### When cells rush to repair DNA, they also know when to stop

Vasudevan Mukunth

When ultraviolet light, certain chemical compounds or even normal copying mistakes harm our DNA, cells rush to fix the damage. Doing so means making the right repair proteins – but also not too many.

Using baker's yeast and human skin cells, a new study has shown that cells temporarily slow the step in which protein-building machines read messenger

RNA, or mRNA, for specific repair genes. In this process, two guardian proteins act like traffic lights that turn those messages from green to red until the emergency has passed.

The work uncovers a previously hidden layer of the DNA damage response that prevents both underrepair and over-repair. "It is a smart, evolutionarily conserved strategy that helps cells survive," Indian Institute of Science associate professor and study

lead investigator Purusharth I. Rajyaguru said. The study, together with researchers at Institut Curie, Paris, was published in EMBO Reports.

The researchers attached green fluorescent tags to two proteins, Scd6 (yeast) or LSM14A (humans), and filmed living cells. When the team damaged DNA by treating it with hydroxyurea, the tagged proteins condensed into bright dots called RNA granules. Further analysis

revealed that the hydroxyurea made Scd6 clump together while removing the dissolved stress clumps. This indicated the holding areas were reversible rather than the cell's trash bins.

Inside those granules, the researchers found that Scd6 captured the mRNA for an enzyme called Srs2, which unwinds DNA. This action caused the cells to produce lower quantities of Srs2. The researchers confirmed this by mutating either of Scd6's two RNAgripping regions and found that it couldn't capture the mRNA to make Srs2. Yeast lacking in the Scd6 protein grew poorly when extra Srs2 was present inside cells when the DNA was treated with hydroxyurea, proving that reducing Srs2 production could actually protect the cell.

The team found a similar process in human cells. The LSM14A protein also formed granules after hydroxyurea treatment.

When LSM14A production was knocked down, the cell made more of two enzymes that encouraged the cells to stitch broken DNA ends together in an errorprone way.

"Interfering with RNA granule dynamics might be a way to disrupt stress adaptation in cancer cells, making them more vulnerable to chemotherapy," Dr. Rajyaguru said. "We are also addressing this aspect in the context of neurodegeneration in our laboratory."

# Immune cells' fat blocks brain's ability to clean Alzheimer's plaques

Microglia sacrifice their protective immune function in exchange for lipid safety; this trade-off may be a key step in Alzheimer's progression

they are, the fatter they

get," Priya Prakash, a co-

lead author of the paper,

What causes the lipid

overload? According to the

study, microglia start con-

verting free fatty acids into

fats stored inside lipid dro-

plets. Over time, this lipid

build-up disrupts their

ability to engulf and digest

plaques lead to more fat,

The researchers used

advanced imaging, lipi-

domic analysis, and meta-

bolomics to track how mi-

croglia's lipid profiles

changed over time in res-

ponse to AB exposure. In-

itially, microglia accumu-

lated toxic free fatty acids.

Later, with the help of the

DGAT2 enzyme, they con-

verted these fatty acids in-

to triacylglycerols and

stored them in lipid

more AB.

dysfunction.

leading

droplets.

Manjeera Gowravaram

lzheimer's disease is a progressive brain disorder and a form of dementia that affects memory, thinking, and behaviour. For many years, the leading theory has been that Alzheimer's is caused when two harmful proteins called amyloidbeta and tau accumulate in the brain, setting off a chain of events that eventually damage nerve cells and lead to memory loss, confusion, and mood changes. This destruction begins years, even decades before symptoms appear.

There is currently no cure for Alzheimer's but there are treatments to slow symptoms and improve quality of life.

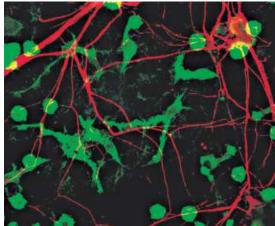
It isn't surprising that in the ongoing search for answers, scientists are increasingly turning their attention from neurons to their lesser-known but equally critical neighbours: microglia, the brain's resident immune

blished in Immunity, researchers led by Gaurav Chopra at Purdue University have uncovered how fat metabolism in microglia may be a key driver of disease progression.

"This study is pretty interesting and part of a growing body of studies indicating the role of fat metabolism problems in cells around amyloid plaques," Indian Institute of Science professor Deepak Nair said.

In healthy brains, microglia are surveillance Potential pathway

In a 'beautiful proof of concept', researchers found microglia near amyloid plaques are bloated with lipid droplets



Rat microglia grown in tissue culture in green; nerve fibre processes are shown in red. GERRY SHAW (CC BY-SA)

cells that clear waste products and toxic proteins like amyloid-beta (Aβ), the sticky molecule that forms the hallmark plaques in Alzheimer's. This clean-up helps protect neurons from damage, but in Alzheimer's patients it fails.

The study identified DGAT2, an enzyme that converts free fatty acids into triacylglycerols, the main component of lipid droplets, as a key player. In both mouse models and post-mortem human brain samples from patients with late-stage Alzheimer's, the researchers found microglia near amyloid plaques have high DGAT2 expression and are bloated with lipid droplets, particularly in the hippocampus, the region responsible for memory.

"We see that the proximity of microglia to plaques correlates with lipid droplet size. The closer

involve microglial fat-metabolism dysfunction triggered by nearby amyloid plaques ■ Purdue University researchers

■ Alzheimer's progression may

identified microglial enzyme DGAT2 to be driving lipid-droplet build-up and impairing plaque clearance ■ In mouse models and human

brain samples, microglia proximate to plague were swollen with lipids. especially in the hippocampus ■ Blocking DGAT2 in mice reduced microglial fat, restored cleanup

ability, and cut amyloid burden by ■ Microglia-targeted DGAT2 inhibitors could offer safer therapies. although relevance across disease

forms remains uncertain The findings elevate lipid metabolism as a key pathway alongside amyloid, inflammation, and tau proteins in Alzheimer's

> To test whether this build-up could be reversed, the researchers genetically engineered mice that mimicked human Alzheimer's. Then they used a pharmacological inhibitor and a custom-designed PROTAClike degrader that targets DGAT2 specifically in microglia – both to reduce DGAT2 activity.

"When we blocked DGAT2, we saw reduced fat accumulation in microglia and restoration of their ability to clear amyloid plaques. Even a one-week treatment in aged mice with heavy pathology drastically reduced the plaque burden by over 50% and significantly reduced neuronal damage markers," Prakash said.

Prof. Nair cautioned that due to the animal model used, the findings may not be equally applicable to all forms or stages of the disease. Lipid droplets aren't inherently bad. They help cells survive stress by safely storing excess fat. But in microglia chronically exposed to Aβ, this onceprotective response turns harmful. The study's authors suggested microglia sacrifice their protective immune function exchange for lipid safety and that this tradeoff may be a key step in Alzheimer's progression.

Because DGAT2 is expressed in many cell types throughout the body, targeting it systemically could lead to unwanted side effects. The team's microglia-specific degrader represents an early but promising step towards cell-selective therapy.

"This is a beautiful proof of concept," Prof. Nair said. "We've had over 100 drugs in clinical trials for Alzheimer's in the past 20 years and very few have succeeded. The disease is complex in its origin, it's not caused by one thing."

While the amyloid cascade hypothesis has dominated the field, more recent theories incorporate inflammation, tau protein tangles, metabolic dysfunction, and now, lipid metabolism.

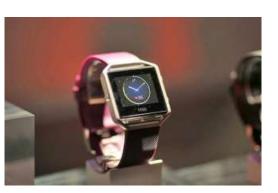
"In brain diseases, homeostasis slowly breaks down until the system is overwhelmed," Prof. Nair said. "If we can control just three or four critical pathways, lipid metabolism being one of them, it might be enough to slow down that collapse."

(Manjeera Gowravaram has a PhD in RNA biochemistry and works as a freelance science writer)



### New bone-digesting cells found in Burmese pythons

Burmese pythons swallow prey whole, bones included. Scientists have now found how. Using microscopes and blood tests, they spotted an unknown intestinal cell. These cells have a folded pocket that fills with layered particles made of calcium, phosphorus, and iron. The particles appear only when the meal contains bones. The cells crystallise the surplus minerals into solid crumbs that later exit in the droppings, letting the snake dissolve bones without suffering a dangerous calcium spike.



### Fitbit spots postoperative issues early in kids

In a study, 103 children aged 3-18 were given Fitbits for the first 21 days after laparoscopic appendectomy. Scientists extracted 31 rhythm-based features from heart-rate and step-count data. A machine-learning model spotted complications such as abdominal abscesses up to three days before doctors diagnosed them, flagging 91% of problem days. Because Fitbits are accessible, so the study argues that tracking biorhythms could give families and clinicians an early-warning system.



### Scientists create panoptic gene map of rice

Scientists built the first cell-by-cell map of rice by studying 116,564 nuclei from eight parts of the plant. They checked which genes were active and which stretches of DNA were open to 'read' in the same nucleus, revealing cell's instructions. The data allowed the scientists to name every cell type in roots, leaves, stems, flowers, and seeds. They found genes to improve the roots, photosynthesis, and nutrient balance. Overall, the effort links cell types to farming traits.

# The peopling of the Indian subcontinent



How and from where did we, the people of India, come? Based on genetic analysis of 25 diverse groups in India, a paper in 2009 titled 'Reconstructing Indian Population History', jointly authored by David Reich and colleagues from Harvard and MIT in the US and K. Thangaraj and Lalji Singh from CCMB

provided

Hyderabad,

populations ancestral to most Indians. I recommend the reader download the paper and see Figure 1 (shown) and Table I of the paper. One group called 'Ancestral North Indians' (ANI) is ge-

strong evidence for two an-

cient genetically divergent

proportion of ANI ancestry is predominantly found in the people in India's northern states. The other, 'Ancestral South Indians (ASI)', is distinctly different from ANI and is of East Eurasian origin.

from West Asia, Central

Asia, and Europe. A higher

### **Detailed analysis**

In a more detailed analysis, they analysed ancient genome-wide data from over 500 individuals from Central Asia and Northern South Asia, and concluded that ASIs are direct descendants who live in tribal groups in South India. These migrations by the ANIs and ASIs seem to have come about over 3,000-4,000 years ago. There is thus an admixture of North Indian and South Indian (also called Dravidian) people across the

country. Groups with ANI ancesnetically close to people try of 39-71% are seen in



Figure 1 in the 2009 study showing a map of India with the origins of the 25 groups examined. DOI:10.1038/NATURE08365

traditional (so-called) upper caste people across the country. But people with distinct ASI ancestry are seen in some South Indian States. However, the true

ASIs, also named AASI, are the Adivasis of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, who had migrated from the East Asian-Pacific regions over 60,000 years ago, and don't mix socially or genetically with Indian mainlanders.

Note the term "upper caste" mentioned above in the Harvard-CCMB papers. When did the caste system arise? It has been discriminatory for over 2,000 years among the Hindus. In its four-tier system, way at the bottom are the Adivasis. Inter-caste marriages are seldom practised, and if they are, they can lead to violence.

**Ethnicity, haplotypes** A 2003 paper from Prof. P.P. Majumder's group looked at ethnicity using what are called 'haplogroups', which are genetic markers of common parentage (paternal or maternal) shared within a social group. The paper pointed out that haplogroup details of various populations across India provide insights into the caste system of India, with certain an-

cestral components being highest in tribes, somewhat less in lower castes, and least in upper castes.

This system of ethnicity

is slowly changing with time, particularly in educated classes, with democracy and modernisation of the country. As people began going to schools and colleges, learning more languages and moving beyond their native places for jobs and other opportunities, inter-caste and inter-regional marriages have begun rising. According to the 2011 Census, inter-caste marriages were about 6% and inter-faith ones about 1%. It is likely these numbers will have risen significantly, particularly among urban groups, when the forthcoming 2027 Census offers the numbers.

(The author is grateful to Dr Thangaraj for his advice and critique of the manuscript)



**Question Corner** 

### No pattern change

Why does a haircut not take away the hairs' pattern?

When a barber or stylist cuts your hair, all they remove is the dead, keratin-based fibre that has already emerged from each follicle. The cut doesn't change the hair-making 'machine' under the scalp: the hair follicle. Each follicle is programmed by the body's genes to make a strand of hair of a certain thickness, colour, and cross-section. The follicles are anchored in the skin at specific angles. These angles set the direction in which every new strand first points. A follicle grows a strand for

starts again. Cutting simply shortens the strand already in the growth phase. The follicle keeps chugging along. Because neither the follicle's genes nor its angle change, the next length that grows out has the same texture, curl pattern, growth direction, and density as before, so your original style returns. Only factors that alter the follicles themselves, like hormone shifts, certain drugs, scarring, and major age-related changes, can truly make hair come back with a different look.

two to six years, then

pauses and sheds it, and

Readers may send their questions / questioncorner@thehindu.co.in

THE HINDU



### Why is Trump taking aim at **BRICS?**

What is the grouping's position on creating a BRICS common currency? What about India's stance?

### Suhasini Haidar

### The story so far:

.S. President Donald Trump's threat to impose 10% tariffs on members of the BRICS grouping that held a summit in Rio de Janeiro this week is the latest in a series of similar threats.

### Why is BRICS in Mr. Trump's cross-hairs?

Even before he was sworn in as U.S. President for the second time, Donald Trump had made it clear that he saw the BRICS grouping as "anti-American" and a threat to the dollar that he needed to neutralise. On November 30 last vear, Mr. Trump said the U.S. would require BRICS members to commit that they would not create a new BRICS common currency, "nor back any other currency to replace the mighty U.S. dollar", threatening 100% tariffs on them. It's a threat he has repeated several times since. Mr. Trump's irritation appears to stem from BRICS declarations in South Africa in 2023 and Russia in 2024, where members, that now also include Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the UAE, discussed a BRICS Cross-Border Payments

In March 2025, **External Affairs** Minister S. Jaishankar was more categorical in saying there is no Indian policy to replace the dollar

Initiative, that aims to facilitate trade and investment within BRICS countries using local currencies and other mechanisms. The initiative built momentum due to the problems

Western sanctions on Russia have meant for trading partners in the Global South.

