

Of Mice and Men — & Orry

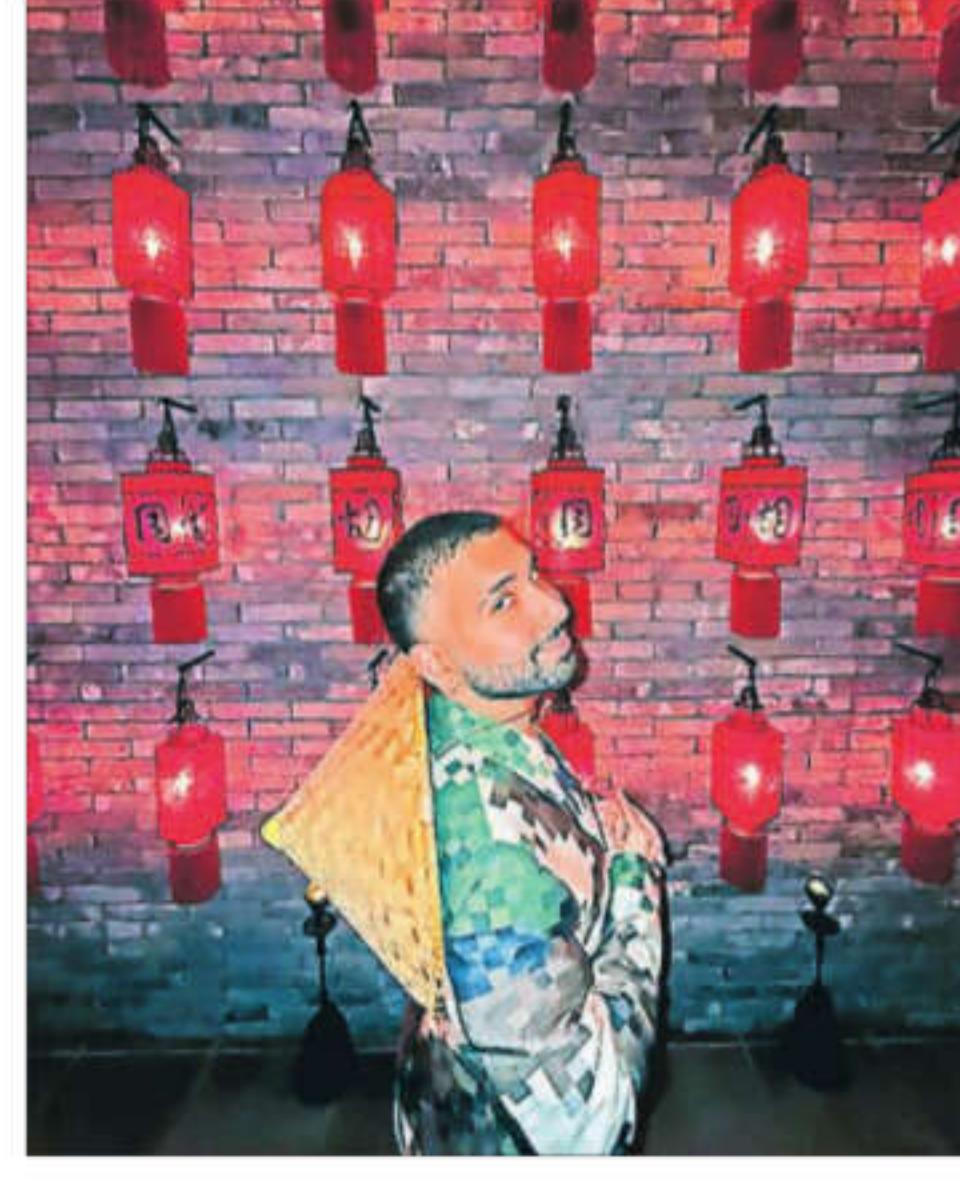


AISHWARYA KHOSLA

WE ARE in the business of making gods out of men, and men out of gods. Orhan Awatramani, better known as Orry, is our latest, most self-aware deity.

While we argue whether a man whose claim to fame is being famous for his famous friends even counts as a celebrity, he has already transcended the debate to become a 'cultural artefact'. He is a case study in what happens when fame detaches from achievement and becomes pure performance. What is startling is that we built this altar of celebrity worship. He is merely performing the rituals we wrote.

