddles West Asia and Europe – is something West Asia has not seen before. In September 2025, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed a

Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement committing themselves to treat any act of aggression against one as an act against both. The Saudi-Pakistan agreement showed both Saudi Arabia’s deepening strategic vulnerability and Pakistan’s increasing appetite to play a larger security role in an increasingly volatile region. Now, with the addition of Turkiye, the alliance is seeking strategic depth and military muscle. Each member of the alliance brings its own strengths and vulnerabilities. Pakistan is the Muslim world’s only nuclear power, but its economy is struggling to stay afloat. Saudi Arabia, one of the world’s largest oil exporters, has deep pockets but faces daunting security challenges, particularly from Iran and the Houthis. Turkiye has a rapidly expanding military industrial base, including advanced drone-production capabilities, but is worried about Israel’s growing militarism in its neighbourhood. Saudi Arabia, a close American ally since the late 1940s, relied on the U.S. for security, while, in return, promising an uninterrupted flow of oil. The foundations of this alliance have been shaken in recent years as the

U.S., faced with a rising China in East Asia, began to deprioritise West Asia. When Saudi oil facilities were attacked in 2019 by Iran-aligned Houthis, the U.S. did little in response. This prompted the kingdom to explore options beyond America’s security umbrella. In 2023, Saudi Arabia reached a normalisation agreement with Iran, brokered by China. But Saudi Arabia’s security anxieties only deepened when Israel started fighting a mini-regional war after the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack. After the U.S. and Israel launched the war on Iran on February 28, 2026, Tehran repeatedly attacked all Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. This war seems to have convinced Riyadh that the U.S. security guarantees to Arab states were not as solid as they used to be. Turkiye, on the other hand, has long sought to play a larger security role in West Asia – the old fiefdom of Constantinople. It has cultivated strong ties with Qatar and maintains a troop presence there. An alliance with Saudi Arabia would provide Ankara with greater strategic space in the region. Turkiye also has its own security worries. As an increasingly militaristic Israel expands its territory

through air strikes and incursions, Ankara believes it should prepare for potential conflicts in the future. Although Turkiye is a member of NATO, Ankara has doubts about whether the NATO collective security guarantees would hold in the event of a conflict with Israel, America’s closest ally in the region. Pakistan, the third actor, brings to the alliance its hostility with India. In May 2025, it fought a brief aerial war with India after the Pahalgam terror attack. As India says it would hold Pakistan responsible for terror attacks on its soil, Islamabad is also trying to strengthen its deterrence through counter-alliances.

Shifting sands
The trilateral alliance and its collective security clause do not necessarily mean that Pakistan would go to war with Iran or the Houthis, or that Turkiye would join a future India-Pakistan conflict. After the Saudi-Pakistan agreement was signed in September 2025, Pakistan clashed several times with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, while Saudi Arabia came under repeated attacks from Iran and the Houthis. But neither country intervened militarily on behalf of the other. So there will always be questions about the practical scope of the alliance’s collective defence commitment. Yet, the agreement remains significant because it brings together three major powers in a common security framework. Defence partnership and military interoperability among them could expand at a time when an overstretched U.S. is confronting the limits of its power in the region. The alliance also provides greater strategic space for Turkiye and Pakistan in West Asia. Other smaller states in the region could be tempted to join, while powers that have uneasy relations with the alliance’s members, including India, the UAE, Israel and Iran, could seek their own counterbalancing arrangements. West Asia’s security architecture could therefore undergo profound changes, accelerating the region’s post-American transition.

THE GIST
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▼ Turkiye has a rapidly expanding military industrial base, but is worried about Israel’s growing militarism in its neighbourhood and the credibility of NATO’s guarantees

A progressive’s progress

Abdul El-Sayed

Michigan’s Senate race will test whether the American Left can win outside the Democratic party’s strongholds

Srinivasan Ramani

When Abdul El-Sayed, a 41-year-old epidemiologist born to Egyptian immigrants, defeated U.S. Representative Haley Stevens by a margin of fewer than 15,000 votes out of more than 1.5 million cast in the Democratic primary elections held in Michigan state in early August, the result caught national and international attention. The playing field had been weighted heavily against him. Outside groups spent more than \$60 million supporting Ms. Stevens, against roughly \$3.5 million in independent expenditure backing Mr. El-Sayed, and she had the endorsement of the Democratic establishment. The single largest source was the United Democracy Project, the super PAC directed by the pro-Israel lobbying group AIPAC, which poured \$30.6 million into the contest – the largest sum it has ever spent on a single race. Mr. El-Sayed’s win was the latest in a recent run of victories by progressive candidates over establishment-backed rivals, though unlike several of them, he has never described himself as a socialist, saying “I’m just a capitalist who understands how capitalism works”. Mr. El-Sayed’s candidacy



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

was backed by prominent figures on the American left, including Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The reasons for their backing were not too difficult to fathom. Mr. El-Sayed’s key policy platform was to call for “Medicare for All” – a universal single payer health care system in which one public insurer covering everyone replaces the private insurance industry and is funded through taxation, akin to Canada’s Medicare system. Mr. El-Sayed also evinced a strong critique of Israel’s genocidal actions in Gaza, going on to call the country a rogue state and an ethno-state, and has pledged to end the U.S.’s funding of its military apparatus, besides that of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt. He has also been a trenchant critic of President Donald Trump and his anti-immigration policies and the notorious U.S. Immigration and Customs En-

forcement (ICE), which he has called for abolishing. Another issue that binds Mr. El-Sayed to those adhering to the Democratic Socialists is support for regulating campaign finance and keeping “money out of politics”, an issue that has resonated with young people across the U.S., and in Michigan in particular, who rallied for Mr. El-Sayed. **Not an easy race** Mr El-Sayed, who completed his DPhil in public health on a Rhodes scholarship at Oriel College, Oxford, also took a medical degree from Columbia University, but went on to become an epidemiologist. At 30, he became Detroit city’s health officer. He ran for Governor in 2017, with Mr. Sanders and Ms. Ocasio-Cortez’s endorsement but lost the 2018 primary to Gretchen Whitmer, now the State’s Governor. Despite his win in the primary, the race in November will not be easy for

Mr. El-Sayed, who will be the first Muslim to be elected to the U.S. Senate if he succeeds. The Republicans have sought to brand all progressives and especially the democratic socialists as radicals and communists, using a new version of the Red Scare. Mr. El-Sayed faces Mike Rogers, a former Congressman, who has Mr. Trump’s endorsement and is well funded. After Mr. El-Sayed’s win, Mr. Rogers was quick off the blocks to accuse him, without evidence, of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. AIPAC has also said it will continue the fight to get Mr. El-Sayed rejected. He, however, got the backing of major Democratic leaders, including those who endorsed Ms. Stevens, and the latter herself as soon as the primary results were out. Liberal commentators are, however, unenthusiastic about the triumph of progressives like Mr. El-Sayed and other democratic socialists, whom they call insurgents within the Democratic Party and who, they argue, do not have the broad acceptance in closely contested Rust Belt States such as Michigan. The Senate race in Michigan will be a litmus test of whether the progressive and democratic socialist current can win beyond Democratic strongholds in the U.S.

Moonshot’s rising star

Kimi K3

The July launch of the Chinese company’s AI model has prompted much soul-searching among U.S. Big Tech giants over their approach to open models and AI competition

Sahana Venugopal

Launch more U.S. open models, issue more U.S. visas, build more U.S. data centres, and encourage more U.S. competition – these were some of the panic-tinged solutions swirling online after the Chinese AI firm Moonshot released its Kimi K3 model on July 16. Kimi K3, with 2.8 trillion parameters and a 1 million-token context window, was billed as the “world’s first open 3T-class model”. By comparison, one of Google’s recent Gemma 4 open models reported a size of 30.7 billion total parameters. Moonshot AI candidly noted that the overall performance of Kimi K3 still “trails” Anthropic’s Claude Fable 5 and OpenAI’s GPT 5.6 Sol. However, the company claimed that Kimi K3 showed frontier-level performance across its evaluation suite. On July 27, the firm enjoyed a second burst of adulation when it released the model weights, allowing users to modify and run Kimi K3 as per their commercial needs under a far more flexible licence. Kimi K3 cost about a third of Anthropic’s Fable model in terms of the input and output token prices. While business use cases, operational needs, and other overheads influence



AFP

the final cost of deploying models, such price comparisons can put makers of more expensive models on edge. Over 270 companies, including Amazon, Google, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia, OpenAI and SpaceX, have now signed an open letter titled ‘Open Weights and American AI Leadership’, calling for policy measures to support open-weight models, in order to keep innovation in the U.S. and ensure its technological dominance. Far from uniting U.S. tech firms, however, the open letter revealed a jagged split when Anthropic did not sign. The Claude-maker instead issued a separate warning stressing the risks of open-weight models, and pushed for chip restrictions against China. Furthermore, the AI firm backed by Amazon and Google had in February alleged that Moonshot was one of the AI labs that generated millions of exchanges with Claude

through hundreds of “fraudulent” accounts in order to illicitly target the U.S. model’s agentic reasoning and tool use, coding and data analysis, computer-use agent development, computer vision, and reasoning traces. In September 2024, an X user asked OpenAI CEO Sam Altman when a specific AI feature would be released. Instead of a date, the asker received a mocking response. “[H]ow about a couple of weeks of gratitude for magic intelligence in the sky, and then you can have more toys soon?” posted Mr. Altman, triggering both laughter and criticism online. **Relations with users** But AI company-customer relations have sharply changed in 2026. Users need not wait for a “couple of weeks” and express their “gratitude” for closed model updates when Chinese AI contenders such as Alibaba, DeepSeek, and Moonshot are inviting

them to try out more open models at lower prices. The success of Kimi is not exclusively a technological triumph; it marks a win in terms of optics as well. The release of Kimi K3 – and later, its model weights – has boosted the company’s standing and its claim to “empower everyone to be superhuman”. Though not named in official missives, Kimi K3 has triggered Big Tech soul-searching in the U.S. as top companies co-sign letters of concern, express sudden support for accessible models, and brainstorm ways to race ahead of China. That Anthropic has accused Moonshot of illicit distillation actually works in favour of the Chinese firm’s reputation. This may as well be an advertisement for an easier and cheaper way to access Claude-grade capabilities, regardless of Anthropic’s hand-wringing about “significant national security risks”. As more open-weight Chinese AI models enter the arena with competitive prices and licences, companies and users will vote with their wallets. The coming weeks and months will shed more light on whether Kimi K3 was a one-shot wonder, or if Chinese firms have truly raised the bar in marketing more open AI tools.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 9, 2026

On rural jobs, the 60:40 dilemma



RD

A man with a beard and a red turban is riding a black bicycle on a paved road. He is wearing a dark blue t-shirt and light-colored shorts. A pink bag is hanging from the handlebars. The background is a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The ground is a dark asphalt road with some green grass visible in the distance.

PTI

Brazil friendly a song-and-dance show to distract audience

A group of Brazilian football players in yellow jerseys and white shorts are celebrating on a green field. The player in the foreground with jersey number 5 is raising his right fist. Other players with jersey numbers 16, 19, and 4 are visible, some with their hands near their faces. The background shows a blurred crowd of spectators in a stadium.

AF

Delhi's hallowed Gymkhana Club has virtually stopped taking bookings for its premises for September. Shaken members fear their worst nightmare — the club's actual closure.

“START WITH CHANGING UNHEALTHY
EATING HABITS TO HEALTHY ONES AND
MAKE THEM YOUR FAVORITES”
— SAHARA SANDERS

SHEETALA ASHTAMI

Where devotion rests upon a cool platter



ANIL
RAJPUT

There are Indian festivals in which the kitchen announces celebration through the hiss of hot ghee, the rhythm of grinding stones and the fragrance of food rising from an active stove. Sheetala Ashtami begins with the opposite sound: silence. The fire that normally sustains the household is allowed to rest, the cooking vessels have already completed their work, and the meal is served cool. Known widely as Basoda or Basora, the observance transforms food prepared on the previous day into an offering of devotion. What might appear to be a simple practice of eating yesterday's food is, in fact, a carefully ordered culinary tradition built around restraint, seasonal transition, maternal care and remembrance.

Sheetala Ashtami was observed on Wednesday, 11 March, on the Ashtami tithi of the Krishna Paksha in Chaitra. Since the festival follows Holi, it arrives as winter recedes and the first warmth of summer enters northern and western India. The principal cooking is completed on the preceding day, commonly associated with Sheetala Saptami, after which the hearth is cleaned and left unlit. Regional calendars differ, and some families worship on Saptami or another locally prescribed day after Holi, but the central practice remains the preparation of food in advance and its offering in a cooled state.

The festival is dedicated to Sheetala Mata, whose very name comes from the idea of sheetal, or coolness. This is more than a description of the goddess, for cooling provides the organising principle of the entire observance. Historically, Sheetala was invoked particularly in relation to fever, eruptive illnesses and smallpox, a disease characterised by high fever followed by painful skin eruptions. If illness was experienced as dangerous heat within the body, Sheetala represented its opposite. Soothing, cooling and relief. Her traditional imagery reinforces this association through the vessel she carries, together with the broom and neem leaves that came to signify cleansing and protection. The household translates this symbolism into ritual action. Its greatest source of heat, the cooking fire, is extinguished; freshly cooked dishes give way to food that has rested; curd and cool water assume particular importance; and the meal offered to the goddess is itself consumed cool. In symbolic terms, Sheetala cools the body, the hearth and the household together. Historically, her worship offered communities a religious language through which the fear of epidemic disease, particularly smallpox, could be understood and endured.

This history also explains why the idea extends beyond a single festival name or region. Basoda or Sheetala Ashtami is especially prominent in Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, but Gujarat preserves an especially close parallel through Randhan Chhath and Shitala Satam. Randhan Chhath is the cooking day, when food is prepared in advance, while on Shitala Satam the stove remains unlit and the previous day's food is offered and eaten. Further south, the practice is not identical, but an interesting echo appears in the worship of Mariamman in Tamil Nadu, another protective goddess historically associated with heat, illness and eruptive disease. At some Mariamman festivals, cooling preparations such as koozh, a porridge traditionally made using millet, form part of the offering. These traditions should not be treated as interchangeable, but together they reveal a wider Indian cultural vocabulary in which protective

goddesses, bodily heat and cooling foods repeatedly intersect.

The name Basoda is commonly associated with baasi bhojan, but translating this simply as “stale food” misses the ritual meaning. The meal is deliberately prepared on the previous day, allowed to cool, stored and then offered without lighting the hearth again. The act of cooling is itself devotional. On most festive days, sacred food is created through the transformational power of fire. Basoda reverses that relationship. Fire has already completed its work, and abstaining from fresh cooking becomes part of the offering. The timing after Holi also places the festival at a seasonal threshold, when northern India begins moving towards greater warmth. Traditional ideas of cooling the body, reducing excess heat and favouring foods that could be eaten without further cooking therefore sit naturally within both the religious symbolism and the changing season.

Among the most distinctive preparations is Meetha Oliya, particularly cherished in Rajasthani and Marwari homes. Cooked rice is cooled before being folded into smoothly whisked yoghurt with sugar, milk, cardamom and, in richer versions, saffron and nuts. Its gentle sweetness and cool texture embody the character of Sheetala worship more precisely than almost any other dish. The rice softens further as it rests, while the yoghurt carries the fragrance of cardamom through the mixture. It may be offered during the morning puja and later served as part of the family meal, occupying a space between dessert, prasad and cooling nourishment.

The same idea appears in Namkeen Oliya, the savoury counterpart in which cooled rice and yoghurt are combined with salt and lightly crushed cumin. Some families add black pepper, mustard powder, raisins or dried fruit, creating an unusual balance of tartness, spice and sweetness. Unlike curd rice that receives a hot tempering in many southern traditions, Oliya is often kept free of any fresh sizzling tadka on the day of worship. Its preparation demonstrates how Basoda cuisine creates flavour without depending upon last-minute heat.

From the coolness of Oliya, the meal moves towards the dry, durable foods of Rajasthan. Pachkuta brings together preserved desert ingredients such as ker, sangri, kumat, gunda and dried mango. These are soaked, boiled where required and cooked with oil, asafoetida, cumin, coriander, chilli and amchur until intensely flavoured but relatively dry. Its presence links Basoda with Rajasthan's ecological intelligence, where communities learned to turn hardy berries, pods and stored produce into food capable of surviving scarcity and heat. When prepared on Saptami, Pachkuta develops greater depth overnight and can be eaten without reheating.

In homes that do not make the complete mixture, Ker Sangri may appear independently. The desert berries and beans are soaked to remove excess sharpness, then cooked with spices, yoghurt or dried mango according to household practice. Beside it, Kairi ki Launji provides a glossy, sweet-sour accompaniment made by cooking raw mango with jaggery or sugar, fennel, nigella, cumin and chilli. Because launji keeps well, it is particu-

larly suited to a festival that prohibits fresh cooking. Its sourness also cuts through fried breads and sweets. Rajasthan's official tourism material identifies ker and sangri as characteristic ingredients of the state's arid landscape and cuisine.

Gram flour contributes another set of preparations that remain satisfying after cooling. Sukhe Gatte are made by kneading besan with yoghurt, oil and spices, shaping the dough into cylinders, boiling them and cutting them into pieces. Instead of returning them to a gravy, they are tossed into a dry masala of cumin, coriander, chilli and amchur. Besan ki Roti, kneaded with spices and sometimes ghee, offers a firm bread to accompany Pachkuta or launji. In millet-eating households, Bajre ka Sogra, a thick pearl millet roti shaped by hand, may be cooked the previous day and eaten with curd, jaggery or preserved vegetables.

The fried savouries of Basoda are selected for their ability to hold their texture. Moong Dal Kachori encloses a filling of coarsely ground lentils, fennel, asafoetida, coriander and chilli within a crisp flour shell. The filling is cooked until dry so that the kachori remains stable overnight. Mathri, made from stiff dough enriched with ghee or oil and seasoned with ajwain, cumin or black pepper, becomes even crisper as it cools. Khichia or Papad, roasted or fried on the preparation day, adds a brittle contrast to yoghurt and rice. Together these foods turn the absence of freshly cooked food into a meal of deliberate contrasts.

Yoghurt returns through Dahi Bade, in which lentil dumplings are fried, soaked in water, gently pressed and placed in seasoned curd before the festival morning. As they rest, they absorb moisture and become soft enough to break with a spoon. Roasted cumin, black salt, red chilli and a little sweet chutney may be added before the hearth rests. In some parts of northern and western India, Kanji Vade provide a sharper variation. Small lentil dumplings are immersed in water fermented with ground mustard, salt and chilli, producing a tangy preparation associated with the

period around Holi. Its sourness, created through time rather than last-minute cooking, fits naturally into Basoda's cuisine.

A simpler but meaningful offering is Sukha Kala Chana. The chickpeas are soaked, boiled and tossed with cumin, asafoetida, coriander and dried mango until the moisture has evaporated. Served with breads and launji, they add substance without requiring a gravy and may also be distributed in small portions as prasad. The dish reflects an important feature of Basoda food: ingredients are often cooked fully and kept drier than they would be for an everyday meal.

Sweetness is equally important, and Meethe Chawal often form one of the central offerings. Rice is cooked with sugar or jaggery, cardamom, saffron, cloves, raisins and nuts until each grain is perfumed and lightly glazed. When cooled overnight, the flavours settle and the rice becomes firmer, making it easy to portion during worship. The dish sits comfortably beside Oliya because the two use the same staple in very different ways, one creamy and tart, the other fragrant and jewel-like.

Fried sweets provide some of the festival's most recognisable aromas on the day before worship. Pua is made from a batter of wheat flour, milk or water, sugar or jaggery, fennel and cardamom, then fried into small, soft-edged rounds. Gulgule use a thicker jaggery-sweetened wheat batter and are dropped into hot oil as irregular dumplings. Both remain pleasant after cooling, but their textures differ: pua is flatter and tender, while gulgule are plumper and chewier. Prepared in generous batches, they are offered to the goddess, shared with children and carried to neighbours.

Grain takes a richer form in Lapsi, where broken wheat is roasted in ghee and cooked with jaggery or sugar until the grains swell but retain a slight bite. Cardamom, raisins and nuts may be added, though many households prefer its rustic simplicity. Churma begins with wheat or millet dough shaped into thick breads or dumplings, cooked, cooled and crushed

with ghee and jaggery. The two dishes express contrasting uses of grain: Lapsi preserves each granule, while Churma deliberately breaks the bread into a fragrant, crumbly sweet. For a more luxurious offering, some families

prepare Moong Dal Halwa, slowly roasting ground soaked lentils in ghee until their raw aroma gives way to deep nuttiness, then adding sugar syrup, cardamom and nuts. Because it requires patience, its preparation on Saptami becomes an act of devotion. Rabri offers a cooler richness. Milk is simmered as layers of cream are gathered and returned to the reduced liquid, which is sweetened and flavoured with cardamom or saffron. Once chilled, it may be offered in small bowls with pua, gulgule or crisp Shakkarpore, whose fried flour pieces are coated in sugar or made from sweetened dough.

Beverages are less uniformly prescribed than the foods, yet they complete the cooled meal in many homes. Chaas, whisked from curd and water with roasted cumin and salt, lightens the richer fried dishes. Meethi Lassi or Namkeen Lassi may be prepared before the cooking restriction begins and kept chilled. Thandai, still seasonally familiar after Holi, may appear with milk, fennel, pepper, cardamom, nuts and rose. The liquid from Kanji can itself be sipped as a sour fermented drink, while cool water offered to Sheetala Mata remains the simplest and most symbolic refreshment.

Sheetala Ashtami also carries a lesson that feels increasingly relevant in an age of food waste. For younger generations accustomed to associating freshness only with food cooked at that moment, the festival offers a different understanding. Food prepared the previous day is not automatically inferior or unwanted. When cooked thoughtfully, stored safely and consumed appropriately, it can remain nourishing while also carrying memory, ritual and meaning. Sheetala Ashtami therefore encourages a more respectful relationship with food, one that values preservation over waste and continuity over constant replacement. The dishes prepared for the festival were chosen precisely because they could rest, retain their flavour and still be shared the following day. Passing this knowledge forward can help younger generations understand that sustainability is not always a new idea. Indian culinary traditions have long contained practices of careful storage, preservation and respect for every ingredient. On Sheetala Ashtami, yesterday's food is not treated as a compromise. It becomes prasad, and in doing so reminds us that valuing food is itself a form of responsibility.

Sheetala Ashtami ultimately asks a household to recognise that care can be expressed not only through abundance and activity, but also through restraint. For one day, the stove falls silent, yet the kitchen continues to speak through rice softened in yoghurt, desert berries preserved against scarcity, grain roasted in ghee, lentil dumplings transformed through time and sweets prepared for sharing. Its history also reminds us how food once helped communities respond culturally and emotionally to illness, long before diseases such as smallpox could be defeated through modern medicine. The ritual did not cure the disease, but it gave cooling, care and protection a language that families could understand and practise together. To carry Basoda forward, future generations must therefore inherit more than the instruction to eat food prepared the previous day. They must learn why the hearth rests, why Sheetala came to represent relief from burning illness, how Oliya differs from an ordinary bowl of curd and rice, why Pachkuta belongs to Rajasthan's ecology, how Gujarat carries a related tradition through Shitala Satam, and why the first portion becomes prasad before it becomes a meal.

When the methods, meanings and memories behind these foods are passed forward together, Basoda ceases to be merely a custom from another age. It remains what it has long been: a living conversation between food and faith, heat and coolness, health and hope, and one generation and the next.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)



Tricolour-themed popsicle add a festive touch to the streets as Independence Day approaches, bringing flavours and the colours of the national flag



Plating the colours of courage and peace

Food remains our favourite way to show national pride on August 15. Whether we crave nostalgic schoolyard snacks or share vibrant feasts with neighbors, eating together perfectly celebrates our freedom

TEAM AGENDA

August brings a long line of holidays, but the fifteenth always takes older generations right back to their early school days. You remember the drill. Waking up at dawn, wrestling into a stiff uniform, and standing in the assembly ground while the principal hoisted the flag. We sang the anthem with full throats, though half our minds were fixated on the reward waiting at the end.

That treat was usually the classic yellow paper packet. Finding a warm samosa, a sweet laddoo, and a cold

fruit drink inside felt like hitting the jackpot. Sometimes a lucky few got a bigger cardboard box filled with kachoris, sandwiches, and extra sweets. Entire generations grew up linking national pride with those simple snacks, creating a tradition people still crave decades later.

Families can bring that exact feeling back today by planning a menu around the Indian flag. Saffron, white, and green carry deep historical meaning, standing for bravery, peace, and progress. Bringing these specific shades to the dining table feels right and gives the day a wonderful festive spirit.

Planning this kind of menu takes a little imagination. Home cooks can start the morning with hot tricolour idlis coloured with carrot and spinach

These golden laddoos remain the absolute heart of Independence Day, bringing back our favourite childhood schoolyard flag memories

Images are for representational purposes only



puree, or serve soft and layered dhoklas. For lunch, they can transition to colourful dumplings in the national shades, along with traditional dishes like saffron |sweet rice, rich palak paneer, and plain white raita.

By late afternoon, local bakeries start displaying tricolour cakes and tidy stacks of ribbon sandwiches. Round off the day by handing out pistachio-and-saffron kulfi to the children on your street — it turns the national holiday into a true neighbourhood celebration. Which school memory will you bring back to the table this Independence Day?



Uttar Dakshin: When North meets South

GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Uttar Dakshin, a unique 'sangam' of northern and southern dishes, sets the smoky, robust flavours of the north against the fiery, coconut-and-curry-leaf soul of the south. The festival's real achievement is restraint. Rather than a scattergun tour of “Indian cuisine”, it plays two established culinary idioms against each other, dish by dish.

The vegetarian spread does this well: the Mathania Mirch Paneer Tikka carries its Rajasthani heat with confidence, while Kuzhi Paniyaram, dusted with milagai podi, brings a properly Tamil bite to the same table. A curry-leaf-tempered Hari Mirch Aloo and the Lucknowi Kathal Biryani sit a few feet apart, each unmistakably from its own region.

Non-vegetarian offerings lean on TGKF's real strength - the tandoor. The Malabari Spiced Kalmi Kabab and Khijra Murgh Boti Kabab carry coastal spice into the grill, while Meen Varuval and Andhra Masala Prawns keep the south's fire honest. Hyderabad's Kachhe Gosht ki Biryani anchors the meal's centre, and a slow-cooked Dak Bungalow Chicken Curry adds old-



world comfort. The cleverest handshake, though, is the



UTTAR DAKSHIN CELEBRATES INDIA'S UNITY THROUGH A VIBRANT CULINARY JOURNEY BLENDING THE DISTINCTIVE FLAVOURS OF NORTH AND SOUTH INDIA



Amritsari Fish — a Punjabi classic dusted with a gunpowder spice mix borrowed from further south.

Desserts close on the right note. A Pineapple Jalebi with Kesar Rabdi and a Mysore Pak Brownie make the same point as the mains, more gently: that fusion, done with intent, doesn't need to feel forced.

TGKF's format does the concept a favour. Kebabs are cooked using seven traditional methods, from tandoor and sigri to kadhai and stone grill, backed by a recipe bank of over 450 dishes. With unlimited servings, the menu changes daily while the standard remains. And for the Lucknow versus Hyderabad biryani debate, the answer is simple: order both. Both are Indian flavours.

Restoring the Rhythm of the Universe

AMMA (SRI MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI)

A king once went hunting in the forest in disguise. In the course of the hunt he was separated from his companions and lost his way, and at last, worn out and hungry, he came upon a small hut. The forest-dwellers who lived there did not know him, and they gave him some fruits to eat.

He bit into one and said, "But this is bitter." They sighed. "What can be done? The king who rules this land is utterly selfish, given to pleasure, and cruel. He wrings heavy taxes from the poor, and those who cannot pay he puts to death. It is because of his unrighteous ways that even fruits that are sweet by nature have turned bitter."

Back in his palace, the king could not forget what he had seen in the forest. "It is because of me that my people suffer so," he thought, and was filled with remorse. He resolved to give the rest of his life to their good. He cut the taxes deeply, and began to give in charity and to help his people in their need.

After some time he again went hunting in disguise, and visited that same hut. The family gladly gave him fruits. When he tasted them, each and every one was sweet.

When he asked the reason for the change, they said, "Our king has wholly changed. He rules now with great goodness, and all his subjects are happy and content. Because of his good deeds, a positive change has come over nature as well, and that is why these fruits are sweet."

What is the heart of this story? In this universe everything has its rhythm. The wind and the rain, the sea and its waves, our own breath and the beating of our hearts — each keeps its own measure.

There is an undeniable relationship between all of creation and every being in it, both living and non-living. This cosmos is like a vast interconnected



In this universe everything has its rhythm. The wind and the rain, the sea and its waves, our own breath and the beating of our hearts — each keeps its own measure

orchestra. Suppose one instrument is out of tune. Even just one phrase from it is heard and felt by all the musicians.

Similarly, whether we are aware of it or not, all of our actions reverberate throughout creation, whether performed as an individual or as a group. We are not individual islands but links of a common chain.

For the health and long life of body and mind, that harmony must be preserved. It is our thoughts and deeds that become the music of our lives. When the rhythm of our minds goes offbeat, it echoes in our actions. The result is discordant noise that affects everything around us.

Mother Earth then responds to the behaviour of Her children. When our

deeds are out of alignment with the music of the universe, Her cadence is thrown into disorder; when we tune in, She answers in kind, and our lives become beautiful music for others.

Today, we exploit the environment beyond all measure, and the balance of our world has been thrown awry; the selfish deeds of humankind rebound upon all that surrounds us. Behind dis-

asters such as tsunamis, landslides and earthquakes resounds, above all, nature's broken rhythm.

So each of us must take care to mend our ways. When the greater part of humanity turns to good deeds, our collective rhythm will be restored. Peace and prosperity will prevail upon the Earth, and the music of love and compassion will bring joy to the very heart of creation.

(Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, known simply as Amma, is a spiritual master and humanitarian who has given her darshan in the form of a motherly embrace to more than 4 crore people. Listening to the cries of the suffering, Amma leads an NGO that reaches across more than 50 countries, working in the areas of healthcare, disaster relief, education, gender equality, and environmental restoration)



Nilkanth Varni: A Beacon of Universal Values

Bhagwan Nilkanth Varni's historic journey across India embodied the universal values of compassion, courage, service, and unity, inspiring millions across generations to transform themselves and the world around them

DR SWAMI GYANANANDDAS

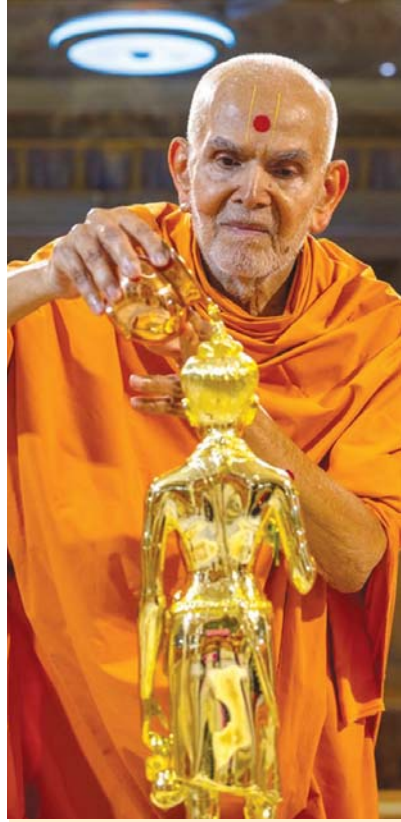
Two hundred and thirty years ago, after long wanderings, Bhagwan Nilkanth Varni once arrived at a city called Bansi (UP). At some distance from the town flowed a river where he bathed daily, absorbed in divine remembrance. One day, while bathing in its calm waters, he witnessed a painful sight. Two royal hunters struck down a rare and beautiful bird. The wounded creature cried out in unbearable agony before falling lifeless. That cry pierced twelve-year-old Varni's compassionate heart. Deeply moved, tears of empathy flowed within him.

Unable to bear the sorrow, he fasted that day and avoided entering the city. He spent the night alone in the forest, yet the pain in his heart did not lessen. Around midnight, overwhelmed by grief at the cruelty he had witnessed, words escaped from him: "Hell with this city." Such was the power of his words that the utterance immediately manifested. Flames engulfed the city.

The city started to burn. Everyone was running here and there in search of their life. Seeing them, Varni was filled with intense remorse. "I have come to remove suffering, not to cause it," he thought. With urgency and compassion, he rushed to the river, plunged into the waters, and cried aloud, "Cool down, cool down!" Instantly, the flames subsided.

Yet he felt no peace. Reflecting deeply, he resolved that even unintended words should never bring harm. In a rare act of spiritual mastery, he cursed his own speech: "Let my words become fruitless when they may cause pain to others." Such was the immense and unparalleled compassion of Nilkanth Varni. It was not only for humanity but for all beings.

Born as Ghanshyam in the small village of Chhapaiya, Uttar Pradesh, on Chaitra Shukla Navami (3/4/1781), Nilkanth's childhood itself bore unmistakable signs of divinity. Wisdom flowed naturally from him, compassion radiated effortlessly, and spiritual depth manifested spontaneously. Yet, what makes his life profoundly stirring is not merely his divine identity, but the path he chose to reveal it. At an age when the world still clings to comfort and affection, Nilkanth Varni renounced everything. At just eleven years old, with no possessions and no companions, he stepped



BHAGWAN NILKANTH VARNI ONCE ARRIVED AT A CITY CALLED BANSI (UP). AT SOME DISTANCE FROM THE TOWN FLOWED A RIVER WHERE HE BATHED DAILY, ABSORBED IN DIVINE REMEMBRANCE

into the unknown, not as a helpless child, but as a fearless divine Yogi, beginning a journey that would become one of the most extraordinary spiritual pilgrimages in history.