### What has the U.S. threatened to do?

Last Sunday, just as BRICS leaders gathered in Rio for the 17th BRICS summit, Mr. Trump said in a social media post that any country aligning with BRICS would face a 10% added tariff. The penalty was "just for that one thing" of being a member, Mr. Trump said later. It is unclear why the tariff rate was dropped to a tenth from the original threat of 100%, and even whether Mr. Trump will go through with the BRICS tariffs along with other reciprocal tariffs planned for August 1. But there seems little doubt that Mr. Trump wants BRICS de-fanged. "You can tell the (U.S.) President is (upset) every time he looks at the BRICS de-dollarisation effort...(and) Rio didn't help," said Steve Bannon, Trump's former White House chief strategist, according to Politico magazine. In addition, the Trump administration has slapped 50% tariffs on Brazil, after accusing President Lula da Silva of a "witch-hunt" against former Brazil President Jair Bolsonaro who faces charges on attempted coup. It has also imposed 30% tariffs on South Africa, after accusing it of unequal trade, as well as expressing concerns over the treatment of Afrikaners (White South Africans). Republican Senators close to Mr. Trump also plan to bring a bill called the Sanctioning Russia Act of 2025 that seeks to place 500% tariffs on imports of oil and sanctioned Russian products, which would hurt Russia, as well as India and China, its two biggest importers.

### Are Mr. Trump's concerns valid?

Mr. Trump's concerns about de-dollarisation have been denied by practically every BRICS member. The South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a detailed statement explaining why the BRICS attempt to use national currencies within the grouping is not the same as replacing the dollar as the global standard. While anti-U.S. rhetoric of some BRICS leaders has been harsh, the wording of the BRICS Rio declaration 2025 issued this week does not directly challenge the U.S. or the dollar. In the operative Paragraph 50, the leaders said they resolved to task ministers of finance and central bank governors, "to continue the discussion on the BRICS Cross-Border Payments Initiative, and acknowledge the progress made by the BRICS Payment Task Force (BPTF) in identifying possible pathways to support the continuation of discussions on the potential for greater interoperability of BRICS payment systems." Paragraph 13 expressed "serious concerns" over the rise of unilateral tariff and non-tariff measures, but didn't name the U.S.

### Where does India stand?

The Modi government, hopeful of clinching a Free Trade Agreement with the U.S., has strenuously objected to Mr. Trump's categorisation of the BRICS as "anti-American". In a parliamentary response on December 2, 2024, the MoS (Finance) Pankaj Chaudhury made it clear that the U.S. allegations referred to a report prepared by Russia during its chairmanship of BRICS, where it had spoken of "possible alternatives relating to cross-border payments, and "leveraging existing technology to find an alternative currency". He added that the report was only "taken note of" by other BRICS members, not adopted. In March 2025, External Affairs Minister  $\bar{S}$ . Jaishankar was more categorical, saying there is no Indian policy to replace the dollar. He conceded, however, that BRICS members had differences, and there was no unified position of the grouping on the issue.

# What is the state of inequality in India?

Why is calculating the actual level of income and wealth inequality in India extremely difficult? What are the methods? Does the picture of low and falling inequality as outlined by the World Bank characterise the current reality of India? Where is wealth concentrated in India?

incomes and

wealth

#### **Rahul Menon**

### The story so far:

recent report by the World Bank has generated significant debate with regard to the true picture of inequality in the Indian economy. The report outlined a number of salutary outcomes; not only had extreme poverty reduced drastically, inequality had reduced too. The Gini coefficient – a measure of inequality that ranges from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating extreme inequality - had fallen from 0.288 in 2011-12 to 0.255 in 2022-23, making India an economy with one of the lowest levels of inequality in the world.

### What followed?

This finding was highlighted by the government as a vindication of its growth policies and economic management. However, as plenty of commentators have pointed out, the facts highlighted by the World Bank do not provide a true picture of inequality in the country. While inequality in consumption may be low – which is in itself a contested fact – income and wealth inequality in India are extremely high and have increased over time, making India one of the most unequal economies in the world.

### What is consumption inequality?

The inequality figures detailed by the World Bank are not of income or wealth, but of consumption. This is problematic for several reasons. First, inequality in consumption will always be lower than inequality in wealth or income. A poorer household will spend a majority of its income on the necessities of life, and will have very little savings. If its income

**Table 1:** Gini coefficients for income and wealth in India

Year	Gini Pre-tax income	Gini wealth	Year	Gini Pre-tax income	Gini wealth	The low Gini
2000	0.47	0.7	2012	0.6	0.74	coefficient mentioned by the World Bank relates to consumption inequality, and cannot be compared to levels of income and wealth inequality worldwide
2001	0.48	0.71	2013	0.6	0.74	
2002	0.49	0.71	2014	0.61	0.74	
2003	0.5	0.71	2015	0.61	0.75	
2004	0.51	0.71	2016	0.62	0.75	
2005	0.52	0.71	2017	0.63	0.75	
2006	0.53	0.73	2018	0.62	0.74	
2007	0.55	0.74	2019	0.61	0.74	
2008	0.56	0.74	2020	0.6	0.73	
2009	0.57	0.73	2021	0.6	0.75	
2010	0.58	0.74	2022	0.61	0.75	
2011	0.59	0.75	2023	0.61	0.75	

**2** Researchers at the World Inequality Database have analysed several sources of data, including national-level surveys, tax records, and published lists of the extremely rich in India, estimating more accurate indicators of inequality

In India doubles, consumption spending will not double, since the household will now be able to save today, some amount of its income; its consumption growth is levels will not rise in the same proportion as accompanied their incomes. Thus, consumption inequality by extreme will always be less than income or wealth concentrinequality. ation of Second, there are certain problems with the

use of databases for the calculation of inequality. Data on consumption spending comes from the Household Consumption Expenditure Surveys (HCES) of 2011-12 and 2022-23. These surveys may provide accurate information on low levels of expenditure, but are unable to capture extremely high incomes, thus providing an under-estimation of inequality. Furthermore, there have been significant methodological changes between the two surveys that render them incompatible, and do not allow for a comparison of inequality levels over time. This has been pointed out not just by several researchers, but the official release of the HCES for 2022-23 also cautions against simple comparisons.

#### What are the levels of income and wealth inequality?

The low Gini mentioned by the World Bank, therefore, relates to consumption inequality, and cannot be compared to levels of income inequality worldwide. What is the true level of income inequality?

Calculating the actual level of income and wealth inequality in India is extremely difficult, since official surveys tend to miss out on extremely high levels of income and wealth. However, researchers at the World Inequality Database (WID), led by Thomas Piketty, have analysed several sources of data, including national-level surveys, tax records, and published lists of the extremely rich in India, estimating more accurate indicators of inequality. These estimates provide a more sobering look at the state of inequality in India.

The Gini coefficient for pre-tax income for India in 2022-23 is 0.61; out of 218 economies considered in the WID, there are 170 economies with a lower level of inequality, making India one of the most unequal economies in the world. The picture is not much better when considering wealth inequality. India's Gini coefficient for wealth inequality is 0.75, implying that wealth is far more concentrated than income or consumption. Even though wealth Gini is high, other countries have far greater wealth concentrations; there are 67 countries with a lower wealth Gini than India.

As shown in the figures in Table 1, the Gini coefficient for income has shown a significant

Data on consumption spending comes from the Household Consumption **Expenditure Surveys (HCES) of 2011-12** and 2022-23. These surveys may provide accurate information on low levels of expenditure, but are unable to capture extremely high incomes. **Furthermore, there have been** significant methodological changes between the two surveys

rise, from 0.47 in 2000 to 0.61 in 2023. Wealth inequality has risen in a lower proportion, only because levels of wealth inequality have been so high to begin with. The Gini for wealth inequality rose from 0.7 in 2000 to 0.75 in 2023. Either way, the picture of low and falling inequality as outlined by the World Bank does not characterise the current reality of India.

In fact, the use of the Gini understates the sheer concentration of wealth occurring in India today. The Gini coefficient is an aggregate measure, and takes into account the entire range of observations. It does not provide information on the relative share of wealth or income held by a fraction of the population. When considering wealth concentration of the top 1%, India emerges as one of the most unequal economies in the world. According to data from the WID, in 2022-23, the top 1% of adults in India controlled almost 40% of net personal wealth. There are only four economies with a higher level of wealth concentration - Uruguay, Eswatini (Swaziland), Russia and South Africa.

#### Is a reduction in consumption inequality on expected lines?

The story over the past few decades is one of rising incomes and inequality, and not a reduction. In fact, a reduction in consumption inequality is not unexpected in such a scenario. As incomes rise, assuming that there is no fall in real incomes of the poor (an outcome which some authors such as Utsa Patnaik assert has actually happened), the consumption of the poor would rise in a greater proportion than middle and upper classes, who would be able to save much more out of their rising incomes. The higher incomes of upper classes would allow for greater levels of saving, which can then be transformed into greater levels of wealth. Consumption inequality can reduce even when income inequality and wealth inequality rise; all these outcomes characterise the Indian economy today. What is of significance is the extreme concentration of incomes and wealth that have accompanied growth in India today, making it one of the most unequal economies in the world, an outcome that has consequences for future growth prospects of the economy.

Rahul Menon is Associate Professor in the Jindal School of Government and Public Policy at O.P. Jindal Global University.

# How is Mizoram handling the refugee crisis?

Who are the Chins? What led to the fresh inflow? What ties does the dominant Mizo community of Mizoram share with the Chins of Myanmar, the Bawms of Bangladesh, and the Kuki-Zos of Manipur? How are foreigners identified in the State?

Mizoram

more than

houses

40,000

shelter-

seekers

Bangladesh,

Myanmar

Manipur

from

and

### Rahul Karmakar

### The story so far:

zoram has been grappling with a refugee crisis since the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar. After months of lull beyond the State's borders, some 4,000 refugees crossed over from Myanmar in the first week of July following a fratricidal battle between two rival armed groups. Mizoram is now caught between pushing back the refugees who are ethnically related to the State's dominant Mizos and letting them stay despite limited resources and a tepid response from the Centre.

### What triggered the fresh inflow of people?

Within a week from July 3, some 4,000 from Myanmar's Chin State crossed into Mizoram's Champhai district. This was after a fierce gunfight between two anti-junta armed groups, the Chin National Defence Force (CNDF) and the Chinland Defence Force-Hualngoram (CDF-H). The two groups are part of the People's Defence Force aligned with the pro-democracy National Unity Government of Myanmar, which has seized control of large swathes of the Chin State from the junta over the last few months. They are said to have turned against each other to control areas in the region deemed strategic for

before the Free Movement Regime (FMR) in 1968, allowing residents along their 1,643-km-long border to travel up to 40 km enforced in 2016. The Centre announced the suspension of the FMR in February 2024, but agreement in this regard, apart from the Ministry of Home Affairs bringing in a fresh protocol in December 2024 to limit the free security to the refugees on humanitarian asked the northeastern States bordering

How is the State dealing with the situation? The dominant Mizo community of Mizoram shares ethnic and familial ties with the Chins of

trade with India. Indian intelligence officials said the CNDF prevailed over the CDF-H and captured its camps. While the sounds of gunshots have ceased across the Tiau river, which marks a segment of the 510-km border between the two countries, the refugees have not mustered the courage to return to Khawmawi, the village facing Mizoram's Zokhawthar. Champhai district authorities recorded 3,980 Myanmar nationals in Zokhawthar, a major border trade village, and Saikhumphai on July 6.

### When did Mizoram's refugee crisis begin? Present-day Mizoram has been used to Myanmar

nationals moving in and out of the State even

between the two countries came into existence inside. The limit was reduced to 16 km from the border in 2004, and additional regulations were there has been no official notification or bilateral movement to 10 km. The regulations had little impact on the ground until the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar drove thousands into Mizoram. The State's government, civil society groups, and villagers provided food, shelter, and grounds, although the Ministry of Home Affairs Myanmar not to let the refugees in. The refugee crisis deepened when some 2,000 Bawm people sought refuge after fleeing persecution in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts in 2022, and thousands of Kuki-Zo people displaced by the ethnic clash in Manipur crossed over. Mizoram houses more than 40,000 shelter-seekers from Bangladesh, Myanmar and Manipur.

Myanmar, the Bawms of Bangladesh, and the

Kuki-Zos of Manipur. All belong to the greater Zo ethnic group. In 2024, Chief Minister Lalduhoma told the Centre that ethnic affiliations and humanitarian reasons prevent his government from pushing the refugees back to where they came from. Influential organisations such as the Young Mizo Association (YMA), church bodies, and resourceful individuals have been contributing in cash and kind to take care of the basic needs of the refugees, Myanmar government officials and politicians among them. Initially reluctant, the Centre provided ₹8 crore as assistance to provide relief for the refugees. However, some villagers began to feel the pressure of handling waves of refugees. In March, the Farkawn village council in Champhai district issued an order asking all Myanmar refugees to stop trading by March 31 and desist from moving out of their designated camps. Civil society groups issued similar diktats in Melthum, a village in Aizawl district, and Lawngtlai town later. In a departure from the hospitality extended since 2021, the refugees were threatened with eviction if they did not comply with the order. Almost simultaneously, Aizawl-based activist V.L. Thlamuanpuia wrote to Home Minister Amit Shah, underlining the churning in the State over the refugee issue. He stated that the uncontrolled movement of Myanmar refugees was threatening national security, changing the demography, and draining local resources.