Look closely, and you will find that Orry is a master of symbolic capital. He trades neither in films nor cricketing prowess, but in signs: the dandelion earrings that caught Rihanna's eye, the "transparent" interrogation outfit, his kooky phone case collection, the signature pose and, most significantly, his mythical "touch" that costs anything between Rs 20-30 lakh. Much like himself, his accessories too, have transformed into totems. In a society saturated with images, Orry understands that the image is the sub-



stance. He has weaponised the anecdote, monetised the cameo and systematised the social climb.

His genius lies in his audacious literalism. Ask him what Orry does, and pat comes the reply: 'I do my best' or 'I live my best life, so I am a liver.' He does not merely

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INSTAGRAM

attend parties like us mortals; he declares partying his profession. He does not just have friends; he collects them. He does not wait for relevance to wane; he plans its "downfall" in a dedicated "relevance room" staffed by "minions". There is a certain method to his madness; one could almost call him a maverick in his own right. He is enacting, with a wink, the very machinery of celebrity that usually operates backstage. He pulls back the curtain and says, "Look! I am pulling the curtain!"

Consider his feuds, particularly the operatic fallout with the Ali Khan clan. This is social theatre at its finest. Each unfollow, each cryptic reel, each reference to "trauma" is a carefully released narrative pellet, fed to a media ecosystem that runs on conflict. He knows that in the digital agora, cohesion is boring. Fracture is the story, which in turn is currency.

Orry embodies what the French situationist Guy Debord called the spectacle — a social relation mediated by images. He has turned himself into a commodity whose primary use-value is to be seen being seen. When he says he is "working on myself," he means he is labouring on the product that is Orry. His "self" is his startup.

So, is he a genius or a charlatan? The question itself is obsolete. He is a symptom and a surgeon. A symptom of a culture that

rewards personal branding over craft, and a surgeon expertly operating on its attention economy. He has milked our starstruck gullibility to extract gold and, in doing so, has gamed the system. The very system we sustain with every click, every share, and every incredulous "Can you believe Orry said...?"

We analyse his "five minutes" while he is busy building a clockwork designed to reset itself. He is acutely aware he is riding the wave of ephemeral fame, and knows to keep dropping little "relevance bombs" to keep the waves agitated. Right now, he is both the wave and the moon pulling the tides.

In the end, Orry holds up a mirror to our own mythmaking desires. We do not just want celebrities, we want allegories.

Orry offers himself as the perfect one: the celebrity as empty signifier, ready to be filled with our projections, our disdain and our fascination. He is the void that stares back, profitably.

The joke is not on him. The joke is the game itself. And Orry? He is the one who read the rules, decided they were absurd and decided to win anyway.

Bravo. Now pass the popcorn. The spectacle isn't ending anytime soon.

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Weakening India with hatred



FIFTH COLUMN

BY TAVLEEN SINGH

WHEN YOU have been writing a political column for forty years as I have, a hard little core of cynicism settles in your heart. So, I have learned to expect little from our political leaders and to not be shocked by the awful things they are prepared to do just to win elections. Despite this, some things get said and done that still shock me. One of these came last week when I saw a clip of the Chief Minister of Assam ordering Hindus to harass Muslims who might be trying to get listed in electoral rolls. With a sickening, smarmy grin on his face, he told his Hindu audience that if they travelled in rickshaws or taxis driven by Muslims and they asked for five rupees they should be sure to give them four.

Later when his atrocious remarks provoked an adverse reaction, he clarified that he was talking only about Bangladeshi Muslims. He had used the word 'miyan', he said, and nobody should be offended by this because that is what Bangladeshi Muslims call themselves. His knowledge is limited so he is clearly unaware that 'miyan' is not an insult but a term of respect in the Urdu language and is used among most Muslim communities on our sub-continent. There is an election coming in Assam and early polls indicate that the BJP leads the race so there is no obvious need for him to try and win by making hate speeches. But the ugly reality of our Hindutva times is that hate speeches have become acceptable. Just as hating Muslims and Christians have become fashionable among Hindu fanatics using anonymous handles to express their hatred and disgraceful opinions on social media.