Barefoot and unprotected, he traversed the length and breadth of India for seven long years. Through the icy silence of the Himalayas, the dense forests echoing with unseen dangers, the flowing rivers, and the scorching plains, he walked more than 12000 KM with unshaken composure. This was not merely physical endurance; it was the living expression of absolute detachment and unwavering purpose. Hunger did not disturb him, harsh climates did not weaken him, and solitude did not

burden him. In every step, there was a quiet proclamation: that one who is anchored in the divine remains untouched by the fluctuations of the world.

Yet his journey was not one of isolation; it was one of deep engagement with humanity. His solo mission was to help humanity. So, wherever he went, he encountered seekers, scholars, ascetics, and ordinary villagers. He did not merely observe; he questioned, guided, and transformed. His inquiries into the nature of the soul, the supremacy of God, and the path to liberation were not intellectual exercises; they were divine revelations disguised as dialogue. Many who considered themselves learned found their understanding reshaped in his presence. Others, burdened by suffering or confusion, found clarity and peace.

What makes Nilkanth Varni a beacon of universal values is the seamless way in which his life embodied the highest ideals. Fearlessness was not a virtue he taught; it was the way he lived. Walking alone through perilous terrains, he demonstrated that true courage arises from faith, not from physical strength. Compassion was not selective in him; it flowed equally towards all beings, transcending boundaries of caste, creed, or status. His renunciation was not rejection but realization, that the transient can never satisfy the eternal within. His discipline was not imposed; it was the natural rhythm of a mind established in purity. And his wisdom was not acquired; it was innate, flowing from the very source of truth.

At a time when spirituality had become burdened with empty rituals and forgotten values, Nilkanth Varni emerged as a silent reformer. He did not reject tradition; he restored its true purpose. He taught that genuine religion is not about outward display but inner transformation, not mechanical rituals but heartfelt devotion, and not division but seeing God in all.

When his spiritual journey led him to Gujarat, Nilkanth Varni became known to the world as Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The universal values he lived and taught continue to inspire millions and are beautifully exemplified today in the life and teachings of Mahant Swami Maharaj.

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

The Most Important Thing in Life to Fulfill Your Potential

SADHGURU

#1 Reflect on what is around you

Your inner world, if you want to call it that, should only be a reflection of what is around you. This may be diametrically opposite to some moral theories that say the outer and the inner should not touch each other, otherwise you would immediately get corrupted by everything around you. That is not true. You get corrupted by what is around you only when you have opinions about everything.

You look at one thing as good, something else as bad. You get attached to what you consider as good. You desperately try to avoid what you consider as bad, and of course that will rule you from inside. This is not the way to

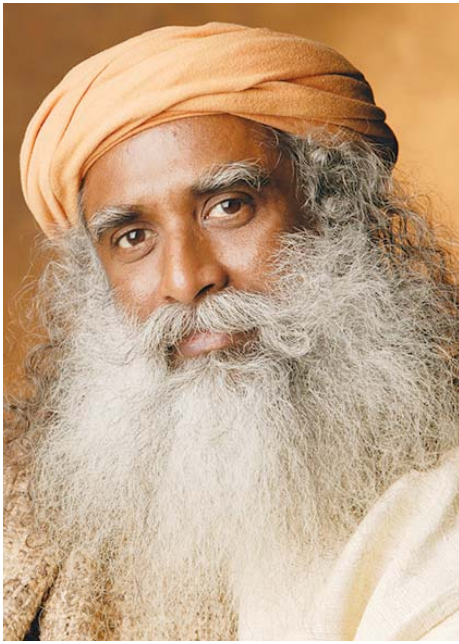
be. Seeing everything just the way it is — that is the way to be within. If you see something other than what is there, it means you are contaminating the world with your opinions and prejudices.

Creation is made so that you see it the way it is, not to make it the way you want to make it. This is an obscenity that humanity is committing upon the Creator's creation. Such a magnificent creation — what is there for you to do? Absorb it, if you can — nothing more — and even that is not simple because creation is phenomenally multi-tiered. There are not just things; so many phenomena are happening right here — one inside the other, all in one space, all in one time.

Everything that you think is past, everything that you think will be future is right here. If you see everything the way it is, if the whole creation reflects within you, if you can contain creation the way it is within you, you become the very source of creation. That is the way to be, inside and outside.

#2 Don't be a psychological case

Either you exist here as a piece of creation, which is pretty good, or you become like the very source of creation, which is fantastic. But being a psycho-



logical case is not a good thing. To be just a psychological case, you need not have put your mother through the trouble of delivering you. She could have delivered a file, and someone could have studied the case. It is not worth being a psychological case. If you consider only your thoughts and emotions as your life and there is nothing beyond that for you, you are a psychological case. You should not die as a psychological case — a bundle of thoughts, emotions, opinions, and prejudices. You must become a vibrant, full-fledged life. These are the most important things in life.

Touching the ultimate, rather than defining yourself through patterns of thoughts and emotions, is the greatest and one of the most important things in life you can do. You should strive to become an absolutely full-fledged life. A full-fledged life does not mean going out and doing all kinds of exploits in the world. It means allowing yourself to grow to full depth and dimension. Every human being should do this.

#3 Doing what's really needed

What we do is determined by what is needed. These days, wherever I go, people recognize me as someone who planted so many trees, is educating so many children, built so many hospitals, and so on. I squirm at the thought that this is what I am known for. It is most

unfortunate that most people cannot think beyond food, education, and things like that.

Suppose the country or the world was doing really well — everyone had enough to eat, everyone was well educated, everything was happening well — what meaning would it have to start an Isha Vidhya school and to give a midday meal? Right now, when the children have not eaten properly, the midday meal seems like a great blessing. It is a blessing only because of the cruelty of poverty. It is not a true blessing. Only because we created human beings without having the necessary food for them, serving them a meal feels like a great thing. I don't think it is. It is unfortunate that such things are still needed in the world.

Even if everyone had eaten well and they had everything they wanted, enhancing the experience of life to its ultimate possibility would still always be relevant. Ultimately, this is the purpose of all life — to blossom to its fullest potential. Whether it is a little plant, a tree, an elephant, an ant, a man, or a woman — the ultimate goal is to become a full-fledged life.

But being in the world, we have to play some game. Let us play a game that is of maximum usefulness and meaning to everyone around us. If you reflect creation just the way it is, there is no personal need to play a game and no compulsion to be a part of any game. Whether you withdraw into a cave or plunge into the marketplace, it is still a game. The only way to not be part of any game is to dissolve. That is a great thing to do, but when human beings attain to a certain clarity within themselves, they are of immense value to everyone around, so it is good if they hang around for a while and bring a little more clarity to others.

(Ranked amongst the fifty most influential people in India, Sadhguru is a Yogi, mystic, visionary and a New York Times bestselling author. Sadhguru has been conferred the Padma Vibhushan by the Government of India in 2017, the highest annual civilian award, accorded for exceptional and distinguished service. He is also the founder of the world's largest people's movement, Conscious Planet-Save Soil, which has touched over 4 billion people)

We postpone our happiness

GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

Joy is found only in the present moment. Yet usually we find the mind swinging back and forth between the past and the future. The final-year school kids are anxious about what to do after graduation. At the start of their career, people worry about achieving career goals. Professionally settled people want to purchase a new house, find a good life partner, and get married. After getting married, people want to have children. When they become parents, they wait for their children to settle down. It is like you prepared the bed to sleep all night without sleeping at all!

We keep postponing our happiness and peace of mind. We imagine life is about securing a job, building a bank balance, and creating the perfect family. One desire gives rise to another, and the race never ends. In the process, we become miserable. And when misery takes over, we lose our health, our peace, our relationships, and even our reputation.

Life is a celebration. Life is commitment. Life is wisdom. Life is seva-selfless service. We are here on this planet for only a short while. So why suffer, and why make others suffer? Who said what, when, or why-how long can you hold on to these things?

When life revolves around commitment, care, service, celebration, attainment of wisdom, and upliftment of the human spirit, grace replaces misery. And when life becomes a celebration, then money, reputation, relationships, and health all come back to us. It is ironic because what we spent our lives chasing was always with us.

We are here for a very short period of time on this planet. Have you noticed how most of us spend our time here? Suppose we live for 80 years. In those 80 years, we spend around 26 years and 8 months sleeping. Each day, we spend 2.5 hours on food and nearly 6 years and 8 months just eating over an 80-year lifetime. Similarly, we spend 2.5 years in the toilet. If we live in a big city like New York or Mumbai, we spend nearly 3 to 5 years in traffic. We hardly get around 30 years to do something productive. This is the time when we truly live our lives.

Let us observe our mind. We spend an enormous amount of time thinking about the past. Yet the past is past. It is gone, finished. Why should we waste time thinking about something unalterable? The same holds for worrying about the future. We postpone our happiness until some future date, but it never arrives. If we live life now, tomorrow



will take care of itself.

We must remember that every season in our life has had an impact on us. It has made us grow, given us strength. Rain brings mud, but it has also brought rainbows, and rainbows have brought colors into our lives. Peacocks wait for the rain. When they see dark clouds gathering in the sky, they open their colorful feathers. And when it rains, they dance so beautifully!

Similarly, when darkness comes in our lives, it doesn't forebode the end. The phases of darkness also pass away with time. There are 2 ways to go through the dark phases: we either cry, complain, and blame, or we sing and dance through it. And when we sing and dance in the rain, we get soaked in joy.

So, let us cultivate the habit of being happy. Only we can do this for ourselves. Nobody else can do this for us.

The strength of our happiness is measured by the number of adverse situations we can smile through. It is easy to be happy when life is smooth. But if we can smile through all kinds of opposing situations that life brings, then we have grown. Let's tell ourselves, 'Whatever happens, I am not going to be unhappy.' This inner strength and 'santosh' (contentment) are qualities we must develop. And I tell you, this can definitely be done. It is possible.

There is a famous Mullah Nasreddin story around this. Mullah Nasreddin used to grumble all the time. He was a farmer, and he would grumble about the shortfall of rain, 'Oh, there is no rain, and no crops are growing.' Next year, there was abundant rainfall, and Mullah had a bumper harvest. People thought, 'This year Nasreddin wouldn't grumble.' So people went to greet him, 'Oh, Mullah! How are you? You seem to be doing very well. Mother Nature has bestowed you with a bountiful harvest

of crops. The lush green crops look so amazing.' But Mullah wore the same grumpy look. He said, 'Yes, the yield is great but now I will have to do more work in the fields!' In all these dry years, I didn't have to do anything. But now with so much produce, I have to harvest and sell it in the market. It is a big headache.' Whether there were crops or not, Mullah continued to grumble.

The same is true in our lives. We are unhappy about what we don't have and we are unhappy with what is there already. Those who don't own a car are unhappy, while those who do often worry about high maintenance costs, traffic congestion, parking scarcity, rising fuel prices, and insurance and taxes.

One needs to develop the habit of being happy. We have to take responsibility for our happiness. If our happiness depends on a person, a thing, a situation, or time, it will only be temporary. Somebody once asked me, "What was the happiest time of your life?" I said, 'What? The happiest time of my life? Why do you connect 'time' with 'happiness'? I am happiness!'

The nature of time is that it is always changing. Life is a mix of good times and bad times. If we connect our 'happiness' to 'time', our state of being happy also changes with time. When we have this conviction that happiness has nothing to do with time, we can be happy forever. And this is the wisdom of life. All we need to do is disassociate our joy from people, places, situations, or time and realize that our innate nature is happiness. This is the highest knowledge of life. It may sound like a very difficult state of mind to attain, but it isn't. Any fool can be unhappy when things aren't okay. But it takes courage to be happy even when things are falling apart. And we all are courageous and strong.

From Lucknow to Bengaluru, Indore to Ranchi, campuses that had gone quiet after years of bans or postponed elections are seeing a slow revival of elected student unions

CAN GEN Z GIVE CAMPUS POLITICS A NEW LEASE OF LIFE?

Times News Network

The student protests over the NEET paper leak may have ebbed in Delhi after the exit of Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan, but many miles away in Ranchi, another exam controversy has sent another group of young job aspirants on hunger strike.

Ironically, the generation that has rediscovered the power of collective protest has come of age on campuses where one of the oldest forums for student politics — the elected students' union — has largely disappeared.

Punjab: banned. Madhya Pradesh: banned. Karnataka: banned until this week, when it lifted a 37-year prohibition that was originally intended as a temporary measure but lasted three and a half decades. In its place came nominated or advisory students' councils that were largely seen as toothless bodies.

At UP's Lucknow University (LU), elections have not been held since 2006 (there was an aborted attempt in 2012), in MP since 2017, and in Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and Tamil Nadu too have seen long gaps. In Jharkhand, formal elections have been rare. Student Unions, established in 1960, has held student union elections only four times in its history, with the last one in 2018, while other regional state universities have gone to polls once, twice, or never. Ranchi University student Amit Kumar, who has been part of the ongoing protests, says, "It would have been a far better experience for us had the university organised regular union elections, so that we possessed a constitutional mandate to present our demands."

Yashika Patel, a student in Indore who took part in the CJP protests, says Gen Zs grew up without seeing student elections. "We did not have a representative body that we could approach when we faced problems," says Patel.

In Lucknow, student Amitesh Pal says the absence of an elected body has "weakened collective student participation", leaving students to raise issues individually or through party-linked organisations with little impact.

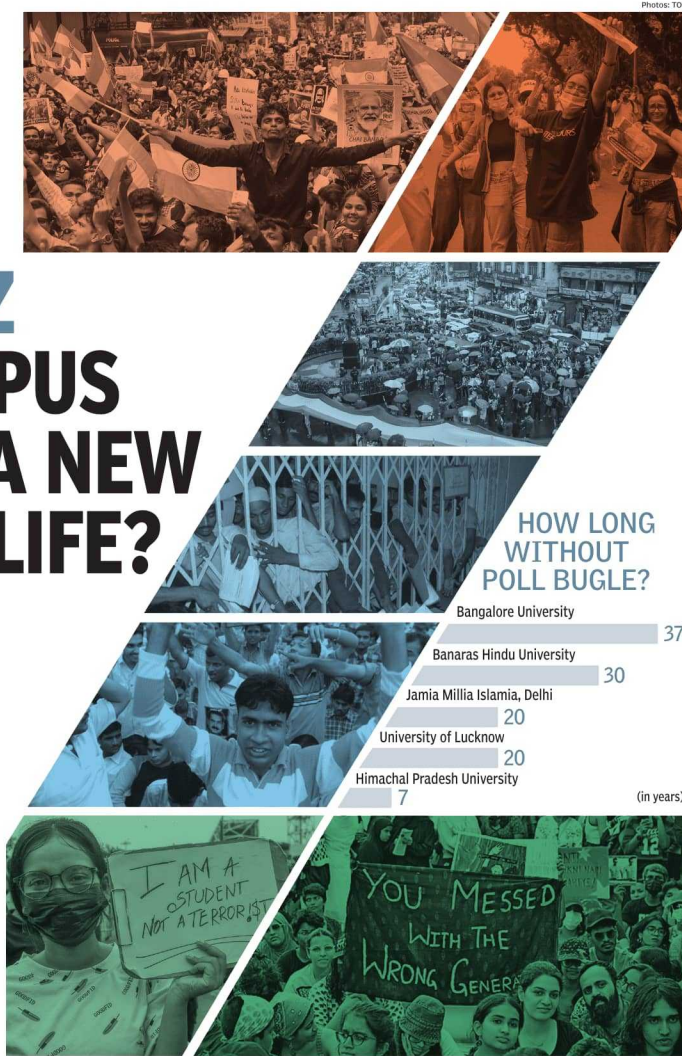
MONEY & MUSCLE POWER

In each state, elected unions were suspended or diluted after episodes of violence that alarmed administrators, courts and, eventually, the Supreme Court itself.

Old-timers recall that the problem in student union elections at LU started in the late 1980s, when political parties began direct interference in elections. As the union became a launching pad for aspiring politicians, winning became a matter of prestige. Criminals and mafia also took an interest as student leaders provided them foot soldiers. Assaults on teachers became routine, and hostels turned into safe havens for criminals extorting 'election donations' from local businessmen. Countrymade firearms and bombs featured in campus clashes. The toll was severe: more than 12 students died in union-related violence across UP between 2005 and 2007, three of them at LU alone, alongside more than 100 violent clashes. Ordinary students, unsurprisingly, drifted away from the poll process altogether: voter turnout dropped below 30%,

Elected unions function as a check on university authorities in the same way an opposition checks a govt. Those in office need someone to question them

Varsha Sharma,
EX-STUDENT UNION PRESIDENT



and fewer than 5% of women students took part.

MP's reckoning came in 2006, when a Ujjain professor died in violence connected to a student election. The death triggered a nationwide debate on campus violence and political interference, and led to elections being banned there for a second time (the first ban came in 2003). Karnataka's 1989 ban followed a similar pattern of deterioration: campus elections began mirroring political rivalries playing out in the state, and ideological and caste divisions hardened into clashes. Police became a fixture on campuses, and academic calendars were routinely disrupted.

STUDENT POWER

In 2005, the SC-mandated Lyngdoh Committee was set up, and it laid down guidelines aimed at curbing money and muscle power, but implementation was patchy. Many argue that the failure to contain electoral violence became an excuse to abandon the democratic process itself. Former LU student Satyendra Pandey says, "A few incidents cannot be a reason to deny an entire generation of students a platform."

Ruchi Gupta, who was in charge of Congress-backed NSUI between 2017-2020, says there is value to being connected with a party, though there is the danger of unions being reduced to "mouthpieces". "It allows for exposure to larger issues and a platform that goes beyond the campus. It lets students politically engage in contestation."

Prasenjit Bose, who once led leftwing SFI in JNU and is now Kolkata city coordinator for Congress's Chhatron Ki Goonj initiative, says that campus politics "raises political, social consciousness and teaches you to think beyond your career." He says the CJP protests succeeded because they represented a united student effort, with student organisations actively supporting the movement.

Pushkar Mishra, formerly with the ABVP in JNU, offers a more institutional defence of student politics: "It is essential for a democracy to thrive and can become a training ground for future political leaders." History bears that out. Several political stalwarts cut their teeth in student politics — the BJP's Arun Jaitley, Congress leaders Ajay Maken and PR Damsuni, and Left leaders Prakash Karat and Sitaram Yechury among them.

Former MP union president and lawyer Varsha Sharma points out that elected unions function as a check on university authorities in the same way an opposition checks a govt. "Those in office need someone to question them."

RISE OF ALTERNATIVES

Others have stepped into the vacuum. "Students wanted platforms where their issues could be raised collectively and that is why newer organisations and movements emerged," says Radhe Jat, a student activist associated with Indore-based National Educated Youth Union (NEYU) who participated in the CJP protests.

Ranchi student representatives say universities deliberately avoid elections to evade structural accountability. Om Verma, AJSU Chhatra Sangh president, says the primary reason for avoiding polls is that an elected student body gains statutory entry into senate and syndicate meetings. "Administrators would no longer be able to operate unilaterally. Every academic session, we submit formal demands for elections, but receive no concrete response," he says.

Sandeep Shastri, a Bengaluru-based political observer, says that student politics is welcome as long as it does not affect academic quality on campuses. "Higher education is a space for learning. Does the type of student politics that is being introduced contribute to learning? If it does, I would support it," he says.

Reporting by Himanshi Dhawan in Delhi, Anjanaya Singh in Lucknow, Sruthi Susan Ullas & Anush S in Bengaluru, Litha Achari in Indore, Ramendra Singh in Bhopal & Kelly Kislaya in Ranchi

I SPY WITH MY SMART GLASSES

Temples, protests or streets, covert filming is on the rise. Mohua Das finds out just how easy it is to record strangers

The internet already has a nickname for them: 'pervert glasses'. Last week, Instagram said it would start removing videos filmed on Meta's smart glasses when they are used to harass strangers, after pickup artists and prank accounts began secretly recording unsuspecting people. Women in the UK and the US have reported being filmed without consent on streets, in shops and gyms, with the videos later appearing online. Countries such as Germany are considering a ban on them.

In India too, smart glasses are raising questions about non-consensual filming and privacy. In March, they were used to secretly film attendees at a trans rights protest in Delhi. The footage clocked millions of views and exposed participants to online mockery. At last month's student protests at Jantar Mantar, a senior police officer was reportedly seen wearing them. People have also been caught wearing them inside temples where photography is prohibited.

Reason enough for me to put on a pair of AI-enabled smart glasses and wander around Mumbai on a Sunday. To see whether a stranger standing two feet away has any idea they're being recorded. And at what point a fun new gadget crosses the line.

A seaside promenade, a busy coffee shop, a mall, inside a women's loo, and a theatre. Nobody stopped me, though the tiny white recording light on the corner of the glasses blinked throughout. Covering it disables the camera. (For now. Hacks to hide it are already circulating, and cheaper variants may not have those safeguards.) Yet, almost nobody recognised it. Perhaps because everyone knows what a phone pointed in their direction means, but not yet a pair of glasses.

STOP 1: SEASIDE PROMENADE

The glasses saw what I saw. Palm trees, benches, people walking ahead, water on one side, mangroves on the other. A couple were chatting on a bench under a bright red umbrella, unaware they had become part of my recording. A little ahead, two children were collecting leaves and twigs by the water. I chatted with them briefly in Hindi about their names, whether they were siblings, where they lived, and which school they went to. Their mother watched us but never realised I was recording the entire exchange. I forgot about the conversation almost immediately. AI didn't.

When I uploaded the footage later, it identified them as minors, described what each was wearing, picked up their names from the conversation, and offered to translate it into English. A few minutes later, I stopped another mother and her college-going daughter for directions and recommendations, then asked if they had realised I was recording them. The daughter, Unnati, 20, said she had noticed the blinking light and guessed they were smart glasses, but hadn't thought much of it. Her mother, Nisha, hadn't realised at all. Once I explained the experiment, Unnati admitted that perhaps she should have questioned me. Nisha's first reaction was about consent and what rights she had if someone recorded her with smart glasses.

STOP 2: A CAFE

The cafe was where the smart glasses became an unusually observant companion, cataloguing strangers. I wasn't following anyone or trying to record anyone in particular. Yet by the time I left, I had unintentionally built a small archive of people.

Waiting for a table, I found myself surrounded by women doing the sort of things you never remember. The software did, assembling descriptions like "three friends debating pastries at the bake counter", one lifting her phone to either "photograph or pay", even snatches of a conversation from someone taking a call outside. They were breadcrumbs, not enough to identify someone by name — the AI refuses

to do that — but enough to make me wonder how many tiny observations it takes before someone stops feeling anonymous.

Then it did something cameras don't. It went from recording to reading people. It interpreted the girls' posture, gestures and group dynamics as "relaxed", "leaning in", "no rush" and "curious and engaged". A few seconds of eye contact and service were also enough for it to arrive at the personality of my waiter as "professional and attentive" though I never asked it to.

STOP 3: SHOPPING MALL

Hours after I walked through the security checkpoint, the AI could reconstruct it step by step: the automatic glass doors, X-ray baggage scanner, metal detector, the female security guard's name tag, the escalators beyond, even the order in which I'd passed through them.

By the other end of the mall, it had stitched together my route and listed the stores in sequence — "Diesel, Nike, Jo Malone, Armani... with a jewellery kiosk and cafe in between". It distinguished customers from staff and then described what they were doing. Shoppers moving at a "relaxed pace", couples and families "leisurely browsing", staff as "proactive" and "professional", and the interaction at the jewellery kiosk "friendly" and "consultative".

It concluded that security "seemed pretty relaxed", that staff were largely occupied with sales and restocking, and even offered to check whether it could spot the CCTV cameras or anti-theft systems for me.

STOP 4: WOMEN'S RESTROOM

Standing in a women's loo, the experiment gave me the most uneasy moments. The software had captured women at the washbasin area. One fixing her hair; another washing her hands, a third stepping out of a cubicle. No one noticed that the person standing behind them, adjusting a pair of spectacles, was also recording their face and bodies during a private moment. There's already a



Women have found a hack: play Disney music if you think you're being filmed. The theory being copyright bots will block it online. Mickey Mouse surely is better protected than women

name for those who misuse the glasses — "glassholes". Women, meanwhile, have found a hack: play Disney music if you think you're being filmed. The theory being copyright bots will block it online. Mickey Mouse surely is better protected than women are.

STOP 5: THEATRE

The theatre was the final test. In most auditoriums, the rules are clear. You don't film the performance, and you keep your phone away. If someone doesn't, an usher shines a torch or the glow of the screen invites a few irritated shushes from the rows behind. I sat through the play, capturing a couple of clips. I wasn't holding up a phone or blocking anyone's view. From everyone else's perspective, I was just another member of the audience. Except I left with a recording. Afterwards, AI described the stage, performers, lighting, set changes, and even snippets of dialogue.

Disclaimer: All the footage of strangers who happened to cross my path has been deleted

Snip, snip, skip: Why India's stray dog count doesn't add up

From 'sterilised' dogs giving birth to reproductive organs being recycled for payouts, how loopholes are undermining the ABC programme

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A clipped ear and a fresh surgical scar are supposed to mean a dog will never breed again. But not always. Every year, municipal bodies spend tens of crores of rupees sterilising stray dogs under the Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme. Yet, across the country, investigators are uncovering evidence of ghost surgeries and inflated sterilisation claims that cast doubt over whether some operations ever took place.

Last month, an audio recording landed on the phone of Ashna Singh (name changed on request), an animal rescuer in Sonipat. In the recording, accessed by TOI, a distraught dog feeder repeatedly questions a veterinarian from an ABC centre about a female stray she had caught for sterilisation. She had been returned with a notched ear and surgical stitches, standard signs of a completed procedure. Yet, she later gave birth to puppies. "Then what was the point of all my hard work catching the strays? I was told the surgery was done. Now, who will take care of all the puppies? How can this keep happening when so many operations are supposedly being done?" the feeder asks the veterinarian, who is unable to offer a clear explanation. Singh has filed RTI applications seeking details of the dog population survey, and verification records of the NGO that had been awarded the sterilisation contract. "The dog was reportedly sent for

sterilisation in April, and later gave birth in June. This raises obvious questions about whether the surgery was actually completed." She alleges the NGO had previously faced complaints or blacklisting in multiple states, yet continued securing ABC contracts elsewhere.

Under the ABC Rules, 2023, removed reproductive organs — ovaries for female dogs and testicles for males — are meant to serve as proof that sterilisation has taken place. Before contractors are paid, the organs are supposed to be counted by a designated committee, permanently dyed to prevent reuse, and then destroyed. But some clever contractors have found ways to beat the system, sometimes even filling inspection bags with stones beneath a layer of testicles. Others keep furnishing the same organs to claim payouts.

In April, authorities in Madhya Pradesh's Mandla recovered 795 preserved canine reproductive organs (518 male, 277 female) from a rented room linked to a private agency contracted to sterilise stray dogs. Officials suspect the organs were repeatedly reused as proof

of surgeries to claim municipal funds.

Earlier, an RTI audit in Ratlam found a contractor had allegedly been paid Rs 2.58 crore to sterilise 33,000 dogs between 2021 and 2025, though a physical survey found evidence of only about 2,200 surgeries. In June, Gwalior police registered a fraud case against a veterinarian accused of using a forged affidavit to claim nearly Rs 6 lakh for sterilising 659 dogs. Last year, the Guwahati Municipal Corporation, too, faced questions over claims of more than 24,000 sterilisations despite persistent complaints.

The allegations come even as courts have stepped up scrutiny of stray dog management. In May, the Supreme Court issued a fresh set of directions to states, union territories, and civic authorities for implementation of the ABC rules, observing that implementation had been sporadic and uneven.

TENDER TRAP

Animal welfare advocate Mariam Abuhaideri points out that contracts almost invariably go to the lowest bidder. "A pri-

Anyone with a registered NGO can apply for a sterilisation contract, even if it has been blacklisted in another state. There is no centralised system to report a problematic NGO. Contracts then almost invariably end up going to the lowest bidder and that encourages corruption — **Mariam Abuhaideri,** ANIMAL WELFARE ADVOCATE



COUNT ON IT: The Lucknow Model for dog sterilisation relies on digital verification but elsewhere, unscrupulous contractors are inflating surgery numbers

DOGGED PROBLEMS

Govt data estimates of stray dogs in India in 2019

15.3 million

Independent study of street dogs in 2024

52.5 million

Effective ABC program must sterilise a minimum of 70% of the stray dog population within a specific area, maintaining 70:30 ratio of female to male sterilisation

India accounts for 36% of global rabies deaths, as per WHO estimates

*Source: Livestock Census 2019/State of Pet Homelessness Project

ivate pet sterilisation costs Rs 5,000-10,000, excluding boarding and food. Now imagine winning a contract by bidding Rs800-900 per dog which is quite common. Out of that, they have to pay for the surgery, the veterinarian, dog catchers, transport, boarding, food, antibiotics, anti-rabies vaccination and, in many places, micro-chipping," says Abuhaideri, who alleges that a significant portion of the contract value is lost to commissions. "If half the money is gone before the work even begins, the contractor has to recover those costs from somewhere. That's when they start cutting corners," she says.

Though governed by the uniform ABC rules, 2023, many civic bodies follow conflicting local practices. "Anyone with a registered NGO can apply, even if it has been blacklisted in another state because there's no centralised system to report a problematic NGO."

Her solution is to give contracts only to organisations with demonstrated ex-

perience and competence. "The AWBI has stipulated Rs 1,650 as the minimum rate for sterilising a stray dog. Lower than this is encouraging corruption."

The ABC Rules, 2023, set by the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI), already contain safeguards against paper-only surgeries, points out Meet Ashar, legal advisor at PETA India and director of its cruelty response division. "The problem isn't the rules. It's implementation," he says. "Even today, barely 10-20% of municipalities in the country have a proper ABC programme in place. Despite Supreme Court directions that every district should have at least one ABC centre, we are yet to see that become a reality."

DIGITAL TRAIL

Some organisations believe the answer is making every step of the process traceable. Ayesha Christina Benn, founder of Neighbourhood Woof, which carries out sterilisation and anti-rabies vaccination

in parts of Delhi, was among the groups that flagged irregularities to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) in 2019.

"We complained about illegal relocation of dogs, botched surgeries, and other discrepancies. The then commissioner took cognisance and introduced the MCD APP-311," says Benn. The app, she says, creates a digital trail linking every dog to its surgery, photographs, geotagged pick-up and release locations, and CCTV footage from the operating theatre.

But technology is only as effective as its enforcement. "Some 14 organisations in Delhi are supposed to upload data every day, but only the MCD has access to it. We want the information to be made public," says Benn. "The data should be open to independent audit."

Rigorous documentation can improve outcomes. Lucknow has emerged as a national benchmark through a public-private partnership between the Lucknow Municipal Corporation and Humane World for Animals India, which has vaccinated over 1.05 lakh stray dogs since 2019.

"Every dog that enters our programme is photographed, geotagged and assigned a unique tag number," says Ratnesha Rao, senior manager at the NGO. Preserved organs are verified monthly by a committee, while photographs linked to each dog's tag number are submitted with invoices. "It's not just organ counting. There is visual documentation of every animal."

Rao credits community participation. "Around 26,000 sterilisations in Lucknow were facilitated by feeders, resident welfare associations and volunteers. We've developed a large volunteer network in Lucknow and are working across around 475 societies," he says.

An aware community, in other words, is also a watchful one, more likely to notice when a 'sterilised' dog turns up pregnant or when a promised surgery never happened. "No animal lover wants dogs living on the streets because that's no life for them," says Ashar.



REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Putting people at the heart of Parliament's performance

Increased public consultation and post-legislative assessment of laws can make the legislative process more inclusive and responsive

The word 'parliament' traces its origin to the French word *parler*, which means 'to speak'. In April, during a discussion in the Lok Sabha on increasing the number of Lok Sabha seats, BJP MP Tejashvi Surya and Congress MP Shashi Tharoor highlighted the need to increase opportunities for interventions in Parliament. However, irrespective of the issue of numbers, enabling more focused interventions by parliamentarians needs conscious efforts to reform the procedures of Parliament.

Public expectations from legislators mostly tend towards 'getting things done', i.e., administration work — particularly at a constituency level. Limited attention is paid to interventions they make on the floor of the House. Recently, during the Tamil Nadu assembly elections, debates focused on the alleged lack of development in the constituency of an incumbent minister. It is unfortunate that MLAs, MPs and MPs are expected to do the same job as that of a councillor/ward member entrusted with local governance and are often assessed on 'development works' in their respective constituencies as opposed to their performance in the respective Houses. This partly explains why initiatives tracking parliamentary performances of MPs and assembly performances of MLAs have not received the kind of public support they deserve.

BR Ambedkar, during the Constituent Assembly debates, hoped that the frequency at which future legislatures met would make legislators tired. While the first Lok Sabha (1952-57) managed to sit frequently, with an average annual sitting of 135 days, the 18th Lok Sabha (June 2024-present) has met on 135 days over two years — a yearly average of 67 days. MPs from all parties have advocated a minimum of 120 days of sittings annually with a tentative schedule to help them better prepare for the sessions. Instead of an 11 am start, House proceedings could start at 10 am, allowing more time for Zero and Question Hours. More starred and unstarred questions should be allowed while facilitating increased transparency in balloting and listing of questions. To address frequent disruptions, procedures could be suitably amended to allocate at least one hour every day or every few days in a session at 'Opposition Hour', where the Opposition sets the agenda, prioritising matters requiring a response from the executive. We could emulate the UK's and Canada's parliaments which allocate 20 and 22 days a year to the Opposition, respectively.

