

SCIENCE

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 under-repair 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 stress dissolved the 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 RNA-gripping 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 error-prone 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.”

SNAPSHOTS



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.

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

Manjeera Gowravaram

Alzheimer’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 amyloid-beta 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.

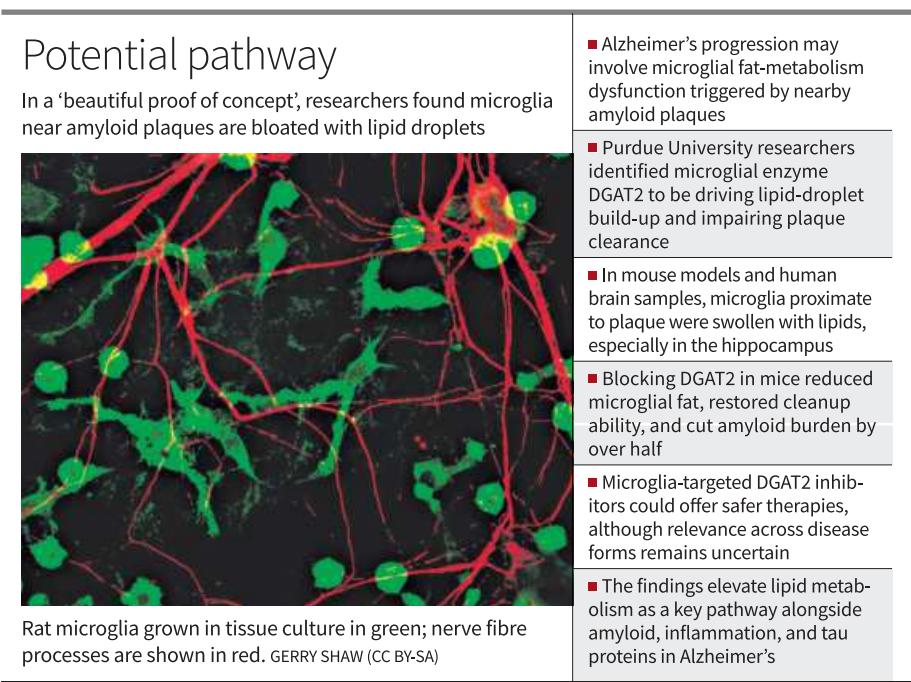
There is currently no cure for Alzheimer’s but there are treatments to slow symptoms and improve quality of life.

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 cells.

In a new study published 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



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

they are, the fatter they get,” Priya Prakash, a co-lead author of the paper, said.

What causes the lipid overload? According to the study, microglia start converting free fatty acids into fats stored inside lipid droplets. Over time, this lipid build-up disrupts their ability to engulf and digest more Aβ. Thus more plaques lead to more fat, leading to more dysfunction.

The researchers used advanced imaging, lipidomic analysis, and metabolomics to track how microglia’s lipid profiles changed over time in response to Aβ exposure. Initially, microglia accumulated toxic free fatty acids. Later, with the help of the DGAT2 enzyme, they converted these fatty acids into triacylglycerols and stored them in lipid droplets.

To test whether this build-up could be reversed, the researchers used genetically engineered mice that mimicked human Alzheimer’s. Then they used a pharmacological inhibitor and a custom-designed PROTAC-like 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 once-protective response turns harmful. The study’s authors suggested microglia sacrifice their protective immune function in 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)

The peopling of the Indian subcontinent



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE
D. Balasubramanian

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 Hyderabad, provided strong evidence for two ancient genetically divergent populations ancestral to most Indians.

I recommend the reader download the paper and see Figure 1 (shown) and Table 1 of the paper. One group called ‘Ancestral North Indians’ (ANI) is genetically close to people

from West Asia, Central Asia, and Europe. A higher 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.

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 ancestry 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

two to six years, then pauses and sheds it, and 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.

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

PROFILES

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

The 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



AFP

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 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 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

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▼ 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

On 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 International Criminal Court (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”. Special Rapporteurs are independent investigators employed by the UN to ex-



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

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. Albanese 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 Washington 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 U.K.’s Barclays also find

mention among others. Tying them together are the world’s two biggest asset management firms, BlackRock 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.” 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

In 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 all-stock 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



REUTERS

July 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 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. xAI asserts that Grok 3 outperforms competitors such as OpenAI’s GPT-4o 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.