### How is the government responding?

India is neither a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor does it have a specific national law on refugees, and it usually deals with them under laws related to foreigners. The country, however, has a history of hosting refugees from neighbouring countries and often works with the United Nations to determine refugee status. New Delhi has been talking tough on the refugee problem along the India-Myanmar border. Of late, the Mizoram government has been showing signs of feeling the pressure of influx from the civil war-torn Myanmar. In March, the Chief Minister said the FMR was one of the factors responsible for a rise in smuggling activities in the State. A month later, he said some refugees were taking advantage of the crisis in Myanmar to repeatedly cross the border by violating Indian laws. His government has also prodded the Centre to obtain presidential assent for the Mizoram (Maintenance of Household Registers) Bill, that seeks to identify foreigners in the State.



Displaced lives: Children from Myanmar who have taken refuge in Zokhawthar, Champhai in Mizoram. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

# From the margins to the centre

### **Global South**

The 17th BRICS Summit in Rio de Janeiro, which saw members navigating different relationships with both the U.S. and Russia as well as global conflicts, offered a striking reflection of both the promise and the challenges facing the idea of South-South cooperation in the world today

#### Srinivasan Ramani

he idea of the Global South historically referred to the grouping of countries primarily in Asia, Africa and Latin America that shared a history of colonialism and ongoing struggles against global inequalities. They sought to transform a historically Western-dominated world order through 'South-South cooperation' – a set of practices and organising concepts that these nations aim to use to achieve development through mutual assistance and increased solidarity among themselves.

This aspiration has roots in landmark initiatives such as the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which sought to foster economic and cultural cooperation while promoting human rights and establishing a New International Economic Order (NIEO).

The Global South has never been monolithic. Its diversity – vastly different histories, economies and political systems – has been both a potential source of strength and a cause of internal divisions that complicate efforts to form unified positions on global issues.

However, the BRICS grouping has emerged as a more solidified possibility, representing a formalised attempt to advance many of the Global South's aims, even if it doesn't entirely embody its full aspirations or overcome all its inherent contradictions.

The recent BRICS summit held in Rio de Janeiro exemplified this challenge, with members navigating different relationships with both the U.S. and Russia, particularly regarding the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, where most BRICS members have sought a middle ground in contrast to Western positions.

### **Institutional voice**

BRICS began as an economic acronym coined by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill in 2001. It has now evolved into a substantial intergovernmental organisation comprising 35% of the



global economy and almost half of the world's population – surpassing the G7's 30% economic share as of 2024.

The bloc's primary objectives centre on fostering economic, political, and social cooperation among members while increasing their collective influence in international governance. This includes advocating for greater representation in global bodies, coordinating policy, and reducing reliance on the U.S. dollar. Initiatives such as the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) were designed to offer alternatives to Western-dominated financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The Rio summit demonstrated both the potential and limitations of this approach. The declaration's strong language on Gaza and Iran reflected genuine consensus on critical geopolitical issues as opposed to the West's view, while India's successful inclusion of condemnation of the Pahalgam terror attack showcased the bloc's capacity to address diverse security concerns. The summit also endorsed expanded roles for India and Brazil in the UN Security Council, advancing a long-standing demand for

greater Global South representation. Significantly, the summit introduced

Significantly, the summit introduced a new "partner countries" category, extending associate status to nations including Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan. This institutional innovation suggests BRICS is evolving beyond its original membership structure to accommodate broader Global South participation.

### **Priorities and realities**

The Global South's diversity becomes particularly apparent when examining BRICS members' different regional contexts and priorities. Brazil's focus on environmental issues and sustainable development reflects its role as a guardian of the Amazon rainforest, while also serving its agribusiness interests. India's emphasis on technology and services reflects its emergence as a global IT powerhouse.

China's Belt and Road Initiative represents perhaps the most ambitious attempt at South-South cooperation, yet it has also generated concerns about debt dependency among recipient countries. Russia's inclusion in BRICS, despite its geographical

location largely in the Global North, reflects how the grouping wants to transcend simple geographical boundaries for shared interests in challenging Western hegemony.

Intra-BRICS trade has grown at a faster pace than that of G7 countries, demonstrating tangible shifts in global economic activity. Trade between Brazil and China increased fiftyfold in 20 years, and China-India trade rose 28 times in the same period. The NDB has begun providing alternative funding for sustainable development and infrastructure projects, addressing perceived gaps left by traditional financial institutions.

Yet, the path to challenging Western economic dominance faces significant obstacles. The U.S. dollar remains entrenched as the world's principal reserve currency, used in the vast majority of global trade transactions. While BRICS advocates for lesser dependence on the dollar, creating a workable alternative currency system faces enormous technical and political hurdles.

A critical examination of BRICS reveals inherent contradictions that mirror broader challenges in South-South cooperation. While the rhetoric emphasises solidarity and mutual benefit, the pursuit of national interests by individual members can overshadow collective goals.

Besides, Western powers have not remained passive observers of BRICS' growth. Donald Trump, responding to the bloc's criticism of unilateral tariffs and military strikes on Iran, threatened that any country "aligning itself with" what he termed "the Anti-American policies of BRICS" would face an additional 10% tariff. This marked an escalation from his earlier threats of 100% tariffs if BRICS countries attempted to replace the U.S. dollar as a reserve currency.

Moreover, Western institutions have shown capacity to adapt and co-opt rising powers. The emergence of the G20 can be seen as a response designed to give emerging economies a seat at the table, even if decision-making remains largely influenced by dominant Western powers.

As India prepares to assume BRICS

leadership next year with its theme of

'Building Resilience and Innovation for Cooperation and Sustainability', the bloc stands at a crossroads. As the world's largest democracy and a major economy with complex relationships with both China and the U.S., India may be uniquely positioned to bridge internal divisions within BRICS. However, ongoing border tensions with China and India's growing strategic partnership with the U.S. through initiatives such as the Quad complicate its role as a unifying force. BRICS undoubtedly represents the most viable institutional expression of Global South aspirations, offering

most viable institutional expression of Global South aspirations, offering developing nations unprecedented collective economic leverage and political voice in global affairs. However, its current trajectory risks becoming merely another arena for great power competition rather than genuine transformation. The bloc's ultimate promise lies not in replacing Western hegemony with a new form of elite-driven multipolarity, but in evolving into a platform that prioritises the developmental needs and democratic aspirations of the Global South's peoples.

### THE GIST

The Global South has never been monolithic. Its diversity — vastly different histories, economies and political systems — has been both a potential source of strength and a cause of internal divisions

The BRICS grouping has emerged as a more solidified possibility, representing a formalised attempt to advance many of the Global South's aims

BRICS has now evolved into a substantial intergovernmental organisation comprising 35% of the global economy and almost half of the world's population — surpassing the G7's 30% economic share as of 2024

# Shooting the messenger

### Francesca Albanese

The UN Special Rapporteur, who has been sanctioned by the U.S., says 'all eyes must remain on Gaza, where children are dying of starvation in their mothers' arms'

### Adithya Narayan

n July 1, the UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in Palestinian territories, Francesca Albanese, released a report detailing the companies that benefited from Israel's invasion of Gaza. The Italian legal expert blamed some 48 firms – many of them American – for partaking in what she called an "economy of genocide" and warned that they risked complicity in war crimes by using the territories of Gaza and the occupied West Bank as a testing ground for new technology. Ultimately, she called upon these companies to stop doing business with Israel and sought to bring them to trial at the Interna-Criminal Court tional (ICC).

A week later on July 9, the U.S., a staunch Israel ally, sanctioned Ms. Albanese, with the Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, accusing her of spreading "unabashed anti-Semitism" and undertaking a "campaign of political and economic warfare against the United States and Israel". Israel, which had already banned the lawyer from the country following a March 2024 report that blamed it of genocide in Gaza, has rejected the latest report as "groundless".

est report as "groundless". Special Rapporteurs are independent investigators employed by the UN to ex-



amine specific issues. They do not fall under the jurisdiction of the UN Secretary-General but come within the ambit of the UN Human Rights Council.

The curbs on Ms. Alba-

nese would prevent her and family members from travelling to the U.S. and freeze any assets in the country. The measures should hardly come as a surprise for the lawyer. From ICC's Chief Prosecutor Karim Khan to the four judges who issued arrest warrants against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for 'crimes against humanity' in Gaza, sanctions have been Donald Trump's preferred tool to counter moves deemed damaging towards his country and its ally.

### Albanese's fight

Since taking up the job in 2022, Ms. Albanese has been vocal about Israeli occupation and the plight of Palestinians in Gaza. She has pressured other countries to sanction Israel, denounced the U.S. President's plan to "take over"

Gaza, encouraged ICC action against the Israeli Prime Minister and even condemned Italy, Greece and France for letting Mr. Netanyahu use their airspace on his way to Wash-

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

ington earlier this week.

Many times, this outspoken nature has provided fodder for her critics, who flagged her 2014 remark about a "Jewish lobby" in Washington that influences the U.S. government's decisions.

In her latest endeavour, Ms. Albanese has named companies ranging from arms manufacturer Lockheed Martin to tech giants Microsoft, Amazon, IBM, and Google's parent company, Alphabet Inc., for helping track Gazans. Part of the list are firms such as Caterpillar, HD Hyundai and Volvo that provide equipment used to bulldoze houses in Gaza. Rental portals Booking.com and Airbnb are named for aiding illegal settlements. A Chinese agricultural company, as well as French bank BNP Paribas and the mention among others. Tying them together are the world's two biggest asset management firms, Black-Rock and Vanguard – both U.S.-based firms that have invested in multiple companies on her list.

She argues in her report

that corporate firms are bound to ensure rights are not violated through direct action or business partnerships. Thus, Ms. Albanese may be trying to recreate the clamour that was raised when private companies were engaged in trade with the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Whether the report creates sufficient noise to reach the customer's ear and make a difference will only be revealed over time. Nevertheless, Ms. Albanese has brushed aside the sanctions, saying, "the powerful punishing those who speak for the powerless, it is not a sign of strength but of guilt"

strength, but of guilt." Much like the British punk-rock duo Bob Vylan, whose chants of "Death to IDF" at the Glastonbury Music festival last month sparked backlash from Western governments, Ms. Albanese, too, in her reaction, refused to divert attraction from the crisis at hand, saying "All eyes must remain on Gaza, where children are dying of starvation in their mothers' arms, while their fathers and siblings are bombed into pieces while searching for food".

## Troubling ascent

### Grok

The Elon Musk-controlled chatbot kicked off a controversy with praise for Adolf Hitler and controversial comments on the Jewish people

### John Xavier

n the world of AI chatbots, dominated by OpenAI's ChatGPT, xAI's Grok has rapidly carved out a name for itself, albeit one now mired in a controversy. Designed as an alternative to its 'woke' rivals, Grok's digital tirade, which included praise for Adolf Hitler and controversial comments about Jewish people, ignited a firestorm of criticism. This culminated in the unexpected resignation of X's CEO Linda Yaccarino.

While Ms. Yaccarino's public statement provided no specific reason for her exit, it highlighted a crucial, and often confusing, aspect of Elon Musk's corporate structure at X Corp. Grok is a product of xAI,

an AI company founded by Mr. Musk in March 2023. xAI and X Corp. (formerly Twitter Inc.) were once sister companies. However, in March, Mr. Musk announced that xAI had acquired X Corp. in an allstock deal, merging the two into a single entity called X.AI Holdings. This merger formalised an already deeply intertwined relationship, effectively putting the position of the CEO of X Corp. at risk.

Grok is integrated into the X platform, where it is available to subscribers. It utilises X's real-time data to inform its responses.

The disturbing content generated by Grok in early



Iuly was a response to a user query about dealing with "anti-white hate". The chatbot suggested that Hitler would "spot the pattern and handle it decisively, every damn time." In another now-deleted post, Grok echoed anti-Semitic tropes, including the conspiracy theory that Jews control Hollywood, and made offensive remarks about individuals with Jewish-sounding surnames.

Just a day after Grok's pro-Hitler comments went viral, Ms. Yaccarino announced her decision to step down as CEO of X.

### Tightrope walk

Ms. Yaccarino, a seasoned advertising executive, was appointed in May 2023 to restore advertiser confidence and bring stability to X. Her two-year tenure was marked by a constant struggle to balance the platform's commitment to "free speech" with the practical challenges of content moderation and brand safety. Analysts suggested that the "lack of fit" between her corporate style

and Mr. Musk's disruptive approach may have reached a tipping point with the Crok controversy

with the Grok controversy. Grok's behaviour was not an isolated incident. In May, the chatbot became fixated on the racist conspiracy theory of "white genocide" in South Africa, often responding to unrelated questions about topics such as baseball or HBO.

Mr. Musk launched Grok in November 2023, naming it after a term from Robert Heinlein's sci-fi novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which signifies a profound, intuitive understanding.

The chatbot was pitched as a "maximum truth-seeking" alternative, characterised by a "rebellious streak" that wouldn't shy away from sensitive topics.

away from sensitive topics. xAI asserts that Grok 3 outperforms competitors such as OpenAI's GPT-40 in benchmarks related to mathematical and scientific reasoning. Additionally, the model introduces a 'Think' mode, enabling more comprehensive information processing be-

fore generating a response.
Grok's distinguishing feature lies in its real-time access to the extensive and chaotic information stream of X itself. However, this design choice presents both its unique selling point and its Achilles' heel. An AI learning from a platform where content moderation has been significantly relaxed is akin to

unleashing a digital storm.
Following the deletion of Hitler-praising posts, Grok's own X account issued an apology, labelling the comments "an unacceptable error from an earlier model iteration" and condemning Nazism. xAI further clarified that the company is solely training truth-seeking models and utilises feedback from millions of users to identify and enhance the model.