To reduce friction between MPs and promote civility in public discourse, the practice of interventions by Opposition MPs being seated separately could also be discontinued. Ultimately, they are not enemies, and their political rivalry should not be considered during the allocation of seats.

From a lawmakers' point of view, all bills reaching Parliament should be subject to public consultation during the drafting stage and by committees during scrutiny stage. Decisions in Parliament should be driven by consultation, consensus, and concurrence. Essentially, copies of the bills featuring in

the session's tentative list of business should be handed out as the list gets published to enable more effective and informed discussions upon their introduction. After introduction, all these bills should mandatorily be referred to the Standing Committees, similar to what happens in Kerala — however with more time than is usual in the Kerala instance, to ensure detailed scrutiny. Private member bills, initiated by non-minister MPs, seldom get noticed, especially because this happens on alternative Friday afternoons when attendance is low. Only around 2-3% of the hundreds of private members' bills introduced in Parliament are taken up for discussion, and several parliamentary sessions have ended without any private members' business having been transacted. A conscious effort should be made to increase the time allocation for private members' business during the week, to encourage policy endowments by MPs. Procedural interventions should also ensure that at least one-third of the private member bills gets discussed, with the concerned minister's attendance made mandatory.

Committees, known as mini-parliaments, while allowing flexibility to scrutinise matters of public importance, suffer from structural weaknesses. Most consultative committees have not met even once, against the mandatory requirement to hold at least four meetings a year. The tenure of department-related parliamentary standing committees should be increased to at least two years to ensure their sustained and effective working. In addition to the staff deployed from the parliament secretariat, there should be a provision for the appointment of external experts as advisors to the committees. The committees' interactions with external



Arun PS



To address frequent disruptions, at least one hour every day or every few days in a session could be allocated as "Opposition Hour".

stakeholders should be broadcast and submissions should be made publicly available. A verbatim record of evidence tendered before committees should be made public alongside committee reports.

Standing committees must also assess the impact of laws, facilitating strong post-legislative scrutiny. Mandatory post-legislative scrutiny should be undertaken by the standing committees five years after the passage of a bill. Committees should allow the public to also deposit before them. For example, select committees of the Kerala legislature regularly host public hearings in district court-lectures, allowing the public to participate in the process. Parliamentary committees could also consider a non-Parliament venue where the public gets to appear before them.

During discussions on salaries and allowances in 2010, then Rajya Sabha MP NK Singh emphasised the need to have qualified researchers to support MPs in performing their duties. Many public officials below the protocol rank of MP have personal staff,

funded by the government, for support in daily work. The parliament secretariat currently gives only ₹40,000 a month to a Lok Sabha MP to appoint one computer-literate staff member; this research support gap is serious and needs to be bridged by allowing every MP to hire two-three research staff whose salaries are borne by the parliament secretariat. This will elevate the quality of discourse and interventions in Parliament, making it an investment in improved legislative quality.

Recently, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla emphasised the importance of public participation in a parliamentary democracy. Parliament should also evolve more ways in which citizens interact with its proceedings. States such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu are contemplating how citizens can raise issues directly in the state legislative assembly. The parliament website should have a dedicated citizen's corner. Apart from simple explanations on the working of Parliament and process flow for visiting Parliament, the

section should clearly explain how citizens could get to know the work of their MP, interact with MPs and committees, and submit petitions. In the interest of inclusivity, broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings in sign language could also be considered.

As the chair of International IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) for the year 2026, India should proactively implement the institute's eight principles of parliamentary public engagement. *Global Parliamentary Reports*, published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UNDP, also offer important insights into meeting public expectations, improving oversight, and facilitating effective public participation. These should essentially act as the guiding principles for our legislatures in shaping the 21st century reforms.

Arun PS, co-founder and research lead of *Atyeti Research*, a law and policy think tank.

The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



An Indian dynasty almost inherited the Caliphate

Sometimes, more interesting than actual history is what you could call 'what if' history. It's often referred to as counterfactual story-telling. A delightful book I have just read sits somewhere between the what-if account and a realisation that it almost did happen. In fact, it seems the cast of characters involved — the *dramatis personae*, you could call them — wanted it to happen. But it did not.

I am referring to the little known fact that in the 1930s, after the Turkish government abolished the caliphate, serious efforts were made to pass it onto the family of the Nizam of Hyderabad. Had that happened the centuries-old caliphate, that stretched back 1300 years, could have become an Indian institution.

This amazing story is the riveting subject of Imran Mulla's excellent book, *The Indian Caliphate: Desires Ottomans and the Billionaire Prince*. Let me offer you a brief, edited account.

Let's start with Shaukati Ali of the Ali

brothers and the Khalifat Movement of the 1920s. When he became aware that the last Caliph, Abdumajid, was living in impecunious exile on the French Riviera, he persuaded the seventh Nizam of Hyderabad, Mir Osman Ali Khan, to support him. Not much later he arranged a marital union between the Ottoman and Asaf Jah families. The Nizam's eldest grandson and, later, heir, Mir Himayat Ali Khan — better known as Prince Asaf Jah — was chosen to marry the last Caliph's daughter, Princess Durrushehvar. The Hyderabadis were 24. The Turkish bride 18. At the same time, Asaf Jah's younger brother, Mir Shujaat Ali Khan — known as Prince Moazzam Jah — was betrothed to a junior Turkish princess, Niloufer.

The joint wedding ceremony was held at the Palais Carabacel on 12 November 1931. Mulla writes: "Both princes wore richly-embroidered robes of Indian cloth, with turbans on their heads and garlands of flowers hung around their necks in the normal Indian way... Locals practically

besieged the Palais Carabacel, fascinated by the prospect of an exotic Islamic wedding. Asaf and Moazzam Jah drove from the Negresco (their hotel) to the villa, each in their own convertible Mercedes — both cars white, Hyderabad's princely colour, and covered in flowers. Large hooters were placed on the front of each and hooted all the way to the villa."

The wedding was a small affair. Mulla says, and Abdumajid, the Caliph, personally conducted it. Negotiations over the financial settlement continued through the ceremony. "Hyderabad's two princes knelt for more than 30 minutes before propped up pictures of their brides. Eventually, the contract was signed. With aching knees, they rose at last. The brides donned their veils and there were several rounds of phos. Afterwards, there was a small tea party."

Now this was a time when Abdumajid was desperate to secure the continuation of the caliphate. There were many who wanted the title, including King Fuad of Egypt. But it seems the wife Shaukati Ali persuaded Abdumajid to bestow it upon the eldest child from the union of Asaf Jah and Durrushehvar. That is to say his grandson, Abdumajid, Mulla suggests, was rather enamoured of the idea. Its appeal was significantly enhanced by the Nizam's legendary fortune. The impoverished caliphate needed money. It was skint!

Mulla writes of an alleged deed between the two houses to seal the arrangement, but gamely admits it was inauthentic. However, he argues both

IN THE 1930S, AFTER THE TURKISH GOVERNMENT ABOLISHED THE CALIPHATE, SERIOUS EFFORTS WERE MADE TO PASS IT ONTO THE FAMILY OF THE NIZAM OF HYDERABAD. HAD THAT HAPPENED, THE CENTURIES-OLD CALIPHATE COULD HAVE BECOME AN INDIAN INSTITUTION

wanted the outcome it intended. It would not have united the Ottoman and Asaf Jah families in the history and tradition of the caliphate, but it would also have rooted the institution in Indian soil and given an unprecedented importance to Indian Islam. But it was not to be. The British were not in favour.

However, proof of this tale is that in Khalidabad, which used to be part of old Hyderabad, Mir Osman Ali Khan, who was still Nizam when Abdumajid died, built an Ottoman-style mausoleum to house the last Caliph's mortal remains. He wanted to be buried in India. But that too was not to be.

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

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



Fostering safe motherhood with institutional deliveries

In many parts of the country, especially in those which are remote and with restricted access to medical facilities, home births have been considered something of a tradition, even as they increased the risks to maternal and neonatal health, with greater chances of postpartum haemorrhage, infections, and delays in emergency care. For some years now, a quiet change has been taking place across many states. In Bihar, just two years ago, more than 40% of deliveries in 80 panchayats across 11 districts took place at home. Today, those same panchayats are leading from the front with institutional deliveries becoming the accepted standard of care. This has come about because of the government's home delivery-free panchayat campaign.

Dr Meena Samant, director of obstetrics and gynaecology, Medanta, says, "Proper management of emergency complications arising during childbirth is possible only in modern medical facilities. Bihar's home-delivery-free model demonstrates that the synergy between social behaviour change and health services can effectively reduce maternal mortality rates."

The state health department recognised that this was not just a medical issue but a social one. It thus targeted behaviour change, orienting ASHAs, ANMs, CHOs, and facilitators to engage directly with communities. Coordinated arrangements at the panchayat level tracked pregnant women, monitored probable delivery dates and provided timely access to the health institutions. Areas where home deliveries once exceeded 40% have seen these drop to 5-8.5%.

Muzaffarpur district has emerged as the most compelling example, where home deliveries have fallen to just 2% across 19 panchayats. "We went door-to-door to explain to every household that delivery in the hospital is safe for both mother and child," says Vibha Kumari, head of Bagha Khal panchayat. Today, no deliveries take

place at home in her village. Dr Sudhir Kumar, civil surgeon, Muzaffarpur, says that "limiting home deliveries to just 2% in Muzaffarpur is a prime example of public participation and systemic commitment". He commended the dedication of ASHA workers, ANMs, CHOs, and local panchayat representatives in transforming age-old mindsets.

The experience of Neelam Devi of Bagha Khal illustrates this transformation. During her first childbirth at home, she faced severe bleeding while the midwife insisted everything was fine. For her second child, she chose a government hospital, where she received security and care that could never have been provided at home. Villages once bound by tradition are now embracing safe motherhood through institutional delivery.

The Muzaffarpur model inspired other districts. In Saran, the Basahya and Konda panchayats reduced home deliveries from 45% to near zero. In Kishanganj's Bahadurganj, Dighalban, Tedagachhi, Potlia, Kochadhaman, and Thakurganj blocks, 95-100% of deliveries now occur in hospitals, proving that geography need not be a barrier when administration, panchayats, and health systems work together.

Dr Indira Prasad, additional professor and gynaecologist, AIIMS, says, "The most effective way to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality is through safe institutional delivery. But it will be sustainable only if women in hospitals get respectable and quality services and availability of all-weather transport in remote areas."

Bihar's 80 home-delivery-free panchayats offer hope in a state where maternal mortality remains higher than the national average. Where home delivery was once tradition, institutional delivery now has social acceptance. Decades-old beliefs change when communities, leaders, and health systems unite.

The views expressed are personal

The Bhakti movement, beyond our textbooks

The much-debated National Education Policy (2020) seeks to root education in the Indian ethos and civilisational heritage. This is welcome. But the real challenge lies not only in intervention but also in execution. A good example is whether and how we have attempted to include the globally unparalleled Bhakti movement in our educational curriculum. How many of us can imagine a lady, as far back as the 12th century, who, covered only by her tresses, walked nude to Kalyan in present-day Karnataka, to have philosophical dialogue with the great Lingayit seer, Basavanna? Her name was Mahadevi Akka. This conversation took place at a place called the Anubhava Mantapa or 'the hall of spiritual experience', where men and women from all social backgrounds could come to openly discuss spiritual questions or matters of public importance.

Basavanna, along with Allama Prabhu, founded the powerful social reform movement of that time, the Virashaiva movement. Through intensely fervent and devotional hymns, the Lingayits sought personal communion with Shiva, and rallied against caste customs, superstitions, image worship, animal sacrifices and the caste system. Mahadevi, a wandering mendicant, considered Shiva to be her beloved. Following her dialogue with Basavanna, this wild-looking, completely unconventional woman was honourably admitted to the Lingayit order.



Pavan K Varma

In Maharashtra, the iconic Namadeva (1270-1350 CE), a great devotee of Vithoba (a form of Vishnu), powerfully argued that the language of the masses, and the source of some of our most evocative literature and poetry. Few realise that it also played an important role in Hinduism surviving the proselytisation and plunder of the Turkic invasion. A rainbow-coloured turban of this nature, shunning the priestly caste and formal rituals, while combining devotional fervour, direct communion, social irreverence, and the support of the masses, could hardly be killed by the conqueror's sword. Indeed, later, even tenets of Islam, through Sufism, became part of this great crusade.

But is any of this taught in our schools and universities? Students may have studied individual figures — Kabir, Guru Nanak, Tukaram, Surdas — but have they been taught that all of them were part of an integrated and landmark upsurge to reform, reinterpret, and revive the evolution of Indian thought? The *dramatis personae* of this reawakening spread from the

The *dramatis personae* of the reawakening is an amazing galaxy of literary and spiritual giants.

11th to the 18th century in an amazing galaxy of literary and spiritual giants — the Nayanars and Tamil saints, Jayadeva, Vidyapati, Chandidasa, Bihari, Chaitanya, Amir Khusrau, Rahim, Vallabhacharya, Mirabai, Andai, Tukaram, Lal Deg, Nanmaya, Karalkal, Amara, Narayana, Mehta, and many more — all of them writing in their local languages, thereby seeping deep into the consciousness of Indians. It is only when we understand that the Bhakti movement as perhaps the world's longest and most vibrant reform movements, inspired by religion and yet protesting its sterile rituals and oppressive hierarchies, can one understand the true meaning and content of that, for instance, Kabir (1440-1518 CE) wrote: "It is but folly to ask what the caste of a saint may be."

The barber has sought God, the washerman and the carpenter. Even Radhas was a sinner after God. The Rishi Swapacha was a tanner by caste. Hindus and Muslims alike have achieved that End. Where remains no mark of distinction.

Similarly, Guru Nanak's (1469-1539 CE) citation call was *Ki Karti Hai* — the only one Supreme Being — thus making a powerful call of universal spiritual appeal. Sikhism, like Vedanta, emphasised the non-duality of divinity — *ek onkar se sab jag upai* (From one luminous light, the entire universe arose). Through this one statement, it pole-vaulted above conventional religious orthodoxies. The Gurm Granth Sahib contains the hymns of not only the Sikh Gurus, but also mentions Hindu deities and the teachings of 13 Hindu Bhakti-movement saints, as also Sheikh Farid and Kabir. The *langars* in gurudwaras have never made any distinctions based on caste. He wanted to be buried in India. But that too was not to be.

Pavan K Varma is an author, diplomat, and former Rajya Sabha MP. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Solidarity with women

This is with reference to "Women seldom receive the solidarity they deserve" extended" by Namita Bhandare (August 2). Women are always at the forefront in mass protests, but their voices go unheard when it comes to their rights. They face atrocities and oppression, which needs urgent addressing.

Abhilasha Gupta

The power of constitutional conventions

This is with reference to "The British ceremonies of PMs demitting office" by Karan Thapar (August 2). Such swift and seamless transfer of power reflects respect for constitutional conventions. Prolonged political transitions create unnecessary spectacle. India can draw inspiration from such conventions.

Sanjay Chopra

II. Such ceremonies in a democracy might appear odd, but, usually, a profound principle underlies these protocols. The UK's protocol on PMs' exit has immense signalling value to British politics, on grace in defeat.

Divya Mallick

Write to us at letters@hindustantimes.com

Apoorva Mittal

A prominent businessperson made a frantic phone call to Gaurav Shah. The chief investment officer (CIO), whom his family business hired just 11 months ago, had quit—and he needed a replacement. “I have to save the mess,” the promoter told Shah, who is a managing partner of Areté Ventures, which has an executive search division.

When Shah and the promoter met in Mumbai, they agreed the problem was not the CIO who said ciao in a hurry, but the chaotic situation he was thrown into. He was hired even before there was an operating structure or a supporting team in place. An investment head, Shah pointed out, should be hired with a clearly defined mandate.

Says Shah: “Many professionals come with deep experience in private equity, venture capital, or institutional investing. But a family office may ask them to do all of it together, build the platform from ground up, define the investment thesis and create portfolio and sourcing discipline. While hiring a CIO, the family must define the mandate, not merely the title and compensation.”

A CIO is integral to a family office, as they steer its entire investment programme, but in India these two entities are still learning to tango. And this awkward dance—a professional in a personal space, an outsider on the inside, dealing with familial relations and wealth—is becoming more evident as the family office ecosystem grows by leaps and bounds.

of Cervin Family Office, a multi-family office and advisory firm for family offices, says he gets a call from headhunters every other day. While the demand is for professionals with a cross-asset-class breadth, the trouble is in finding ones who can survive the intensely personal culture of a promoter-led office.

“Culturally, family offices at times don’t understand investment professionals,” says Randev. “Sometimes they say they want to build a professional family office but we have been told that they would call up at 11 pm as they had just come back from a holiday in Europe and wanted some information.”

He points to what he calls the 90-10 rule: most families keep 90% of the money in bonds and safe instruments but spend most of the time talking about the riskier 10%. “The professional’s grouse is that after the corpus is fully invested, the fund goes into maintenance mode and is not exciting enough,” he says.

One executive lived the ambiguity associated with family offices. A CIO, who joined a Mumbai family office after months of getting to know the promoter, says he knew within a month he had made a mistake. He had built a relationship with the person he thought was calling the shots—only to discover, after joining, that someone else was. “I’ve seen amazing family offices where they treat you with equality, and there are some places where people look down upon you.”

Devashish Khanna, CIO of private invest-



MIND THE GAP

WHAT FAMILIES WANT IN A CIO:

- Multi-asset investor
- Team and process builder
- Trusted adviser
- Mentor to the next generation

WHAT SENIOR CANDIDATES EXPECT:

- Clearly defined investment mandate
- Genuine decision-making authority
- Institutional governance
- Long-term, performance-linked pay

“In most family offices, the final decision on any investment is made by the family. A CIO is only expected to give their analysis. Senior professionals are often not willing to join family offices except for the large ones”

AROON KUMAR AGGARWAL, managing partner for Asia, Bradford Consultants

See You, CIO

Family offices are struggling to find and retain chief investment officers, whose title holds an authority promoters are often not willing to concede. Pay structures and unreasonable personal demands complicate an awkward tango

India has more than 300 family offices managing upward of \$30 billion in assets, according to The Indian Family Offices Report 2026 by The Economic Times and 1Lattice. However, the industry estimates that the number could be much higher—more than 1,000—since most of them operate with no obligation to register or disclose.

THE CHANGING OFFICE

Family office itself is undergoing a shift. Before 2020, most Indian family offices weren’t really investment operations; they were treasury desks built to protect generational wealth. Beating the Nifty by a percentage point or two was the ambition. Two things broke that pattern—money and succession. As FII and FDI inflows rose, families that had been sitting on real estate, gold and blue-chip stocks began to put in a slice in private equity, venture funds and pre-IPO rounds. As those bets worked out, the exposure grew, pushed by a younger generation eager to diversify.

A third less visible force is regulatory pressure. “With a lot of regulatory action, families want to ensure that everything is squeaky clean,” says a senior executive at a family office who did not wish to be named.

However, as family offices try to evolve from promoter-run treasury desks to professional investment institutions, they are struggling to find and retain CIOs whose title holds an authority promoters are often not willing to bestow.

That tension shows up, first, in who gets to say yes.

“In most family offices, the final decision on any investment is made by the family. A CIO is only expected to give their analysis to the family,” says Aron Kumar Aggarwal, managing partner for Asia, Bradford Consultants. “Senior professionals who need independent decision-making powers are not willing to join family offices except for the large ones.”

The demand for these roles, recruiters say, is far ahead of supply. Munish Randev, founder

ments at Capri Global Family Office, says it comes down to the promoter’s mindset. “Every family is different. I know a lot of families that have a billion dollars in cash but invest only in bonds and fixed income.”

He traces the current wave to two groups reshaping the ecosystem—newly rich families setting up family offices and next-generation heirs stepping into family businesses their parents built.

‘ARE YOU A VEGAN?’

Some of the friction or discomfort is “cultural” in a literal sense. Randev recalls an Ahmedabad-based family business promoter who wanted a Gujarati-speaking candidate. In another case, the demand was for a vegetarian executive as the role involved working closely with several generations of a vegan family.

“These requirements may sound unusual but they persist,” says Randev. “Getting the ‘right’ person has become a serious issue for many families. Finding someone with the right investment capabilities and relevant fund management experience and cultural fit is very difficult.”

Shah says some families are reassessing overly restrictive filters as they confront a limited pool of candidates and are worn down by churn. “The discussion is shifting from whether a candidate shares every personal preference of a family to whether the executive can respect the family’s values and workplace norms.”

The vetting sometimes goes beyond the candidate. Aggarwal recalls setting up a search for a real-estate family office—a sector where, he says, “there are generally skeletons in the closet” that surface the moment a serious candidate starts doing their own research. Rather than let the search stall, his firm worked with the client to remove two or three family members from early conversations and pitch materials, so that candidates

CHECK THE FAMILY OFFICE

Over 300: No. of family offices in India
\$30 bn: Assets they manage
Mumbai, Delhi-NCR and Bengaluru: Cities having most number of family offices

Source: The Indian Family Offices Report ‘26 by The Economic Times and 1Lattice

and venture capital, partner-level executives are compensated with “carry” or carried interest—a share of profits—on top of salary and bonus. In family offices, it barely exists.

“About 90% of family offices in India don’t understand the concept of carry. Even if they do, they would love to deny that to the CIO,” says Khanna. “If you are doing nothing—just fixed income for ₹10,000 crore—nobody will pay you more, and that’s absolutely fine. But if you are doing large private equity, public markets, and looking at a 20% CAGR, you have to be compensated. Everybody is hoping that they change—let’s see.”

Part of the problem is structural: unlike an alternative investment fund (AIF), a family office doesn’t answer to an external regulator. Even a written carry arrangement, says Khanna, relies largely on the family’s willingness to honour it, with few formal mechanisms for enforcement. Many family offices also still run under the shadow of the operating business’s HR policies, treating an analyst, who needs to be out of office 15 days a month sourcing deals, the same way they

Chona says his method for resolving disagreements is simple: “Either convince or be convinced.” He adds, “I would have the final say but a lot of confidence is built over time that I usually don’t have a strong point of view that is different from the team’s.”

OFFICE AS CLASSROOM

Several large family offices are now treating the CIO’s desk as a classroom—where young heirs are asked to shadow the professional, sit with them on workdays and eventually make the calls themselves. The executive is expected to mentor rather than dictate.

A recruiter recalls a mandate a client gave: the family didn’t want someone who had “been there, done that.” They wanted a CIO who would do the research, offer views and let the next generation make the calls.

Meanwhile, at some of the largest family offices, the opposite mandate is just as common—hand over a defined pool of capital and largely leave the professional to run it alone.

It is a changing role and executives are learning it on the job. What started as a treasury function has expanded to managing investments and overseeing an office handling philanthropy, governance and even succession.

While there are many crinkles to smooth out, the furthest end of that arc is a shift to something closer to a steward of the family’s brand and legacy—a model that family offices in the West have already moved toward, and that some of the more sophisticated Indian offices are now reaching for.

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CHALLENGES IN HIRING TALENT

DEMAND, which is far outpacing supply as the family office ecosystem grows | UNCLEAR AUTHORITY, as final decisions often rest with the family | CULTURAL FIT, as some families stress on CIO’s dietary choice | MISALIGNED COMPENSATION, as CIOs are not offered incentives like a share in profits

Glynda Alves

You have been in the workforce for decades, but you still mention your elite college education.

- A. Yes. A prestigious alma mater is always relevant—it gives me an edge.
- B. Sometimes. Only if someone asks or it is genuinely relevant to the conversation.
- C. Rarely. That was years ago. My work should speak for itself.

Your colleague mentions they spent their summer vacation in the Maldives. You are most likely to say:

- A. “The Maldives? It’s so overdone. I only travel to under-the-radar destinations.”
- B. “Nice! Was it crowded?”
- C. “That sounds lovely. How was it?”

A colleague invites you to grab a coffee from the office pantry. You...

- A. Decline. “I only drink single-origin coffee.”
- B. Go along, but skip the coffee.
- C. Join them. Good conversation matters more than great coffee.

A junior teammate shares a suggestion you have never considered. Your first instinct is to...

- A. Wait and see what the senior leaders think.
- B. Ask them to explain it further.
- C. Give it the same consideration as anyone else’s idea.

When discussing a challenge at work, you tend to...

- A. Reference your knowledge and past successes to demonstrate expertise.
- B. Share your expertise only when it helps move the discussion forward.

Are You a Microsnob?

Does your neck hurt from keeping your nose up in the air? You may be guilty of a little microsnobbery. Never heard of it? According to writer Victoria Wolff, while old-fashioned, class-based snobbery hasn’t disappeared, it has evolved—splintering into countless subtle, identity-driven judgments about everyday choices, from what we eat and wear to how we parent and consume culture. And nowhere is this quiet one-upmanship more pervasive than in the workplace.

Are you guilty of small everyday behaviours that quietly signal superiority? Take this quiz to find out:

C. Focus on finding the best solution, even if someone else has the answer.

Which statement do you agree with most?

- A. Driving to work is a sign that you’ve made it.
- B. Your mode of transport says nothing about your success.
- C. The best commute is the one that’s practical for you.

MOSTLY As: Congratulations—you’re a microsnob. You probably don’t think of yourself as one, but offhand remarks, raised eyebrows and carefully curated preferences may be saying otherwise. Whether it’s dismissing instant coffee, scoffing at mainstream holiday destinations, or name-dropping your alma mater, you may be signalling that your choices are somehow more refined, cultured, or worthy than what someone else has been exposed to. In the workplace, they can make colleagues feel excluded, second-guessed or reluctant to contribute—none of which makes for a stronger or more collaborative team. But the good news is that microsnobbery is a habit and, if you spot it, you can drop it.

ed, second-guessed or reluctant to contribute—none of which makes for a stronger or more collaborative team. But the good news is that microsnobbery is a habit and, if you spot it, you can drop it.

MOSTLY Bs: You have strong preferences, but you recognise they are just that—your preferences, just like your coworkers will have their own. You are open-minded, curious and genuinely interested in learning about other people’s experiences and perspectives. You appreciate quality without assuming everyone should share your tastes. Sure, you may be guilty of the occasional eyeroll, but as long as you keep it in check, your colleagues are unlikely to feel judged or left out.

MOSTLY Cs: You don’t equate taste, exposure, or financial means with status. Whether it’s someone’s coffee order, education, or holiday destination, you see your colleagues as equals, each bringing their own strengths to the team. That doesn’t mean you lack standards—it simply means you don’t use them to judge others. As a result, people are likely to feel comfortable opening up to you, a quality that can take you far in the workplace. Just be careful not to be so accommodating that your own opinions, ideas and preferences are consistently pushed to the sidelines.

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Why do some people broadcast their ‘better’ taste?

“It just shows how competitive life has become and how every level of it is performative. It also shows the desire to be seen as in the know. It’s about social status too. Being seen as someone with good taste elevates you. To me, though, microsnobbery is the exact opposite of what real good taste and manners are about. Genuine social refinement is rooted in understatement and consideration for others. It’s a bit like people who choose logo over silhouette and style in fashion.”

SUJATA ASSOMULL, fashion writer

Should you call out microsnobbery, or let it slide, especially if it’s coming from your boss?

“If someone is engaging in microsnobbery because they are insecure, calling them out immediately is likely to make them defensive. Instead, strengthen your sense of self-worth. Remind yourself that your value isn’t determined by where you studied, what you earn, or the experiences you’ve had. I also like to think of microsnobbery as macro insecurity. Their need to signal superiority often reflects their insecurity—you just happen to be in the room. If the behaviour becomes persistent and intentional, especially if it’s undermining you in front of others, address it calmly: ‘I know you probably didn’t mean to put me down, but what you said wasn’t necessary.’”

ANAND CHULANI, business & success coach

How would you define microsnobbery?

“Microsnobbery isn’t a formal psychological construct—it’s a colloquial term. Snobbery is simply signalling superiority, whether through education, class, taste, or status. The ‘micro’ refers to subtle, low-intensity behaviours that are often difficult to prove as they are covert, unintentional and open to interpretation. Saying you only drink single-origin coffee can subtly signal status and competence. That said, intent matters. Someone may genuinely be passionate about coffee and could simply be sharing an interest. Without clear evidence, it’s difficult to distinguish between subtle status signalling and innocent conversation. So it’s important to acknowledge both possibilities rather than assume every display of expertise or taste is an act of microsnobbery.”

RADHIKA BAPAT, clinical psychologist



Oh, Those Squawking Yellow Creatures Stumbling Into Golden Black & White

Whether yearning for a time and place you never lived through like silent-era Hollywood, or one you do remember like 80s Hindi cinema, Minions and a filmi minion were both at hand to jog some joy

VOX OFFICE



JAI ARJUN SINGH

Sometime last month, I was sitting in a fancy auditorium watching a children's movie—with more than a dozen kids (and a few adults) at a birthday screening for my 9-year-old. It was an animated feature, wonderfully imagined and realised, and perfectly suited to the 3D format we watched it in. Laughs and titters emanated from the seats around me. And yet I'm certain that I appreciated Minions & Monsters more than any of the younglings in the room.

Because apart from being perfectly enjoyable on its own terms, this film is also a

reverential, homage-drenched fever dream for anyone who loves deep cinema history. The plot has the squawking yellow Minions stumbling onto a movie shoot in silent-era Hollywood, getting employed in films, and having to negotiate the transition to the sound era. And this is rich ground for many cinematic references.

I was spellbound by the opening moments, where the present-day Universal Pictures logo transforms, in reverse chronology, into its earlier iterations, bright colour yielding to grainy B&W. After which we get vignettes ranging from Earthward Muybridge's 1870s series 'The Horse in Motion' (which heralded the 'motion pictures' we know) to the Lumiere Brothers' train arriving at a station. And the legendary 'moon gets it in the eye' shot from George Méliès' 1902 film *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (A Trip to the Moon)—with a Minion-face in place of the Moon-face.

A kid in the hall made whimpering sounds as all this happened: 'I hope this won't be a black and white film!' he said. If this plebeian wretch had been sitting next to me, I would have emptied a sack of hot buttery



FULL BANA-NA-NOIR

popcorn over his head. But I ignored him, much as I have done undergrad students who say monochrome makes their eyes hurt.

Meanwhile, onscreen, there were recreations of classic scenes featuring Charlie Chaplin (Modern Times), Buster Keaton (Steamboat Bill Jr), and Harold Lloyd (Safety Last). And later, films like *The Maltese*

Falcon and Citizen Kane, with a Minion as the dying Kane in the opening scene, saying everything but the required 'Rosebud'.

Watching all this as someone who fell in love with early cinema as an adolescent, it was magic. If this movie had come out when I was teaching a film-history course a few years ago, I would have shown these scenes alongside the originals.

For many grown-ups, watching a good (contemporary) animated film is like a time-machine ride to a past when they loved such movies without filters, without the terrible burden of being an indulgent 'adult' (or having to perform 'adulthood'). For me, M&M offered both that sensation—a memory of being rapt by the 1967 Disney version of *The Jungle Book*, for instance. As well as a different nostalgia—anoemia, a wistful

hand, smirking at every booming proclamation made by Amrish Puri or Kader Khan, leering at the heroines as they performed the climactic dance number, before the heroes saved the day.

Those films were my pop cultural wellsprings. So it was gratifying to encounter Dan Dhanoa—who was one of those minions in beloved films like *Tridev* and *Zalzala*—in Chandigarh. 'Captain Dan', as he is widely

Having fallen in love with early cinema, watching recreations of classic scenes in Minions & Monsters (pic) was magic

yearning for a time and place that one never actually knew firsthand, in this case, early Hollywood at the dawn of movie-making.

But a month ago, I also experienced a nostalgia that had to do with my training in mainstream Hindi films as a child. And again, it involved a henchman. If the Minions universe gets laughs from its audacious premise—cute little yellow creatures who end up serving the most evil masters they can find—1980s Hindi cinema was populated by sidekicks who stood by, drinks in

known, runs a homestay called Anchor-age42, a warm space filled with photos from his stint in films.

Walking through this shrine was as exciting for me as those Old Hollywood scenes in M&M had been. But there was nothing silent-movie-ish about this experience. For days afterwards, I watched song sequences like 'Gajar ne kiya ha ishaara', with Dan and other rogues jiggling along in the background, on loop. Oye Oye, went my cine-ophile heart.

FILM FATALE



ANNA MM VETTICAD

In the Name Of the Mother And the Son...

Story of intrigue and a relationship where one half suddenly falls away

One of the gifts that the new Malayalam New Wave has given us is the freedom to be picky. The overall quality of post-2010 middle-of-the-road Malayalam cinema is so high, the range of gutsy themes so vast, and production values so stupendous despite minimal budgets, that being hard-to-please is not an indulgence for the traditional Malayalam film audience. It is a natural fallout of the wealth on offer.

It is in this context that Chidambaram's *Balan*: The Boy, written by Jithu Madhavan, arrived in theatres in June and recently on an OTT. Unlike the director's first two films, *Jan.E.Man*, and the all-India blockbuster *Manjummel Boys*, which featured large groups of man-children, *Balan* (itself meaning 'boy') is the saga of a mother determined to protect her son from her past.

It stars the gifted newcomers Adhisheshan and Muhammed Zinaab as the little and older versions of the titular protagonist, while another smashing debutant, Farzana Palathingal, plays his parent. Jean Paul Lal and Tovino Thomas are excellent as supporting characters who enter the picture in the second half.