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

As 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 leading-edge technologies. Since the 1970s, India was at the receiving end of discriminatory US export controls on account of its nuclear weapon programme 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-I, enabling certain sensitive nuclear-related commerce without a licence. 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, including the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions, the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the Wassenaar Arrangement on conventional arms and dual-use technologies, and the Australia Group on biological and chemical items.

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



Dhruva Jaishankar



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

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 strategic 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 communication and enforcement.

Dhruva Jaishankar is executive director, ORF America. The views expressed are personal.

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



ECI needs to course correct on Bihar SIR

The 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 possibly crores be disenfranchised as a result? Will the poor and the marginalised 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 ahead.

Let's now come to the details. People born before July 1987 are required to provide proof of birth and birth place. But a 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 ques-

tion is how many people in Bihar will have one of these 11? 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, Muslims, 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 have their parents' birth certificates.

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 labour. They won't be there when the SIR 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 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 daughters. Marriage is not their final destination. It is career and financial independence. Girls are not *paraya dhan* (someone else's wealth) to be brought up to understand that their "own" homes are not the one they are born into but the one 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 Ridhanya 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 as 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

crisis. Instead, we carry on as if we've lost the will to fight the dowry battle. Nearly 65 years 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", its prevalence only increasing with time.

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 India*.

In the post-liberalisation years, better educated 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" marriages 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

In the Hindi film world, Deepika is not the only famous Padukone. Many decades 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* (1955), 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, *Pyasa* (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 *Pyasa*, arguably his magnum opus. At its heart is Vijay, a penniless poet in a materialistic world, whose verses, suffused with anguish and truth,

find no takers. In crafting Vijay, Dutt gave us a character who was as much a reflection of his own inner torment as he was a 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.

Pyasa 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 stunning 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 *Pyasa* — 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 *Pyasa*, Dutt introduced a visual grammar rarely seen in Indian cinema at that time, turning cinema into poetry. HT PHOTO

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*, Guru 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.

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

II.

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

Sanjay Chopra

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Across
THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM

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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

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, *Karikalaan*, 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

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

How to build, how to grow

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 sub-standard 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 90-degree 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 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 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.

Fifth
COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

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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, I 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.

inside
TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



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 *manos* 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 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.

History
HEADLINE

SHYAMLAL
YADAV



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 sep-

arately 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.

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On the
LOOSE

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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 thoroughly 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 intense. To everyone watching footage of bejeweled guests disembarking the gondolas, what seemed magnified exponentially (and somewhat unusually), was a startling display of décolletage, prompting both — a slew of opinion on plastic surgery, and dis-

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 a 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-people problems. 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 haunted 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

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

Opinion

SUNDAY, JULY 13, 2025



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

Father Time catching up with the Great Serb

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri



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 mind, 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 Jan-nik Sinner routinely dismantle 24-time Major winner 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 mini-comeback 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

2021 quarter-finals when he was a month short of turning 40, which would have signalled that the end was near.

Nadal won a few Majors in his mid-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 2024 edition.

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 unthinkable 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 experience, court nous and ability to raise his game at the opportune time still gets the job done in the early rounds.

When the US Open comes along in 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.

New firm in charge

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 emulate them, at least in terms of dominance. 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 David Nalbandian.

Djokovic may or may not watch 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 men's game.

The commentary team during Friday's semi-final were almost pushing Djokovic through the retirement door, saying it's time for him to seriously consider his future, and he himself admitted later that the physical grind of five-set tennis was a bit too much for him at the moment.

But only the player himself, especially 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.

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



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

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



Roads cave in within days of construction, raising serious questions on using sub-standard material

EXPRESS FILE: ABHINAV SAHA

How to build, how to grow

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 ₹18-crore road was opened to the public, it caved in. In Morbi, Gujarat, 141 people were killed when a bridge collapsed 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 sub-standard 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 90-degree 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 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 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.



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INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



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% 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 *manooos* 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 Rajasthans 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 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.