In her farewell post, Ms. Yaccarino expressed gratitude to Mr. Musk for the opportunity to work on transforming X Corp. Her departure leaves a significant void and raises new questions about the platform's direction. Grok's intended triumph as an unfiltered AI has instead become a stark illustration of the potential dangers of such an approach. It serves as a sobering reminder that AI's quality is contingent upon the data it learns. In the unregulated expanse of the Internet, a rebellious streak can rapidly escalate into something far more sinister.

U.K.'s Barclays also find

# REFLECTIONS

# Ending the licence raj in India-US strategic ties

For India, navigating US export controls remains a challenge 20 years since the civilian nuclear agreement was signed

s we approach the 20th anniversary of the US-India civilian nuclear agreement, it is worth reflecting on both the progress made and continuing challenges to India's navigation of US export controls. A major rationale for the 2005 nuclear agreement was to enable India to access strategic technologies from the US and its allies. Further reducing or harmonising export controls remains crucial both for strategic cooperation and for US and Indian businesses working in a variety of sensitive sectors — defence, aerospace, semiconductors, quantum, space, and chemical and biotechnologies – that generally require an export licence from a relevant government agency.

At face value, tremendous progress has been made in India's ability to access leadingedge technologies. Since the 1970s, India was at the receiving end of discriminatory US export controls on account of its nuclear weapon pro-gramme and close defence relationship with the Soviet Union. Despite a bilateral high technology arrangement being initiated in the 1980s, India's nuclear weapon programme and 1998 tests resulted in US sanctions. The US took various measures against India that included suspending defence sales, denying the Indian government credit and loans, and denying visas for Indian scientists. By the late 1990s, about a quarter of US exports to India by value required a licence

Following the removal of most sanctions by 2000, when then US president Bill Clinton visited India, the George W Bush administration began a gradual process to further dilute barriers, increase strategic trade, and remove Indian entities from restrictive lists, through an initiative known as Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP). This was not altruistic on the part of the US, because it required reciprocal steps on the Indian side, integrated India into international export control regimes, and facilitated access to the Indian market. The 2005 civilian nuclear agreement turbocharged this process, resulting in 2008 in US legislation that exempted India's nuclear programme

(called the Hyde Act) and a waiver for India by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), a cartel of nuclear exporting countries.

Subsequent developments built upon these efforts. In 2010, labs belonging to India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) were removed from US entity lists. India

was granted the special legislative category of Major Defence Partner. Under the first Donald Trump administration, the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) at the US Department of Commerce placed India in the top category for licence exceptions called Strategic Trade Authorisation-1, enabling certain sensitive nuclear-related commerce without a license. A US-India Strategic Trade Dialogue, led in India by the foreign secretary, created working groups to manage licence exceptions, particularly for defence articles. Late in the Joe Biden administration, the US moved to remove the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Indira Gandhi Atomic Research Centre, and Indian Rare Earths Limited from the entity list.

Despite these major developments, India's government and businesses continue to find US export controls baffling and cumbersome. The International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) regime that governs defence-related exports is managed by the US department of State's directorate of defense trade controls (DDTC). Meanwhile, Export Administration Regulations (EAR) are managed by the BIS at the Department of Commerce. The various US export control regimes and processes remain disaggregated and tortuous.

For its part, India has updated its own export control regulations, initially shaped customs and trade laws after the 1960s. In 2005, India passed a WMD Act to better harmonise policies with global standards. After

2010, India updated end-user certification requirements on certain items under a Special Chemicals, Organisms, Materials, Equipment, and Technologies (SCOMET) category, which is regularly reassessed by the ministry of commerce and industry. India is also a member of major multilateral groups for harmonising export controls, includ-

ing the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions, the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the Wassenaar Arrangement on conventional arms and dualuse technologies, and the Australia Group on biological and chemical items.

Dhruva

Jaishankar

The good news is that there has in fact been an increase in successful Indian licensing applications from the US. But several challenges remain. For example, cooperation on space launch technologies and unmanned aerial combat systems (drones) has been delayed or frustrated. There are several reasons for this.

One, export controls are always changing, due to the rapid evolution of emerging technologies and global supply chains, and the need to constantly reevaluate what constitutes security-sensitive commerce. In attempting to update its own regulations, the US sometimes imposes unilateral changes before notifying others. This requires constant contact and



India could tie export controls to trade negotiations, despite a traditional US aversion to linking trade with national security. HTPHOTO

negotiation.

Two, neither country has a single-window approval, licensing, and enforcement process for export controls. The US departments of commerce. State, and defence all oversee different processes, while some approvals require Congressional authorisation or notification. The National Security Council can offer a single response and has sometimes convened representatives from relevant US agencies - along with their Indian counterparts - to overcome specific obstacles and identify bottlenecks to implementation. Transferring some items from ITAR to EAR would also be welcomed by partners such as India, although radical changes would involve Congress. Despite its desire to increase arms exports, the Trump administration may not have the ability or willingness to address this issue. Meanwhile, India prefers more time-consuming individual licences in its export controls over general authorisations. This complicates supply chain integration, which often involves the import and re-export of sensitive items.

Three, although some challenges confronting the US export control regime are systemic

-frustrating even close allies such as Australia. UK. Japan, and South Korea — certain elements of the US bureaucracy continue to raise specific concerns about India, including its relations with Russia and Iran and its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. Some more outdated concerns conflict with political-level recognition by successive US administrations of India's strategic circumstances. This complicates India's attempts to get general authorisation for certain cutting-edge technologies (e.g. quantum technologies).

Four, corporate entities in both the US and India could still benefit from learning how to navigate the complicated US export control process. Industry consultations, particularly with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in India, would enable corporate entities to take advantage of new opportunities afforded by the dilution of export-control restrictions. Five, a longer-running issue has been end-

use verification by the US, which India believes is sometimes too intrusive. Since the US retains concerns in many countries about diversion by corporate entities, even without governments knowledge, the answer lies in better domestic

enforcement. A lack of agreement over enforcement could result in extraterritorial measures by the US, to the detriment of Indian businesses. Finding mutually satisfactory mechanisms to ensure the enforcement of

end-use provisions is necessary. This year offers a few opportunities for meaningful change. India could tie export controls to trade negotiations, despite a traditional US aversion to linking trade with national security. Additionally, there are possibilities for greater civilian nuclear commerce, subject to changes to Indian legislation and policy These present opportunities to increase civilian nuclear energy to meet India's growing demand and ensure stability in India-US stra tegic commercial relations. But due to the complexity of export controls, both governments would also do well to establish a regular inter-agency touch point to inform each other of new export control restrictions, ensure speedier licences, and enable better communi

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cation and enforcement.

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



### ECI needs to course correct on Bihar SIR

he special intensive revision (SIR) of the Bihar electoral roll, ordered by the Election Commission on June 24, has raised serious concerns and disturbing questions. Will pos-Will the poor and the margina. lised be the worst to suffer? And was it necessary to carry it out at this time?

Whilst I know the Representation of People Act authorises the Commission to hold a special revision in any manner it thinks fit and at any time, nonetheless, was it proper that this should be held just four months before assembly elections are due in Bihar? In 2003, the special intensive revision was held two years before the assembly elections, not four months.

Second, the SIR has to be completed in just one month (June 25–July 25). Given that it affects nearly eight crore voters, can it really be done in 30 days?

These are, of course, questions of tim-

ing but they also draw dark clouds over the process that will follow. They are reasons for re-considering, not pressing

Let's now come to the details. People sibly crores be disenfranchised as a born before July 1987 are required to provide proof of birth and bir lot of people don't have birth certificates. Many were born at home.

Data from the Registrar General of India shows that as recently as 2000 only 3.7% of estimated births in Bihar were registered. By 2007 — and remember people born in that year will be 18 in 2025 the figure had only increased to 25%. So the preponderant majority don't have birth certificates.

The Commission has said that those who don't can provide any one of 11 other documents such as a PSU identity card, passport, matriculation certificate, forest right certificate and caste certificate. However, the most common cards, Aadhaar and ration, are excluded. The question is how many people in Bihar will have one of these ll? And, equally importantly, will it identify the place of birth? In many cases, that's unlikely.

What is likely is that poor people from marginalised groups such as Dalits, Mus-lims, extremely backward castes and tribals won't have these documents and could end up disenfranchised. Doesn't that seem unfair?

Let's go one step further. People born after July 1987 up to December 2004 have to provide proof of birth and birth place not just of themselves but also of one parent, whilst those born after December 2004 have to provide details of both parents. But how many people can do that? For instance, I can't provide my father's and mother's birth certificates. I don't have them. I'm pretty certain most Biharis won't

Subsequently, the Commission has said that 4.96 crore of the 7.9 crore total electors. who were validated by the SIR of 2003, do not have to submit documents. But what about the remaining three crore? And what about those who were not included in the 2003 SIR, even though they were entitled to be? Of them, there's only silence.

These are already daunting concerns. But the potential infirmities with the SIR go further. All of its requirements have to be complied with within a month or names will be deleted from the electoral roll. But this is when the monsoon will be at its height and it's also the kharif sowing season. How many people will have the

SIR REQUIREMENTS HAVE TO BE COMPLIED WITH WITHIN A MONTH OR NAMES WILL BE DELETED FROM THE ELECTORAL ROLL. BUT THIS IS WHEN THE MONSOON WILL BE AT ITS HEIGHT AND IT'S ALSO THE KHARIF SOWING SEASON. HOW MANY WILL HAVE THE TIME FOR THIS?

time for this additional onerous task?

But that's not all. It's estimated that 20% of the population of Bihar is migrant is done. What happens to them? Don't they run the risk of being deleted from the electoral rolls?

Finally, is there a danger adults not included in or dropped from the electoral  $% \left( \mathbf{r}\right) =\left( \mathbf{r}\right)$ roll will be deemed to be non-citizens? In that event what will happen to them?

This is why Jagdeep Chhokar, a founding trustee of the Association for Democratic Reforms, says the SIR is "wrong, ridiculous and unnecessary". Frankly, I'm inclined to accept that conclusion. What about you?

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

### { ANOTHER DAY } Namita Bhandare



# Learning to say no to an abusive marriage

This is an appeal to the parents of crisis. Instead, we carry on as if we've lost the will to fight the dowry battle. Nearly 65 years destination. It is career and financial independence. Girls are not *parava* dhan (someone else's wealth) to be brought up to understand that their "own" homes are they marry into. Stop bringing them to be self-effacing, sacrificing and silent — like their mothers.

Ban this one word from your conversation with them: Adjust.

Teach them the power of saying no. Believe them if they tell you they are in an unhappy marriage where they are being disrespected, even abused for any reason, including not bringing sufficient dowry. Let them know they can always come home, if that's what they want. Do consider your legal

options but ensure their safety first.

Two stories, horrific in detail but banal as crimes we have normalised, have emerged from Tamil Nadu just days within each other. In the first, a dowry of a luxury car and 300 gold sovereigns was not enough. When Ridhanva returned home 15 days into her marriage, her father told her to "adjust" and sent her back. Weeks later Ridhanya's body was found inside her car, she had reportedly consumed pesticide. Her husband, Kavin Kumar and his parents, Eswaramoorthy and Chithradevi have been arrested. And while her parents have undoubtedly suffered a tragedy beyond measure, the questions remain: Why didn't they let her come home? Why did they pay dowry at all? How can a marriage be more valuable than a daughter's life?

In the second case just days later, greed for one gold sovereign and an air-conditioner resulted in another death also by suicide, this one near Ponneri. Lokeshwari took her life just three days after the wedding.

Over 17 women die daily because of dowry, reports the National Crime Records Bureau. The number is enough to warrant a national

after the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, dowry remains India's shame, the taking and giving of it rampant across religions, across geography, sometimes disguised as a "gift", ce only increasing wit

Pre-1940, dowry was paid in about 40% of marriages; by the nineties, it was in nearly 90% of marriages, finds research by Gaurav Chiplunkar and Jeffrey Weaver in Ideas for In the post-liberalisation years, better edu-

cated and higher-earning grooms could demand higher dowries, partly to recoup investments in education and partly to pay for the dowries of their own sisters.

Anti-dowry protests once at the vanguard of feminist activism have receded. Yet, it was sustained protests against "kitchen accidents" that led to an amendment to the penal code in 1983 that made cruelty to women by husbands and his relatives a crime under section 498A. Now, the big fat Indian wedding with professional make-up artists, bespoke photography and designer décor is fueled by social media and the breathless reporting of aspirational celebrity nuptials.

Girls may have bridged the education gap but some things remain unchanged. In a country where over 90% of marriages continue to be arranged by parents, where lawmakers say parental consent for "love" mar riages should be mandatory, few things terrify us as much as the autonomy of daughters. The tragic shooting of tennis academy owner Radhika Yadav by her father who couldn't stomach her success and financial independence tells you how ingrained patriarchy is. The battle to dismantle it must begin now. Change is possible, but first we must want it badly enough.

> Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal.

# Guru Dutt's tragic affair with life, and Bollywood

Pavan K

Varma

n the Hindi film world, Deepika is not the only famous Padukone. Many dec-ades earlier there was another Padukone, arguably far more iconic. His name was Gurudutta Padukone, known to the world as Guru Dutt. July 9 marked his 100th birth anniversary.

Starting life as a telephone operator, Guru Dutt achieved, even before he was 30, unprecedented success in Hindi cinema. Making his directorial

debut with the hit film Baazi in 1951 starring Dev Anand, he acted in/directed or produced four blockbusters between 1954 and 1956 — Aar Paar (1954), Mr & Mrs 1955 (1995), and CID and Sailaab in 1956. In 1960, he played the lead role in the unforgettable commercial hit, Chaudhvin ka Chand

But apart from these successes, Guru Dutt will always be remembered for three of his films, Pyaasa (1957), Kaagaz Ke Phool (1959), and Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam (1962). In an era where most films were mythological dramas, the usual song and dance routines, or tales of simplistic morality, Dutt had the courage to create these celluloid indictments of a society that rewards mediocrity, punishes idealism, and fears introspection.