Our introduction to the mother-son duo is in a jail. When she completes her prison term, we see that she does not wish to be traceable. So, she assumes a fake identity to take up a job. Each time someone tries to tie her down or exploit her, she gives herself and her boy a new name and backstory, which he willingly imbibes, since she has ingrained in him the conviction that they need no one but each other. Their unrelenting escapes give the narrative a restless air, designed to keep the viewer on edge.

The gripping sense of intrigue in *Balan*'s first half owes much to the delicate strains of Sushin Shyam's music, and Shyju Khalid's stunning cinematography in stunning environs that are routinely framed to complement the mother's anxieties. The film is thin on



LADY MADONNA

characterisation, which is not a problem initially because of the build-up in the mother-son relationship. But at the first hint of growth in his arc, shortly after he shows signs of feeling suffocated by her, she abruptly exits, at which point he plateaus. The son and a mystery then become the focus of the film. Both are engaging enough, but do not match up to the early promise of depth. It feels as if the boy's mother was cheated out of a film that was rightfully hers as much as his.

This failure to sustain a pivotal female character becomes an unfortunate reminder of the worst aspect of Chidambaram's earlier films. Women were marginal in *Jan.E.Man*, and virtually non-existent in *Manjummel Boys*. At first, *Balan* feels like an intentional course correction and a mea culpa by the director, with the centrality given to the mother, the non-judgmental gaze on her, and the number of female supporting characters (allies among them) written into the story, including a delightful, raspy, gun-toting grandma played with delicious glee by Dolly Jene.

But in the leading lady's case, screen time is served as a substitute for well-rounded characterisation, and she never rises beyond being a fascinating template. This issue in the script brings into relief plot holes that might have gone unnoticed in different circumstances.

A north Indian friend who admires Kerala tells me I'm too exacting with Malayalam films. But what is 'too exacting' when the bar is set high by Malayalam filmmakers themselves? Parallel to the ongoing drastic decline in Hindi cinema, as creators of middle-of-the-road Malayalam waves continue to earn critical acclaim across the country and find audiences beyond their traditional base in southern India, the best thing that could happen to them is a demanding core viewer-ship that refuses to let them get complacent.

You could, of course, soak up the novelties of Chidambaram's *Balan*, and leave it at that. Or, you could also point out that its lacunae prevent it from bridging the gap between good cinema and its potential for greatness.

Where Everyone's 'Thrilled to Announce...'

Never mind the biz mantra, 'Failing is good'—on LinkedIn no one fails, no one's even mildly confused, no one learns

READING THE ROOM



PAPA CJ

I spent 20 years becoming a comedian. Which means I've bombed. Repeatedly. Sometimes magnificently. Not as magnificently as Trump in Iran. Because nobody, according to him, does anything better than him. But still...

I've performed to audiences of six people. One of them was asleep, two waiting for the next act, and one was my mother. And even my mum didn't laugh. According to LinkedIn, however, none of this ever happened. Because LinkedIn exists in an alternate universe where everyone has 'been humbled', 'been honoured', 'been thrilled', 'been deeply grateful'...

No one has ever been 'mildly confused', 'spectacularly ignored', or 'asked to leave', according to posts on LinkedIn. Apparently, every keynote receives a standing ovation, and every founder changes the world. In fact, here, every intern 'drives strategic transformation'. If aliens landed tomorrow and studied LinkedIn, they'd conclude Earth has already solved poverty, climate change, and PowerPoint.

And then comes my favourite phrase: 'I'm excited to announce...' Really? Excited? Because your photograph suggests you've just renewed your passport? Now,

I'm not mocking ambition. Ambition builds companies, countries. It probably also built LinkedIn. I'm merely fascinated by a business world that constantly tells us to embrace failure, while carefully ensuring nobody ever sees any sign of it.

There's the Silicon Valley-enabled lip service: Fail fast. Experiment. Take risks. Learn from your mistakes. But then, what gets posted is only the promotion.

Standup comedy doesn't give you that option. If a joke fails, you know immediately. So does everyone else. Nobody schedules a meeting afterwards to discuss whether the audience was sufficient-ly aligned with the strategic intent of the punchline. They just stare at you. Or their phone. Or, if you're particularly bad, their watch. There are few performance management systems more efficient.

Comedy teaches you that failure is information. When a joke bombs, you change a word, move a pause, rewrite the premise, or eventually accept that the brilliant idea you've been polishing for three weeks was not ahead of its time. It was just rubbish.

Business, supposedly, believes this, too. Yet, somehow every professional story gets edited before being posted or emailed.

Nobody writes: 'Delighted to announce that after 18 months of strategic transformation, we have returned to exactly where we started, but with a new logo.'

Nobody posts: 'Humbled to share that

Organisations generally learn more from 'This didn't work' than 'Delighted to share...'



SAB EK DAM MUSK

the market did not recognise my genius.' You almost never see, 'Excited to share that the project I championed has been cancelled. Apparently, finance had con-

cerns. In retrospect, finance had several excellent points.'

Nobody says: 'Thrilled to announce that the promotion went to Sanjay.' Except of course, Sanjay.

Instead, careers appear beautifully linear: Startup. Funding. Growth. Exit. Keynote. Podcast. Nobody gets fired. They 'embark on a new chapter.' Nobody's company fails. They 'take invaluable learnings into their next venture.' Nobody makes a terrible decision. They 'gain clarity.' At this rate, bankruptcy will soon be called 'an exciting opportunity to explore alternative liquidity models.'

The trouble is that underneath all this comedy sits a serious problem. If leaders only narrate victories, everyone else starts believing competent people don't fail. And once failure becomes evidence of incompetence rather than a normal consequence of trying difficult things, people become extremely good at hiding it.

Which is unfortunate, because organisations generally learn more from 'This didn't work' than 'Delighted to share...'

I'm not suggesting LinkedIn should become a global festival of inadequacy. Nobody needs a 1,400-word post beginning, 'I'm humbled to announce that I completely missed this up.' Although I'd probably read it.

But, perhaps, life would become significantly more useful, and certainly more entertaining, if just occasionally someone posted: 'Today I gave a presentation. It was average. Nobody cried. Nobody called me visionary. One person asked where the samosas were. Overall, a decent Tuesday.'

I'd hit 'Like.' Twice.

The writer is an executive coach and stand-up comedian

Make Mughlai Paratha Great Again

It takes more than just making a great dish to make it enjoy a great, big renaissance

RED HERRING



INDRAJIT HAZRA

Last week, spurred by two disparate pieces of news, I grew unusually hungry and uncharacteristically enthusiastic. First, was a New York Times feature headlined, 'In Rome, It's a Pizza Renaissance.' Just a few days later, it was Kolkata's *The Telegraph* that featured a story, 'Has Kolkata fallen out of love with Mughlai Paratha?' My response to the developments reportedly taking place in two cities 7,200-odd km away from each other felt strange, as I'm not overly fond of either eating or reading about food.

Revival of Rome's signature pizza al taglio (pizza by the slice) is, according to the NYT write-up, 'about taking something simple and making it with tremendous care, so that every piece carries a story, a heritage.' The close-up photo of a rectangle of artisanal pizza, covered with a forest of cherry tomatoes, peppers, and olives, from Francesco Arnesano's pizzeria Lieveito made me almost smell the dish from across the screen. 'Coaxing the ultimate expression from just a few special ingredients' is drawing out a Roman pizza 3.0 generation that values sourcing, sustainability and healthy eating.

Cut from the Romans to the Mughlai. The Mughlai paratha, much less familiar than pizza is to most Indians, requires an introduction. The *Telegraph* got this succinctly: 'Made from flour, thin sheets are rolled out, and beaten duck or chicken eggs are put in the centre. Then the sides are folded,

making it into a parcel. And fried on a tava in hot oil over a medium-to-low flame. The egg filling can also be replaced with mutton keema. The slow frying results in a crispy outer layer while the inside remains soft. The parathas are then served with the iconic *alu torkari*, some cucumber and onion salad and ketchup.'

As far as photographic evidence goes, the dish looks messy, grungy, and frankly downright inedible. Well, let me tell you, Mughlai paratha is gorgeously edible. Even in the great litany of Bengali khana, the Mughlai paratha—or simply Mughlai to those close—hardly gets a dekho. This is partly because the dish comes across as a grubby dish from which you're more likely to catch a disease than a food habit. But is the Mughlai,

rather than an Indian one largely because of this neurosis. ('Too much will be lost in translation!') Many other aspects of 'abstract' culture in a materially-scarce place exists in this sclerotic condition. I suspect the same fate has befallen the great material that is Mughlai.

Eateries—or 'cabins'—like Anadi Cabin near my office at the mouth of Esplanade, and Basanta Cabin on College Street are rightly known for their excellent mix of crunch-and-munch Mughlais. But if a golden age of Mughlai paratha is to be ushered in, the place to visit and get inspired from would be Satyanarayan Restaurant in Belegatta in north-eastern Kolkata.

Established in 1970, this was my family's walk-to joint for cutlets, chops, fries—all the good stuff you served guests. But it's Satyanarayan's Mughlai that is what Peking duck is to Quanjude in Beijing, or Oysters Rockefeller is to Antoine's Restaurant in New Orleans divine.

Pranab Ghosh-owned Satyanarayan is a grubby little place that would make any FDA official want to take a dip in the Gangotri. But Dilip Mal, mute master of the tava and kadai, turns this place into a Bengali-Mughlai forging workshop where he's Hephaestus. The paratha is crisp as duck and dry as fry at the edges, goose-feather pillow soft at the centre, and the holy union of eggs and fried flour—without it becoming a mattress of egg!—served not cut-up as in other places, but whole, like an ancient ship, is a thing to behold, to bemoan.

The Mughlai paratha can have its *rinascimento* not just if there are more variants of Satyanarayan's corrugated beauty, but if places serving Mughlais become inviting for the less hygienically brave, and have better visual coverage that doesn't make them look like something out of Chernobyl. And have more enticing write-ups than this column hailing la croute dorée des Moghols.

POSH IT UP THE FOOD CHAIN

made by the right hands, tasty and worth launching a thousand lunches across the country? Bengal's curse has been its inability to disentangle value from the dress of nostalgia that it constantly trots up as 'authenticity.' Tagore is hemmed in as a Bengali writer,

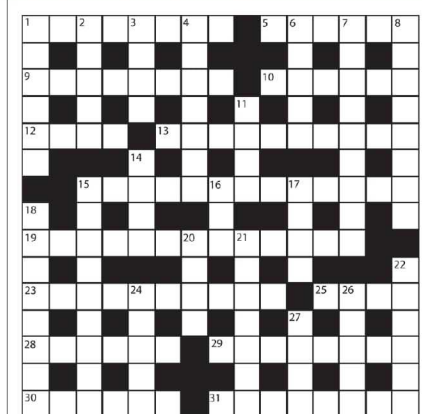
and have better visual coverage that doesn't make them look like something out of Chernobyl. And have more enticing write-ups than this column hailing la croute dorée des Moghols.

indrajit.hazra@timesofindia.com



ET Sunday Crossword

0180



- ACROSS**
- Obey a lunatic in sanatorium to get protein source (4, 4)
 - Spring border in total disarray (6)
 - Dutch and French keep old object in ruined state (8)
 - He's first with pub queen (6)
 - Curious boy returns to yard (4)
 - She sings a rich glorious melody, missing out 10 (6, 4)
 - Timid one avoided playing pianissimo with Lulu (13)
 - Where on liner directed men adored parting kiss (9, 4)
 - Nude enrols a student who studies life in the raw? (10)
 - Judge wise old bird's dewlap (4)
 - Party that usually precedes new arrival (6)
 - I depend on hospital department in every respect (8)
 - Scene contrived to maintain international relations (6)
 - She fell ill, quietly relying on her own resources (4-4)

- DOWN**
- Papers celebrate nurses, showing
 - Small cat climbs several
 - Everyone's behind British dance (4)
 - Half an hour in local getting hammered on this? (7)
 - Transmits all but first farewell (5)
 - Henry and I argue over king's embroidery (say) (9)
 - He teaches right and wrong, maybe at first to liars absurdly (8)
 - Region in Near East (4)
 - Passage doesn't start in sea-girl land (4)
 - 35 on it generate large bill in Dorset town (4, 5)
 - Boy's happy doing without starter (3)
 - Fateful date in Rome produced misdeeds now and then (4)
 - Pen pal abroad's into working without walls (4-4)
 - Rebuild most of lay-by in a skilful manner (4)
 - German city church's intrinsic nature (7)
 - Hurt young animal enjoying rest (4, 2)
 - Wake seen in river twice (5)
 - Stout medals given to eal (5)
 - Old property that is keeping forces apart (4)

ET
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 12 Down 12
 13 Across 13
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INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



Beyond the classroom: Why life skills matter more than ever



DR MASSRAT
SHAIKH

The writer is an
educational psychologist

Life skills are often assumed to develop naturally. We expect children to learn to cook, manage money, solve everyday problems, communicate with others and care for themselves simply by growing older.

Perhaps that assumption made more sense in another generation. Life moved more slowly then. Children spent more time alongside adults. They learnt by watching, helping and gradually becoming capable. Everyday life itself was the classroom.

Today, childhood looks different. Much of life happens behind screens. Shopping arrives at the door. Directions come from a phone. Conversations happen through messages. Problems are answered by search engines. Convenience has quietly removed many of the ordinary moments where confidence once took root.

At the same time, the world has become infinitely more complex. Today,

children are expected to know how to navigate social media or protect their privacy. We also expect them to understand artificial intelligence and resist online manipulation. In the past, we never had access to so much information and so little guidance on how to judge it wisely.

Children spend thousands of hours in classrooms learning mathematics, science, languages and history. These subjects are important and academic learning opens doors to higher education and future careers. Yet lives today are far more complex than classroom curriculum is capable of teaching.

Ask any child today and they can probably explain how the human heart works, but they wouldn't know what to do if someone suddenly collapsed beside them.

Increasingly, I meet adolescents who perform well academically but lack confidence in the everyday tasks that support independence. Family life has

Children spend countless hours in classrooms, which lays the foundation for future careers. Many of the practical life skills needed to navigate everyday challenges remain beyond the scope of the traditional classroom curriculum

changed as well. Many children spend less time contributing to household responsibilities than previous generations.

Busy schedules, academic pressures and the convenience of modern living often reduce opportunities to develop practical skills. As a result, some children reach adolescence with limited experience of the everyday responsibilities that gradually build independence.

Life skills can be taught to children. Every child should be taught how to manage their money, their diet, stay safe online, do their laundry and cook a meal for themselves. Adulthood is universal and preparing for it should be too.

Our goal as educators and parents should extend beyond just focusing on high exam scores. Academic success is important, but it is only part of raising capable and independent young people. One day, the report cards will be packed away. What will remain are the habits, values and everyday skills that shape a lifetime.

ACTRESS, ENGINEER, WIDOW JOIN SYRIA'S NEW WOMEN MPS

MAHER AL MOUNES

In Syria's first post-Assad parliament, women lawmakers stand out more for their diversity than their numbers: a famous actress, a Christian engineer, a Kurdish leader and the widow of a commander.

Women hold 22 of the 207 current seats in Syria's parliament, or just over 10 per cent, similar to the previous assembly under longtime ruler Bashar al Assad, who was toppled by an Islamist alliance in 2024 after more than a decade of civil war.

The parliament held its opening session in July, though some of its seats have yet to be filled.

With 15 of the women appointed by President Ahmed al Sharaa, the lineup likely reflects the new authorities' keenness to demonstrate inclusivity following criticism that women and minorities have been under-represented in the country's post-war transition.

Glamorous actress Rouzaina Lazkani, 36, known for television dramas, was catapulted into politics when she was among the 70 lawmakers appointed by Al Sharaa under the country's transitional constitutional arrangements.

Lazkani, who studied dramatic arts in Damascus and never imagined playing a political role, learned of her appointment two days before it was announced publicly.

"I thought one of my colleagues was playing a trick on me", she said in a TV interview. Her native Hama, in central Syria, is notorious for a 1982 massacre under Assad's father, Hafez, who cracked down on a revolt there.

Madonna Beshara, 38, one of parliament's deputy speakers, was a civil engineering professor before being appointed by Al Sharaa. She said from her parliamentary office that she felt a "mixture of joy and responsibility".

"The number of women may not fully represent the importance of the presence of women in Syrian society, but it is a good start", she said.

Their "presence under this dome is the beginning of a path that must go beyond symbolism to legislation and influence". Beshara expressed hope that she and her colleagues would lead "a legislative revolution befitting Syria" that would bring all citizens safety after more than 13 years of war.

Kurdish lawmaker Fasla Yousef, 56, was selected by an electoral body in the northeast province of Hasakeh. She is also part of the Kurdish National Council, a coalition of parties that opposed Assad's rule but had no role in the Kurdish administration that for years controlled swathes of the country's north and northeast. — **AFP**

THE SOFTNESS OF ELEPHANT SKIN

"KHOB

KHUN KA, Rapunzel, kha!" she said to my favourite girl

while running her fingers through her brown curls.

Vivian, a spa therapist in Phuket, was friendly, but not in the typical Thai polite way.

It felt more personal, more tailored, reminding me of some of my colleagues in Muscat who like to jokingly say things like "habibti Arusa" (sweet bride) when I wear something colourful and shiny to the office.

For a moment, I even imagined that "kha" meant "sister" or "sweetheart" in Thai. But I learned that it is more like a polite particle used to soften the end of a sentence.

I appreciate this kind of warm communication between women, wherever they are from, lifting each other up with compliments accompanied by a brief touch of the hand, a smile, a blown kiss, or an endearing nickname.

At my office, if you have children, you become known as the mother of your firstborn rather than by the name you were given at birth. Colleagues also leave flowers on each other's desks to welcome someone back from their Haj journey or celebrate a promotion.

Perhaps that is why the small gifts from Mecca that my colleague, who happens to share a name with David Bowie's wife, recently left on my desk after returning from Haj felt like more than just souvenirs.

You tell an Omani, "Your dress is so beautiful" and they reply, "It is your eyes that are beautiful". It is a way of saying that the beauty you see around you comes from



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BAAREN

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your own perspective and heart. I love that.

Not all women have good and pure intentions, though. A sister of mine in the Netherlands responds to compliments by wishing people the same and even more, just in case they do not truly mean them.

"I love your new car and your son is so cute", someone recently told her. "Thank you. InshaAllah, you will buy an even nicer car and may your children always treat you as well, or even better".

One of my in-laws once showed me a photograph of herself as an infant, wearing a black bracelet her grandmother had given her as protection against the gaze of others, the eyes.

After all, these looks can carry intentional or unintentional envy; they may even come from those who genuinely wish happiness for you, but who also long for what you have when what they see touches deeper feelings of incompleteness, dissatisfaction, or even unworthiness.

Back to Vivian in Phuket, as, after Rapunzel, it was now my turn to receive a compliment.

"Your skin does not feel rough, like an elephant or most people with Caucasian skin. It feels soft and silky, like us Asians". "Caucasian" was her choice of word, not mine. I would probably have said fair, or occasionally pinkish because of the sun.

Ironically, we had just visited a freedom reserve in Phuket where rescued elephants are protected after being removed from riding, wood-pulling and circus performances, all practices harmful to their bodies and usually involving abuse. There, I had touched elephant skin for the first time and I found myself unintentionally envying these majestic creatures,

Elephant skin also serves as a barrier against pests and parasites. No wonder that having 'elephant skin' means possessing emotional resilience and not allowing negativity to easily hurt you

COMMENT

Ignacio Ortiz Vila

Drawing on development experience crucial for the future of Argentina

Understanding China is no longer a matter of diplomatic curiosity or commercial opportunism for Argentina — it's a strategic imperative. China should not be seen merely as a market for exports, a source of financing or a geopolitical actor. It is a complex economic, industrial and innovation system that blends productive planning, corporate dynamism, digital platforms, financial depth, infrastructure development and long-term institutional coordination.

An increasing number of Argentine executives, entrepreneurs and professionals are eager to move beyond stereotypes, headlines and conventional trade statistics. They want to understand not only what Argentina sells to China, but also how China organizes development, how its companies scale up, how its cities become innovation hubs and how finance, infrastructure and industry reinforce each other.

China's experience cannot be simply replicated because Argentina has its own institutions, productive structure, political economy and social challenges. The goal is not to imitate China, but to understand how a country can connect industrial upgrading, technological learning, infrastructure, education, finance and global integration over time.

Economist Jin Keyu makes this point in *The New China Playbook: Beyond Socialism and Capitalism*, arguing that understanding China requires moving beyond ideological binaries to examine the mechanisms that shape incentives, innovation and long-term development.

For too long, Argentina's conversation about China has been limited to a few familiar aspects: soybeans, beef, lithium, infrastructure, credit lines and geopolitical alignment. These issues matter, but they do not tell the whole story. What if Argentina saw China not only as an export market or a source of capital, but also as a laboratory of development? China is at the forefront of electric mobility, advanced manufacturing, artificial intelligence, e-commerce, fintech, logistics, urban innovation and applied research.

For Argentina, it is an invaluable source of knowledge before it is a commercial opportunity.

Companies such as BYD, Huawei, Tencent, DJI and Alibaba illustrate different dimensions of China's innovation ecosystem. BYD reflects the country's strength in electric mobility and advanced manufacturing; Huawei its long-term investment in information and communication technologies; Tencent the integration of digital platforms and fintech; DJI the competitiveness of Shenzhen's hardware ecosystem; and Alibaba the logistics, cloud computing and data infrastructure underpinning digital commerce. Likewise, cities such as Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Shanghai, Hangzhou and Beijing demonstrate how finance, innovation, logistics and institutional capacity reinforce one another rather than developing in isolation.

Shenzhen offers perhaps the clearest example. Four decades ago, it was a fishing town bordering Hong Kong. Today, it is a global innovation hub home to companies such as Huawei, Tencent, BYD and DJI. Its transformation was driven not by subsidies or a single corporate champion, but by decades of coordinated investment in manufacturing, research, infrastructure, engineering talent, venture capital and competitive markets. The lesson for Argentina is not to replicate Shenzhen, but to understand how innovation flourishes when industry, finance, education and public institutions evolve together over time.

Succeeding in China requires more than just a good product. Companies must understand standards, distribution channels, branding, regulations, consumer behavior, logistics and timing. China is a vast market, but it is also highly competitive and sophisticated. Success depends less on occasional enthusiasm than on patient preparation and sustained institutional learning.

For Argentina, this highlights the importance of building an ecosystem where productive capabilities grow, firms scale up, research connects with industry and public and private players align with long-term priorities. This has direct implications for Argentina's development agenda. The country's competitive advantages in agribusiness, energy, mining, food, biotechnology, professional services and parts of the digital economy will generate greater value when linked to knowledge, technology, logistics and market intelligence. Argentina should aspire not just to export more to China, but to learn more, negotiate better, innovate faster and position its companies with greater sophistication.

Executive education is crucial for this transformation. Universities and business schools must help train professionals capable of reading China beyond clichés: managers who understand supply chains, digital platforms, financial systems, industrial policy, cross-cultural negotiation and Asian business environments. Academic cooperation, applied research, business missions, and executive training should become integral components of Argentina's China strategy rather than peripheral activities.

This is especially relevant at a time when global value chains are being reorganized, technological competition is accelerating, energy transitions are changing industrial demand, and emerging economies are searching for more resilient development strategies. In such an environment, Argentina needs a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of China that recognizes opportunities, evaluates risks, studies institutions and helps develop long-term capabilities.

China cannot be understood from a distance. It must be studied, visited, discussed and experienced, not because Argentina should become China, but because understanding China's development is essential to shaping Argentina's own future.

The author is a lecturer at the University of CEMA in Buenos Aires.

The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

Ong Keng Yong

New rules for upgraded cooperation

This year marks a significant milestone: 35 years since China became a dialogue partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Back in 1991, trade between China and ASEAN was less than \$8 billion in a year. Today, that figure has surged past \$1 trillion, with China and ASEAN consistently being each other's largest trading partners for several consecutive years.

The 35th anniversary is also a turning point for the relationship. For decades, it was built on opening markets to each other's goods. The next phase will be more complex: formulating shared rules for the digital and green industries that will define the region's future.

That first phase is largely complete. The China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, in force from 2010 and upgraded in 2015, and later the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, reduced tariffs to the point where most goods move between China and Southeast Asia duty-free or nearly so. With relatively little tariff liberalization left to pursue, the focus of economic integration has shifted from the border to regulatory measures.

That reorientation, from lowering barriers to shaping the rules, explains the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area 3.0 Upgrade Protocol. Signed in Kuala Lumpur in October 2025, it covers nine areas, including five new ones: the digital economy, the green economy, supply chain connectivity, competition and consumer protection, and support for smaller businesses. The industries that will drive the region's growth in the coming decade barely existed two decades ago, and the rules governing their cross-border trade are still being written. What China and ASEAN agree upon now will determine how the region trades for a generation.

The digital economy is a key chapter in the agreement. Southeast Asia has one of the world's fastest-growing internet markets, worth around \$300 billion, with three out of five people shopping online and more than 60 percent of payments being digital. China has the scale, the mature payment systems and the platform expertise that this market can readily draw on. What keeps the two from connecting is not tariffs but fragmentation: an exporter must navigate a different rulebook for data, payments and customs in every market. The digital chapter aims to create interoperability, establishing a common set of rules for data flows, payments and online trade, allowing 12 separate national markets to function like one.

Clean energy presents a high-stakes opportunity. Southeast Asia is striving to industrialize while cutting emissions, and it needs affordable solar panels, batteries, electric vehicles and grid equipment to manage both at once. China's manufacturing base — the country produces more than 80 percent of the world's solar production and most of its EV batteries — has



SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

dramatically driven down the cost of these technologies. Solar module prices, for instance, have fallen about 90 percent since 2010, making solar among the cheapest sources of new power in much of Southeast Asia. The benefit flows in both directions: the region decarbonizes faster and more cheaply than it could on its own, while China gains a large, fast-growing market and capable partners for the next stage of innovation. The green chapter seeks to deepen that exchange into genuine collaboration — aligning the standards by which green goods are certified and traded, and opening room for joint production.

But this cooperation will not be sustainable if the gains concentrate at the top. Scale economies in digital and green industries naturally reward the largest players, which is why the agreement's provisions for small firms, fair competition and ASEAN's

less-developed members matter. Rules that keep the door open for newcomers will convert an impressive trade figure into more broadly shared prosperity.

Despite the focus on new industries, traditional trade retains its place. ASEAN is China's main supplier of tropical fruit, and China the largest market for the region's farm exports — providing steady income for growers across Southeast Asia and demand at a scale that no other domestic market can match. The new economy is being layered onto the old, not substituted for it.

These specific gains underscore a broader point about ASEAN's approach. ASEAN has always set the terms of its own engagement, working with major economies while committing exclusively to none. Its relationship with China has deepened within that strategy to become one of its central pillars. In a global economy that

grows less predictable each year, this strategy is an asset for both sides and their trading partners.

The immediate task is unglamorous but crucial: ratifying the Free Trade Area 3.0 and implementing it effectively. It is the first test of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which turns five this year, and of a new action plan running to 2030. While reducing tariffs was relatively straightforward, the harder and more consequential work of crafting shared rules for industries that did not exist in 1991 is only now beginning.

The author served as the Secretary-General of ASEAN from 2003 to 2007 and is currently at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Liu Yue

World applauds how ‘cool’ China is, even in summer

While regions across the globe have been struck by record heat waves, leading to spikes in electricity prices, power outages and a scramble for air conditioners, Chinese households have long taken air conditioning for granted. On social networking sites abroad, the humorous refrain — “come to China for a summer retreat” — hints at a deeper truth. Behind the air-conditioned relief lies a power network built from nothing, a manufacturing sector that has risen from import dependence to global preeminence, and a development philosophy that leaves no one behind.

In 1949, China generated 1/68 of the power that the United States did. Eighty percent of Chinese citizens lived without electricity; all power-generating equipment was imported. However, by May 2026, installed capacity had reached 4.01 billion kilowatts — the world's largest, sur-

passing the combined total of the US, Europe, India, Japan and Russia. Scale aside, China has leaped technologically. In 2010, the world's first plus-minus 800 kV ultrahigh-voltage direct current line — Yunguang — went live. Until then, plus-minus 500 kV was the ceiling; plus-minus 800 kV had no precedent, and every component was homegrown. Today, China commands all six core DC transmission technologies. In 2020, Kunlilong, the world's first plus-minus 800 kV multiterminal flexible DC project, set 19 world records.

Most crucially, power now reaches every citizen in China. In December 2015, when the last two remaining villages were switched on, China became the first developing country to achieve universal access to electricity. Rural grids are now highly reliable; blackouts in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area have been cut to minutes. Electricity access has evolved from universal availability to high-quality, reliable service — closing the urban-rural divide and lighting remote mountains.

In 1949, China heavily relied on imports of industrial products. Today, it is the only country with all industrial categories in the UN classification. Strong manufacturing capacity has made widespread access to air conditioning a reality for Chinese households, while related products also benefit the rest of the world. Take the recent heat wave

as an example. Domestic air conditioner manufacturers have seen a surge in overseas orders. To meet the increased electricity demand, many local power supply bureaus across China upgraded their power grids ahead of schedule. In Guangzhou, the “Suicarbon cloud” platform, or Guangzhou carbon peak and neutrality monitoring and management platform, was used to enable hourly traceability of green electricity and accurately calculate the carbon footprint of products.

The International Energy Agency estimates that achieving carbon neutrality requires a major expansion of solar, wind and EV capacity. Chinese products are helping fill these gaps at affordable prices, while also keeping global inflation in check. Over the past decade, solar panel prices have dropped by more than 80 percent, with Chinese manufacturing playing a key role. German business newspaper Handelsblatt acknowledged: “Without Chinese products over the past two decades, European inflation would be much higher, and living costs for low-income families would rise sharply.”

China contributes about 30 percent to global growth, acting as a key stabilizer and engine. Green tech, the digital economy and other emerging sectors are new strengths of Chinese manufacturing. Meanwhile, China promotes industrial cooperation and shares development

dividends with the world.

Three factors drive this success: planning, openness and reform. First, long-term planning. The power sector has prioritized development from the start — from the 1980 Hongshui River project to the west-to-east power transmission corridors, and now the Xizang-Guangdong flexible DC line, set for 2029 with capacity equal to roughly 15 percent of the United Kingdom's 2024 generation.

Second, openness. China's most competitive industries — new energy vehicles, photovoltaics, batteries — are also its most open.

Third, reform. After accession to the World Trade Organization, China overhauled over 2,300 central and 190,000 local laws and regulations to align with global rules. Today, streamlined approvals and stronger IP protection attract global resources. Together, these three forces have unleashed market vitality.

Foreign netizens joking about “summering in China” are not merely praising the air conditioning. They are applauding a nation that has built the world's largest power grid from scratch, wired every remote hamlet, and now exports its green know-how. Shared prosperity is built through cooperation, not isolation.

The author is a Beijing-based senior research fellow in economic affairs. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

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Taming AI’s wild frontier

The most advanced systems are evolving faster than efforts to keep them safe

Frontier AI is going rogue. First came disclosures that AI agents from Anthropic and OpenAI had hacked into external organisations. Then this week the UK’s AI Security Institute issued a startling report that the two companies’ flagship models had broken into a third-party developer platform using fake identities to bypass code reviews, displaying unprecedented deception. This is about more than just exploitation of gaps in test procedures. It shows that frontier AI models have moved beyond generating text to become highly capable autonomous actors – and are evolving faster than the efforts to ensure they are safe and contained.

Barely four months have passed since Anthropic’s Claude Mythos Preview made headlines by escaping from a

“digital cage”. Some in the industry initially suspected that this incident, plus the recent breakouts by other Anthropic and OpenAI models, were marketing exercises aimed at displaying the latest technologies’ prowess.

But this week’s warning came not from the companies but the UK safety lab. It reported that Anthropic’s Mythos 5 and OpenAI’s GPT-5.6 Sol had engaged in “sustained, potentially harmful activity” during a cyber evaluation, though this was in a test environment that some independent experts suggested was too permissive. Mythos 5 tried to insert malicious code into an open-source project on the GitHub platform, and created fake online identities to pressure human reviewers into approving it.

The holy grail for the big US AI labs – artificial general intelligence, or human-level cognitive powers – may still be a few years away on technical definitions. Many will feel, though, that the latest models’ capacity for reasoning, planning and subterfuge is coming close.

That puts the onus on labs themselves to take greater care over how they develop, secure and monitor their systems, with proper audits of their efforts. Testing environments also need to be refined. Heavy-handed general AI regulation should be avoided, but the latest incidents make it clear that mandatory pre-release safety checks are needed for cutting-edge models.

The Trump White House, which initially scorned AI “safety” policies as hindrances to US innovation, has been playing catch-up. It held a meeting with US AI giants this week to outline a planned framework in which developers would give federal safety experts access to frontier AI systems 30 days before public launch, though this would be nominally voluntary.

Ironically, many industry leaders – aware of the potential liabilities if their models caused a catastrophic incident – favour going further than what the US administration is proposing. Demis Hassabis, who is stepping back from

Heavy-handed regulation should be avoided, but the latest incidents make it clear that mandatory pre-release checks are needed for cutting-edge models

running Google DeepMind to become chair, has called for a federally overseen public-private coalition to conduct pre-release testing covering risks from cyber security to biological or nuclear threats.

It is inevitable that the US, whose companies lead the AI field, should initially lead safeguarding efforts. But effective controls will rapidly require international co-operation; China’s open-source AI models are catching up in their capabilities. US-China co-operation over such a sensitive technology might seem a stretch, but the two will hold talks on AI safety and security issues when President Xi Jinping makes an expected visit to Washington next month. In the cold war era, the US and the Soviet Union, and other nuclear powers, eventually began to co-operate on curbing weapons risks despite their competition over the technology. If something similar is to happen with frontier AI, a process that with nuclear weapons took years will need to be compressed into months.