Soon after the chief minister's vile remarks came news of an attack on a Muslim meat trader by a Hindu mob in West Bengal. In a post on 'X' I saw a picture of a man with a badly bruised face who said he was called a Bangladeshi before being beaten nearly to death by a mob of about 50 people who ordered him to strip to further humiliate him. The police arrived in time for this man to stay alive, so he is among the fortunate ones. Hindutva vigilantes usually beat meat traders badly enough to kill them or at least disable them permanently. They are proud of these attacks because they believe that they are doing this out of 'nationalism'. What we need to ask is whether they are helping our nation or damaging its soul irreversibly?

When I have tried pointing out to my Hindutva friends that they could be doing more harm than good when they support hatemongers and violent mobs, I hear from them that they are avenging the wrong done to Hindus for centuries by Muslim invaders. These days they usually add that they are also taking revenge for what is being done to Hindus in Bangladesh since Sheikh Hasina's regime fell. If I point out that fanaticism is a bad idea, their answer is that Hindus cannot be fanatics because religious violence is not sanctioned by the Sanatan Dharma. This is true. There is no concept of 'jihad' in India's religious traditions whereas Islam sanctions the elimination of us idol-worshippers. This should make us proud of our spiritual and religious traditions. So why is the opposite happening?

Perhaps because our religious traditions are now in the hands of politicians who have more cynicism in their hearts than political columnists. You do not need me to tell you that the Chief Minister of Assam is far from being the only political leader spreading hatred against Muslims. He is among an increasingly large team of senior BJP leaders who believe that the way to win elections is by whipping up animosity against Muslims and Christians. Often it is Pakistan or Bangladesh that are invoked to disguise attacks that are really directed at India's Muslims who are told routinely that they should go to these countries if they do not like what is happening here. It is from these leaders that the vigilantes get their inspiration to attack Muslim traders and farmers.

The irony of what these cynical politicians and violent fanatics are doing is that they seem to believe that their hate speeches and their violence are making India stronger. The exact opposite is happening because as a country in which divisions of caste and creed run deep, the fissures that are now being created make India not just weaker but more like the Islamist republics in our neighbourhood. As a proud Indian it offends me personally that this is happening, and it worries me that those who can put a stop to this senseless weakening of India are doing absolutely nothing to put a stop to it.

Usually when I write against the damage that Hindutva is doing, I face a barrage of abuse on social media, but I shall continue to write on this subject so do your worst, you repugnant fanatics. I shall write against hatemongers and fanatics because I may have that core of cynicism in my heart, but it is not strong enough for me to forget that silence in the face of evil amounts to complicity. I refuse to be complicit. I shall keep repeating that hate speeches in a civilised country are deplorable and when they are made by political leaders, they are truly dangerous.

In West Bengal, the dilemma of a political binary



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY ABHIK BHATTACHARYA

FOR CENTURIES, Bengal's culture and politics have been steeped in binaries — despite its presumptive intellectual supremacy, the place for the transcendental has been limited. Take football clubs, for instance: It's either East Bengal or Mohun Bagan; other clubs rarely pop up in popular discussions. In debates over fish, the conflict revolves around hilsa and prawn; over identity, it is *Bangali* versus *ghotu*, and many more. This is not to claim that there is no liminal space, but that its scope is constrained. The state's politics also reflect these binaries, hardly leaving space for alternatives.

The recent instance of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee intervening in an Enforcement Directorate raid on the political consulting agency I-PAC, and the subsequent confusion over whether it should be read as federal resistance or administrative interference to safeguard the corrupt, reflects a larger political contradiction, produced out of the binaries that determine Bengal's political landscape.

Since 2011, when the TMC came to power, ending the Left Front's 34-year rule, the party has faced widespread corruption allegations. From Saradha, Narada to the teacher recruitment scam, the TMC's track record has been anything but clean. The only narrative that helped the party return to power in 2021 and increase its seat tally in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections was the question of "Bengali" identity. Its political campaign after the 2019 Lok Sabha elections weaponised the insider-outsider binary, the Bengali-non-Bengali conflict, and the imagination of a homogenous Bengali community that is propped up against the communal politics of north Indian parties.