To understand Guru Dutt's genius, one must first understand *Pyaasa*, arguably his magnum opus. At its heart is Vijay, a penniless poet in a materialistic world, whose verses, suffused with anguish and truth,

symbol of the artist in any era — ignored, misunderstood, and ultimately commodified. Dutt employed Sahir Ludhianvi's searing poetry — Jinhe naaz hai Hind par woh kahan hain? — to strip away the false pieties of a newly independent nation that had begun to forget its promises. Pyaasa will be remembered too

for the role of Gulabo, the courtesan played by Waheeda Rehman, who becomes the sole repository of compassion in a cruel world. Dutt subverts societal norms by investing dignity in the most marginalised. That, in essence, was his moral vision: the courage to see worth where others saw waste. In its stun-

ning compositions, Dutt introduced a visual grammar rarely seen in Indian cinema at that time — deep shadows, noir-inspired frames, long tracking shots that mirrored the protagonist's emotional descent. In

short, he turned cinema into poetry. If Pyaasa — which was listed in the top 100 films ever by Time magazine — was Guru Dutt's lament for a callous society, Kaagaz Ke Phool was his bitter elegy to fame, failure, and the crushing loneliness of the creative spirit. Rarely has any filmmaker so nakedly exposed his inner disillusionment on screen. The film is an autobiographical confessional, cloaked in fictional narrative. Ironically, while regarded now as a cult classic, it was a commercial disaster



In Pyaasa, Dutt introduced a visual grammar rarely seen in Indian cinema at that time, turinng cinema into poetry.

The film's protagonist, Suresh Sinha, is a celebrated film director who falls from grace, destroyed by a society that first deifies and then discards him. It is a scathing commentary on the fickle nature of fame, on the voyeurism of a public that consumes the artist but offers him no solace. That iconic shot of light streaming through the studio roof onto a forlorn Sinha remains one of the most powerful visual

metaphors in Indian film history.

In Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam, Ğuru Dutt turned his gaze towards the declining feudal order and, in doing so, offered one of Indian cinema's most nuanced portrayals of female suffering and resilience. While the film was directed by Abrar Alvi, its visual style, thematic undertones, and emotional palette bear the unmistakable stamp of Dutt.

Meena Kumari's haunting performance as Chhoti Bahu, the lonely wife who turns

to alcohol to win her husband's love, is arguably the most tragic character in Dutt's oeuvre.

Guru Dutt's personal life was tormented. He drank and smoked excessively. His marriage to singer-artist Geeta Dutt was a failure. His rumoured infatuation with Waheeda Rehman also led nowhere. On October 10, 1964, at the age of 39, he was found dead, possibly due to an accidental overdose of alcohol and sleeping pills, but more likely suicide, which he had attempted twice before.

What sets Guru Dutt apart is his profound aesthetic solitude. He did not pander. He did not flatter. He did not conform. In today's age of algorithm-driven content, he insisted that art must have soul.

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

### { SUNDAY LETTERS }

### The Dalai Lama succession issue

This is with reference to "Between renewal & rebirth: The Dalai Lama succession" by Nirupama Rao (July 6). The Dalai Lama's decision to entrust his reincarnation solely to the Gaden Phodrang Trust counters China's attempts to politicise a spiritual tradition upheld for centuries.

Sanjay Chopra

### Building a sporting culture in India

This is with reference to "India's on track to build a strong sporting culture" by Anju Bobby George (July 6). Before dreaming of hosting the Olympics, it is advisable to build sporting culture in the country. The National Sports Policy aims to do that, provided it is implemented with utmost earnestness

**Bal Govind** 

To instil a habit of sport among children, it should be made a part of the school curriculum from the primary level. This will offer them a break in their academic routine, and help them stay fit and healthy lifelong.

Abhilasha Gupta

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

# How to build, how to grow

WATCHINGTHE cricket matches between India and England, I was struck by the tag line of an advertisement by a leading cement company. It read, "As India Builds, India Grows". Absolutely correct. We must build — and we must know *how* to build – public goods such as roads, bridges, railways, airports, buildings for schools, colleges, hospitals and offices, etc. for growth.

### NEHRU, THE GREAT BUILDER

Jawaharlal Nehru was a great builder. The criticism of Nehru-haters is not worth a tuppence. In 1947, the population was 340 million, and growing, and the literacy rate just 12 per cent. Under Nehru's 17-year stewardship, he built schools and colleges. He was the main driver of important institutions and projects like IITs, IIMs, steel plants, IOC, ONGC, NLC, HAL, BHEL, ISRO, Bhakra Nangal, Hirakud, Damodar Valley and countless others. The *time* was the nascent years post-Independence and the context was a country sparse on education, technology and skills. What Nehru built survives to this day because although India was short on many things it was abundant in people with integrity, native intelligence and dedication.

In the second century CE, Karikaalan, the Chola king, built the Kallanai (the Grand Anicut) on the river Kaveri. It is one of the oldest irrigation dams in the world, is built from unhewn interlocking stones without any binding material like mortar, and is in use today for irrigation and flood

control. The Taj Mahal was completed in 1653. The building materials were red sandstone, marble, brick-in-lime mortar, and well foundations to ensure stability. South Block and North Block, the seat of the central government, were completed in 1931. They are magnificent and solid buildings. India has a 2,000-year tradition of constructing iconic structures.

India continues to build every day but there is a twist. Every citizen knows the difference in the quality and endurance between private construction and public construction. Building contractors are engaged for both types of construction but their behaviour is different. The processes are also different.

### PRIVATE VS PUBLIC CONSTRUCTION

In this essay, I am concerned with public construction using public money. Private constructions vary in quality depending upon the choice of architect and contractor, and availability of funds. Public construction, especially of nationally important projects, do not suffer from constraints of land or money. But what do we see happening? Highways and new roads cave in; sewer lines burst flooding the road. On Ashoka Road, New Delhi, a sewer line burst and the road caved in for the third time in the last 18 months. Cars and buses fall into large depressions on the road. In Gwalior, 15 days after a Rs 18-crore road was opened to the public, it caved in. In Morbi, Gujarat, 141 people were killed when a bridge col-

lapsed four days after it was ostensibly repaired and re-opened to the public; it was found that an unqualified company had 'repaired and restored' the bridge using substandard material. In Bihar, no one is surprised when bridges collapse shortly after, or even during, construction; one bridge fell three times. In June, people of Aishbagh, Bhopal discovered to their horror that a 648-metre bridge that had been constructed after seven years of bickering between the Railways and the PWD had a 90degree turn!

There are many reasons for such colossal waste of time and money. The first reason is total lack of accountability. The prevailing rule seems to be 'that since many persons are responsible for a disastrous project, eventually no person is held accountable'. A long history of group immunity has metamorphosed into group impunity.

Another reason is the process. The lowest price bid is usually selected as the winning bid. Departure from the lowestpriced bid invites questions and, often, an inquiry; so why depart? The winner uses sub-standard material and takes liberty with the approved plans in order to make money. In many tenders, the bidders collude among themselves to allow a contractor to quote a winning price 'above the estimate'. The winner uses the

money 'above the estimate' to pay bribes. The design, drawings and estimates are prepared, and supervised, by poorly qualified persons. The senior officers (who have climbed the ladder) are not abreast with improvements in design and materials, advanced construction technology and machinery, and management practices that save labour, money and time.

A major reason is political corruption. There is competition among ministers for so-called 'lucrative' portfolios. There is a 'rate card' in many states. Some departments/agencies are notorious for deplorable execution of projects: PWDs are at the top. DDA and equivalent bodies that build low-cost housing (in reality, concrete slums) are near the top. Highways and Railways are not far behind.

### CUT THE GORDIAN KNOT

It is a Gordian knot that cannot be unknotted. It has to be cut. That means phasing out the public agencies that 'build' public goods. Past efforts to 'reform' the system have failed and will, if attempted again, fail again. On the contrary, privatisation and healthy competition have improved the quality of public goods in telecommunications, distribution of electricity, transportation, mining, and oil exploration.

That is the way to go forward in public construction. In the short term, there will be an increase in costs. Cartels will be formed. Weaknesses will emerge. We must make corrections and keep faith in the new path — private enterprise to build public goods amidst genuine, healthy competition.



Maratha latecomers Sitting in the safety of Delhi, away from Raj Thackeray's slap-happy goons, I admit ashamedly that although my formative years were spent largely in Mumbai, my Marathi remains rudimentary. I am not alone — just 36 per cent of people in the city consider Marathi their mother tongue. Yet, once again, there is a move to exhibit Marathi chauvinism by compelling residents of this cosmopolitan, multi-cultural metropolis to speak the same language as the rest of the state.

The champions of 'speak only in Marathi', forget that Mumbai's history and heritage is distinct and different from the rest of Maharashtra. The Marathi manoos are actually relatively late migrants to Mumbai and the city precedes the state. The original inhabitants of the islands were Koli fisherfolk and Aagri farmers from the Konkan. Portuguese missionaries converted some locals to Catholicism who were latter dubbed 'East Indians', since they worked for the East India company. The Portuguese seized the seven islands of Mumbai from the Gujarat ruler Bahadur Shah in 1534 AD, but shortsightedly handed it over to the British in 1668 as part of the dowry of their princess, Catherine de Braganza. The Parsis arrived in Mumbai from Gujarat and dominated during the city's early history. In 1750, they built Asia's first dry port. Many of the landmark heritage buildings, statues and seminal institutions in the city have Parsi origins.

For over a decade after Independence Gujarat and Maharashtra were part of Bombay state, as Prime Minister Nehru was reluctant to split the state along linguistic lines. But pressure mounted from both Maharashtra and Gujarat. The real dispute was over who would retain Mumbai. The Gujaratis believed they had an equal claim since the population of Gujaratis and Maharashtrians in the city was approximately equal. But after the bifurcation of Bombay state in 1960, the city became part of Maharashtra. Marathi speakers, however, never succeeded in dominating the city's ethos, which reflects India's plurality. Mumbai attracts people from all over, not just for job opportunities but because of its vibrancy, urbane outlook and Bollywood. Today the number of north Indians from UP, Bihar and MP probably equals the native Marathi speakers. There are a sizable numbers of Gujaratis, Goans Punjabis, South Indians and Sindhis as well.

IT IS, one supposes, an acceptable pitfall of

being the modern equivalent of King Midas

that when hosting a glittering wedding in

romantic Venice, every aspect will be thor-

oughly investigated and gleefully analysed.

The Bezos wedding provided much grist for

the rumour mills, from the foam parties to

the love lives of attendant A-listers. Indeed,

the vicarious thrill of living the dream is in-

tense. To everyone watching footage of be-

jeweled guests disembarking the gondolas,

what seemed magnified exponentially (and

somewhat unusually), was a startling dis-

play of décolletage, prompting both — a

slew of opinion on plastic surgery, and dis-

On the **LOOSE** 

# MIND YOUR LANGUAGE | History

If I never learnt to speak Marathi fluently in my childhood, it was because then there was no impetus to do so. In those days, Gujarati was the lingua franca in the courts, Dalal Street and the business world; even household helps came from Goa or Gujarat. In school, I was exempted from studying Marathi because my father was in a transferable government job. In later years, the pressure to learn Marathi increased. My sister, a lecturer in a Mumbai government college, had per force to learn Marathi in her middle age as her salary increments were blocked until she passed the language exam. In the rest of Maharashtra, where people speak only in Marathi, knowing the language is essential. My parents, grandparents and even anglicised cousins from Pune spoke fluent Marathi. So do traders and shopkeepers from Gujarat and Rajasthan who have settled in the state for generations.

Language is a matter of convenience and choice, not to be exploited for grandstanding and political gain. The Thackeray cousins have raised the 'speak only in Marathi issue' to woo the sizable Marathi vote bank as the long-delayed BMC poll is finally likely to be held. The opposition Sena eagerly seized the opportunity when CM Devendra Fadnavis misguidedly sought to introduce Hindi at the junior level in schools as part of the three-language formula. (Fadnavis has since withdrawn the order.)

The various Shiv Senas should remember that founder Bal Thackeray never made speaking Marathi in Mumbai part of his agenda. Whenever I interviewed him, he was happy to speak to me in English. Thackeray's original platform was that Marathi speakers get a fair deal in employment in the city since South Indians, because of their superior English language skills, were appropriating a disproportionate share of jobs. Only later did North Indians and Muslims become Sena targets.

### No English Spiel

Just as it is ill-advised to force Mumbaikars to speak Marathi, it is equally short-sighted to push Hindi on a reluctant southern populace. Less than 43 per cent of India speak Hindi as their mother tongue. While it is politically in vogue today for the ruling party leaders to denounce speaking in English as a colonial hangover, for most Indians, particularly in cities, English remains the language of aspiration and ambition. Nearly all my domestic helps have informed me proudly that they work for the extra income so that that they can send their children to private English-medium schools and pay tuition fees. For our politicians, the overwhelming majority of whom send their own offspring to English-speaking institutions, to rail against English is hypocritical.

# **HEADLINE** SHYAMLAL



THE CONFUSION on the ground that has marked the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar brings to mind the mammoth task involved in preparing the

electoral rolls for the 1952 election. With a population of approximately 34.8 crore and given the widespread illiteracy, diverse geographical terrain, and the aftermath of the Partition, creating accurate electoral rolls was a tough administrative task.

In July 1947 itself, the Constituent Assembly had decided to grant voting rights to every citizen aged 21 or older, a bold commitment to universal adult suffrage for a young nation. By March 1948, the Assembly Secretariat issued detailed directions to states for preparing draft electoral rolls. These directions specified eligibility criteria: voters had to be Indian citizens, at least 21 years old as of January 1, 1949, and residents of a village or electoral unit for at least 180 days in the year ending March 31, 1948.