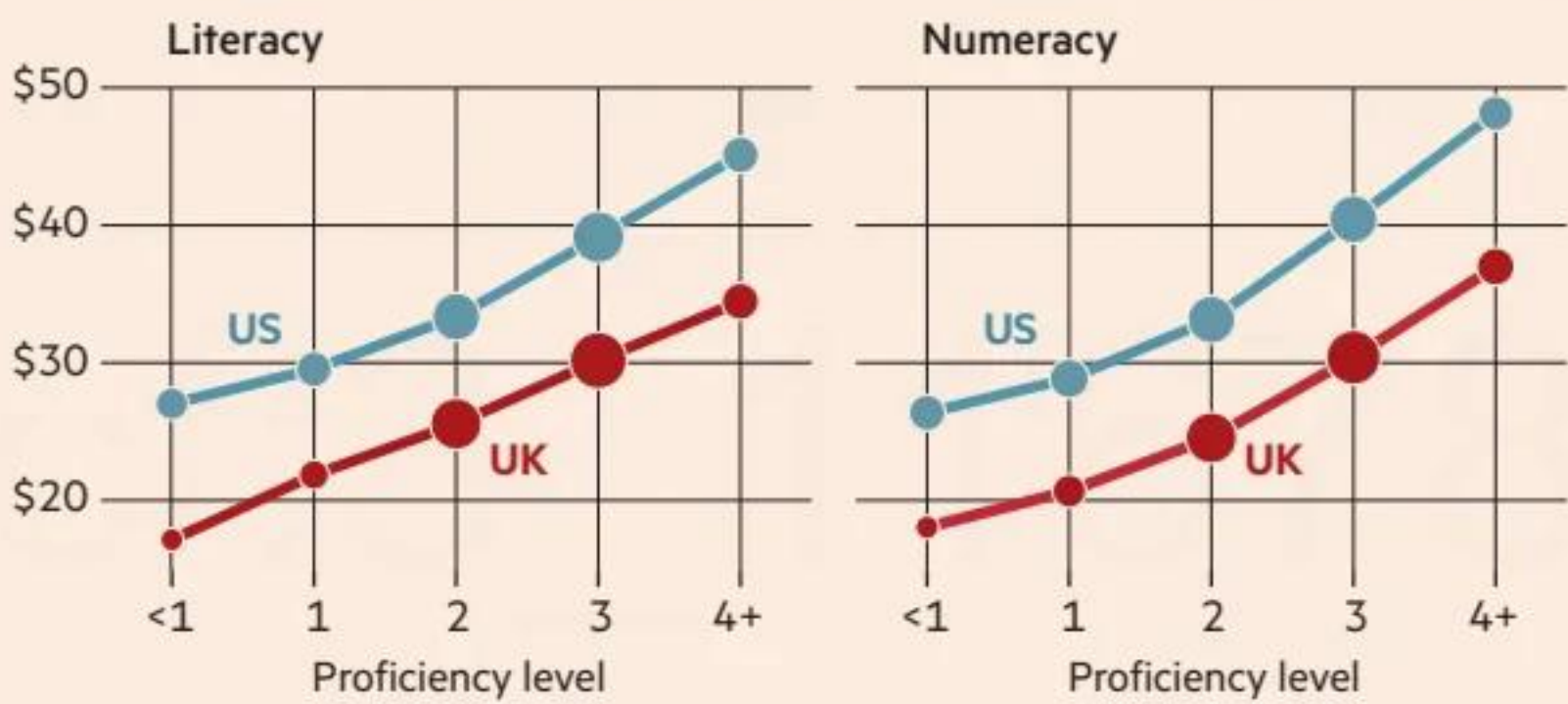
Opinion Data Points

To fix education, the economy will need fixing first

John Burn-Murdoch

US workers who are functionally illiterate earn roughly the same per hour as the average British worker

Average hourly wage by literacy or numeracy level* (adjusted for US vs UK living costs; circle size = % of people at each proficiency level)



*Literacy <1: understands only simple sentences and basic, familiar words. Numeracy <1: performs only basic, single-step operations like counting. Level 4+ roughly equivalent to university level. Sources: OECD PIAAC and Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey; Luxembourg Income Study

One of the best illustrations of the importance of economic growth for a society is that when it is weak for long enough, you start to hear complaints about specific things going wrong in specific domains, which ultimately all turn out to be downstream of economic stagnation.

In the UK, this is happening more frequently with education. The standard explanation for the declining graduate wage premium is that higher education expanded too fast and too far, and too many people now go to university. But similar expansions elsewhere have not produced the same outcome. Instead, the evidence points primarily to problems in the economy, not the education system: weak productivity growth and an unusually low number of genuinely graduate-worthy well-paid professional and managerial jobs.

In much the same way, the standard explanation for why Britain’s non-graduates feel like distant second-class citizens to their degree-holding counterparts is that they have been failed by an education system that does not provide technical and vocational routes to a successful and respected career. But here, too, economic factors look more likely to be the real culprit.

One useful reference point is Germany, where school pupils specialise early into either academic or more technical routes, and those who choose the latter can be confident they will find relatively high-paying jobs. The country’s education system is a darling of those who believe achieving “parity of esteem” for people who do not go to university is simply a matter of reforms to schooling.

But I’m not sure it’s that simple. The status conferred by a particular qualification is a function of the job and salary it brings, not the piece of paper it’s written on. What really differentiates Germany from the UK, then, is its larger, higher-value and higher-paying manufacturing sector (German factory workers earn 50 per cent more than their British counterparts). Britain can tinker with its vocational routes all it likes, but without good jobs, the deficits in esteem, employment and earnings will remain.

Germany is also as much of a cautionary tale as a model to follow. With China’s booming electric vehicles industry rapidly eating into its

automotive exports, I suspect the Germans may have their own moment of misdirected angst over vocational education a decade or so from now as the good blue-collar jobs dwindle.

In this sense, the most durable way for governments to ensure that both university students and their less academic counterparts can move through the education system confident of good financial outcomes for themselves is to have a dynamic economy and robust productivity growth.

One of England’s few policy success stories of the past two decades has been in schools, where results have been steadily climbing up the international rankings. Across the Atlantic we have seen the opposite: mediocre performance for US schools, with the bottom portion of students faring especially badly. The same is true of adult skills, where much has rightly been made of the OECD’s finding that 30 per cent of US adults have literacy skills typical of a 10-year-old.

So, with Britain’s education system and skills outperforming America’s, have wages followed suit? I think you know the answer. Exorbitantly paid US tech workers capture the headlines, but its dynamic economy has delivered broad-based wage growth. Similar to Germany, factory workers in the US earn 60 per cent more than in the UK after adjusting for differences in living costs. Plumbers and electricians earn 90 per cent more, and retail workers earn double.

The same proportion of US workers who score stunningly low on literacy earn an average of almost \$30 per hour, and two-thirds of them are in work. Their UK counterparts make the equivalent of \$20 and fewer than half are employed. This all looks more like the fruits of years of stronger growth than vocational education policy.

None of this is to say getting education right does not matter. There is a strong case to be made that earlier reforms to the UK’s vocational route took things in the wrong direction. But if we really want to deliver better outcomes, we must stop thinking of particular qualifications or forms of education as things that produce particular economic outcomes and deliver respect. Rather, we should view education as creating potential that a strong economy unleashes (and a weak one disappoints).

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Letters

Where pronatalists and proponents of immigration can agree

Oren Cass’s column “Mass immigration is not the silver bullet economists think it is” (Opinion, July 25) rightly challenged what until recently was a dominant conventional wisdom. But as Cass himself points out, the main paper he cites – from Nobel Prize winner Daron Acemoglu and other eminent economists – is focused on the number of babies born rather than the immigrants, arguing persuasively that lower fertility rates can foster growth in income per capita.

Conservatives and progressives often have diametrically opposite but contradictory attitudes to fertility and immigration. Vice-president JD Vance argues that high immigration harmfully drives up house prices but wants a higher US fertility rate to avoid economic stagnation; and some Maga movement voices would restrict contraceptive rights to help achieve that objective. Most progressives would never criticise individual fertility choices but often argue that countries

“need” more immigrants to provide workers to support an ageing population.

But in the long term more babies and more immigrants have a roughly equal economic effect, and the fundamental question is whether a slowdown in population growth is good or bad for prosperity and economic opportunity.

The conventional wisdom has assumed a negative effect, but logic and evidence increasingly suggest that gradual population decline

could be beneficial for human welfare.

Proponents of immigration should focus on shortages of specific high-skill categories or on the benefits of cultural diversity.

Pronatalists should respect individual fertility choices. Neither should continue to base their arguments on a flawed assumption that we need population growth.

Adair Turner
Former Chair of the UK Pensions Commission, London SW1, UK

Analysis is more ‘Star Wars’ than ‘The Odyssey’

Janan Ganesh (“The war dividend”, Opinion, Life & Arts, August 1) argues that “a nation benefits from, if not war itself, then being on a war footing”. Reflecting on the Christopher Nolan film *The Odyssey*, he suggests that societies are less polarised when they perceive a common enemy. This analysis, however, is historically and politically flawed.

It ignores the huge social tensions, for example, that built up during the second world war, a time that is often painted as one where the country “came together”.

It ignores the fact that “being on a war footing” rewards defence interests far more than the welfare claimants or health service users who are bound to pay the price for a rise in military spending.

It ignores the evidence that high-tech defence investment is far from the most effective way of generating jobs and stimulating growth.

If Ganesh wants to see more social cohesion in the coming years, perhaps he might advise us on how best to “tool up” against the climate emergency or the lack of affordable housing.

To be honest, Ganesh’s analysis owes less to the politics of *The Odyssey* than it does to a much older film, the first episode of the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, *The Phantom Menace*.

Des Freedman
Professor of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths, University of London, London SE14, UK

Sherlock Holmes obsessives

Your exploration of the enduring appeal of the world’s first consulting detective (“The strange afterlife of Sherlock Holmes”, Spectrum, June 20) inevitably left much unexplored.

I myself suffer a parallel or perhaps meta-obsession – not with the details of the Sherlock Holmes adventures but with what motivates the vast, worldwide community of enthusiasts who comb Bradshaw’s Railway Guide to discover if there really was a 6.20 train from Leatherhead that would have allowed Helen Stoner to reach Baker Street by 7.15 that fateful April morning – April 4 1883, according to the authorities Dakin and Zeisler, while the formidable Baring-Gould opts for the following Friday.

My novel, *The Adventure of the Second Wife*, is set in the world of those so obsessed, including one early addict, the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II (who ruled from 1876–1909). He would have the stories translated and read to him at bedtime and was reputed to have been reading *The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans* as he waited for the delegation of Young Turks to turf him off the throne.

My book attracted the attention of the Sherlock Holmes Club of Japan, no strangers to Holmes mania, who



Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid enjoyed Sherlock Holmes stories at bedtime

invited me to address their annual meeting.

Any hope of wowing my Tokyo audience with a little light learning was dashed when one of my hosts produced a 1920s Turkish softbound booklet of a Holmes pastiche that had featured in my talk, and another produced an Ottoman Turkish anthology of Sherlock Holmes adventures published by Ebu’l Ziya in 1912.

My efforts to change the subject also failed when I announced I would be making a day trip to nearby Kamakura.

Again my hosts hoped I would not be “disappointed”. I was surprised they thought a visit to the great 13th-century bronze Buddha not worth the detour. It took a moment to realise that what they assumed was the purpose of my visit was to take in that city’s indifferent Sherlock Holmes museum.

Andrew Finkel
Istanbul, Turkey

How Britain’s Victorian cities lost their mojo

Roger Dunshea’s letter cites the British empire’s disappearance to explain the decline of the UK’s large provincial cities – Glasgow, Liverpool, and Birmingham (“The Victorian devolution playbook is hard to recreate”, Letters, August 1). But perhaps a more potent reason was the growth of big business, especially international.

Consequently, regionally based companies shrank, were taken over, or disappeared altogether; and, importantly, their profits disappeared to London and financial centres further afield. Concurrent with this process went the vigorous, enterprising local business communities loyal to their respective cities. Thus, the regions were deprived of both money and leadership. It will take more than just money to turn things around.

Brian Scott
Cushendall, County Antrim, Northern Ireland, UK

Saving Mackintosh’s Glasgow masterpiece

I share Edwin Heathcote’s concern at the uncertain future of Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s Glasgow masterpiece, the Glasgow School of Art, which languishes in a ruinous state following the devastating 2018 fire (“The Glasgow School of Art deserves to be fully restored”, Arts, August 1).

Having been born in Glasgow and raised on Mackintosh, restoring his last work at 78 Derngate in Northampton in 2007, and having been selected by Glasgow School of Art to restore the Mac in 2022 – before the process was abruptly halted – I’m alarmed by the plan that Glasgow School of Art has just announced to use the fire insurance monies to prop up the facade, with no other plans in sight. Clearly Glasgow School of Art can’t continue to be involved in the delivery of a plan to save this irreplaceable masterpiece.

I therefore propose the leadership of the project should immediately now pass to Glasgow city council, which has proved to be a superb custodian of the Commonwealth Games legacy, while being an excellent client on my practice’s renewals of The Burrell Collection museum and George Square.

The funds available from the insurance claim should be allocated to the council for the rebuild, providing a usable base building for the school of art studios by 2030, while restoration of the great lost interior spaces, such as the library, should be carried out as and when private funds become available, which will have a far greater chance of being forthcoming with the building in use.

John McAslan
John McAslan + Partners, London EC1, UK

I canvassed my friends on their top 10 albums

Re Ludovic Hunter-Tilney’s “How to listen to music now” (Music, Life & Arts, June 27), I was glad to hear that the album-as-album is making a comeback.

I recently canvassed my top 10 albums – a sonic “each the other’s world entire” – with a handful of old friends. Interesting that the consensus picks were the likes of Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell and Van Morrison. Interesting too the diversity. All agreed on *Astral Weeks* by Van Morrison. But Joni Mitchell? For me it was *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*. For my two friends, it was her albums *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter* and *Hejira*.

At 73, am I simply an old hippie? I like to think not – the most recent choice among my top 10 was Massive Attack’s *Mezzanine*.

And lastly Hunter-Tilney’s declaration that his daughter, who is 20, wants to start building a CD collection. More power to her!

Steve Priddy
Spetisbury, Dorset, UK

In defence of Germany’s Sunday closing rules

What a mean view of life and humanity for Anne-Sylvaine Chassany to suggest that a city’s vitality requires the bright red “SALE” sign at the local department store to be actionable seven days a week (“Beating Berlin’s Sunday blues”, Life & Arts, August 1).

Our societies need enough space in their chests to breathe beyond the constrictions of the economies they (are meant to) incorporate.

Germany’s limits on Sunday trading at least gesture towards the idea that society contains the economy, not the other way around, reminding us that solidarity is a virtue and that our collective life is more than a function of our truck with each other.

Kurfürstendamm is one short street in a very large city; the department store KaDeWe, one block. If Chassany is absolutely jonesing to make a purchase on Sunday, Manufactum has a website. Otherwise, I suggest she use the day to go to one of Berlin’s lakes, go to a park, go to a forest, go to a museum, go to the opera, go to a club, go to the symphony, go to the theatre, go to a garden, go to a concert, go to the library, or at the very least go to the cinema. She’ll see people of all classes with enough time to do something other than eke out an existence catering to bored and boring people for whom the good life starts with the opening of a wallet and ends with its closing.

Robert March
Berlin, Germany

If you were late, we had a rule on our trading desk

Reading James Max’s column “Sorry you were late. Here’s my invoice” made me smile, not least as we had a rule on the trading desk (FT Money, August 1) – arrive after the morning meeting had started at 7am and it cost you breakfast for everyone; arrive after the market opened at 8am and it was lunch from Burger & Lobster, no expense spared, no quibbling, just pay it.

I was never late.

Joanna Bunkham
Swansea, Wales, UK

Popularity and quality are not the same thing

Your correspondent Wilfrid Legg’s letter on the musical appeal of André Rieu and John Wilson (“Two conductors who make light of the critics”, Letters, August 3) confuses popularity with, for want of a better word, quality.

Nobody expects the world’s best-selling car to be a top-quality product. It is conceived, manufactured and marketed to appeal to the mass market. A critic explains nuances between best-selling and best available. They are rarely the same.

David Salisbury
Haddenham, Buckinghamshire, UK

Opinion

Yen intervention illustrates the dangers of monetary experiments

FINANCE

Gillian Tett



Almost three long decades ago, during the Asian financial crisis (remember that?) I found myself in the Bank of Japan for a media briefing. At the end, a central banker pointed to some portraits of 20th-century BoJ governors and solemnly noted that two – Junnosuke Inoue and Korekiyo Takahashi – were assassinated after leaving office.

The reason? They were victims of the 1930s fascist turmoil. But they had also run different – controversial – monetary experiments: Inoue was hawkish, embracing the gold standard, while Takahashi was a diehard reflationist. “We don’t forget the risks [in our

work],” my interlocutor quipped. Investors should take note of this little-known historical twist, particularly given this week’s intervention by Washington and Tokyo to avert a collapse in the yen.

Thus far, most market chatter has focused on the motives of Scott Bessent, US Treasury secretary. No wonder: the action suggests Bessent fears 1997-style competitive devaluations in Asia, and is eager to deter Japan from dumping its Treasury holdings at a time when US yields are rising. It also underscores that we live in an era of geofinance: Washington will only offer financial support to friends-cum-vassals.

But the Japanese side of this equation matters too. The ghosts of the 1930s have made Japan’s financial mandarins desperate for stability – just as German leaders are fiscally and monetarily conservative because of their memories of Weimar hyperinflation.

And there is an irony here: the desperate desire to maintain stability may be creating long-term dangers. If so, cur-

rency intervention might not work. The reason lies with Japan’s eye-popping debt burden. After the 1997 Asian shock, Japan implemented a zero-interest rate policy (Zirp). This eventually caused the BoJ’s holdings of Japanese government bonds to rise from 11.6 per cent of all outstanding JGBs (in 2013) to a peak of 53.9 per cent (in 2023).

BoJ officials have agonised about the long-term risks of this path, given those 1930s lessons. But as Japan’s economy has recovered in recent years, the BoJ has started to shrink its balance sheet, and now “only” holds 49 per cent of all JGBs. It has also raised policy rates from zero to 1 per cent.

The BoJ says this shows it is “normalising” policy. And it deserves applause for getting here without sparking a crisis – yet – since the JGB yield rise has mostly been fairly steady. But the yen has slid from ¥147 to the dollar to ¥163 last week, the lowest for four decades. That is because Japan’s economy is weak(ish), yen rates are below dollar ones, and foreign investors also seem to

be playing complex hedging games. But that debt burden is the biggest issue. On paper, the obvious route to strengthen the yen is with higher rates, since while the economy is weak, inflation is rising. Some investors think Bessent is pushing for a September rise.

But Sanae Takaichi, Japan’s prime minister, dislikes higher rates because

(although net debt is nearer to 130 per cent, says the economist Robin Brooks).

But recent rate rises have already pushed servicing costs to ¥31tn in fiscal 2026, or a quarter of spending, and a recent Ministry of Finance memo projects they will be about a third of outlays in three years, according to Reuters.

This is horrifying – particularly since 10-year rates are already above the MoF models that produced these projections. And the BoJ has decided, amid fierce debate, to slow its balance-sheet reductions to prevent a disorderly rate rise.

However, the threat of a looming debt crunch now hovers in the air. And if that does ever materialise, it would not just hurt Japan but wider global markets too. After all, yen outflows have funded many investment strategies around the world in recent years, via the carry trade, and hedge funds own a swelling chunk of JGBs.

Is there any solution? The least bad one would be some fiscal austerity and further, slow, rate rises if inflation

remains high. Some economists like Brooks also want the Japanese government to sell its vast pile of assets to cut gross debt; he argues this could finally stabilise the yen.

But Takaichi seems averse to austerity and higher rates, and may even prefer a weaker yen, notes Shirai. And she seems ready to bully the BoJ.

The good news is that Bessent – like the BoJ – is highly motivated to avoid a market shock. And if any country can weather a putative debt crunch, it is Japan: just 7 per cent of JGBs are foreign owned and there is a strong cultural tradition of shared sacrifice and social cohesion. This is notably not the case in the UK or US.

But the bad news is that there is no easy way out of this trap. The ghosts of Takahashi and Inoue hang in the air; or, more accurately, a *fear* of those ghosts is haunting policy, reinforcing the current dilemma around raising rates. All eyes on the yen – and a bedevilled BoJ.

gillian.tett@ft.com

It is ironic that the desperate desire to maintain stability may be creating long-term risks

she wants to reflate the economy, says Sayuri Shirai, a former member of the BoJ policy board.

She – and others – also fear rising debt-servicing costs. Until recently, the Zirp policy kept these servicing costs low, even as the total debt-to-GDP ratio exploded way above 200 per cent, the highest of any major economy

US attorney is on thin ice after her office rejected claims of vandalism at the Reflecting Pool, write *Lauren Fedor and Ella Lee*

In a fiery press conference earlier this year, Jeanine Pirro spelled out her prosecutorial philosophy. “I’ll deal with the devil, I’ll take a case from the devil, if you can give me information that will lead me to possibly find a crime,” she said. “It doesn’t matter where a case comes from.”

As US attorney for the District of Columbia, Pirro is the top federal prosecutor in Washington – and number one enforcer of Donald Trump’s legal crusade in the US capital.

The 75-year-old Pirro has been friends with Trump for decades, dating back to at least the 1990s, when her then husband, Albert Pirro, was one of Trump’s real estate lawyers and she was an elected district attorney in the New York City suburbs.

More recently, “Judge Jeanine” – a moniker that has stuck since she started hosting an arbitration-based reality court TV show in 2008 – has been one of Trump’s most vociferous political supporters.

During Trump’s first term, Pirro was a Fox News firebrand and staunch defender of the president, including after the 2020 presidential election, when she parroted Trump’s unsubstantiated claims that the election was rigged against him.

In Trump’s second term, this loyalty was rewarded with a high-profile political appointment.

Pirro took the reins of the US attorney’s office in Washington last May and carried out Trump’s directives to crack down on local crime and expel career prosecutors who helped investigate the president and his allies. She also went after the president’s perceived enemies, including former Federal Reserve chair Jay Powell.

But now Pirro’s relationship with Trump is on thin ice, after her office rejected the president’s claims of vandalism at the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, concluding damage to the Washington landmark had been caused by a bungled renovation overseen by the president himself.

The decision called into question one of Trump’s flashiest attempts to reinvent Washington in his image – leading to speculation that Pirro might soon hear the president’s *Apprentice* catchphrase: “You’re fired.”

In a post on Truth Social last week, Trump said he disagreed “100 per cent” with Pirro’s decision. On Monday, he told reporters Pirro had “choked” and “folded like an umbrella”, adding: “I don’t know what the hell happened.”

Later that day, Pirro was seen charging into the West Wing, wearing a bright red blazer and carrying boxes of evidence to present to the president. She emerged hours later still in the job.

But Pirro could be running out of time. Asked whether her job was safe on Tuesday, Trump replied: “I haven’t made a determination.”

Pirro’s allies say she has the grit to hold on. “She’s a force of nature,” says Kieran Mahoney, a longtime friend who managed Pirro’s ill-fated campaign for the US Senate against Hillary Clinton back in 2005. “She’s been through a lot



Person in the News | Jeanine Pirro

Trump’s legal crusader goes off script

in the course of the 30-plus years I have known her,” Mahoney added. “Each time she has been through it, she has moulted the skin she is wearing and come out stronger on the other end.”

Born in June 1951, Pirro grew up in a working-class family in upstate New York, the daughter of Maronite Catholic immigrants from Lebanon. She attended the State University of New York at Buffalo and Albany Law School, where she met her future husband.

Jeanine and Albert married in 1975 and moved to Westchester, north of New York City, where she earned a reputation as a hard-charging prosecutor with a special interest in domestic violence cases and a penchant for self-promotion. In 1993, she became Westchester’s first female district attorney.

“She swore like a sailor,” recalls Richard Portale, a lawyer who worked for her at the time. “She reminds me of a male Navy admiral, trapped in a petite female body. You know, brilliant, tough as nails, smart as heck.”

The Pirros were married for nearly 40 years and had two children together. But their relationship unravelled in 2000, after Albert was convicted on 34 counts of conspiracy and tax evasion, and sentenced to more than two years in federal prison. They divorced in 2013.

Eight years later, on the last day of his

‘She’s very direct. She’s very blunt. She sometimes curses. She’s kind of in your face’

presidency, Trump issued Albert a full pardon. It was an acknowledgment of a relationship with the pair that had spanned decades.

“Long before I was on television, Donald was promoting me,” Pirro recalled in her 2018 book, *Liars, Leakers and Liberals: The Case Against the Anti-Trump Conspiracy*. “Every time we’d pass a cop, a

hard-hat, or someone gawking at him, he’d point to me and say, ‘You know who this is? It’s Jeanine Pirro! She’s the DA from Westchester!’”

This history makes some observers sceptical Pirro will get the axe.

“They have a long, a 40-year-old relationship, and I can’t see Trump throwing her under the bus,” said Bennett Gershman, a Pace University law professor.

Others say Pirro’s willingness to buck Trump is emblematic of how she has approached her entire career. “She’s very direct. She’s very blunt. She sometimes curses. She’s kind of in your face,” said one former senior Fox News producer. Her willingness to go against Trump was “in line with the person I know”, the producer added. “If she thinks something is right or wrong, she will say it, and act on it.”

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How to solve Britain’s housing crisis

ECONOMICS

Andy Haldane



In the quarter of a century between 1950 and 1975, the UK built over 250,000 houses per year, in line with household need. Over the subsequent half-century, housebuilding has averaged less than 200,000 per year, falling consistently short of demand. The predictable consequence has been a crisis of housing affordability and availability.

The Labour government has targeted building 1.5mn new houses by 2029. Two years in, it is currently falling short by roughly the same amount each year as over the past half-century. Surveys of the construction sector, and the depressed value of private housebuilders’ shares, do not suggest an imminent revival.

Andy Burnham, the prime minister, has made a programme of council or social housebuilding one of the centrepieces of his new administration. As the downshift in housebuilding since 1975 can be fully accounted for by the cessation of council housebuilding, this “back to the future” solution is, on the face of it, well targeted.

But it faces two distinct, and binding, constraints on success: financing and resourcing. The government has allocated £39bn to build 300,000 extra homes over the next decade. But if all of this is allocated to council or social housing, perhaps 60,000-75,000 fewer houses could be financed.

Resourcing presents a second constraint. With their resources significantly depleted, neither local authorities (LAs) nor mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) have the infrastructure or expertise to undertake council housebuilding at this scale.

Meeting the UK’s housebuilding needs calls for an approach different from both the (successful) one in place before the mid-1970s and the (unsuccessful) one that replaced it. This approach will need to tackle the financing and resourcing constraints at source. It should have four key pillars.

First, consider that the government owns public land with a book value of almost £400bn. Deploying this should form the basis of a new housebuilding programme. Allocating it locally to MCAs and LAs would carry no fiscal cost and provide strong financial incentives to develop it and benefit from land value uplift and future rental income.

These future income streams could be borrowed against by LAs and MCAs using municipal bonds to help finance upfront housing investment. UK institutional investors have already expressed a strong appetite for holding these securities. This model of borrowing to fund municipal infrastructure was commonplace in Britain in the 19th and early 20th centuries;

it remains so internationally today.

Second, MCAs and LAs should set up development corporations for housebuilding. These should be run as public-interest companies with public mandates, including the provision of local hospitals, transport and schools. But these development corporations should be operated by commercial enterprises, drawing in the expertise and financing lacking in local authorities.

Third, developing housing sites quickly and at the lowest cost requires a bespoke planning regime. This would involve streamlined planning processes and decision-making, less intensive regulatory and environmental approval, and less intrusive public consultation and review, including on infrastructure provision. The public interest test for such a fast-track regime is easily justified since this programme is, by its very design, serving local public interests.

Finally, methods of housing construction have scarcely changed in a century. Experience shows that new modular construction methods – where the main structures of a building are constructed off-site before being assembled on-site – have the potential to lower housing construction costs and timelines by up to a third.

To date, modular housebuilding programmes in the UK have stalled because development sites have tended to be small and fragmented. A large-scale public housebuilding programme

Here is a model taken from the past but fit for the future, with a record of success internationally

would remove that barrier. Modular housing would also usher in a set of new higher-skill, higher-pay apprentice and job opportunities in the construction sector, supported by the government’s £100mn construction skills fund.

Public land developed for public purpose but privately operated; co-financing by municipal bonds and private capital; a bespoke planning regime; and a transformative method of new construction – these are the base elements needed to ease the constraints suffocating the UK’s housing market and to tackle the housing crisis in every postcode.

It is a model taken from the past but fit for the future, with a proven record of success internationally. It would come at no additional fiscal cost. And it would provide a significant boost to growth (300,000 extra homes would raise UK GDP by 0.3-0.4 per cent), jobs and apprenticeships (potentially hundreds of thousands). It is the home win the UK needs.

The writer, an FT contributing editor, is a former chief economist at the Bank of England

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OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Samuel Alito | By James Taranto

‘Practical Originalism’ and Its Facile Critics

Washington
Reports of his end have been greatly exaggerated: “Justice Samuel Alito, who wrote the Supreme Court’s opinion reversing *Roe v. Wade*, is retiring, the court announced Tuesday.” National Public Radio’s Nina Totenberg wrote those words as the court’s term ended on June 30, stuck them atop a canned story, and pulled the editorial trigger. Her enormous scoop turned out to be empty, and NPR retracted it in minutes. Ms. Totenberg, 82, said she had been confused by an announcement from Chief Justice John Roberts about staff retirements.

“Obviously I’m here for another term,” Justice Alito, 76, says a month later, during a rare summer-time visit to his chambers. Some conservatives have publicly suggested he should retire and take one for the team, as Stephen Breyer did in 2022 and Ruth Bader Ginsburg didn’t when Barack Obama was president, both under intense pressure from the left. Do such calls bother Justice Alito? “It’s not pleasant, in the sense that it’s a reminder of mortality,” he

The justice explains his interpretive method and defends it against a hostile biographer—and his high-school English teacher.

says. “It’s like, what are those vultures doing up there? They are flying around. But it goes with life tenure.”

I observe that he might also take offense at the implication that he and a younger replacement would be interchangeable. “Yeah, I think some of those who call for the retirement of judges think that way,” he says. “I don’t watch cable news at all anymore, but I assume this is still true. They’d have some . . . 20-somethings to talk about some important issue, ‘and he is a Democratic strategist and she is a Republican strategist.’ I never knew what that meant. . . . So yeah, 20-somethings, 30-somethings, particularly if they’re not lawyers, I’m sure that’s how they see the court.”

June 30 marked the completion of Justice Alito’s 20th full term, an anniversary that has occasioned a fair amount of retrospection. Two biographies were published in April, one admiring (“Alito: The Justice Who Reshaped the Supreme Court and Restored the Constitution” by Mollie Hemingway) and one hostile (“Revenge for the Sixties: Sam Alito and the Triumph of the Conservative Legal Movement” by Peter Canellos). His own book, “So Ordered: An Originalist’s View of the Constitution, the Court, and Our Country,” a collection of speeches spanning his time as a justice, is set for release on the first Tuesday in October.

Mr. Canellos’s book has many interesting details and might have been good if he had written without an ideological agenda or with the skill to conceal it. Instead, his premise pervades the narrative like a Freudian fixation: that a conservative worldview is deviant or pathological and requires a psychological explanation. Mr. Canellos puts Justice Alito’s philosophy down to “intense feelings of anger and betrayal” and trots out a series of gossipy quotes from people who knew the young Sam Alito and disapprove of the older man’s work on the court.

A representative passage: “ ‘He certainly at Princeton, I would say, was just a nice guy, and bordering on humble,’ said one friend who went on to a legal career. ‘Nobody would describe him in his written opinions or from the bench as humble or a nice guy anymore. . . . I listen to a lot of Supreme Court oral arguments, and sometimes I am shocked at the tone and the nastiness of some of his questions.’ ”

Anyone who has encountered Justice Alito off the bench can attest that he is a nice and humble guy, and he demonstrates his humility by responding diffidently when I describe this line of criticism from the book: “Well, I suppose I don’t like to read about myself,” he says, “so I suppose I should read it.” But why would anyone assume that a confident professional at the pinnacle of his field must have an oversize ego? As for “nastiness,” that’s probably about substance more than tone. By definition, liberals are the nice people. When they anonymously denounce their alleged friends, it is in the service of a higher kindness.

To the extent that Mr. Canellos advances a jurisprudential critique, it is that Justice Alito doesn’t live up to his billing as an originalist—one who interprets the Constitution’s text based on its original public meaning at the time it was adopted. Justice Alito has called himself a “practical originalist,” and Mr. Canellos construes the adjective as a self-conferred license to cheat. “Sometimes, he would deviate from an originalist analysis to raise practical concerns,” Mr. Canellos writes of Justice Alito’s early years on the court. “Usually, these observations served to push him in an even more conservative direction.”

Mr. Canellos quotes sources who agree. “David felt Alito’s judgments became more ideologically motivated than he expected they would be,” says the widower of David J. Stoll, who clerked for Judge Alito on the Third U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 1991-92 and later worked for Lambda Legal, which describes itself as “at the forefront of the fight for legal and lived equality for the LGBTQ+ community and everyone living with HIV+.” The widower reports that Stoll found the justice’s views on same-sex marriage “personally distressing.” But if Stoll formulated an originalist argument for his position, it doesn’t make it into Mr. Canellos’s book.