These narratives appear to thrive on three historical anxieties. First, students in Bengal schools learn a single unnuanced narrative: When Siraj-ud-Daulah, the nawab of Murshidabad, lost the battle of Plassey due to Mir Jafar's betrayal, Bengal lost its in-



Banerjee's invocation of "outsiders" to refer to BJP leaders shows how this binary plays out

dependence and paved the way for the British Raj. In this lack of complexity, what gets lost is Siraj's indecisive tenure, nepotism and arrogance that affected the people of undivided Bengal. However, beyond Siraj's heroism, as celebrated by the anti-colonial historians, and his "autocracy" and "despotism", as upheld by British officials' saviour approach, there was a realpolitik that made Mir Jafar use the East India Company to take over the throne.

The image of colonising outsiders making inroads due to a betrayer continues to resonate with Bengalis. Banerjee's repeated invocation of "outsiders" to refer to the BJP leaders shows how this binary is played out.

Second, the Bengali-non-Bengali binary has both an economic and a political root that has been overlooked. During the early days of the British Raj, with Calcutta as the capital, there was a wave of English education in the city. European rationality and what the West called modern education shaped the Bengal Renaissance. Apart from producing an upper-caste English-educated elite bhadralok class, such socio-cultural churn also led to the formation of a "clerk" class, more precisely, a clerk mentality. This section was happy in its comfortable cocoon of 9 to 5 jobs at Company offices or other private enterprises. Scientist Prafulla Chandra Ray criticised this mentality and asked Bengalis to start businesses, a very early call for entrepreneurship, from a person who founded Bengal Chemicals and Pharma-

ceuticals. But Bengali *bhadraloks*, basking in cultural pride, barely paid heed to this advice and continued serving at the offices owned by "non-Bengalis", mostly "Marwaris", even after Independence.

Third, the memory of Partition and the Bangladesh war that the BJP seems to be playing on to invoke communal sentiment among Bengali Hindus, with the "Bengali Muslims are Bangladeshi" narrative at the Centre, is another historical anxiety that is helping the TMC. Though the sentiment of being uprooted from their *Bhita-maati* (land and home) undoubtedly played a strong role in the consolidation of Bengali Hindus across refugee camps on Jersore road, instances of "our Muslim neighbour helped us escape a mob" were also galore.

All these have trapped the Bengali voter into another political binary: A secular TMC versus communal BJP rhetoric; regionalism versus religious politics. The Left parties, along with the Congress, have miserably failed to transcend this and create an alternative space. As a result, Bengal's future is caught up in this confusion. Unless Bengalis learn to break free of this binary, the state risks remaining trapped in a political loop that repeats old ideals without offering new futures.

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A momo for myself



SHE SAID

BY SHALINI LANGER

LOVE IS, setting aside that last momo piece for your child. It sounds pithy, but it is meant to be.

And with two grown children in the house who can sniff a momo from the dungeons of their rooms, from which they emerge at their choosing, you better have one for each.

I use momo as a metaphor, of course. But before you dismiss it as flimsy, consider this: rarely has such translucent held such succulence; add the red, fiery sauce and the ear-popping experience stays with you much longer than those infinitesimal moments between a full and an empty plate of momos.

Returning to the metaphor, what happens with those momos increasingly reminds me of my own growing-up years. Restaurant visits were rare, money scarce, and a go-to order was tomato soup, "1:2". My sister and I spent a large part of the soup

round eyeing our mother's crunchy bread crumbs. She, of course, dutifully fished them out of her soup bowl to put them in ours, equally (or maybe not, my sister being the less likely one to throw a tantrum).

Did our mother want those bread crumbs to herself? We never asked. But now that both of us have moved on to other soups, and have our own bread crumbs to split and share between our children, I often wonder.

I also try and think back to whether I know what my mother's absolute favourite food is, and come up short — though given that she is like a child in trance when it comes to ice-cream, at least the dessert part is settled. Then I wonder when I ever got cooked a meal at my home because solely I wanted to eat it, not to meet son's ever-growing "protein requirements", or to fulfill daughter's hostel-deprived taste buds, or to nurture husband's

belief that *dabbas* of home-made *kebabs* kept in the freezer will get us through any doomsday.

The sharpest reminder comes every time I am out alone and now order "just for myself" a plateful of anything, momos included — usually in the cinema hall where the job requires me to squeeze a lunch in while watching films. As I sit cushioned in the seat watching, if luck would have it, Hugh Grant, and it's another person delivering to my seat a hot meal, it is a cornucopia of pleasures.