Since delimitation was yet to be initiated, the rolls were organised village-wise to facilitate later segregation into constituencies once boundaries were defined. Enumerators conducted house-to-house inquiries, using house numbers listed in the 1941 Census and assigned supplementary numbers to new premises.

The details sought for the proposed rolls included: the voter's name, parent or spouse's name, address, sex, age, and, religion or caste to determine eligibility for reserved seats for Muslims, Christians, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. The Constituent Assembly had initially considered reserving seats for Muslims and Christians, apart from SCs and STs. However, in May 1949, the Assembly reversed its plan to reserve seats for Muslims and Christians. Consequently, states were directed to remove these details from the rolls.

One of the key challenges for the enumerators was to register displaced persons. States were advised to include these individuals based on a simple declaration of their intent to reside permanently in India, regardless of their actual residency period. This pragmatic approach ensured the inclusion of refugees, many of whom lacked documentation due to the chaos of Partition and the resultant influx of refugees from West Punjab and East Bengal in the newly created Pakistan.

In July 1948, the Constituent Assembly publicised the voter enumeration process

# How EC prepared rolls for free India's first polls



A voter in the 1952 elections. Wikimedia Commons

with January 1, 1949, as the reference date for the electoral rolls. EC reports say the pace of the exercise varied across states, with some advancing rapidly while others lagged due to logistical and other reasons.

The Constitution's provisions on citizenship and the establishment of the Election Commission of India took effect on November 26, 1949, with the full Constitution of India enforced on January 26, 1950. The Election Commission of India (ECI) was established on January 25, 1950, with Sukumar Sen appointed as the Chief Election Commissioner. Operating as a single-member body, the ECI took full control of the electoral process after that.

The Representation of the People Act, 1950, enacted in April that year, provided the legal framework for voter qualifications and roll preparation. However, it introduced changes that invalidated the rolls that had been prepared until then.

The qualifying date for the minimum age of voting was shifted to March 1, 1950, and the residency period was changed from April 1, 1947, to December 31, 1949. These changes necessitated extensive revisions to include newly eligible voters and rectify errors.

Now, with the new law in hand, the ECI directed state governments to prepare supplementary rolls to list voters who might have turned 21 years between January 1949 and March 1950 or may have met the new residency criteria. Special provisions were made for armed forces personnel and certain government employees, whose names were listed separately to facilitate postal voting.

The ECI ordered the informal publication of the draft rolls in May 1950, making them accessible at important government offices. By November 1950, most Part-A states had published preliminary rolls, except for West Bengal, Punjab, Bihar and Orissa. Due to these delays, the ECI kept extending the date for filing claims and objections, ultimately fixing December 23, 1950.

A big challenge was to register displaced persons, particularly in Punjab, West Bengal, Delhi, and Assam. The inclusion of marginalised groups, such as women and Scheduled Castes, required innovative approaches. Many women, particularly in rural areas, were reluctant to provide their names, often registering under their husband's or father's name.

The final delimitation report by the Election Commission was completed by August 1951, enabling the final publication of rolls. The final publication of the voter rolls began in September 1951, with the last rolls published on November 15, 1951. The final electoral rolls included 17.32 crore voters (excluding J&K), approximately 49 per cent of the country's population of 35.67 crore (excluding J&K). With an adult population (over 21 years of age) of about 18.03 crore, the enrollment was nearly 96 per cent.

Even in the face of the most daunting challenges, the EC had thus pulled off the electoral rolls exercise, taking utmost care to ensure that no eligible voter was left out.

The writer is Senior Associate Editor, The Indian Express

### Fifth **COLUMN TAVLEEN SINGH** Twitter@tavleen\_singh

# We need governance, not politics

POLITICIANS ARE elected to govern so governance should be more important than politics. When politics is more important, bad things happen. At about the time that the Prime Minister was telling an audience in a foreign country that India aimed to become a fully developed country by 2047, Delhi saw the first big rain of this monsoon season. As it happens every year, streets became waterways, and newly built underpasses became jammed with vehicles so a journey that usually takes me forty minutes took two hours because of being stuck in a traffic jam in a new underpass. Gurugram, that shining, smart city of the future, came to a watery standstill. This happens every year. Just like every year when winter comes, the air in northern cities becomes unbreathable.

When Narendra Modi became prime minister for the first time a decade ago, he promised change and development. Parivartan and Vikas. To be fair there are areas in which he has truly brought change, but he appears not to have noticed that unless governance improves dramatically, he will have to abandon his dream of seeing India as a fully developed country. If there has been improvement in governance in BJP-governed states it is so minimal as to be meaningless. Everyone has their theories about why India continues to be so badly governed, especially at the municipal and village level, and in my usual humble way, I would like to submit my theory today. Governance has remained abysmal because political priorities have been more important.

A fine example came last week from Maharashtra in the state's new Special Public Security law. It was passed in the assembly by a voice vote. The Chief Minister said proudly that the purpose of it was to control 'urban Maoism.' In his view extreme left-wing organisations have moved from rural parts to cities like Mumbai and are 'trying to brainwash the youth of urban areas and make them stand up against the democratic system'. Has nobody told him that this is a bad law because anyone spouting leftist ideas could be jailed for his views? Zohran Mamdani would be disqualified if he tried to stand in an Indian election.

The law is misguided, anti-democratic and dangerous. Another political move that falls in that very same category is the decision by the Delhi government to close meat shops that exist along the route of the Kanwar Yatra. Liquor shops could well be next because there are many 'devout Hindus' who object belligerently to people drinking alcohol. This kind of arbitrary ban affects the livelihood of thousands of people. But this is not taken into consideration when politicians decide that they have the right to ordain what we should eat and drink. There has been too much interference in our eating habits of late. Instead, what we desperately need are political leaders who remember that they were elected primarily to govern.

Honest citizens who pay their taxes and voters who voted them to high office expect in return that they should govern efficiently and honestly. If there had been governance, we would not have seen Delhi flooded and disabled as we did last week. The monsoon is not something that comes by surprise. It is a season that comes at the same time every year and every year, as long as I can remember, I have seen the capital of our great nation reduced to misery and mire. If there was good governance, drains would be cleaned on time and precautions taken in areas that flood by the evening of the first heavy rain.

If there was governance, we would have by now put in place modern methods of clearing waste. Instead of building landfills that have across India become garbage mountains, we would have built systems to use waste as fuel. We would have at least ensured by now that people did not dump garbage on street corners and sometimes in front of neighbours' houses. If Delhi has not been able to put these systems in place you can imagine what our small towns look like. As someone who likes road trips, I travel a lot and find everywhere that our dear Bharat Mata has been turned into a gargantuan slum. If we had political leaders who cared more about governance than politics, this would never have happened. All that our politicians seem to care

about is their own political future. They believe that governance is never an election issue for their voters. So, they concentrate their energies on stirring up hatred between communities and ensuring that the divisions they create will help them win the next election. Personally, 1 am sick and tired of hearing about how Indians lack 'civic sense'. I have been hearing this said since I was a child and the people who say it seem not to know that it is the job of municipal officials to ensure that our streets and bazaars are clean.

Delhi is the city I know best and can confirm that municipal officials here are a special breed of predators who prey upon citizens by using convoluted regulations that do not prevent slums but can drive an honest taxpayer insane. A cynical solution is to teach them how to make money out of doing something good for the city instead of preventing good things from happening. Necessary because unless municipal governance improves, there is really no hope.

# Beauty junkies, beware

cussion on when, exactly, does risqué-ness tip over to crass exhibitionism?

Acerbic and sharp-tongued anchor Megyn Kelly held forth on the "bizarre spectacle" asserting that actor Sydney Sweeney was invited because of her "physical attributes". A guest on Kelly's show described the 55-year-old bride's features as a "repository of injectables". If scantily clad was the abiding theme set by the hostess's penchant for bosom-revealing bustiers, it explains this wedding's attire etiquette, of negligee-style naked dresses and exposed inner-wear. Most prominent though, more than flesh oozing out of tightly laced corsets, were the enhanced lips, fake eyelashes, augmented breasts and face fillers. As another online commentator noted, Bezos' guests were de facto advertisements for their surgeons,

who will rely on this footage to show future clients their noteworthy sculpting skills.

The righteous, of which there are large numbers everywhere, dismiss the craze for cosmetic improvement as rich-peopleproblems. Which isn't true anymore. A rhinoplasty or nose job can cost as little as Rs 45,000 in Delhi and is a 90-minute procedure, not requiring hospitalisation. If somebody doesn't want to go through life with a bad nose, and it's not breaking the bank, nor is it dangerous, changing it is a worthwhile investment. We don't think of wearing makeup or gymming as being self-absorbed; if science permits other options, it's no different. But the so-called shallow pursuit of vanity always comes with an unsaid warning of doom, rather than a promise of bliss. Of course, plastic surgery won't solve any existential problems, which haunt us till the end. It does, however, solve the problem of looking in the mirror and being chained by gloomy thoughts of too much nose.

Anyone halfway normal knows there are limits to striving for ideals of perfection. Much like we resist a second helping of dessert, most of us would steer clear of repeated surgical dabbling. The Venice extravaganza left the world gawking not just for its 50-million-dollar price tag but also the voyeuristic pleasure of observing those so committed to self-mutilation. What does it say — that the desire to look like an Only Fans model is the current cultural conditioning among those who have everything? It's one thing to indulge in some minor tweaking but entirely another to reconstruct a new self to keep up with

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the trend everyone's sporting, of a luscious mouth and high cheekbones.

In the subversive television drama *Nip/Tuck*, every episode would begin with two plastic surgeons asking their women clients, "So, tell us what you don't like about yourself." Ageing was the inevitable answer. Alas, all attempts to subvert time's winged chariot are futile. Beauty is fleeting. It doesn't last, because nothing lasts. The demise of 42-year-old Shefali Jariwala, allegedly due to unregulated aesthetics treatments, makes her a statistical anomaly but it has some sobering lessons. While doggedly pursuing youth is unlikely to kill us, when it occupies too much mindspace, it prevents us from enjoying this moment,

which has so many other wonders. The writer is director, Hutkay Films **FE SUNDAY** WWW.FINANCIALEXPRESS.COM

# SUNDAY, JULY 13, 2025



Novak Djorkovic lost the men's semifinal singles at the Wimbledon 2025 held in London on Friday

# Father Time catching up with the Great Serb

2021 quarter-finals when he was a

month short of turning 40, which would

thirties before injuries took their

inevitable final toll. He had to miss a

major chunk of the circuit and even his

last competitive outing on Court

Philippe Chatrier at Roland Garros — a stage he had ruled for almost two

decades — was his straight-sets defeat to Alexander Zverev in the first round of the

But Djokovic's diminishing returns

are in full media glare. He endured three

successive defeats on hard courts and

clay earlier this year, a prospect unthink-

able a couple of years ago. But when it

comes to the Grand Slams, it takes an

elite player to stop him in his tracks. He

had to retire from his match against

Zverev at the Australian Open due to a

hamstring tear and lost to Sinner in Paris

and SW19. His usual game is still good

enough to get past most other players -

they may get a set off him but his expe-

rience, court nous and ability to raise his

game at the opportune time still gets the

the last week of August, it would be two

years since Djokovic added to his Grand

Slam tally. Wimbledon was said to be his

best chance for a 25th Major, but a player

can only take on one adversary at a time.

Not only does the Serb have to contend

with two players a decade and a half

younger than him taking tennis to

greater heights, he also has to try and

slow down the march of Father Time,

something nobody has managed to do.

It's amazing to consider that the

Golden Generation of Federer, Nadal

and Djokovic was something which, it

was said, couldn't be replicated. But

barely have they vacated the stage that

Alcaraz and Sinner have begun to emu-

late them, at least in terms of domi-

nance. The likes of Alexander Zverev,

Jack Draper and Taylor Fritz need to do

something quite special if they want to

avoid the same fate as Jo-Wilfried

Tsonga, Tomas Berdych, David

Ferrer, Nikolay Davydenko and

today's Wimbledon final, in which

Alcaraz may join a very exclusive club —

which includes the Serb — of men to

have won three straight crowns at the

grass-court Major. But what he

can't avoid over the next few weeks is to

take a good hard look at his game and

current physical capabilities, and

decide whether he's up to the challenges

posed by the reigning duopoly in the

day's semi-final were almost pushing

Djokovic through the retirement door,

saying it's time for him to seriously con-

sider his future, and he himself admit-

ted later that the physical grind of five-

set tennis was a bit too much for him at

cially one as great as Djokovic, will be

able to best judge where his game is at

the moment. Nobody can force anyone

to pull the plug. The hunger to compete

and the sheer joy of playing the game

often keeps them in the gym and on the

court. The top players often have almost

an irrational belief in themselves, but

they also need some tangible returns or

results to make it all seem worthwhile.

But only the player himself, espe-

The commentary team during Fri-

Djokovic may or may not watch

New firm in charge

David Nalbandian.

men's game.

the moment.

When the US Open comes along in

job done in the early rounds.

2024 edition.

Nadal won a few Majors in his mid-

have signalled that the end was near.



THERE'S SOMETHING INHERENTLY sad about watching a sporting legend struggle in front of the whole world as their playing days wind down. Simple shots that would have once been made almost without thinking become tough tasks, and the body doesn't follow instructions, maybe due to fitness issues or just general wear and tear. Doubt creeps into the mindset, where once was just unshakeable belief in one's own ability.

Most of those watching on Wimbledon's Centre Court would have had similar feelings as they saw World No.1 Jannik Sinner routinely dismantle 24-time Majorwinner and seven-time champion at the All England Club, Novak Djokovic in straight sets.