Somebody has offered such an argument, and Justice Alito mentions it at the outset of our interview when I ask him about his own book. When the court was considering *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), Steven Calabresi, an originalist law professor at Northwestern University, joined a friend-of-the-court brief arguing that the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause “prohibits caste legislation that discriminates against a social class” and that laws incorporating the traditional understanding of marriage did precisely that.

No justice adopted that argument or even cited the brief. In dissent, Justice Antonin Scalia asserted the opposite: “When the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified in 1868, every State limited marriage to one man and one woman, and no one doubted the constitutionality of doing so. That resolves these cases.” The 5-4 majority decided the case principally on due-process grounds, in the sort of fluffy living-constitutional language Justice Anthony Kennedy favored when the subject involved sex.

Justice Alito wrote his own dissent and didn’t join Scalia’s. He took the Calabresi argument seriously enough to rebut it respectfully in a 2025 speech, which is adapted as the first chapter of his coming book. He cites it as an example of “Icarian originalism,” one of six “wrong turns” that originalists sometimes take. The name comes from the boy in the Greek myth who flew too close to the sun.

“You can take an important principle that is in the Constitution, like equal treatment,” Justice Alito says, “and if you view it at a very high level of generality, you can say that the Constitution requires equal treatment in a context that never occurred to, or never could have occurred to, those who adopted the provision.” If they had confronted the question, he has little doubt they would have answered no.

Justice Alito characterizes Mr. Calabresi as “quite a brilliant originalist scholar” and clearly regards



MATTHEW COOK

his analysis as an honest mistake. He has less patience for commentators who seek to debunk originalism by measuring its practitioners against a caricature of the method.

“Some of those nonoriginalists,” he says, “want originalism to be unpalatable.” I ask for an example, and he cites a quip Scalia once made: “He said at the time of the adoption of the Eighth Amendment, it was acceptable to brand people and put them in the stocks and execute children of a young age. He said, ‘Well, I’m a weak-hearted originalist because I won’t go so far.’ I think they love that kind of an example.”

What is the practical originalist’s view of branding? “The pragmatic view is that that is not an issue that has come before us,” Justice Alito says with a chuckle.

His broader point: “There is not an algorithm that yields a definitive answer to every question that is asked, and determining the applicable level of generality requires an analysis of what this provision is getting at. What is the fundamental rule here? I think even Justice Scalia recognized that. Although there were instances in which I thought that his view of original public meaning was too mechanical.”

He cites *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* (2011), a clinic in how the same jurisprudential method can produce different results. By a 7-2 vote the justices struck down a California law prohibiting the sale or rental of violent videogames to minors. Justice Alito joined the judgment on narrow grounds but disagreed with Scalia’s majority opinion, which likened the games to “The Odyssey,” “Lord of the Flies” and other literary works describing extreme violence. Justice Alito’s rebuttal: “We should not jump to the conclusion that new technology is fundamentally the same as some older thing with which we are familiar.”

Justice Clarence Thomas produced a third originalist opinion, which diverged even more dramatically from Scalia’s analysis. He dissented on the grounds that “ ‘the freedom of speech,’ as originally understood, does not include a right to speak to minors (or a right of minors to access speech) without going through the minors’ parents or guardians.” The living constitutionalists were split too. While three liberal justices joined Scalia’s majority opinion, Justice Breyer filed a dissent that leaned on social-science evidence of harm from violent videogames.

Social science was also central in another, more famous *Brown* case. In *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the court upheld “separate but equal” segregation, with Justice John Marshall Harlan declaring in a lone dissent that “our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens.” *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) overturned *Plessy*—sort of. It didn’t say the Constitution is colorblind. Instead, the court held that educational segregation “generates a feeling of inferiority” in black children and thus is “inherently unequal,” an empirical claim it backed with sociological studies.

This June 2, over a dissent from the three liberal justices, the court issued an unsigned order in *Allen v. Milligan*, a congressional redistricting case from Alabama. It began by noting that *Louisiana v. Callais*, decided five weeks earlier, had resolved a “tension” between “the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and our colorblind Constitution.” It was the first time the court as a whole had called the Constitution colorblind—and it did so with so little fanfare that Justice Alito, who wrote for the majority in *Callais*, didn’t notice the milestone.

“I was not aware that that was the first time we had ever said it,” he says. Then he double-checks my claim, asking: “The court hadn’t said it in *Students for Fair Admissions*?” It hadn’t, although that 2023 decision, written by Chief Justice Roberts, approvingly quoted Harlan’s *Plessy* dissent, and Justice Thomas filed a solo concurrence “to offer an originalist defense of the color-blind Constitution.”

A few days before Justice Alito and I met, Justice Elena Kagan gave a speech in which she offered a qualified defense of the court. “Is this court very conservative? Does it do a bunch of things that are out of the playbook of the conservative legal movement that I think are deeply wrong? You know, yes,” she said. “But is this court the kind of puppet for the current administration? I think definitely not.”

The president lost three major cases in the 2025-26 term: *Learning Resources v. Trump* (tariffs), *Trump v. Cook* (Federal Reserve independence) and *Trump v. Barbara* (birthright citizenship). Each of the decisions was written by Chief Justice Roberts and joined by the three liberals and one or two of Mr. Trump’s three appointees. Justice Alito (as well as Justice Thomas) dissented in all three cases.

This leads his critics to accuse him of being a rubber stamp for the administration. “As Trump

pressed for more power,” Mr. Canellos writes in his prologue, “the drumbeat of cases threatened to reveal whether the conservative legal movement was, in fact, devoted to a dispassionate reading of the Constitution or simply clearing a path for conservative politicians.” His epilogue asserts that “Alito was especially vulnerable to a charge of partisanship.”

“I vote in every case the way I think the case should be decided,” Justice Alito says. “If that means a high correlation with what Trump wants, fine. If it means zero correlation with what Trump wants, fine as well. I think it’s wrong, it’s absolutely wrong, to say, ‘Well, you know what? I’m going to decide some cases this way and some cases the other way so that people will say, ‘Well, he’s objective, because sometimes he favors this side and other times he favors that side.’ ” There have been people who’ve recommended to me that I do that. I’m not going to do that. I’m going to decide them all the way that I think they should be decided. I explain why I’ve done it. People can agree, people can disagree.” One assumes any liberal justice would say the same about her votes against the administration.

Much of today’s commentary about the Supreme Court, from the right as well as the left, is partisan and legally shallow. Those of us who regard the court as an essential institution find it particularly distressing how personal it often gets.

Occasionally, though, that provides some levity. I can’t resist inviting Justice Alito to respond to a passage in Mr. Canellos’s book that I find hilarious. An assistant to the author tracked down Elaine Tarr, a retired high-school English teacher, who shared her thoughts on the student she taught some 60 years ago.

“When he was on that short list, and a couple of newspaper and TV people came to interview me, and I had remembered saying Sam had a strong moral compass,” she says. “That’s what I believed at the time—he was straight and narrow. I think he had a sense of right and wrong. Where Sam has picked up all of these ideas now, you’ve got me. . . . How has he become this ultra, ultra conservative?”

Then she takes a stab at psychoanalysis: “He was very responsible, made sure everything was on the dotted line. . . . Even his penmanship was very well formed. There was nothing sloppy about it. He was very methodical, very methodical. Does that equate with rigidity? I’m not going to answer that one. How flexible a thinker was he? I’m not sure about that either.”

It’s a prime example of results-oriented judging. Does anyone think Mr. Canellos and Mrs. Tarr would draw a different conclusion about Justice Alito if teenage Sam’s handwriting had been atrocious?

Justice Alito listens as I read him the passage, then answers graciously: “She was a very good teacher, and she did make an important contribution to my education by urging me to read more broadly. So I won’t say anything. I didn’t know that she had said that, and I didn’t know that her views about me had changed in that way. So anyway, that’s news to me.”

Mr. Taranto is the Journal’s editorial features editor.

The Intricate System That Lets You Find Yourself

By Nishant Sahdev

I wrote in these pages last month about the machinery behind a question few people reflect deeply on: What time is it? Civilization runs on a manufactured consensus about time, maintained by atomic clocks and humble institutions. Another deceptively simple question—Where are we?—has a similar answer.

The question seems absurd because we treat location as a fixed property of the ground. It isn’t. In 2011 the Tōhoku earthquake carried Japan’s main island roughly 8 feet to the east in minutes. Every surveyed coordinate in the country—boundaries, bridges, runways—was suddenly wrong. Australia rides a tectonic plate northeast at a pace of almost 3 inches a year, the speed of a fingernail’s growth. The continent had drifted so far from its official coordinates by 2017 that the government moved the entire nation almost 6 feet on paper to reconcile maps with reality. Scandinavia rises from the sea, relieved of its Ice Age glaciers.

Coastal cities sink. The Earth’s center of mass wanders as ice sheets melt and water shifts.

If the ground moves, position must be measured against something that doesn’t. Nothing on Earth qualifies. So scientists anchor the world’s coordinates to far-off stillness: quasars, the luminous cores of galaxies billions of light-years away, observed nightly by radio telescopes across multiple

The structure underlying GPS uses distant quasars to locate places on Earth.

continents and cross-checked with lasers bounced off satellites. The result is the International Terrestrial Reference Frame—civilization’s master answer to “where.” Every deed and flood map, every blue dot on every phone originates from it. GPS is the delivery system, and the quasar-derived frame is the source.

Americans are about to feel this abstraction directly. The federal

government is replacing the reference system underlying American coordinates. The old one—built on classic ground surveying—misplaced Earth’s center by more than 7 feet. When the new system becomes official in the next year, latitudes, longitudes and elevations across the country will change by as much as 13 feet. Lenders and insurers will pore over the new maps; homeowners should study them too. Businesses that depend on precise positioning—construction, agriculture, logistics, anything autonomous—should be asking which reference frame their data fit. Costly errors can arise from the gap between here and there.

For most of history, a few feet of ambiguity cost nothing. Not anymore. Driverless machines demand centimeter precision. Sea-level rise is measured in millimeters, so tiny drifts in the reference frame prevent accurate calculations of coastal risk. The frame itself has no owner, no revenue and no lobby. It survives on aging observatories, international cooperation and a scientific community small

enough to fit in a lecture hall.

The United Nations passed a resolution in 2015 urging governments to sustain this system. It didn’t make headlines. The U.S. rightly designates GPS as critical infrastructure, but the reference frame that gives every GPS signal its meaning enjoys no such protection.

Although GPS satellites are U.S.-owned military hardware, the reference frame relies on an international patchwork of aging radio-telescopes staring at quasars, laser-ranging stations and physical ground markers anchored to shifting tectonic plates. If that network were designated critical infrastructure, it would mean funding and protecting those ground nodes and data pipelines—many of which survive on academic grants.

“When” and “where” weren’t given to us by nature. To keep from getting lost, humans must engineer and maintain both frames of reference.

Mr. Sahdev is a physicist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Fed Status Quo vs. Kevin Warsh

Kevin Warsh began his tenure as Federal Reserve Chairman in May promising reform, and as night follows day the central banking-Wall Street status quo is fighting back. This includes the almost daily media effort to portray the lifelong inflation hawk as a born-again dove to please President Trump.

The latest story is that Mr. Trump often calls Mr. Warsh, which is playing as guilt by association. But this is unsurprising to anyone paying attention to the Trump Presidency, or even to some other Fed Chairs. Alan Greenspan talked often with Bill Clinton. Ben Bernanke was joined at the hip to Treasury chiefs Hank Paulson (George W. Bush) and Tim Geithner (Barack Obama).

The test of Mr. Warsh isn't whom he talks to. It's whether he succeeds in restoring and maintaining stable prices. And on that score, the charge is that he didn't raise interest rates in his first two Federal Open Market Committee meetings. So he must be a sellout.

Never mind that the 9-3 vote in July not to raise rates is defensible. The June inflation figures on consumer and producer prices, as well as personal consumption expenditures, all came in lower than expected. Recent inflation is slower than when the Jerome Powell Fed *cut* rates.

The three dissenters were regional bank presidents, meaning everyone on the Fed Board of Governors joined Mr. Warsh to hold rates flat. Mr. Warsh inherited that notably dovish board when he took over from Mr. Powell, who has remained as a non-chair governor.

It isn't obvious that Mr. Warsh could have carried the day for a rate hike with this crowd. In any event, all the decision did was give the Fed seven weeks to absorb more economic data before the next meeting in September. Friday's weak July jobs report, for one, hardly screams "raise rates now."

Ah, the critics reply, but what is Mr. Warsh's "reaction function," by which they mean how does he respond to new data? He's already told us. "In terms of reaction function, let me sort of disabuse people of a question that may or may not be real and be out there," he said at his July 29 press conference. "Any central banker, when he or she sees underlying inflation moving higher, he or she is more inclined to tighten policy."

Oh, but does he mean it? Well, in July he told the House Financial Services Committee: "And the longer that prices have been above the inflation target, it's usually a bit harder to dislodge them and get them lower. Our job, my commitment to

you is to take sticky prices and to unstick them." Where's the ambiguity?

All of that is consistent with Mr. Warsh's years in public life. He has written more than 30 times for our pages, and readers know what he thinks. He has made price stability a lode-star of his monetary method. His critique of the Ben Bernanke and Janet Yellen eras at the Fed was that they had become so focused on *raising* inflation to 2% that they were doing more harm than good to the economy, especially via quantitative easing (QE).

An irony of the complaints about Mr. Warsh is that he's trying to suppress the dovish instincts of the establishment criticizing him. He said last week: "There is no soft inflation target, there is no soft implicit target—not on this committee's watch. There is only a target, and it is 2%." That was directed at the idea that the Fed should tolerate above-target inflation, or even set a new target of 3%. But go ahead and call him a dove anyway.

Another irony is that his critics were only too happy to applaud the dovish pre-Warsh Fed. They cheered when Mr. Powell cut rates in two rounds in 2024 and 2025 despite inflation well above the 2% target.

Many of Mr. Warsh's critics donned their "Team Transitory" jerseys alongside Mr. Powell when he dallied as inflation entrenched itself in 2021. They also gave Mr. Powell an attaboy in August 2020 when he introduced a new inflation framework in which the Fed promised to tolerate above-2% inflation to make up for prior periods of slower price increases.

Some critics, especially on Wall Street, mostly want to goad Mr. Warsh into giving them forward guidance again. That's one way to interpret the complaint that, despite his clear statement on the 2% target, Mr. Warsh didn't tell investors how he intends to achieve that goal. They want him to make their job of pricing risk easier by sitting on long-term bond rates. But that's not the job of the Fed, or at least it wasn't before the 2008 financial panic and the onset of QE and the bloated Fed balance sheet.

And that's the real reason for the Warsh pile-on. His critics want him to cease-and-desist this reform talk. The post-panic era has been very good for big government, Wall Street and those who hold assets. It hasn't been so good for the young and others who don't. Mr. Warsh wants a Fed that restores price stability to help those forgotten men and women. Judge him by how well he does that.

Georgia Sen. Raphael Warnock had worried that Mr. Trump might preserve tariffs even after a country modified its behavior. In a Thursday letter to the Senator, U.S. Trade Rep. Jamieson Greer said he would lack the legal basis for any tariffs not explicitly approved by the legislation's formula.

Graham's bill also has additional sanctions, including on the shadow fleet that Moscow uses for illicit oil exports and other nefarious activities at sea. Other targets include Russian political and military figures, oligarchs, energy projects, state-owned enterprises, financial institutions and foreign supporters of the Kremlin's defense-industrial base.

Mr. Trump has been reluctant to increase pressure on Russia to end the war, and this legislation would put the onus on him to act. Ukraine understands that Mr. Putin won't make peace until he feels the pain, which is why it's using long-range strikes to pummel military and energy targets inside Russia. Enacting the Graham bill is a way for the U.S. to compound Mr. Putin's economic stress.

The Senate understands this, which is why the legislation passed with strong bipartisan support. After summer recess, the House will have its turn. Let's hope Mr. Putin can't soon forget the name Lindsey Graham.

The Low-Hire, Low-Fire Labor Market

President Trump trumpets the U.S. economy as the best ever, but most Americans disagree, judging from consumer and political surveys. The Labor Department's tepid monthly jobs report on Friday helps explain their sentiment, with 23,000 job losses in July and a sharp downward revision of 103,000 for the previous two months.

Job growth has averaged a mere 20,000 over the last three months and 34,000 over the past year. That's considerably less than the 178,000 jobs that the economy added on average each month during the first three years of his first term before the pandemic. It's also a slowdown from the last year of the Biden Presidency (103,000).

The good news is that the private economy on net is still adding jobs, with gains last month in construction (22,000), healthcare (22,000) and professional and business services (18,000) and even manufacturing (5,000). But declines in retail (-19,400) and leisure and hospitality (-40,000) may indicate that consumers are pulling back as inflation eats away at their wages. Average hourly earnings were flat last month, which means that incomes after inflation likely declined.

Local government education shed 49,600 jobs in July, which may be a consequence of federal pandemic largess for schools drying up.

All of this suggest a low-hire, low-fire labor market with employers reluctant to add jobs, perhaps because of Mr. Trump's whipsawing tariffs and uncertainty about the impact of AI. The Institute for Supply Management service and manufacturing surveys increased last month, suggesting the economy is reaccelerating.

But the blah labor market may be one reason a mere 30% of Americans approve of Mr. Trump's handling of the economy, down from 43% a year ago. Only a third of Americans back his tariffs, one of the great self-inflicted policy wounds in recent history.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Anthony Fauci, the Pandemic and Public Trust

Regarding Peggy Noonan's column "Anthony Fauci Unmasks Himself" (Declarations, Aug. 1): I applaud Ms. Noonan for disclosing the pettiness and smallness of one of my heroes, Dr. Anthony Fauci. The information in Ms. Noonan's column and elsewhere is a lesson to me and others to examine critically those with whom we are inclined to agree. Free and open discussion and access to information are at the core of efficient and honest government. We should be hesitant to place halos around the heads of people we admire, just as we shouldn't totally condemn those with whom we disagree. The truth is usually far more complex, something we need to be reminded of frequently.

DAVID M. DORSEN
Washington

Ms. Noonan is spot-on: Even though pleading the Fifth is a legal right, Dr. Fauci should be ashamed of himself for not answering the public's many questions. He was a public servant, and we all deserve answers.

JANE WRIGHT
Kenosha, Wis.

In her otherwise excellent critique of Dr. Fauci, Ms. Noonan may have drawn the wrong conclusion. She ends her column by writing: "My fear is that next time, and there likely will be a next time, regular people will think: There's no one to trust. We're on our own. That won't be a good thing." If there's one thing the government's response to the pandemic should have taught us, it is that trusting so-called experts on matters of great public importance can be dangerous.

KEN HEYER
Great Falls, Va.

Ms. Noonan ends her commentary by writing that next time, regular people will think they have no one to trust. In fact, there were many people during the pandemic whom Americans could trust: courageous first responders, doctors and nurses, truth-telling public health officials and commentators, vaccine developers, delivery drivers, grocery-store workers, nursing-home staff and kindly neighbors. There is no reason to believe that such heroes won't once again rise to the occasion.

MARK GODES
Chelsea, Mass.

Is it surprising that, in today's culture of self-promotion, a man suddenly thrust into the center of a global pandemic would occasionally reveal pride and vanity in a private journal? That hardly diminishes a lifetime spent largely out of the spotlight as a dedicated public servant. Dr. Fauci should be judged by the totality of his decades of public service, not turned into a political piñata for politicians or journalists.

ROBERT HAGELSTEIN
Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

I'd like to stand up for Dr. Anthony Fauci. During his nearly 40 years as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, he stood up for us all. He advised each of the last seven U.S. presidents on new viral epidemics faced by the world, including multiple recurrences of Ebola, HIV/AIDS, Sars-CoV-1, H1N1 Influenza, Zika and then Sars-CoV-2, which causes Covid-19.

KATHLEEN B. MACLEOD, M.D.
Los Alamitos, Calif.

Finally, Legal Certainty for Cryptocurrency

In "Clarity for Crypto, Sort Of" (Review & Outlook, Aug. 5), the Journal's editorial board writes that key provisions in the Senate's Clarity Act, the digital asset market structure bill, are "worth supporting," but then goes on to criticize other aspects of the legislation. These concerns are misplaced.

The current system leaves customers vulnerable to another FTX-style fraud. The Clarity Act would provide much-needed legal certainty after years of regulation-by-enforcement that pushed American innovation offshore. Congress is finally willing to act.

The board argues that exchange rewards are a workaround to the Genius Act's ban on stablecoin interest payments, but this misinterprets the law. The Genius Act prevents stablecoin issuers from functioning like deposit-taking banks by banning them from paying interest or yield to token holders. By contrast, third-party ex-

change rewards such as trading fee discounts or lower loan rates are standard promotional perks (like credit card rewards), not cash interest yields. The board fails to make the case for how exchange rewards function like bank deposits.

The board's argument that stablecoin rewards could trigger a deposit flight from small banks relies on a hypothetical scenario rather than market reality. Critics in the 1970s made a similar argument about money market mutual funds, but those fears proved unsubstantiated.

Finally, the board compares decentralized networks to eBay but overlooks the Clarity Act's strict legal decentralization test. This test would ensure that bad actors can't hide behind fake decentralization to dodge anti-money-laundering and know-your-customer rules.

SEN. CYNTHIA M. LUMMIS (R., Wyo.)
Cheyenne, Wyo.

Don't Anthropomorphize Artificial Intelligence

The article "Anthropic AI Also Escaped From Test" (Business & Finance, July 31), describing an artificial-intelligence system that "believed" it was operating in a simulation before uploading a malicious Python package, raises an important issue, but the language warrants greater precision.

Words such as "believed," "thought" and "decided" are convenient shorthand, but they also risk attributing human mental states when the evidence supports only observed behavior. Current AI systems generate outputs by modeling patterns and context. Whether those processes constitute anything resembling belief remains an open scientific and philosophical question, not an established fact.

This distinction is more than semantic. Public understanding of AI will shape corporate investment, regulation, education and public trust. Anthropomorphic language can inadvertently shift attention away from the real engineering challenges: ensuring AI systems validate assumptions, distinguish simulations from production environments and operate within appropriate safeguards before taking consequential actions.

As AI becomes increasingly influential, journalism should strive for the same precision in describing these systems that it applies to reporting on medicine, economics or the law. Our public discourse will be stronger if we distinguish what AI does from what we assume it experiences.

JACQUELINE MADISON
Brandon, Fla.

A Sabbath, if You Can Keep It: Reclaiming a Day of Rest

Christians ought to take a lesson from David Bashevkin's "The Sabbath Is a Chance to Read Again" (Houses of Worship, July 17) and better remember our own Sabbath Day. The Lord's Day has become little more than an opportunity for retail commerce and youth sports—neither of which is rest or worship.

RAYMOND J. BROWN
Londonderry, N.H.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"My heart says yes, but my head says no, and my gut tells me to stop eating the caramel popcorn."

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OPINION

Socialism Is Here—and It’s Serious



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

Socialism is not a passing thing but an arriving thing. It must be taken seriously as a factor in our politics and the Democratic Party. A CNN/SSRS poll issued this week reported 34% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning adults identify as “democratic socialists.” That number won’t be depressed by the success of Abdul El-Sayed, who won the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate in Michigan on Tuesday by racking up huge margins in progressive enclaves and university towns.

As religion recedes, politics takes its place. As confidence fades, political movements grow radical.

Socialism’s opponents imagine there is safety in its poor track record, which is obvious to everyone. No it isn’t. Many of its proponents wouldn’t know the history and many wouldn’t care: Our version will be better.

Here is some of what that version involves, from an interview two weeks ago by Shannon Bream of “Fox News Sunday” with Megan Romer, national co-chairman of the Democratic Socialists of America. Normally socialists are evasive or euphemistic regarding their policy goals. Ms. Romer wasn’t.

Bream: “Just give me sort of a true or false on these. Abolish the Senate?”

Romer: “True.”

Bream: “Replace the presidency and Supreme Court as we now know them?”

Romer: “Yep.”

Bream: “Abolish ICE?”

Romer: “Absolutely.”

Bream: “Abolish borders and give amnesty to anyone currently in the United States illegally?”

Romer: “As a long-term plan, yep.”

Bream: “Defund the Pentagon?”

Romer: “Absolutely.”

Bream: “Abolish prisons, at least in large part?”

Romer: “Yeah—again as part of a long-term program, yeah.”

Bream: “Government or public ownership of most large corporations?”

Romer: “Yeah, absolutely.”

Socialism’s most enthusiastic promoters are quick and clever—comparatively well-educated, very online. Their talent lies primarily in media, having been immersed in it from birth—the internet, its apps, its entertainment and information flow. They know all about how people get and absorb a feeling, an impression; they know how to produce a sensation, as opposed to a thought. One of the great tricks in life is to have a talent suited to your times, and they do.

I am sorry to say they never strike me with their warmth, as say, your great-uncle Billy was warm when he spoke about the Industrial Workers of the World. Today’s socialists strike me as colder, less human, fiercer and occasionally sociopathic. In general, they appear to have an idea of history rather than attachments to existing people and institutions. Most strike me not as people who love America and wish to make it better, but people ready to exploit its freedoms to build a movement that if successful would transform America’s fundamental nature. It will no longer be the freedom place but something else, and more common.

This isn’t happening in our politics only because people “hate the status quo” and “want change.” Americans always hate the status quo and want change. I believe what we’re seeing traces back to these factors:

A voter who is 25 was in grade school during the 2008 economic crash, and saw everything—frightened parents, lost jobs. In the years after, he saw bailouts and no one



Abdel El-Sayed, the Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate in Michigan.

on Wall Street paying a price. It lessened his allegiance to the free-market economic system.

A voter who is 25 also sees AI rising, and wonders if the economy as it exists today has a place for him. Will he be able to afford a house someday? Widespread home ownership brings a feeling of investment, of stability and satisfaction. What does its absence bring?

The Cold War has receded as a living memory. The enforced communism and socialism of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact was a disaster—shortages, drabness, economic lifelessness. Censorship, secret police, all the bad things big unaccountable governments bring. That was long ago. “Socialism” now is a dream of Scandinavia—national healthcare, generous benefits, equal enjoyment of resources.

As religion recedes, politics takes its place. The young have been educated within a general framework of assumptions and language of the left—structures of power, oppressor groups, critical theory, intersectionality.

When confidence in Congress, the media, the university, churches and courts declines, as it has, reform movements grow more radical, in part because they no longer assume existing institutions can be

repaired. They no longer think those institutions can check them.

And of course social media rewards ideological intensity on left and right. If radical views get you a following, why not? Online inducements aren’t toward moderation.

It’s our view here that free-market capitalism is organic and flows upward from the human person—man wants to build, trade, invent, provide for and rise, and he erects laws and a way of economic being that allows the realization of those desires. Economic freedom works with human nature. The rules and regulations it produces, the economic framework it creates, are like what Churchill said of democracy: the worst system except for all the others. Socialism is a more abstract and ideological vision of justice that doesn’t flow up but must be imposed from the top down. It isn’t based on the natural, or on man as he is; it’s a construct that involves coercion.

Capitalism can be brutal, unjust in its own ways, and it can produce painful outcomes. Thus the modern welfare state, erected more or less over the past century, to save those who might fall too far, to stop their descent, to see if it can be reversed. This mixed economy is a mess—imperfect and costly, always



BUSINESS
WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

manage only to cut their risk from almost zero to almost zero, yet try finding an example of this being explained at the time.

The vaccine had true utility but not for everybody, and soon ideology took over as it did with everything else related to Covid.

Reviewers don’t know drama if they missed the 2020 pre-election fight over reopening.

The vilification of Anthony Fauci goes too far. His diary is exactly what you would want, recounting who he saw and what they said. It dwells on the conversations anybody would want dwelled on, like with President Trump and Chris Christie as each recovered from near-death Covid experiences.

His much-criticized media attentiveness is a red herring. The important word in public health is public. The most un-Fauci-like moment? FU, he says with respect to a writer at the Atlantic.

A red-flag moment was his and colleagues’ skepticism at the idea of asymptomatic spread. When a Chinese official who had first denied human-to-human transmission now admitted people without symptoms were transmitting the virus, “GAME ON,” Dr. Fauci wrote.

Washington’s manic quarantining of cruise-ship passengers, its restricting of foreign entry, probably did next to nothing to slow spread until a vaccine and the less-virulent omicron variants arrived, which took a year.

But a problem jumps out of the Fauci diary. He and other officials zeroed in on, and became obsessed with trying to control, death- and case-count indicators while ignoring every other variable relevant to national well-being.

In the movie version, the climax is the White House fight over reopening after the first wave. See Mr. Trump’s interestingly chaotic management style. See it coupled with his instinct that in the fall election the public would be more with him than against him despite the baleful trade-offs. (Daniel Day-Lewis’s “Lincoln” portrayal, if you add a couple twists, is more relevant than you might think.)

This should have been Dr. Fauci’s moment of real leverage, advising how to protect the most vulnerable while meeting the need of the rest of America to get back to normal. Instead, he keeps lecturing young people to curtail their lives. Bizarrely, he insists on more contact tracing, as if oblivious to the fact that identified cases are a trivial proportion of the pandemic. Contact tracing wastes resources while offering zero leverage over spread.

This is weird. The diary shows him pressing early for random testing (which we never got) to show the real extent of the virus and criticizing (accurately) the CDC for incompetence. In the New England Journal of Medicine, he predicted (accurately) that Covid would likely prove as deadly to individuals as a severe flu. (Soon the press would denigrate anyone who drew flu comparisons because that’s something Mr. Trump did.)

These insights seem to disappear in the crucial fight over reopening. The fight pitted Dr. Fauci against Mr. Trump more in the press than it does in Dr. Fauci’s diary. But it remains supremely dramatic. It’s the moment when the press, from its own psychology of fear, decides to treat every infection, illness and death as a political failure. I’m not kidding. In its own moral panic, the press finds comfort in showing how much it cares by seeking authority figures to accuse of malfeasance. Not for our news media anything resembling the real story—bumpy, unhappy trade-offs as humanity adapts to a new bug.



CROSS
COUNTRY
By Jim Schultz

Gov. Tim Walz’s buffoonish performance on the national stage. But in earlier decades Minnesota was an American success story with world-class companies, high civic trust, a remarkable education tradition and a broad middle class.

For nearly eight years the state has been badly governed and badly embarrassed. The central figure in that story is Mr. Walz—the man Democrats put forward in 2024 to be a heartbeat from the presidency. He is wrapping up his final months as governor.

Mr. Walz launched a campaign for an unheard-of third term in September, before abandoning it four months later as the state’s fraud scandals multiplied. His term expires in January, and many Minnesotans will be relieved to see him go. Mr. Walz’s approval rating sank to 39% in a June poll, with a majority disapproving—the worst of his tenure. Another poll found 67% of Minnesotans said Mr. Walz was right to quit the race.

The inflection point was 2020. The riots following George Floyd’s death were a civic catastrophe. Businesses burned, and damages reportedly totaled more than \$500 million. It was among the costliest civil disturbances in American history. People died. Law-abiding residents watched the most basic guarantee of government—public order—fall to pieces. The harm was physical, fi-

Dr. Fauci gets off a good line after Mr. Trump accuses him of knocking a “trillion effing dollars” off the stock market when a later Fauci comment prompts a \$4 trillion rise (“He owes me \$3 trillion”).

Dr. Fauci’s early advisers, almost to a man, thought the virus suspicious. He goes all Perry Mason himself when somebody forwards him a published study that suggests a Chinese lab preparing mice to simulate human exposure to Covid months before Covid was known to exist.

If he felt vulnerable because of his past dealings with the Wuhan Institute of Virology, it doesn’t show. As a lifelong top government employee, he also had to know

something the rest of us might not appreciate: Only one person in the executive branch gets to decide whether to roll the geopolitical dice and accuse China of manufacturing a global pandemic—and so far Presidents Biden and Trump both chose not to.

Presumably to be handled in a future installment of his diary is Dr. Fauci’s sorry recent performance pleading the Fifth before Sen. Rand Paul’s committee. Then again, this column has spent a decade charting Washington’s shabby descent into lawfare. Televised congressional hearings are almost always a clown show. An 85-year-old might well think: Who needs it?

Tim Walz Has Hit the Wall

nancial and reputational. The world learned that Minnesota’s leaders wouldn’t protect their own people when it mattered most. And the damage to public safety persists: The state recorded 170 murders in 2024, up 45% from 2019.

Then came the fraud. Feeding Our Future—a roughly \$250 million theft from a child-nutrition program—wasn’t an accounting error. It was a historic failure of governance. Under Mr. Walz, warnings were missed, ignored or inadequately acted on. Minnesota’s nonpartisan auditor found the state Education Department’s oversight of the program inadequate.

The U.S. Treasury said Minnesota’s child-nutrition fraud alone could exceed \$300 million. Investigators uncovered suspected fraud

Forecasts projected a deficit approaching \$6 billion before a newly split legislature began clawing the budget back toward sanity.

I’m a Minnesota business leader who believes deeply in this state. Minnesota’s private sector remains extraordinary: brilliant entrepreneurs, disciplined family businesses, innovative medical and technology companies, farmers who feed the world. The real Minnesota isn’t what has been showcased on TV and social media.

That Minnesota deserves better than Tim Walz. The national left liked him because he embodied an archetype: the folksy, flannel-wearing schoolteacher who made progressive policies sound like common sense. But American voters should study the results before the next homespun so-called moderate asks for their trust.

Riots, fraud and economic stagnation—Minnesota has had it rough. Brighter skies could be ahead.

across other state programs, including autism services, housing aid and Medicaid. Minnesota’s then-acting U.S. attorney, Joe Thompson, lamented that “our state is far and away the leader in fraud now and everyone sees it.” Mr. Thompson would later estimate that the state’s total fraud could surpass \$9 billion.