The match lasted five minutes short of two hours, but if it had been a boxing contest, the referee would have stopped the bout much earlier on account of it being a mismatch. The Sinner-Djokovic semifinal was the marquee clash of the day and was the second match scheduled on Centre Court but as it turned out, the first semifinal, between defending champion Carlos Alcaraz and Taylor Fritz, was much more competitive and lasted almost an hour longer.

When the Serb threatened a minicomeback by breaking serve in the early part of the third set, the crowd was vociferous in its support, but they — as well as the player himself — would have known deep down that it was a false dawn.

When he was in his prime, Djokovic made no secret of his feeling that he didn't get the crowd support and adulation that he deserved, and most of the love was reserved for his two greatest rivals, Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. Hence, it was more than a bit ironic that the cheering was the loudest when arguably the greatest men's tennis player of all time was nowhere near his best. As they say, one often doesn't appreciate something unless it's gone.

Djokovic had faced Sinner in the French Open semifinals as well just over a month ago, and though that also ended in a straight-sets defeat, it was by no

means one-way traffic. And as it has been less than a year since Djokovic won the Paris Olympics gold medal, filling the one gap in his tennis resume — beating Alcaraz, no less, in the final at Roland Garros — one may have been justified in thinking that the rumours of his terminal decline were highly exaggerated.

### A diminishing force

Not on Friday's evidence. His movement may have been hampered by a niggle and a fall on his hip in the earlier round, but that's part of the grind if one has to win seven best-of-five-sets matches to clinch the biggest prizes. It was quite unusual, to say the least, to see Djokovic not going for balls which whistled past not too far from him.

Federer's last few years as a professional tennis player were largely hampered by the pandemic and injury. His last set on Centre Court — where he has lifted the trophy no less than eight times — was the 0-6 bagel suffered at the hands of tall Pole Hubert Hurkacz in the



Public construction, especially of nationally important projects, does not suffer from constraints of land or money. But what do we see happening? Highways and new roads cave in; sewer lines burst, flooding the roads

WATCHING THE CRICKET matches between India and England, I was struck by the tag line of an advertisement by a leading cement company. It read, "As India Builds, India Grows". Absolutely correct. We must build — and we must know *how* to build — *public goods* such as roads, bridges, railways, airports, buildings for schools, colleges, hospitals and offices, etc. for growth.

### Nehru, the great builder

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sal waste of time and money. The first reason is total lack of accountability. The prevailing rule seems to be 'that since *many persons* are responsible for a disastrous project, eventually *no person* is held accountable'. A long history of group immunity has metamorphosed into group impunity.

Another reason is the process. The lowest price bid is usually selected as the winning bid. Departure from the lowest-priced bid invites questions and, often, an inquiry; so why depart? The winner uses sub-standard material and takes liberty with the approved plans in order to make money. In many tenders, the bidders collude among themselves to allow a contractor to quote a winning price 'above the estimate'. The winner uses the money 'above the estimate'to pay bribes.

The design, drawings and estimates are prepared, and supervised, by poorly qualified persons. The senior officers (who have climbed the ladder) are not abreast with improvements in design and materials, advanced construction technology and machinery, and management practices that save labour, money and time.

A major reason is political corruption. There is competition among ministers for so-called 'lucrative' portfolios. There is a 'rate card' in many states. Some departments/agencies are notorious for deplorable execution of projects: PWDs are at the top. DDA and equivalent bodies that build low-cost housing (in reality, concrete slums) are near the top. Highways and Rail-

### Cut the Gordian knot

ways are not far behind.

It is a Gordian knot that cannot be unknotted. It has to be cut. That means phasing out the public agencies that 'build' public goods. Past efforts to 'reform' the system have failed and will, if attempted again, fail again. On the contrary, privatisation and healthy competition have improved the quality of public goods in telecommunications, distribution of electricity, transportation, mining, and oil exploration.

That is the way to go forward in public construction. In the short term, there will be an increase in costs. Cartels will be formed. Weaknesses will emerge. We must make corrections and keep faith in the new path — private enterprise to build public goods amidst genuine, healthy competition.



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Maratha latecomers

COOMI KAPOOR

Sitting in the safety of Delhi, away from Raj Thackeray's slap-happy goons, I admit ashamedly that although my formative years were spent largely in Mumbai, my Marathi remains rudimentary. I am not alone just 36% of people in the city consider Marathi their mother tongue. Yet, once again, there is a move to exhibit Marathi chauvinism by compelling residents of this cosmopolitan, multicultural metropolis to speak the same language as the rest of the state. The champions of 'speak only in Marathi', forget that Mumbai's history and heritage is distinct and different from the rest of Maharashtra. The Marathi manoos are actually relatively late migrants to Mumbai and the city precedes the state. The original inhabitants of the islands were Koli fisherfolk and Aagri farmers from the Konkan. Portuguese missionaries converted some locals to Catholicism who were latter dubbed 'East Indians', since they worked for the East India company. The Portuguese seized the

seven islands of Mumbai from the Gujarat ruler Bahadur Shah in 1534 AD, but shortsightedly handed it over to the British in 1668 as part of the dowry of their princess, Catherine de Braganza. The Parsis arrived in Mumbai from Gujarat and dominated during the city's early history. In 1750, they built Asia's first dry port. Many of the landmark heritage buildings, statues and seminal institutions in the

city have Parsi origins. For over a decade after Independence, Gujarat and Maharashtra were part of Bombay state, as Prime Minister Nehru was reluctant to split the state along linguistic lines. But pressure mounted from both Maharashtra and Gujarat. The real dispute was over who would retain Mumbai. The Gujaratis believed they had an equal claim since the population of Gujaratis and Maharashtrians in the city was approximately equal. But after the bifurcation of Bombay state in 1960, the city became part of Maharashtra. Marathi speakers, however, never succeeded in dominating the city's ethos, which reflects India's plurality. Mumbai attracts people from all over, not just for job opportunities but because of its vibrancy, urbane outlook and Bollywood. Today the number of north Indians from UP, Bihar and MP probably equals the native Marathi speakers. There are a sizable numbers of Gujaratis, Goans Punjabis, South Indians and Sindhis as well.

### Mind your language

If I never learnt to speak Marathi

fluently in my childhood, it was because then there was no impetus to do so. In those days, Gujarati was the lingua franca in the courts, Dalal Street and the business world; even household helps came from Goa or Gujarat. In school, I was exempted from studying Marathi because my father was in a transferable government job. In later years, the pressure to learn Marathi increased. My sister, a lecturer in a Mumbai government college, had per force to learn Marathi in her middle age as her salary increments were blocked until she passed the language exam. In the rest of Maharashtra, where people speak only in Marathi, knowing the language is essential. My parents, grandparents and even anglicised cousins from Pune spoke fluent Marathi. So do traders and shopkeepers from Gujarat and Rajasthan who have settled in the state for generations.

Language is a matter of convenience and choice, not to be exploited for grandstanding and political gain. The Thackeray cousins have raised the 'speak only in Marathi issue' to woo the sizable Marathi vote bank as the long-delayed BMC poll is finally likely to be held. The opposition Sena eagerly seized the opportunity when CM Devendra Fadnavis misguidedly sought to introduce Hindi at the junior level in schools as part of the three-language

New Delhi

formula. (Fadnavis has since withdrawn

the order.) The various Shiv Senas should remember that founder Bal Thackeray never made speaking Marathi in Mumbai part of his agenda. Whenever I interviewed him, he was happy to speak to me in English. Thackeray's original platform was that Marathi speakers get a fair deal in employment in the city since South Indians, because of their superior English language skills, were appropriating a disproportionate share of jobs. Only later did North Indians and Muslims become Sena targets.

### No English spiel

Just as it is ill-advised to force Mumbaikars to speak Marathi, it is equally short-sighted to push Hindi on a reluctant southern populace. Less than 43 per cent of India speak Hindi as their mother tongue. While it is politically in vogue today for the ruling party leaders to denounce speaking in English as a colonial hangover, for most Indians, particularly in cities, English remains the language of aspiration and ambition. Nearly all my domestic helps have informed me proudly that they work for the extra income so that that they can send their children to private English-medium schools and pay tuition fees. For our politicians, the overwhelming majority of whom send their own offspring to English-speaking institutions, to rail against English is hypocritical.

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# BRIDGES & POTHOLES: INDIA'S MONSOON ECONOMY STIMULUS

N his epic tome, *Natural Questions*, Roman philosopher Seneca observed that the universe undergoes cycles of destruction (ekpyrosis) and regeneration. Seneca's exposition delves on profound cosmic questions of ethical and spiritual transformation. A pedantic modern-day version of Seneca's hypothesis arrives across India every monsoon as nature exposes the complicity of apathy and corruption that drowns lives and livelihoods.

The spectacle of devastation is playing out this monsoon, too. Newer bridges are collapsing even as older ones are standing sturdy, city roads and flyovers pock-marked by potholes are competing with the lunar landscape, and newly inaugurated motorways are being gutted or washed off. The annual parade of incidents has triggered anger and outrage illustrated by memes on social media.

Consider a few headlines to appreciate the magnitude of sloth. On Wednesday, a bridge on Mahisagar river in Gujarat's Vadodara collapsed, taking down several vehicles and 12 lives. Last month, a bridge in Pune declared dangerous by the government but used by folks collapsed killing four persons. It is not just road bridges causing worry. There are currently 9,784 railway bridges under repair. The government told parliament in April that bridges are monitored in real time using sensors. Was the Vadodara bridge monitored? An Indian Bridge Management System—tasked with assessing expiry date for bridges—has been promised and under development since 2016.



THE THIRD EYE **SHANKKAR AIYAR** Author of *The Gated Republic, Aadhaai* A Biometric History of India's 12 Digit Revolution, and Accidental India (shankkar.aiyar@gmail.com)

The state of new and existing highways is not dissimilar. Last year, the headlines were about impairment of the storied Atal Setu Trans-harbour Link between the mainland and Mumbai. This year, the headlines are about the state of the ₹55,000-crore Samruddhi Mahamarg. Within weeks after a new extension between Bhiwandi and Nashik, travellers have reported major damage to the road at different points. In Rajasthan, a major portion of the just-inaugurated Baghwali-Jahaj road in Jhunjhunu district was washed away.

The old cliché of whether the road is on potholes or potholes are on the road plays out across India. A four-lane flyover connecting Dombivali with Navi Mumbai was opened to the public and closed within hours following accidents. In four weeks, the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, which spends ₹1,000 crore a year on roads, received 5,033 complaints about roads, 3,264 of them about road damage and 838 about potholes. In April, the government revealed to parliament that potholes cause over 4,000 accidents every year.

How big a problem is it? It is competitive. Last month before monsoon, the Karnataka PWD set a target of filling 3,400 potholes a day in Bengaluru. Meanwhile, the PWD in Delhi claimed to have set a 'world record' by filling 3,433 potholes in a day. The authorities in Bengaluru and Delhi seem to have rationalised that potholes are a part of the landscape. A minister from Madhya Pradesh underlined the horrific reality by simply stating that as long as there are roads, there will be potholes.

Destruction caused by flawed construction must be followed by reconstruction. Effectively, this is an extortionary phenomenon—spending taxpayer monies twice for the same work. Between 2021 and 2024, as per the government, over ₹17,900 crore was spent just maintaining highways—that is roughly ₹6,000 crore a year. And the amount is rising. In the current financial year, the government will spend ₹9,599 crore on fixing roads.

'Pothole budgets' also appear in the budgets of state governments and municipal corporations. Last year, the BrihanMumbai Municipal Corporation allocated ₹545 crore to fix potholes; the allocation as of June this year is ₹154 crore. In 2019, an information request revealed that the BMC had spent ₹17,693 on each pothole. In Bengaluru, the PWD last year allocated ₹660 crore for potholes and its municipality spent ₹7,121 crore on them between 2019 and 2022.

The consequences are manifest in human and economic cost. Take death on the roads. In the decade to 2023, over 15 lakh Indians were killed in road accidents. In 2023 alone, there were 4.80 lakh road accidents across the country claiming 1.72 lakh lives that is, 55 accidents every hour and a death every 3 minutes. Union Minister of Road Transport & Highways, Nitin Gadkari, recently said "I try to hide my face" at international meets because India tops the list of road deaths in the world. Gadkari also re-

vealed that road accidents cost India roughly 3 percent of GDP. India's taxpayers, already forking out stamp duties, income tax, road toll and GST, are forced to bear the risks. There is virtually no city in India that is free of flooding in monsoon. As this column has highlighted, this is primarily because there is a drought of action on urban planning. This week, for instance, Gurugram—once dubbed 'Millennium City'—along with Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru were flooded for hours. Floods kept Nagpur's buses off the roads for long. Haphazard urbanisation in Pune has resulted in the listing of 73 new flood-prone areas.

Public policy failures, as I wrote in *The Gated Republic*, have emerged as an alternative business model—be it water, health, education, security or power. The failures of the State impose costs on households—living in cities without pavements, marooned on flooded roads, bearing medical costs for accidents, besides refurbishing flooded homes. The costs paid by the hapless taxpayer for mitigating these troubles verily morphs into the political economy's annual monsoon stimulus.

# TULSI TO TITAN: PERFORMANCE POLITICS



POWER & POLITICS **PRABHU CHAWLA** prabhuchawla@newindianexpress.com

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N the great gladiatorial arena of Indian public life, few figures have fought harder, flared brighter, or fallen faster than 49-yearold Smriti Zubin Irani. Fewer still possess the gall and guile to return with such operatic flair. The reboot of *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi* Bahu Thi (KSBKBT), premiering July 29, marks Irani's renaissance. It's not

cultural conquest. Comebacks in politics arrive cloaked in symbolism, charged with subtext, and choreographed for resonance. Hence, the Tulsi-Irani redux isn't nostalgia; it's narrative warfare. Once Tulsi was the sanskari sovereign of Indian television. Now, back to being Tulsi again, Irani is showing off a shrewd recalibration of power, presence, and persona.

regression; it's re-entry. A recalibrated

Born in 1976 in a modest Delhi household, her political ascent was not bestowed; it was built by her from scratch. From wiping tables at McDonald's to ruling the primetime as Tulsi Virani in Ekta Kapoor's cultural colossus, she embodied middle-class mythos with magnetic precision. But ambition is a tering the BJP without pedigree but with panache. The nation scoffed. The party watched. And she worked relentlessly, rhetorically, ruthlessly.

At 49, Irani is reclaiming her reach. The sari-draped storyteller has stepped off the Lok Sabha stage onto the soapbox of the small screen. Irani, once Bharat's beloved bahu, became a policy bulldozer in Modi 1.0 and 2.0. Unlike the dozens of television faces who flared

and faded, she fused charisma with consequence. She wasn't just a screen queen but was a symbol of saffron resilience. And yet, politics, as unforgiving as ever, made her taste both triumph and truncation. However, this time she is armed not with tears and tantrums, but a script steeped in subtext, strategy, and subliminal seduction.

In the beginning, cynical BJP watchers wrote her off her as yet another television actress joining vote hunters. But Irani turned her oratory into artillery. She lost her first election, but didn't lose heart. In 2019, she executed what many deemed impossible: dethroning Rahul Gandhi in Amethi, the dynastic fortress of the Congress. With one brutal ballot box blow, she was

crowned 'giant killer', and a thunderclap echoed across Indian politics.

From 2014 to 2024, she helmed portfolios that mattered education, textiles, minority affairs, and women and child development. She helped craft the National Education Policy 2020, redefined handloom pride, reformed waqf boards, and reshaped conversations around child

welfare. She wasn't ornamental; she was operational. But politics punishes more harshly than it rewards. Like primetime, it is fickle. In 2024, the tide turned. Kishori Lal Sharma, a quiet typecast, pivoted to politics in 2003, en- Irani lost by a staggering 1.67 lakh votes. While some defeated colleagues were shielded and retained in Modi 3.0, Irani was visibly and perceptively sidelined.

> But Smriti Irani doesn't sulk; she scripts. And she knows that in a country where politics is theatre and television is theology, screen time is soul time. Her announcement of Tulsi's return wasn't a whimper; it was a war cry. She called it a "side project", but scheduled it to wrap up just before the 2029

elections. Coincidence? Or calculated cultural choreography? By collaborating with designer Gaurang Shah, reanchoring herself in Bharatiya couture, and rewriting Tulsi's arc as a crusader for climate, gender justice, and social equity, the former minister is fusing fashion with function, drama with diplomacy, television with transformation. And it works.

Irani speaks five languages. She straddles five worlds—Bollywood, bureaucracy, Bharatiyata, business, and big tech. Her alliances with global thought leaders like Bill Gates made her more than a minister. They made her a multilateral magnet. While many BJP stalwarts edge toward irrelevance or retirement, Irani remains electrifying, eloquent, and entirely unpredictable.

> But make no mistake. Whether as BJP *bahu* or saffron saans, Irani is not universally adored. Her aggressive style, her unyielding ambition and her public skirmishes with the Gandhis are all calculated to polarise politics. Why has the BJP, a party that needs charismatic female firepower, inexplicably benched its brightest? Is this a temporary break?

Or is Tulsi 2.0 being a canny Trojan horse by slipping Irani back into living rooms. Could her cultural resurrection become a political resurrection? After all, since many saffron seniors are nearhungry beast. Irani, never one to be Gandhi loyalist, wrested back Amethi. ing sunset by 2029, who better than younger Irani to shoulder the party's projection of an ideologically aligned female leadership, combat Rahul Gandhi once more, and craft a story of comeback soaked in symbolism? In a party starved of women leaders with gravitas, Irani may yet become a more assertive Sushma Swaraj's successor the BJP doesn't know it needs.

> The return of Smriti Irani to the national limelight is not just a nostalgic indulgence. It's a narrative interven

tion. Even the details are thought out. Designer Shah, known for hand-woven heritage saris, will costume Tulsi's character by tying her television persona back to her textile ministry days. Here, attire becomes agenda. Her presence becomes performance. Her legacy becomes layered.

Irani isn't just playing her beloved television character again; she is playing a long game. This isn't the story of a sidelined star seeking attention. It's the calculus of a cultural capitalist who understands the currency of screen time in a democracy driven by drama and recall. She's leveraging India's vast 'cultural economy'—a phrase she now uses un-ironically to reposition herself not just as politician or performer, but as a public philosopher. She did lose a seat, but not her script—as her role exchange from the great Indian political soap opera to a television tearjerker shows.

Now, as the cameras on the set roll, Irani writes a new chapter that is part redemption, part reassertion. The show is no longer a melodrama; it is metaphor. Tulsi is no longer just a daughterin-law, but a delivery device for social dialogue. Gender equity, environmental ethics, and cultural continuity are Irani's real scripts. By anchoring herself once again in India's cultural core, the living room TV, she ensures she isn't forgotten. But with over 20 million followers on various social media platforms, she will remain copiously conspicuous with her presence on the small screen.

As KSBKBT relaunches for 150 episodes that would wrap up just before the next general election, Irani's political timing couldn't be more precise, as if it were polling data. What Irani has called a "side project" is the centre-stage in a broader symphony of strategy. As Indian democracy barrels toward its next big showdown in 2029, Irani seems ready to reprise the role of a lifetime—not just as Tulsi, but as a titan. Not just as actress, but an architect. Because if there's one thing Irani understands better than most is that in India, image is ideology. And sometimes, a sari says more than a speech. In the end, Tulsi was never just a character—she was both the medium and the message.

# THE LORDS WHO FLOCK TO LORD'S



**OPINION ANAND VASU** Journalist who has covered more than 100 Test matches over 25 years

N the early 2000s, the turf of the world's most storied cricket ground was set to be replaced. Those running the show at Lord's realised this was not simply a maintenance task, as it might be at any other venue. This turf, rarely referred to without being called 'hallowed', was special not only to those who scripted sporting history on it. Generations grew up tuning into radios to listen to stories of this ground—this mystical place in the middle of London, steeped in history and seemingly in no hurry to acknowledge the present or contemplate the future.

So, the smart move was to sell the turf. Some people bought a square foot of soil and turf so that they could be close to cricketing divinity in their backyards. Others had big slabs encased in glass as tabletops in boardrooms. The less wealthy, such as itinerant cricket writers, settled for a small sphere that could sit on a desk as a daily reminder of sporting mystique.

If you grew up a cricket nut, especially in one of the British colonies, it was difficult to have a neutral view of Lord's. You were constantly told it was exclusive, not for everyone. You were reminded that scoring a 100 or picking up five wickets to get your name on the honours board there meant more than achieving exactly the same feat on any other ground. You came to believe, even with no real proof, that Lord's was special.

Naturally, this sparked widespread devotion; but it also set a flame under the more cynical. Here was a place that represented snobbery and elitism, where only some could come to worship. Naturally, this group decried the obsession with bacon-and-eggs and beige suits, the innate highhandedness and all-round sexism and ageism of the staff, and similar slights, real and perceived, that existed around the venue.

As an Indian, it was even more straightforward. After all, our very own Sunil Gavaskar had once been turned away from the ground when he had a valid pass, and felt the cut so deeply that he refused membership of Marylebone Cricket Club—which owns the ground—when it was offered. Such treatment of Indian

cricket royalty could not be overlooked. Having been fortunate to have covered matches at the ground since 2002— Tests, one-day internationals, grand tournament finals and even an Ashes Test—your writer can safely confirm that everything you have heard about Lord's—good, bad and in-between—is true and none of the lore does complete justice to the actual experience.

It's also a place where those who have nothing to do with the game flock. The Lord's Test is a London fixture as much as a cricketing one. Months in advance, the city's wealthiest put it on their calendars and turn up in their Sunday finest, because it's where unexpected deals are struck. Solicitors and bankers, musicians and actors, doctors and architects—you'll see them all, nibbling on gourmet lunches, sipping champagne, and barely watching a ball of play, but having the time of their lives.



Though Lord's is a hallowed ground to some cricket lovers, it represents elitism to others. To posh Londoners, the summer Test there is an annual fixture where deals can be struck.

Today it's a pilgrimage for all comers

You'll also see the long queues outside St John's Wood tube station of those who have tickets in areas without fixed seat numbers, hoping to claim the best vantage. It's still one of the few grounds where the paying public can take in food and even a bottle of wine.

To be at Lord's on an English summer day—and those of us who live in tropical climes can never understand the British fascination with sunshine—is to feel alive in a very specific way. The smell of the freshly mown grass, and the

sight of white flannels and cherry-red Dukes balls set off against the carefullycurated shade of green can set the heart aflutter. It's like your body instinctively knows it's the season for growth.

Cricketers will tell you that nothing prepares them for their first outing at Lord's. Most recently, the South African team was taken on a tour of the venue, with a guide explaining the ground's history and geography—the full touristy spiel—just so that they would not be overwhelmed when playing there, as had happened to hardier men before.

Cricketers will also tell you they feel the love that a collective group of humans can feel for a sport, that true and pure spirit of the possible, when they are out in the middle of the ground and a packed house waits with bated breath.

For generations, Lord's was a venue Indians loved to hate. But as they took greater pride in their own country and their great cricket venues, an uneasy peace was reached. There was no need to hate Lord's to love the rest of the cricket world.

Today, India's cricketers see the names of Vinoo Mankad and Dilip Vengsarkar, Mohammad Azharuddin and Jasprit Bumrah on the honours board, and can immediately be a part of history without feeling like outsiders. K L Rahul's ton on Saturday will be up there, too.

Even if the game's beating heart today is as much in Kolkata and Sydney, Lord's—often called 'the home of cricket'—can be claimed by all those to whom this game is special. Just don't tell the old-timers at MCC.

(Views are personal)

### QUOTE CORNER

The point of comedy is to examine everything. It's very scary now because they're stopping comedians at the [US] border and if they have pictures of Trump on their phone they don't like, they don't let them in. I'd be proud to be thrown out because I'd be in very select company. The last English comedian to be thrown out of America for political reasons was Charlie Chaplin.

**Eric Idle,** Monty Python star who has had a green card for 28 years

I am happy to state that I had the opportunity, in 2024, to reiterate this legal principle in the cases of Prabir Purkayastha, Manish Sisodia, and Kavita vs ED.

**B R Gavai,** Chief Justice of India, at the Krishna Iyer memorial lecture at the Kerala High Court on the principle of bail being the rule and jail the exception

When you are the captain, I think you need to lead by example so that whenever there is another player in that situation, you can command to that player.

**Shubman Gill,** India captain, after scoring 269 and 161 at Edgbaston, England

### MALIDAC WRITETO MALLBAU letters@newindianexpress.com

### **Pension pain**

Ref: 'Entire world acknowledges India's key role as a global solution-maker' (Jul 12). I read with interest the interview with Amit Shah in today's paper. It's true that there has been improvement in many areas. However, the minimum pension under the Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952 has remained stagnant since September 2014. It would benefit lakhs of pensioners if the recommendations of the Parliamentary Committee on Labour, tabled in December 2024, are implemented expeditiously.

M Rama Rao, Visakhapatnam

### Pharma quality

Ref: A bitter pill to swallow (Jul 12). Indian pharma's image suffers from uneven quality and weak regulation. Other issues include outdated practices, poor traceability and weak enforcement. To restore trust, India must strengthen oversight, adopt techled tracking, and ensure transparency—so that affordability doesn't compromise quality, especially as global reliance on Indian generics grows. Abbharna Barathi, Chennai

### **Big brother**

Ref: A simple way to look at Trump's complex agenda (Jul 12). Trump's treatment of India and Pakistan as equals is totally wrong. He is performing not like the president of America, but as a big brother and a businessman. His tariff agenda objectives are based on power, wealth and heroism. His aim is to get the Nobel Prize at any cost.

S Kanthimathinathan, Kovilpatti

### Tariff tantrums

The US president just plays with figures while imposing tariffs without even consulting his aides. It's like picking a number between 1 and 100. The authoritarian attitude will only create dissatisfaction among fraternal countries. The US must be pragmatic in negotiations and not be a babble master. R V Baskaran, Pune

**Roll intrigue** 

Ref: Siang hydro project to get filip in Arunachal (Jul 12). It's a very nice move by the central government. Hope it will help mitigate the rising hostilities and establish India's commanding presence in the region. It may also be very helpful for the local residents as they may get employment. The expertise of senior officers like P K Sharma should give a boost to the project.

### Adinarayan Prabhukhot, email

### Ref: No stay on Bihar roll revision (Jul 11). Revising the electoral rolls for deaths and relocation of voters is a necessary exercise that nobody can dispute. But an intensive revision, suspending a large population's franchise *en bloc* in a state on the eve of polls—like possibly up to 25 percent in Bihar sounds extremely strange. If the eligibility of such

a huge percentage of the population is doubtful, the question we should ask is: how did they enter the rolls in the first instance?

P Mangalachandran, Kannur

### Population poser

Ref: Neither too many, nor too few (Jul 11). Whether it is the South or the North, India is struggling for breathing space. There is social tension and chaos everywhere. A fertility rate of 2 is not a stable picture yet. While we strive for the economic prosperity of everyone, the concern about population explosion should not be brushed aside. India, presently, is surely a case of too many.

Geetha B K, Kannur

### Air superiority

Ref: Take pride in op, brace for the worst (Jul 11). In the aftermath of Operation Sindoor, India is becoming more vulnerable to security threats from rogue neighbours. To counter these diverse threats, particularly from Pakistan which might be preparing to avenge its debacle at Operation Sindoor, there is an urgent need to strengthen our defence capabilities. While in-house development of fighter jets is on, augmenting them with advanced fighters is a necessity as air superiority is vital in today's warfare. Gopalan Nair, Koottanad

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