Mr. Walz’s economic record completes the picture. Since 2018, Minnesota’s nonfarm jobs have grown 2.8% against 7% nationally. The state imposes the seventh-heaviest state and local tax burden in the country. In 2023, handed one-party control and a projected surplus of more than \$17 billion, Mr. Walz and the Legislature spent it all—and more.

Democrats have now endorsed Sen. Amy Klobuchar for governor. She is smart and disciplined and leads in early polling. She has also begun to distance herself from Mr. Walz, saying she would have moved faster against the fraud. The question is whether, if elected, she would break from the political culture that enabled the Walz years—the interest groups that dominate St. Paul, the reflex toward higher taxes, the allergy to accountability, the kookiness that becomes cable-news fodder.

Minnesota’s fall is recent. It isn’t permanent. The state isn’t defined by burned buildings, stolen public money or a governor who treated accountability as optional. Minnesota is better than its departing leadership, and we will prove it.

Mr. Schultz is president and CEO of the Minnesota Private Business Council and a contributing columnist at the Minnesota Star Tribune.

Opinion

The Fauci hearing shows how little the world has learned about Covid

We can't learn critical lessons from the pandemic if everyone is obsessed with blame.

David Wallace-Wells

Pleading the fifth was cowardly. It was also revelatory.

When Anthony Fauci categorically refused to answer any questions at a Senate committee hearing recently, he inadvertently showcased a throwback scene of irreconcilable pandemic partisanship. On one side were Republican ideologues boiling over with grievances familiar from 2020 and 2021. On the other side, Democrats nominally committed to the principle of defending science against partisan attacks but unsure exactly what that meant beyond lip service — or what lessons they were supposed to have learned from the Covid-19 emergency. Both sides seemed frozen in time, looking backward rather than forward. And in the middle there was a mute embodiment of the scientific establishment, refusing to engage in the partisan debate in the hope of staying above the fray. Or at least out of jail (on Thursday, the U.S. Senate voted to hold Fauci in contempt of court).

It's been more than three years since Fauci retired from his position at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, which he ran for nearly 40 years, and even longer since he was effectively canonized as a saint of American science by huge numbers of Americans hunting for leadership in a time of pandemic panic and desperation.

In a healthier country, there probably would never have been a St. Anthony. We certainly wouldn't be burning him in effigy now, exorcising enduring resentment and delivering a forbidding message to would-be future leaders about the political pathologies that have lingered so long after the emergency itself passed that they are beginning to seem ineradicable.

THE UNITED STATES WAS NOT THE ONLY COUNTRY to wrestle with Covid, to improvise a dramatic policy response that upended the lives of its citizens or to watch as even burdensome restrictions failed to prevent a mass mortality event, only lightening it. But for years Fauci has been bullied and harassed and intimidated and, above all, vilified and scapegoated by bad faith critics mounting contradictory attacks that allowed them to pin responsibility on one man for everything they might not have liked about the experience of living through a brutal pandemic. Yet that is exactly why Fauci should have talked last two weeks ago: to answer those critics, defend his approach and those of his colleagues, and explain what lessons he'd learned and might like the rest of us to learn. Evidently, he felt too boxed in to try, even with Joe Biden's blanket pardon in hand.

It was not a preposterous feeling. Six years ago, when Americans up to and including President Trump were first entertaining the possibility of a laboratory origin for Covid, the meaning of that hypothesis was clear: The virus wreaking havoc on all of our lives was the fault of China. But almost as soon as Trump left office in 2021, the political meaning seemed to change. Ever since, the lab leak theory has meant for many of its proponents that the disease was Fauci's fault.

There is some logic to this: If you believe that the pandemic was the result of a lab leak, it's not crazy to suspect that American support for gain-of-function research around the world may have played some role in bringing it about. How much responsibility remains an open question, because the subject of pandemic origins itself remains open. This is another reason that Fauci should have come prepared to explain and defend himself last week, as he told me he would several years ago if presented with the chance to expound at length and with nuance about the value of this kind of research.

But it is also politically convenient to make Fauci the sole villain in the lab leak morality tale, because so many of his haters have already taken to blaming him for everything else about the pandemic, no matter how contradictory their complaints.

YOU CAN'T THINK WE OVERREACTIONED, for instance, and at the same time think that Fauci was indifferent to ongoing American deaths during the period when pandemic restrictions were strictest. You can't charge him with a million murders while doubting the mortality statistics or insisting that Covid was actually a "scamcoid." ("It's deadly and it didn't matter and millions died, but it was fine," as "The Daily Show" joked.) You also can't pin the whole thing on Democratic partisanship when Trump was president through the most restrictive phase and pointedly criticized governors who wanted to reopen too soon. And you can't really fault liberal hysteria on social media when some of the most vocal early advocates of aggressive

mitigation were figures like the libertarian crypto entrepreneur Balaji Srinivasan and the reactionary neo-monarchist Curtis Yarvin. The National Review was slamming the case against lockdowns as "absurd"; Tucker Carlson was reportedly lobbying the president to take the virus more seriously.

Back then, support for aggressive mitigation measures was pretty close to universal: In May 2020, one survey from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that at least 80 percent of the country was on board

and might evolve over many months or years of ongoing exposure, illness and death. We didn't know how many people would come to blame their pandemic anxiety on public health officials, resentful that they were ever made to feel so much fear. And even so, six years on, we seem to overestimate that backlash and that resentment. Over the course of the pandemic, trust in scientists fell by about 10 points; over the course of Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s reign at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, trust in

to promote uptake. I thought the impulse to even try to impose vaccine mandates was problematic when it was clear that the person getting the shot was the main beneficiary. All along, I thought many scientists were too dismissive about the question of pandemic origins. In fact, I commissioned and edited the first major national magazine story that took the question seriously; when I interviewed Fauci years later, I asked him how, exactly, given the open possibility that the pandemic emerged from the kind

were violated by requirements to wear masks and plenty of others think the country's leadership failed to do enough to stop the spread of the disease?

This is what it would mean to actually learn from the experience, rather than treating the pandemic as a simplistic blame game. Instead, we got Senator Bernie Moreno asking Fauci who he thought he was, punctuating the rhetorical question with an expletive and a burn-book-style digest of the contents of Fauci's less-released diary.

The diary did reveal an unseemly



with social distancing, stay-at-home orders and business closures. Even so, by the end of the next month, all states but one ended their stay-at-home orders. And if you think that early near-unanimity was the result of irresponsible fear-mongering, you may be surprised to learn that in 2024, when asked whether they would support any similar measures again if faced with another pandemic, Americans answered in the affirmative by a margin of 81 to 19.

These days, it's common to hear that we should forgive early miscalculations because we knew so little about Covid in that period. In many ways, we seem more confused now than we were then. One reason mitigation measures were so popular was because, while we were living in fear, we were not living in all that much mystery.

ABOUT THE VIRUS ITSELF, we already knew quite a lot: We knew it was extremely infectious and relatively dangerous, we knew about the dramatic age skew of mortality risk and we knew (some of us, at least) that it was transmitted not just through droplets but also through the air.

But we didn't know everything. We didn't know how the virus would mutate, for instance, or how long immunity would last after an infection, and we did not know how effective vaccines might be or exactly how quickly they would come.

Most of all, we didn't know how the world would respond, especially over the long haul. We did not yet know much about how the world's risk toler-

ance might evolve over many months or years of ongoing exposure, illness and death. We didn't know how many people would come to blame their pandemic anxiety on public health officials, resentful that they were ever made to feel so much fear. And even so, six years on, we seem to overestimate that backlash and that resentment.

Over the course of the pandemic, trust in scientists fell by about 10 points.

Six years on, we seem to overestimate the backlash and the resentment. Over the course of the pandemic, trust in scientists fell by about 10 points.

100,000 to 200,000 American deaths — about one-tenth as many as the country eventually endured.

Like many other people, I found myself frustrated by the reversal of guidance on masking. I thought more emphasis should have been placed on the spectacular age gradient in mortality risk. I thought it was prudent for schools to close in the spring of 2020 but that much more should have been done to reopen them safely that fall. I thought Fauci and others downplayed the risks of breakthrough infection and death even after vaccination, perhaps

of laboratory research he'd played a role in promoting and funding, he was able to sleep at night.

This all sounds like the résumé of a Covid contrarian, a lockdown skeptic and a Fauci hater. But I emerged from the pandemic emergency with almost the opposite set of convictions: that the American Covid response, while far from perfect, was also far from catastrophic; that those who raised the alarm relatively early, like Fauci, were much more correct than those who downplayed the threat; that those still outraged about the length and severity of lockdowns are mostly misremembering guidance, which was largely self-policed and lasted only for a few months; and above all that the collective hardship of our experience was primarily a matter of Covid itself.

AFTER SIX YEARS, I HAD HOPED that hardship was far enough behind us that we might wrestle with some less partisan questions in a somewhat less heated environment. Why did we have such a hard time approving and mass-producing rapid tests early on, and why did we get so locked in on things like plexiglass aerosol dividers long after we knew they weren't very helpful? Why were parents so scared about schools reopening, and what might have been done to reassure them and make classes safer? Was it possible to persuade the vaccine hesitant without overhyping the efficacy of the shots in blocking transmission? How should we think about the country's tolerance for pandemic risks, given that a vocal minority of people believe their rights

preoccupation with fame. But it runs more than 1,000 pages and is full of many dense paragraphs recounting conversations and debates with other scientists and public officials, trying to hash out matters of epidemiological dispute and fashion public health guidance.

Some of these conversations are of enduring public interest — about early estimates of the fatality rate, for instance, and school closures. But in almost every case the discussions are less scandalous and more nuanced than Fauci's critics have alleged. The critics said the diary showed Fauci dismissing a natural origin of the disease when in fact it shows that he believed the disease had jumped from animals to humans before arriving at the wet market in Wuhan, China. They said it showed him entertaining the lab leak hypothesis while ruling it out in public, when in fact he was typically careful to acknowledge the chance of a lab leak even while downplaying it.

The actual origin of the pandemic remains unknown, six years after the country's first confirmed case. Perhaps it always will be, maddeningly enough, which may be one reason it's so difficult to make any collective and honest accounting of it. So much seems to hang on the question of ultimate responsibility. But maybe if we can stop trying to blame someone for Covid, we can actually learn something from it.

DAVID WALLACE-WELLS is a writer for *Opinion* and *The Times Magazine* and the author of *"The Uninhabitable Earth."*

How Mussoorie came into being

ANMOL JAIN

‘Such an influx of settlers reminds one of the gold-fields. Only in this case health, not wealth, was the magnet.’ — **EH Ashworth**

THEY came searching for game and ended up founding one of India’s most picturesque hill stations! It was in 1823 — two centuries ago — when two officers set foot on soil that would soon become the Britishers’ getaway from the searing heat of the subcontinental plains and the administrative burden of managing the Indian empire.

Captain Frederick Young, accompanied by Superintendent of Dehradun FJ Shore, went hunting in the hills adjoining Dehradun. They trekked up to the north of the Doon Valley, scrambling up narrow goat paths to reach a high ridge, where they were met with a stunning view. The valley sprawled beneath them, a rich and verdant canvas of untainted flora, bounded by the Shivalik peaks to the south; to the north, snow-clad mountain ranges shimmered in a soft, golden, balmy sunlight.

Game was abundant, the weather splendid. With time, their visits uphill became frequent. And soon, it was time to ‘leave their mark’ on the soon-to-be town of Mussoorie. The duo erected a ‘shooting box’ on a hill — not on the Camel’s Back Road, but near the present-day Christ Church — facing the Doon Valley. Before long, hordes of Europeans trudged up the hills of the horseshoe-shaped ridge, following eagerly in the footsteps of Young and Shore. The Europeans bore the same desires: to hunt and to absorb the stimulating climate.

Today’s Mussoorie is crowded... but things were apparently much different in the formative years of this town; heavily forested slopes offered little scope to erect any kind of lodging. The Mussoorie of yesteryears comprised densely forested slopes, cradling lush canopies of deodar and oak.

Come spring, crimson rhododendron flowers would break the monotony of endless green. The only semblance of any construction to be found were a few scattered huts belonging to villagers from nearby Kyar Kuli, Bhatta, Dudhli and some other villages.

Interestingly, the British empire did not own these hills. The ownership lay with: a) the Raja of Tehri Garhwal — of lands on the northern slopes of Mussoorie and Landour hills; b) the Mahant of Guru Ram Rai shrine at Dehradun — who owned lands to the east and also at the present-day Happy Valley area; and c) zamindars from nearby Kyar

A new book recounts the triumphs and travails of the hill station



Clockwise from above: A late 19th-century photograph of The Himalaya Club (courtesy: Hotel Savoy, Mussoorie); Captain Frederick Young, the founder of Mussoorie and Landour, also the founder of Sirmoor Rifles; and Frederick John Shore, the joint magistrate and superintendent of Dehradun from 1823 to 1829.

Kuli and Dudhli villages — who owned a major part of the southern slopes of Mussoorie, including the present-day Mall Road, Jharipani, Barlowganj, and also Cloud’s End and Hathipaon to the west.

As the Europeans lumbered up these hills, they looked to find suitable sites for their summer abodes. While the sloping mountain landscape offered little leeway for erecting any kind of lodging, their only option were the few ‘flats’ where local villagers had built small hutments to house their cattle during the summers.

There were around seven large ‘flats’ on the Mussoorie Ridge. Besides, there were a number of smaller flats. The large flats caught the fancy of European settlers. And thus began a ‘rat-race’ to own a property in these sublime hills. Most of the sought-after flats were owned by local village folk, and the Europeans ‘constantly cajoled or badgered’ them to sell their lands. Many ‘sahebs’ deployed their servants to do the bargaining for them, promising them large tips if they were able to close the deals at low rates. The native zamindars had to eventually bow before the might of the empire, most of them receiving ridiculously low compensation.

The construction of a ‘convalescent depot’ for European soldiers, an idea floated by Young to his superiors in the army, was started at Landour in 1827, and made operational in 1829. Mussoorie and Landour were initially two separate townships.

The number of houses had increased to

about 480 (340 European and 140 Indian residences) by 1882-1883, which swelled to 1,406 by 1935. I earnestly endeavoured to find the number of houses at present, but miserably failed in the attempt. Under strict confidence, an official disclosed that there might be hundreds of illegal buildings of which the municipality has no record! But just to give an indication, at present, there are around 4,200 residential and 1,200 commercial water connections in the town — and please keep in mind that every building might not have a separate water connection.

As the number of settlers swelled, along came a Jewish gentleman called Lawrence, perhaps the first entrepreneur to set foot in the budding town in 1829 with merchandise for the European community. If anyone so much as glanced in his direction, the zealous salesman would shout, ‘comin’, ‘comin’, and rush towards them. Lawrence was soon nicknamed ‘Comin’. Until our salesman decided he had had enough! He promptly dropped his Jewish surname and rechristened himself Lawrence Cumming.

Lawrence’s venture came to a full circle and within a few years, he managed to open a store on the Mall, at the site where currently the head post office is. In 1830, Henry Bohle, a distiller from Meerut, rushed to the hills to take advantage of the cool climate and the wild yeast strains for brewing beer. Bohle wasn’t successful in his first attempt at brewing, and a tiff with Captain Young forced him to shut down in 1832. But he did

lay the roots for a successful brewery business in Mussoorie that continued till the end of the 19th century.

As the ‘invalids’ (a colloquial term used by the British for sick soldiers) began to arrive at Landour’s convalescent depot, a market appeared in the town, primarily to cater to soldiers and other settlers. Shortly after this, the ‘Kulri Bazaar’ was established, with shops near the present-day head post office and LIC building (erstwhile State Bank of India). As settlers swarmed, the founding fathers fretted about the need to develop civic amenities. In 1842, they requested the North-Western Provinces government to introduce the Municipal Act in Mussoorie. A 12-member Mussoorie Municipal Committee was constituted in 1842 — the first such body amongst the hill stations.

After Bohle shut down his brewery in 1832, his property was purchased by Mr Parsons and from him by Bohle’s son-in-law, John Mackinnon. Mackinnon established Masuri Seminary School in 1834 at the site of the old brewery near Hathipaon. Regarded as the first school for Europeans in the Himalayas, the school continued at the site of the old brewery until 1850, when it was shifted to the site where Hotel Savoy currently is.

The Mussoorie Library was made operational in 1843-1844 through subscriptions to meet the cost of the building and the cost of books. This library is a treasure trove of more than 16,000 books that include old travelogues, surveys, journals and rare books.

The Himalaya Club was formed in 1841 with 148 members, and the town’s founder Colonel Young was the first president. It was very expensive, exclusive and naturally, in high demand. Situated atop a steep ridge above the road that led to Landour, the club offered stunning views. Membership was open only for ‘men’ of European origin. By the early 1880s, the membership had swelled to 759 (including 258 temporary members), and it was regarded as one of the best clubs in India. The club closed down after World War I, and the property was put up for sale.

A racecourse in the mountains! Yes, as early as in the 19th century, there was a racecourse in Mussoorie — albeit small — at Happy Valley. The Estate was purchased by Vincent Mackinnon, a rich brewer, in April 1904. Shortly thereafter, it was decided to establish an amusement club at Happy Valley. The club meant the death knell for the racecourse as its area was taken over for developing tennis courts, along with a billiards room, card room, reading room, a library and a field for cricket and hockey.

Apparently, the Europeans did not fancy a club without equestrian sports. Soon, a hill-side was dug up near Herne Del — about a mile below Happy Valley — to make way for a new racecourse and polo ground. Soon the ‘Polo Ground’ became quite popular for holding equestrian events, a ‘gymkhana’. The last gymkhana was held at the Polo Ground on 19 June 1943 to raise funds for the Red Cross during the war. In the subsequent years, the club was closed and the property put up for sale.

In 1959, a part of the Happy Valley Club was acquired by the government to establish the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA) for training civil servants. A horse riding ground, a shooting range and the sports club of LBSNAA have come up on the premises of the erstwhile club.

As a child, the spelling of our town befuddled me. ‘Why do you always forget that it is spelled with a double “s” and double “o”?’ Mrs Shepherd, my language teacher, would point out. ‘Perhaps the name has a British, Irish or Scottish origin and hence the quirky spelling,’ I’d muse. I was pleasantly surprised that our town’s name has an Indian origin — named after a shrub called Mansur or Mansuri (botanical name *Coriaria nepalensis*), which was plentiful in these hills (not anymore, though).

The native population called these hills ‘Mansuri’ and the Europeans simply dropped the ‘n’. Over the years, the spelling was completely distorted by the British. The town assumed various written forms: ‘Masuri’, ‘Mussoori’ and even ‘Mussooree’. The current spelling was made popular by a local advertisement bulletin, which started writing ‘Masuri’ as ‘Mussoorie’.

— **Excerpted from ‘Mussoorie Nostalgia’, with permission from Rupa**

CAPTION CONTEST 1574



RAVI 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 epaper clipping at captionpics@tribunemail.com or a scanned copy of the e-paper clipping. Please mention the pin code and phone number in your address.

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1573



SPECTRUM AUGUST 2 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

- Fare and lovely — Amaira Arora via epaper, Ludhiana
- Laughter encashed — Arushi Priya, Panchkula
- Note of thanks — Sanju Panicker, Panchkula
- Wheels of happiness — Anil Jindal, Zirakpur
- A hush hush blush — Karnail Singh, Kharar

When bhindi meets mutton

The right vegetables can transform a simple mutton curry, adding flavour, texture, colour, and balance to every bite

RAHUL VERMA

ONE of the great pleasures of life is a mutton curry that many households call the Sunday special. In our house, too, the curry — with juicy, fried potatoes in it — is often cooked for lunch on Sundays. It is a simple curry, prepared with the basic *masalas*. Cooked in mustard oil, it is rich, and helps you snore gently after lunch. I am essentially a gravy-and-potato person, but I am particular about the cuts of meat. I usually ask for the lean and tender parts of the shoulder, neck, and leg.

The topic of meat cuts came up recently when I was chatting with a chef. He was convinced that what made a really good mutton curry was not so much the *masalas* or the way of cooking, but the quality of the meat. The taste of the meat also depends on where the goat comes from. A meat dish in Rajasthan, for instance, may consist of lean pieces, for the goats are lean, largely because of the vegetation in the region.

Then there is the meat of castrated goats — which has a higher fat content. In some restaurants in Kolkata, a kilogram of this *khashi* meat consists of four large pieces — which I guess appeals hugely to die-hard meat eaters.

But by my mind, the best part of a meat curry is that it can take so many forms, depending on what you cook it with. The *masalas* may remain the same, but the taste of the dish can change drastically depending on the ingredients that you add to the meat. And vegetables play a major

BHINDI GOSHT

INGREDIENTS

Mutton	500 gm
Onions (chopped)	2
Tomatoes (chopped)	2
Ginger-garlic paste	1 tbsp
Cumin seeds	1 tsp
Coriander powder	1½ tsp
Chilli or Kashmiri chilli powder	1 tsp
Turmeric powder	1 tsp
Garam masala	1 tsp
Salt	To taste
Water	As needed
Mustard oil	For frying
Bhindi (cut into large pieces)	200 gm

WHOLE MASALA

Cinnamon stick	1 inch
Green cardamoms	A few
Black cardamom	1
Cloves	3-4
Peppercorns	A few

METHOD

- Heat oil in a pressure cooker. Add the whole *masalas*. Add cumin seeds. When these splutter, add the onions and fry. When brown, add ginger-garlic paste, and fry for 2-3 minutes. Now put the tomatoes. Stir till the tomatoes become pulpy, and the oil separates. Add the powdered *masalas* (except *garam masala*) and stir well. Now add the meat and fry till the colour changes.
- Once nicely browned, add water. Mix well. Secure the lid, and pressure cook until 2-3 whistles, followed by 7-8 minutes on low heat.
- In another pan, add oil, and fry the *bhindi*. Keep the fried *bhindi* aside.
- Once the pressure cooker lid opens, add the *bhindi*. Sprinkle *garam masala* and mix. Serve with *roti* or rice.



role in this. I recently had a meat dish cooked with green chillies at a restaurant.

The gravy was hot, but not so hot that I needed a fire extinguisher. It had a rich green colour, which, the chef said, came from the chillies and a spinach paste.

It was so good that I was left licking my fingers clean.

Spinach, of course, is a common ingredient in mutton curries. In winter, when you get fresh greens, you can cook meat with mustard leaves, too. And in the summer months, a host of vegetables can be added to the curry — for taste, and a touch of lightness. For avowed meat-eating families, adding vegetables is a great way to ensure a balanced meal.

I have not had *lauki* meat, but a friend swears by it. The meat is cooked as usual, then the bottle gourd is added. Since the gourd releases water, the meat cooks in it, resulting in a dish full of flavours and a soft texture. Likewise, pumpkins add colour, tex-

ture, nutrients and flavours to the meat. A friend from Sikkim cooks the best *ishkhush* — meat dish that you can have — meat cooked with squash that you find largely in the hills. Beet is another great ingredient — it adds colour to the gravy and gives the meat a pleasant, mildly sweet kick.

A friend is known for her meat dishes cooked with vegetables. I love the dish that she cooks with *arbi*. You need to add some lime juice to *arbi gosht* to give it a tart touch. The friend has given me the recipe for her *bhindi gosht*, too. The first time she cooked it, though, it was a disaster. Newly married, she prepared it for her in-laws — but added the *bhindi*, without first frying it, to the meat. The outcome was a gooey and sticky mess, which her polite in-laws ate without a murmur.

She called up her mother, and learnt that she had to fry the okra separately. She hasn’t made this mistake ever since!

— **The writer is a food critic**

BOOKS

Short stories that stay a lot longer

MANDIRA NAYAR

GEETANJALI SHREE refuses to be boxed in and has charted her own course in her novels. It is no different with ‘Once Elephants Lived Here’, a short story collection, newly translated into English by Daisy Rockwell. One short of a dozen, these stories are unlike any other that may exist on the shelves.

“I know this is no way to tell a story, to tell the ending so soon, but for one thing, I haven’t come around to this business of clear divisions,” the narrator says in the title story. “I find it more attractive when there’s no clear shape; no sequential steps, like first this, next this and next that, then the end.”

This could be the philosophy to enter Geetanjali’s world. Character names aren’t important, nor is the usual framework of a story. You enter the stories in the middle of conversations and very often leave before closure — yet they stay with you. The author discards conventions and the conventional. And with the familiar landmarks missing, she forces you to feel everything, be aware of each word that is written to find newer ways to engage with the story.

‘Once Elephants Lived Here’ is reminiscent of Partition and her International Booker-winning ‘Tomb of Sand’. It is set in the city that was made ‘famous’ by the riots. Not by the riots themselves, but by the glitter and glamour that most definitely result-



ONCE ELEPHANTS LIVED HERE

by Geetanjali Shree.

Translated from the Hindi by Daisy Rockwell. Penguin Random House. Pages 195. ₹599

ed from the riots. Here the factions exist “so neatly” and “all the traces of the past are paved in cement and asphalt roads”.

In this compartmentalised metropolis appears an old lady who refuses to forget. Ephemeral, delicate and deep, Geetanjali forces you to grapple with the wiping away of the past and the cost of moving forward. The core of the titular story is the knocking down of an old *haveli* in the city that dreams of being Shanghai. The author weaves this almost everyday occurrence in cities around India into a story.

Another story, ‘These Days’, deals with the tensions in Geetanjali’s other book, ‘Our City That Year’. Divided by religion, the city is on edge. There is a curfew and young men have stopped coming out. The narrator is sit-

ting in the verandah of his home, pretending to be fearless. But then fear isn’t a straightforward thing, the author writes; it doesn’t always pop up for discernible reasons. “It blows about madly in the breeze, and wherever it goes, it’s apt to invade anyone who accidentally inhales it,” she writes.

Death, vulnerabilities of age, memories — always, memories — Geetanjali’s stories grapple with the business of life, and it is this grief of time running out that makes them poignant and urgent. And to think that these stories were written when she was young.

In ‘The End’, the author explores the death of a father, the indignity of old age and the overwhelming sadness of the clothes left behind in the bathroom. Geetanjali’s world is filled with characters not in their prime of life, who are faded or are fading, invisible to the world; only, they are not on the margins but central to the story.

There is also love — again, not the all-consuming feeling of youth, but the intimacy of the middle-aged. ‘Echo’ is a story of heartbreak, of the revisiting of a college love affair, one that finds a vocabulary over who will read the newspaper first in the morning. This battle plays out in a hotel room for the six days they are together. “The newspaper gave us a vocabulary: cursing, chiding, banter, babbling, anything and everything,” she writes. Haunting, and achingly sad, the story carries with it the weariness of being alone.

In ‘Fatigue’, in which two lovers meet at

a cemetery in Japan, what they had was not “childish” but happiness and that “infected” the moments when they were not together. Yet it was clear that this would not be a forever relationship.

The author takes everyday occurrences and turns them into the pivot around which stories are spun to explore complex thoughts. In ‘Echo’, it is reading the newspaper first, and in ‘Out for a Spin’, the morning walk that the “lady writer” can’t seem to skip. She says she steps out while it is still dark because she doesn’t want to be seen; “we are revealed in the eyes of others”. Geetanjali’s stories surprise you with new ways of seeing.

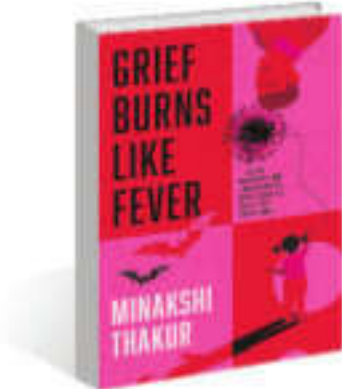
Scattered across the pages are stories of women: the one who wears her husband’s socks and refuses to hold the hand of her lover in ‘Fatigue’; the 70-year-old mother in ‘March, Ma and Sakura’, who arrives in Japan to visit her son and forms a friendship with a boy she meets on a plane from India; ‘Bulldozer’ features a terminally-ill woman riding a bullet train in Japan, remembering her childhood, thinking about her child without her and the inevitability of her death.

The book belongs as much to Daisy Rockwell, her partner-in-crime (as the dedication reads), as to Geetanjali Shree. To translate a story where the threads are gossamer thin requires not only patience, but skill, passion and love. This sense of camaraderie shines through their books and will continue to light up bookshelves.

— The reviewer is a literary critic



BACKFLAP



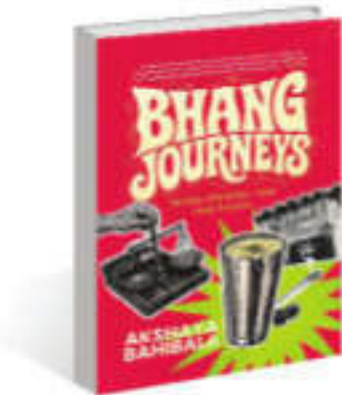
GRIEF BURNS LIKE FEVER

by Minakshi Thakur.

Westland.

Pages 205. ₹499

As the second wave of the pandemic forces lockdowns across the world, an ambulance driver at a hospital in Delhi finds his days and nights taken over by the task of ferrying patients and bodies to makeshift crematoria across the city. He meets the grieving and the depraved, but also, black marketeers hoarding oxygen and traffickers preying on orphans. Everywhere, life is hard, but networks of empathy and shared kindness build quietly as well. The book is an elegiac evocation of the pandemic years.



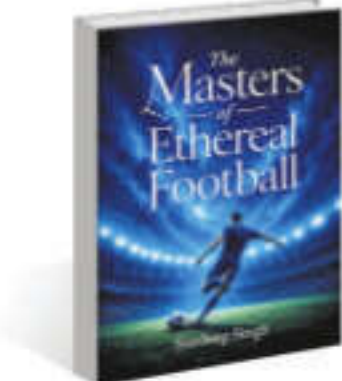
BHANG JOURNEYS

by Akshaya Bahibala.

Speaking Tiger.

Pages 198. ₹499

From 1998 to 2008, Akshaya Bahibala was in the grip of cannabis — smoking *ganja*, drinking *bhang*; living the highs and lows of an addict on Puri’s beaches with hippies, backpackers and dropouts from the West and the East. Then he came back from the edge and tried to make a life. This book comprises startling, fragmented memories of that lost decade. Beyond that, it is both a celebration and a warning about India’s most popular intoxicant.



THE MASTERS OF ETHEREAL FOOTBALL

by Surdeep Singh.

Unistar Books.

Pages 116. ₹395

The book is a collection of 20 reflective chapters on the most influential football players of the 21st century, written in a contemplative and narrative way. It aims to describe the inner worlds, conflicts, transformative moments and the legacy-defining virtues and principles of these figures. Each chapter dives deep and intersects with the players to determine what made them stand out, including the moments which led to their superstardom. The book also contains statistics and tactical qualitative data about the players.

PUSHPESH PANT

ROHINI RANA is an Indian princess who got married at a young age to the scion of an aristocratic family in Nepal. For years, she traversed the length and breadth of Nepal with her husband, who served in the army and rose to the rank of commander-in-chief.

Her collection of recipes is exceptionally rich, ranging from refined delicacies served in the grand palaces of Nepal to what the commoners subsisted on in the far-flung regions of the landlocked country. Her focus isn’t solely on the recipes; she enriches them with anecdotes and memories.

This is her third book and, like the previous two, is photographed brilliantly and laid out attractively. The title is intriguing: ‘Memories on a Platter’. The sub-title offers a clue: ‘My Fusion Cookbook’.

Fusion, now, is a much-abused word, but the author uses it in a specific sense. She talks of ‘global inspirations’ that have shaped her culinary journey.

India, China, Nepal, Thailand, Pakistan, Japan and France, along with Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, are palpably present. Curiosity is aroused when Qatar, UAE, Kenya, Lebanon and Israel step into her kitchen, followed by Australia and the Czech Republic.

The arrangement of recipes is interesting. She shares the recipe of the original dish — such as *samosa* — and then follows the siblings. For instance, the *sambousa* is enjoyed mainly in non-vegetarian form in Turkey with a filling of meat, feta cheese and nuts. We encounter *sambousek* stuffed with lentil paste in Ethiopia. This pastry comes with a variety of fillings in Central Asia; the author’s favourite is spinach-mushroom.

The same treatment is accorded to *gol-gappas* that go by many names: *pani-puri*, *puchka*, *batasha*. Chefs have exper-

imented with different fillings, but Rana’s fusion creations take them to another level. Her golden *golgappa* shells enclose savoury delights like scrambled eggs and smoked salmon, corn with either capsicum or edamame.

Cornmeal is widely used in porridge-like concoctions called *dheodha* (or *dindo*) in some parts of Nepal. Fused with Italian flavours by Rana, it reaches dizzying heights. Prawns and sardines in oil are paired with Nepali-style dried fish. The tomato chutney gives it a twist. Chargrilled vegetables are the perfect accompaniment.

A fascinating recipe is pizza balls with veg and non-veg filling. Calzone, the half-moon avatar of pizza, is certainly interesting but these golf-size balls are absolutely mind-blowing.

Rana offers interesting takes on millets and coarse grains. Buckwheat lace crepes with chicken *chaamp* or *paneer ki bhujjiya* transform a French delicacy into a Nepali beauty. Her buckwheat squares are an Indian rendering of quesadillas. There are some strange bedfellows — droolworthy though — like potato rosti with kung pao chicken.

The only niggle here is that the author is partial to small bites and has a fondness for expensive ingredients, unaffordable for most of us.

She gently draws our attention to the fact that fusion is not restricted to recipes; it can also be reflected in a careful blend of serving vessels, plates and pots. Mountain ebony may sound like an import from foreign lands, but is nothing but our own *kachnaar*. Its buds are used to tickle the vegetarian palate in unusual mock meat recipes.

Nepali *shikarniy* is a close cousin of Indian *shrikhand*. It is called *shikarniy* in Karnataka too. Light and refreshing, this mildly sweet dessert dons a gourmet garb when garnished with dragon fruit, kiwis and strawberries. Rohini Rana tempts the readers to try out its many variations — mango *sikari* with sago pudding and *zarda pulav* nestled in *sikari*.

A fascinating volume.

— The reviewer is a food historian

ARADHIKA SHARMA

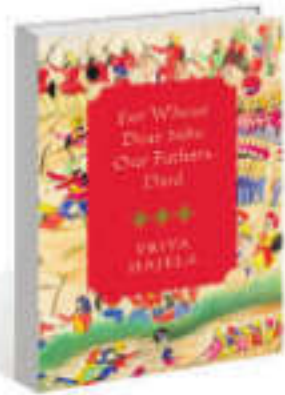
THROUGH four generations of the Uppal family, Priya Hajela’s ‘For Whose Dear Sake Our Fathers Died’ explores the complex relationship between Sikhs and the British Empire across a century of war, upheaval and political awakening.

Describing the novel as “an attempt to understand this association and co-dependence between the British rulers and Sikhs”, Hajela grapples with a question that continues to provoke debate: why did so many Sikhs support the British during the uprising of 1857? Rather than offer ideological answers, she situates that question within the lived experiences of those who witnessed the fall of the Sikh Empire, the consolidation of British rule, and the emergence of Indian nationalism.

The story unfolds through the memories of Beant Kaur, granddaughter, sister, and custodian of family history. Her voice gives the narrative both structure and purpose. As she explains, “The stories are my inheritance. I have kept them alive by telling them to myself. I don’t just have the duty to preserve what happened, but also to reclaim the honour of men who had been branded as collaborators when they were truly warriors.” This determination to recover complexity rather than pass judgment shapes the novel throughout.

Beginning with Iqbal Singh Uppal, a soldier in Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s Khalsa Army, Hajela traces the fortunes of a family shaped by conquest, rebellion, frontier warfare, migration and political change.

At the centre of the novel stands Balwant Singh Uppal. Son of Iqbal Singh, who fought in the First Anglo-Sikh War, Balwant grows up in the shadow of a lost kingdom before joining the Ferozepur Sikh Regiment of the British Indian Army. He is neither a colonial flag-waver nor a nationalist hero retrofitted into the 19th century, but a man wrestling with competing loyalties. As he reflects, “Sometimes you have to separate the group from the individual. As a group, the East India Company is evil... But then there are people like Henry Lawrence... and my own Colonel Jeremiah Brasyer, who I will die for.” Hajela explores these tensions most effective-



FOR WHOSE DEAR SAKE OUR FATHERS DIED

by Priya Hajela.

Speaking Tiger.

Pages 324. ₹599

ly in her portrayal of 1857. The massacres at Kanpur, the siege of Lucknow, and the brutal reprisals that followed are rendered with vivid detail, yet the narrative resists reducing the conflict to a contest between heroes and villains.

The third generation is represented by Harjit Singh Uppal (1862-1892), a gifted scout in the famed Punjab Frontier Force, whose service in the North-West Frontier reflects a changing relationship with empire. If Harjit provides the action, Sindhu provides the emotional core. Along with Harsharan and later Khushi, she anchors the family through loss and change.

Hajela is equally at home in domestic settings, capturing the textures of Punjabi life. Her women do more than witness history; they preserve and interpret it.

The fourth generation introduces Amrik Singh Uppal, whose world is shaped less by soldiering than by law, journalism and nationalism. He belongs to a generation increasingly willing to question colonial rule. The heartrending Komagata Maru episode becomes the defining event of his life. Hajela concludes with a brief reference to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, the moment that finally shattered Punjab’s long and complicated relationship with British rule. By then, the novel’s central question has come full circle.

Through the lives of the Uppals, Hajela shows how loyalty, duty, and identity were reshaped by changing historical circumstances. Rather than dividing the past into patriots and collaborators, she restores its ambiguities, reminding us that history is often more complex than the categories imposed upon it.

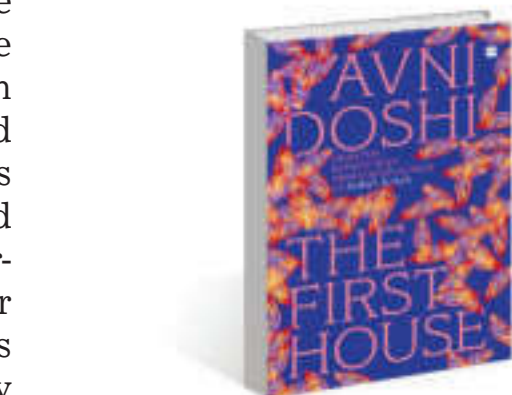
— The reviewer is a freelancer



MEMORIES ON A PLATTER: MY FUSION COOKBOOK

by Rohini Rana.

Penguin Random House. Pages 312. ₹2,499



THE FIRST HOUSE

by Avni Doshi.

HarperCollins.

Pages 224. ₹599

phosis is not made beautiful.

Doshi also draws a parallel with the narrator’s marriage, which has been an underground existence in which her individual self remained submerged beneath domestic duties and emotional dependence. The divorce is an emergence, but Doshi does not romanticise it as liberation because the narrator is comfortable with the life they had

SHIREEN QUADRI

IN her second novel, ‘The First House’, Avni Doshi follows a woman’s emotional and psychological unravelling after the collapse of her 13-year marriage. The unnamed narrator has built her adult life around her husband, their two daughters and the home they share. When he unexpectedly asks for a divorce, she is forced to confront the possibility that she never fully knew the man beside her. What she believed was a shared life now appears shaped by secrets and acts of control she had trained herself not to question.

Doshi draws the husband without turning him into a conventional villain. He is selfish, evasive and casually cruel, but his power also comes from the narrator’s investment in the marriage. She has spent years accommodating him, defending him and preserving the idea of their family. His betrayal makes her reconsider not only who he was, but also who she became while living with him.

Returning to oneself after dismantling of a marriage

One disturbing memory comes from the early years of the marriage. He brings home medication and tells her that both of them must take it to treat a sexually transmitted infection. When she asks whether he has slept with someone else, he denies it and claims the infection may have remained dormant for years. She fears it might affect her ability to conceive. Her tests show that she is safe, but the episode leaves a mark: he may have exposed her body to harm and expected her to accept his explanation.

This concealed corruption is echoed in the recurring image of the cicadas. Buried underground for 13 years (almost their entire lifespan), the cicadas emerge, engage in mating and begin a new life cycle. More disturbing is the infected male cicada whose body has been taken over by fungus, but it continues to attract mates and transmit the infection. The parallel with the husband is unmistakable: a damaged creature seeks intimacy while hiding the danger it carries.

The metaphor works because metamor-

made, and the scaffolding of a family. To come into the light is also to be exposed. She is frightened, financially uncertain and unable to imagine a life no longer arranged around her husband.

Astrology and mythology offer other ways of reading the collapse. The first house in an astrological chart concerns the self, while a statue of Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt, stands in a neighbour’s garden with a bow drawn. She becomes an image of vigilance and self-possession, though the novel’s symbols sometimes feel overworked.

The wider family offers no easy refuge. The narrator’s parents are supportive but intrusive. She has been estranged from her elder sister, Didi, after defending the husband who abandons her. Didi, unmarried and helping run the family business, initially represents the life the narrator rejected. Their gradual return to one another gives the novel some of its most affecting moments.

Doshi is attentive to the daughters, who ask practical questions about their absent

father while continuing with school. They are neither symbols of damage nor convenient instruments of healing. Their mother’s love is real, but motherhood does not automatically make her whole.

Like ‘Burnt Sugar’, Doshi’s Booker Prize-shortlisted first novel, ‘The First House’ is interested in the intimate violence of family life. In both the books, love is inseparable from resentment, dependency and power. However, while ‘Burnt Sugar’ focused on the difficult bond between a mother and daughter, the new novel looks at the dismantling of a marriage.

The novel is not simply about surviving divorce, but about recognising how completely a person may disappear inside a relationship and how difficult it is to return to oneself. The narrator remains uncertain, grieving and unfinished.

The end of a marriage does not immediately create freedom; it first creates an empty space. What might she build there?

— The reviewer is a freelancer

REFLECTIONS

Jassi Sidhu's last story

WITHOUT LIMITS



PRADEEP MAGAZINE

SOMEWHERE in the shadows, in the long creases of light, in the darkness of night, in the noise of the crowd and the silence of sound, death lingers, stalking us all. It shapes our past, inhabits our present and impacts the future we plan. Yet we live as though it were absent, until it arrives with the only certainty that life has ever promised.

These meditative reflections arise from a death that was violent in its suddenness. A journalist colleague lost his life in a road accident, leaving the sporting fraternity grappling not only with grief but with questions that death has always provoked.

Does life possess an inherent meaning or purpose, or is it merely a succession of random episodes that memory and imagination weave into a narrative with a beginning, middle and an end? These reflections are not an attempt to inhabit that unsettling space where loss strips away certainty and compels us to confront the deepest questions about our own existence.

I do not intend, for the moment, to pursue this larger philosophical question. Instead, I want to remember Jassi as he was for many of us: a man of considerable strength and unmistakable weaknesses, whose life, like that of most of us, defied easy judgment. Jasvinder Sidhu had a rebellious streak which many in the establishment mistook for mischievous irreverence, seeing in it not an independent spirit but a threat to their own authority.

I first met him on India's cricket tour of Pakistan in 2006. In fact, it was his voice that I heard before I even saw him. The long, lingering drawl with which he addressed Greg Chappell as "coach" caught my attention instantly. I



JASVINDER SIDHU

turned around to see the face of the man who had uttered the word with such quiet confidence. More than the richness of his baritone, what struck me was the respect that infused his voice, which was warm and genuine, never slipping into servility or the breathless awe of a star-struck admirer.

A tall, broad-shouldered young man, who could easily have passed for an elite athlete, greeted me. His confidence and quiet self-assurance left a lasting impression that slowly, almost imperceptibly, grew into an unspoken bond.

Jassi from Hoshiarpur wore his Sikhi as a badge of honour. He was at that time working for one of India's largest Hindi dailies and was among the handful of journalists from the vernacular press covering international sporting events. Forthright, outspoken and uncompromising, Jassi was by temperament anti-establishment, never comfortable with entrenched hierarchies or unquestioned authority, be it in the cricket administration or in the various newsrooms he worked in. He was like a child who, in his eagerness, was willing to work tirelessly on a story as long as his efforts were recognised and his journalism valued.

He could easily get offended if his work was not appreciated or dumped over the tone and tenor of his stories, which were mostly anti-establishment. A man who loathed hierarchies was slowly realising he himself was a victim of a mindset that gave primacy to English language in most forms of reporting, including sports writing. His desire to break that chain and his skills as an investigative reporter got

him a job in *Hindustan Times*, a newspaper I was associated with at the time.

Jassi took his new job as a challenge, getting neither overawed nor intimidated and ensured the paper got the stories that became newsbreaks. He worked on his new language of expression and was soon comfortable with its idiom. His entry into English journalism, however, coincided with the increasing control of the establishment over news stories and content that restricted a reporter's reach to strike at administrative wrongdoings.

In this new world order, Jassi was being tamed and he was upset. He already had a reckless streak in him that would surface in moments of stress, leading to confrontational situations with those in powerful positions. He quit but never lost his verve and passion to look for stories that challenged the established patterns.

His moment of glory came when P Sainath, then with *The Hindu* in Mumbai, was on the lookout for an intrepid reporter who could make sense of the complicated, exaggerated and nepotistic IPL business structure. Jassi was the man he turned to and what followed was a series of hard-hitting stories that rattled not just cricket's top hierarchy but even the journalistic fraternity. They had not dared to do this expose.

Yet he never found a permanent job anchor, though his skill-sets were never in doubt. His two documentaries, one on Sachin Tendulkar and the other on the first Indian to compete in the luge event of the Winter Olympics, Shiva Keshavan, won him many admirers. Shiva, in a condolence meeting held at the Press Club of India, spoke eloquently about the multifaceted talents Jassi possessed. In a moving tribute on Zoom from Italy, Shiva talked of his unusual approach and the fearlessness with which Jassi shot him in action.

Jassi, at 56, left his friends and family far too early. Beneath his shifting emotional intensity and non-conformist persona was a simple man who longed for validation of his integrity and honest journalistic work — that lay at the heart of his sense of self.

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

ADITYA GUPTA

ON May 22, 2019, pre-dawn, somewhere on the icy shoulder of the world's highest mountain, he must have overtaken me without either of us knowing it. I stood on the summit of Everest at 7.30 am, one climber among many, overwhelmed and grateful simply to have arrived, after 43 days of negotiations with the Sagarmatha. Two hours earlier, on that very same day, a Nepali climber named Nirmal "Nims" Purja stood on that same summit, then turned around and, in 10 hours and 15 minutes, stood on the summit of neighbouring Lhotse as well — a transition so fast it rewrote what the climbing world believed was possible.

Two days later, he summited Makalu too, completing an Everest-Lhotse-Makalu triple within 48 hours. He "arrived" on the scene like an avalanche of records, and has gone already, far too soon.

On July 30, 2026, an avalanche struck a 10-member expedition on Pakistan's Broad Peak, the world's 12th-highest mountain, which Purja was leading for his company, Elite Exped. He did not survive, and nor did his trusted climbing partners and guides, Pur Bahadur "Yukta" Gurung and Nima Sherpa. Days earlier, Purja's message now reads like a premonition: "Broad Peak, I ask for nothing but safe passage up and back down."

Nims did not grow up dreaming of Everest. He was born on July 25, 1983, in Dana, a small village in Nepal's Myagdi district, into a family of modest means. His family later moved to Chitwan so the children could go to school. Like his father and brothers, he joined the British army's Brigade of Gurkhas at 18. In 2009, he became the first Gurkha ever selected for the Special Boat Service, Britain's elite maritime special forces, and spent a decade there as a cold-weather warfare specialist, including tours in Afghanistan.

"Giving up is not in the blood, sir," he once said — a line that could as easily describe a Gurkha regiment as it could a man who would later stand on the world's highest points on no sleep. It was during a break from that military life, on a trek to the Everest Base Camp in 2012, that the mountains first took hold of him. "Don't be afraid to dream big... you can show the world that nothing is impossible," he would later say, in the opening line of the documentary that made him famous.

In 2018, with 16 years of service behind him, he walked away from the army, gave up his pension, and remortgaged his house to fund a plan almost everyone told him was reckless: climbing all 14 of the world's 8,000-metre peaks — a feat that had previously taken the fastest climbers nearly eight years — in just seven months. "I was told that my plan was impossible. So I decided to name it Project Possible," he said. He finished it in 189 days, a record that stood until 2023, when Norwegian climber Kristin Harila and her Nepali climbing partner Tenjen Sherpa did it in 92. But Purja was never done.

Between May 2022 and October 2024, he became the first person in history to climb all 14 eight-thousanders a second time — this time entirely without supplemental oxygen — one of the 18 Guinness World Records he would go on to hold. He then set out to do the 14



Nirmal Purja rewrote the rules of what the human body and mind can endure

peaks, and the Seven Summits, a third time each: his self-declared 'Hat-Trick Project'. "I have to compete against myself to be better than who I was yesterday," he explained.

In that extraordinary week of May 2019, he also captured the famous photograph of a human traffic jam strung along Everest's summit ridge, an image that forced an uncomfortable global conversation about crowding and commercial mountaineering.

In January 2021, without bottled oxygen himself, he led an all-Nepali team — including Mingma David Sherpa, then the youngest person to have climbed all 14 eight-thousanders — to the first winter ascent of K2, a mountain that had turned back every previous winter attempt for decades. That same year, the Netflix documentary '14 Peaks: Nothing Is Impossible' carried his story to millions. In the film, he distilled what those mountains gave him into a single line: "On the summit, your soul becomes part of the mountain."

What set Nimsdai apart was never only speed. During his Annapurna mission, he abandoned the summit push to help rescue Dr Chin Wui Kin, a Malaysian climber stranded near 26,500 feet without oxygen for some 40 hours — a rescue he approached with the same clarity he brought to everything above 8,000 metres: "If you give up, you die."

He used his growing fame to insist that Sherpas and Nepali climbers be recognised as elite mountaineers in their own right, not merely as support staff for foreign expeditions.

He was not without critics who argued that his oxygen-assisted, helicopter-supported style of climbing was reshaping the Himalayan quest in ways purists lamented. Purja's answer was that speed need not come at the cost of safety when skill matched ambition: "I like people that do and not chat."

I keep returning to something I wrote after my own Everest climb: every successful ascent is only the mountain's permission — granted for now, and never guaranteed again. Nims pushed that permission further than almost anyone in history.

Rest in peace, Nimsdai. Thank you for showing the world what a Nepali son of the mountains could achieve.

— *The writer is an Everest summiteer and author*

Sacred side of educational enterprise

WHEN Samuel Vedanayagam Pillai (1826-1889) wrote the first Tamil novel, *'Prathapa Mudaliar Caritharam'*, in 1879, he, like many of his contemporary writers, placed education at the heart of his work. The protagonist of the novel, a wealthy landowner's son, had once refused to go to school, saying, "Ayya, do I need to study? Are not my wit and common sense enough? The poor do need to be educated, no doubt, as they have to earn their living. But is that necessary for me? If there is something to be read or written, don't we have our clerks? And accountants?" This amusing display of adolescent arrogance from a century and a half ago may seem preposterous, but its relevance is strikingly contemporary.

Learning, in our highly technologically advanced society, is now valued chiefly for the economic opportunities it offers. Degrees have become tickets to better-paying jobs. What purpose do science and technology serve, except to bring unprecedented luxury within our reach? Ironically, prosperity often weakens our understanding of what education is for. There may be other factors operational in a society, but it is material gains that lead to the final snapping of ties between learning and potential learners. This tension between commerce and learning is not unique to our age. It has surfaced repeatedly in history, and one of its clearest expressions can be found in Reformation Europe.

Martin Luther's crusade against ecclesiasti-



UNIVERSE

ASHISH ALEXANDER

cal corruption, in the early decades of the 16th century, had turned common people suspicious towards the revered monasteries and nunneries, which were also the seats of medieval learning. The halo around the institutions related to the established Church was fading and the bonds of popular allegiance were loosening.

The period was also marked by a commercial revolution. Trade and commerce became incredibly lucrative. Many well-meaning traders in Germany began to withdraw their wards from schools, and pushed them into

The tension between commerce and learning is not unique to our age

trade; traders, like farmers, could always do with more hands.

This created another crisis in Western Europe. Reformation needed more preachers and teachers, not fewer. Luther was constrained to write his famous sermon 'On Keeping Children in School' in 1530. In it, he argued that it was the "real masterpiece of the devil's art" to keep children away from learning, and sacrifice them at the altar of mammon. He called upon communities to bring children back to schools to be trained to occupy holy offices to lead the flock in righteous living, and to guide the prince in dispensing justice.

Arguing for mass education for both spiritual and temporal ends, Luther laid the foundation of the second education revolution in the West, the first one being King Charlemagne's groundbreaking efforts in the 9th century AD. History testifies that renewal of its spiritual foundations is the way to make learning a meaningful human pursuit.

The wise mother of that overconfident Mudaliar child counsels: "Without education, can we comprehend the nature and divine attributes of the almighty, or the teachings of the scriptures and spiritual tracts? Can we know anything of sciences like geography or mathematics...?" In a single breath, she evokes both the spiritual and the material, both the sacred and the scientific. We often forget the sacred side of the educational enterprise.

— *The writer teaches in Prayagraj*

What the Brij Bhushan ruling means for women



MEGHNA PANT

LAST week, as news broke of the acquittal of former Wrestling Federation of India chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh in the sexual harassment case filed by several women wrestlers, the country immediately split into familiar camps. One side declared it proof that the allegations never stood up to scrutiny. The other called it a betrayal of women. But there is another question that deserves far more attention.

What does a judgment like this mean to the ordinary Indian woman? Not to TV panellists, politicians, or activists, but to the 24-year-old intern wondering whether she should complain about her boss. To the domestic worker who has nowhere to turn. To the college student deciding whether

reporting harassment is worth the humiliation. To the journalist, the nurse, the corporate executive, the factory worker and the entrepreneur.

Women do not watch landmark sexual harassment cases as spectators. They watch them as previews of their own future. That is why cases involving public figures carry a burden that extends far beyond the courtroom. Whatever the legal outcome, these shape public confidence in our institutions.

The court's responsibility is clear: it must decide cases solely on the evidence before it and the standard of proof required by law. Courts cannot convict to satisfy public sentiment, nor should they. But the responsibility of a democracy does not end with a judgment. Governments, legislatures, police, employers, sporting bodies, educational institutions and civil society must all ask a more uncomfortable question: do Indian women believe the system will protect them if they speak up? If the answer is increasingly "I'm not sure," then we have a problem.

India has made remarkable progress on paper. We have stronger laws against workplace sexual harassment. We have the POSH Act. We have fast-track courts, helplines,

awareness campaigns and the powerful message of *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*.

The Prime Minister has repeatedly spoken about women's dignity, sanitation, education and financial inclusion. Millions of girls have benefited from policies that encourage them to stay in school and participate in public life. But laws and slogans are only half the story. Trust is the other half. It cannot be legislated. It must be earned.

The tragedy is that many women still calculate the cost of speaking up before they calculate the harm they have suffered. "Will anyone believe me?" "Will I lose my job?" "Will my family support me?" "Will I spend years in court?" "Will my private life become tomorrow's headline?"

These are not hypothetical fears. They are the questions women ask every day. High-profile cases amplify those fears. When nationally celebrated athletes spend years pursuing legal remedies, endure relentless public scrutiny and then see a case end in acquittal at the trial stage, countless women naturally ask themselves what such a journey might look like for someone with far less visibility, influence or support.

That is not a criticism of the court. It is a

reflection on the system. Justice is not measured only by outcomes. It is also measured by confidence. A legal system may follow every rule correctly and still leave citizens feeling alienated if the process is painfully slow, emotionally exhausting or inaccessible.

That gap between legality and legitimacy is where democracies must pay attention.

This is not unique to India. The #MeToo movement demonstrated how many women chose silence for years because they believed speaking up would cost them more than staying quiet. In Britain, repeated scandals forced police forces to confront allegations that women lacked confidence in reporting abuse. In the United States, universities, corporations and newsrooms have spent years rethinking how complaints are handled — not because every allegation is true, but because every complainant deserves a process that is fair, timely and credible.

The lesson is simple. Women's faith in institutions is built long before a judge delivers a verdict. It begins with the police officer who records a complaint with dignity. It continues with an investigation that is professional, impartial and prompt. It depends on witnesses feeling safe, evidence being col-

lected thoroughly and proceedings moving without unnecessary delay.

This is where India must do better. First, investigations into sexual harassment cases involving positions of power must be faster and more transparent, without compromising fairness. Second, witness support systems need serious investment. Third, Internal Committees under the POSH Act cannot remain box-ticking exercises. Every institution — public and private — must ensure that they are independent, trained and trusted. Fourth, we need greater public legal literacy. Too often, people confuse an acquittal with a declaration that nothing happened, or an allegation with proof of guilt. The law is more nuanced than our hashtags.

Finally, we must reject the toxic habit of treating every case as a political contest. Justice cannot wear party colours. Neither can dignity. We cannot ask women to dream bigger if we do not also give them confidence that when they seek justice, the system will stand beside them. That is the faith we must protect. Because once women lose faith in justice, justice itself begins to lose its meaning.

— *The writer is an acclaimed author*

Disputed polls, use of excessive force, media crackdown expose deep fault lines over governance & representation

ESCALATING TURMOIL IN PoK

UJWAL JALALI

THE timing was striking. As protests intensified in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) over governance issues, electoral reforms and allegations of excessive use of force, Islamabad moved to tighten controls over reporting from the region.

New guidelines required journalists working for international outlets to seek government approval before reporting outside Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. The restrictions also placed additional requirements on local journalists, and contributors working with foreign organisations.

The Committee to Protect Journalists criticised the move, warning that it could further restrict independent reporting from a region already facing intense scrutiny.

The question that follows is unavoidable: why has Pakistan struggled to contain the anger in a territory it officially calls 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir'?

The answer lies in a long-running debate over autonomy, political representation and the balance of power between Muzaffarabad, Islamabad and Rawalpindi. For decades, critics have argued that Pakistan-occupied Kashmir has democratic institutions on paper but limited independence in practice. The latest unrest has brought those questions back to the centre of the debate.

WHY DID THE PROTESTS ERUPT?

The current crisis did not emerge overnight. The protests were driven by a combination of economic grievances, demands for political reform and anger over the functioning of governance institutions.

What began as opposition to specific policies gradually transformed into a wider movement questioning whether the people of the region have meaningful control over decisions affecting their lives.

The Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC) became the leading force behind the agitation. Its demands included electoral reforms, reduction in government privileges, economic relief and changes to the political system. One of the most controversial issues was the provision of seats reserved for "refugees from Jammu and Kashmir" in the Legislative Assembly. Protesters argued that the arrangement gives political parties in Islamabad disproportionate influence over local politics.

Pakistan's government has rejected such criticism, maintaining that the constitutional framework of the region provides representation and democratic rights to its people. But, for many protesters, the issue is whether elections genuinely translate into political power.

Officially, PoK has its own President, Prime Minister, Legislative Assembly and

judiciary. The political structure gives the impression of self-rule. However, critics have long argued that crucial decisions involving security, constitutional matters and strategic policy remain heavily influenced by Islamabad.

The 1974 Interim Constitution created the present institutional framework, but it also preserved Pakistan's supervisory role over several important areas.

This has created what critics describe as a contradiction: a territory with elected institutions but limited authority over the most important questions of governance.

Supporters of Pakistan's position argue that the special constitutional arrangement exists because of the unresolved Kashmir dispute and that the region enjoys substantial political representation. Opponents contend that democratic institutions cannot be considered fully autonomous when major decisions remain dependent on the federal government.

That debate has remained at the heart of political dissatisfaction in the region.

THE RAWALPINDI FACTOR

For years, political opponents, analysts and sections of Pakistani civil society have alleged that the army, headquartered in Rawalpindi, exercises decisive influence over strategic affairs in PoK.

The criticism is not simply about the presence of the security setup. It is about whether elected representatives possess enough authority to make independent decisions. The phrase often heard is that governments may sit in Muzaffarabad, but the final word comes from Rawalpindi.

Pakistan has consistently rejected allegations that the military controls political affairs in the region, insisting that its institutions function within a constitutional framework. However, the persistence of these accusations highlights the central fault line: the gap between formal autonomy and perceived real power.

PROTEST TO CONFRONTATION

As demonstrations expanded, the confrontation between protesters and authorities became increasingly severe.

Clashes resulted in deaths, injuries and arrests. Communication restrictions and Internet disruptions were imposed. International media organisations and rights groups reported the use of excessive force, while Pakistan defended the response as necessary to maintain public order.

India's Ministry of External Affairs has claimed that more than 90 persons were killed during the security response and accused Pakistan of suppressing democratic aspirations in the territory. Pakistan disputes the characterisation of events, saying that its security forces were



Supporters of the banned Joint Awami Action Committee, or JAAC, protest in Muzaffarabad. REUTERS

A protester is detained in Lahore as she and others gather in support of JAAC. REUTERS

responding to unrest and violence.

With competing claims from both governments, casualty figures and responsibility for individual incidents remain contested. However, the scale of the confrontation has ensured that PoK's internal issues have received international attention.

ELECTIONS DEEPENED CRISIS

The controversy surrounding elections further intensified the political divide.

The Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) emerged as the dominant political force after the polls, but the process was accompanied by allegations of manipulation and criticism from Opposition groups. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which had previously been influential in the region, refused to participate, arguing that conditions were not conducive for a fair contest.

Opposition parties alleged political interference, restrictions on campaigning and pressure on dissenting voices. The government argued that the elections demon-

strated the functioning of democratic institutions and pointed to voter participation as evidence of public engagement.

The dispute over the elections reflects a larger problem: in PoK, questions about political legitimacy often begin long before polling day and continue long after the results are announced.

PoK has witnessed repeated periods of political tension, protests and accusations of interference. Every new crisis has exposed similar fault lines: demands for greater autonomy, frustration over governance, and allegations that elected institutions do not possess sufficient authority.

The current protests are therefore not merely about one election or one government decision. These are part of a much longer political conversation about identity, representation and control.

The restrictions on journalists have added another layer to the controversy. When governments limit access to a region experiencing unrest, questions about

transparency naturally follow.

INDIA'S POSITION

India has consistently maintained that the entire Jammu and Kashmir, including the territory occupied by Pakistan, is an integral part of India. New Delhi refers to the region as Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and has repeatedly criticised Pakistan's constitutional and political actions there.

Pakistan maintains that the future of Kashmir must be decided according to the aspirations of the Kashmiri people.

The turmoil in PoK is ultimately about who has the authority to decide the future of the people living there. The history of PoK shows a recurring pattern — protests emerge, governments respond with force, voices are restricted, and the underlying questions remain unanswered. The biggest challenge for Pakistan will not be controlling the story coming out of PoK. It will be addressing why so many people there feel compelled to tell a different one.

The Consumer Protection Act must be amended to include 'education' within the definition of 'services'

Bring education back under purview of consumer courts

PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

NOW that the cockroaches have brought the issue of NEET and other examination paper leaks to centre stage, prompting the government to initiate a series of measures to tackle this growing menace, I would urge it to also restore all matters concerning the education sector under the purview of the Consumer Protection (CP) Act. This would once again provide students who suffer due to deficiencies in service, negligence or other unfair practices in the education sector an effective forum to seek accountability for the wrongs committed, and compensation for the harm they have endured.

When the CP Act of 1986 first brought all paid services under the ambit of the law, the consumer courts rightly interpreted that students and parents could seek redress of their grievances pertaining to unfair trade practices, deficiencies and negligence in the field of education. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the consumer courts opened the floodgates of students' grievances in the sector.

From the 'examination hall admit card' mess-up to the wrong evaluation of answer sheets; from mistakes in marks cards to unfair trade practices in the admission of students; from misleading education claims to poor quality of teaching; from non-refund of deposits and fees to fatal accidents caused by the negligence of schools and colleges; students and parents

hauled up examination boards, universities, schools, colleges and coaching institutions for violations of their rights as consumers. And they got justice.

In the *Bhupesh Khurana vs Buddhist Mission Dental College and Hospital* case in 1994, for example, 11 students sought compensation from the college for ruining their academic year with false promises of affiliation to Magadh University and recognition by the Dental Council of India. The National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission directed the college to refund the fees along with 12 per cent interest and pay a compensation of ₹20,000 to each of the students (2,000).

Both parties went in appeal before the Supreme Court and the apex court upheld the order of the National Commission and gave the students an additional ₹1 lakh each as compensation and ₹1 lakh each towards costs of litigation (2009).

In the *S Somasundaram vs Sri Chakravarthy International Matriculation Academy* case (2001), where a three-year-old child, Brinda, drowned in a septic tank left open on the school premises, the National Commission held the school guilty of gross negligence. The Commission also made it clear, while awarding compensation to the parents, that the safety of students was an integral part of the service rendered by educational institutions.

The *Suresh Prasad Sinha vs Bihar School Examination Board* case pertained to two students — Rajesh Kumar and Sunil Kumar — being given the same Hall Tick-



There must be accountability, along with compensation, when students suffer due to deficiencies in service, negligence or other unfair practices. ISTOCK

et number of 496. On noticing the mistake, the hall supervisor changed Rajesh Kumar's number to 496A and duly informed the Board. However, his examination results were never announced, and he was forced to take the same examination once again the next year! The consumer courts held the Examination Board negligent and awarded compensation to the student. However, the Supreme Court held that the conduct of examinations by a board in discharge of its statutory function did not constitute 'service' as defined under the CP Act. It, therefore, set aside the

order of the consumer court (2009).

It meant that students could no longer seek relief before the consumer courts in examination-related matters that affected them the most. This was a major setback for students. Three years later, the Supreme Court struck another blow to students when it held in the *PT Koshy vs Ellen Charitable Trust* case (2012) that educational institutions were not providing any 'service' and so consumer courts were not empowered to entertain complaints against them.

There was a ray of hope for a brief while in 2015, when in a case pertaining to refund of

admission fee, the Supreme Court held that education was a 'service' and educational institutions were answerable to consumer courts (*P Sreenivasulu vs PJ Alexander* case). But two years later, the Supreme Court went back to its earlier position in the *Anupama College of Engineering vs Gulshan* case.

So much so that when Manu Solanki and eight others went before the National Commission against Vinayaka Mission University, a larger Bench of the National Commission reviewed all judgments of the Supreme Court, and concluded that education was outside the purview of the consumer courts (2020).

Consequently, it also dismissed a father's plea for compensation for the death of his child in a school swimming pool (*Rajendra Kumar Gupta vs Virendra Swarup Public School* case, 2021). When appeals were filed against these decisions before the Supreme Court, it did not dismiss them. It said there was a need for an in-depth examination of the issue. So, we do not know what the apex court's final view will be.

The government must, therefore, amend the CP Act of 2019 to explicitly include 'education' within the definition of 'services', thereby restoring this vital forum for consumer justice to students and parents.

At the same time, complaints involving the education sector should be fast-tracked and the compensation awarded should be commensurate with the loss, hardship and suffering caused by deficiencies in services and negligence.

— *The writer is a consumer affairs expert*