I step out into the food court and the pleasures multiply: so many outlets, so many choices, and the decision entirely mine. What do I want to have at that particular time, no breakfast, lunch or dinner categories to factor in? What sins to indulge without considering calories, setting examples, or worrying about the cleaning up to do after? What guilty pleasure in dis-

posing of something I don't end up liking? My only creeping worry surrounded by all this variety is if I am missing out on something better — as anyone with a remote and a Netflix account would know.

As for those momos, I am slowly exploring other things — not the least because the cinema hall I frequent has the "healthier", wheat option. Now whoever wanted that sandwiches, wraps have my fancy now and — if you must know — brownies.

But guess what, more often than not, halfway through, I wrap half a brownie in a paper napkin, put it in my bag, and bring it home. The children may not eat it, but the sight of that hopelessly crushed brownie lying on the dining table for any one to have fills me completely.

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Now that they're adults, I see how that openness has shaped them. They're thoughtful, gentle men who can listen without needing to fix everything, who can admit when they're struggling, and who don't hide behind silence. In a world that still has lessons of its own.

One of the most important lessons I've learned in raising boys is that they need permission — and language — to express their emotions. From the time my sons were little, I made sure feelings were part of everyday conversation. "How do you feel?" wasn't a question reserved for moments of crisis; it was something we talked about as naturally as what we were having for dinner.

I refused to let phrases like "boys don't cry" find a place in our home. Tears were allowed. Vulnerability was allowed. We talked about anger, fear, sadness, and frustration — not as weaknesses, but as parts of being human. I wanted them to see that strength and sensitivity are not opposites. In fact, the ability to be kind, empathetic, and emotionally aware is one of the greatest forms of strength.

Now that they're adults, I see how that openness has shaped them. They're thoughtful, gentle men who can listen without needing to fix everything, who can admit when they're struggling, and who don't hide behind silence. In a world that still has lessons of its own.

When they were around 11 or 12, we talked about what it means to care for someone, to be trusted, to communicate honestly. These were awkward conversations at first — as they often are between parents and children — but I wanted them to have space to explore those questions safely, without shame or judgment.

When they reached their teenage years, I had early, honest conversations with them about love and sexuality. I didn't want them to think that heterosexuality was the only "right" way to be. I told them that love can take many forms — what matters is respect and kindness. I believe that if we want boys to grow into men who are compassionate partners, fathers, and friends, those conversations need to start early, long before society teaches them otherwise.

Those pink gloves — now tucked in a drawer — remind me of where it all began: A little boy who loved colour, and a mother determined to let him.

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THAT
BLIND
RHODES
SCHOLAR



Rahul Bajaj
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In equality law, there are two major schools of thought – formal and substantive equality. Those subscribing to a formal view of equality believe that everyone must be treated alike and that equality means sameness. Those subscribing to a substantive view of equality, however, contend that our society was never equal to begin with. The law, they argue, must account for the patterns of disadvantage and discrimination that certain groups, such as women, black people, the scheduled castes, and persons with disabilities, have suffered for centuries and must be designed asymmetrically to undo that discrimination.

Viewed from the lens of substantive equality, the Supreme Court order dated January 29, 2026, staying the UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026 [commonly called UGC caste regulations] is profoundly concerning. While framed as a cautious, *prima facie* intervention, the order reflects a troubling reversion to a formal, symmetry-based understanding of equality

that risks obscuring the very structural injustices the Regulations sought to confront.

At the heart of the Court's reasoning lies discomfort with Clause 3(c), which defines "caste-based discrimination" in a manner focused on historically marginalised caste groups. The Court appears persuaded by the argument that such a definition is "restrictive and exclusionary" because it does not extend equal remedial protection to individuals from non-reserved or general categories. This ignores that caste is not a neutral social marker operating symmetrically across society. It is a deeply entrenched system of hierarchical ordering, sustained through material deprivation, social exclusion, and institutional bias. To insist that caste-based discrimination must be conceptualised as bidirectional to satisfy equality norms is to ignore the structural reality of caste as a system of dominance. Such an approach risks converting equality law into an instrument that neutralises, rather than dismantles, entrenched disadvantage.

The Court was concerned with the possibility of misuse of this clause. A lawyer for the petitioners argued that, in case a general category candidate, who is in his or her first year, is subjected to ragging by a second-year SC student and lodges a complaint against the latter, the latter may use Clause 3(c) to file a cross-case on caste-based discrimination. The invocation of potential misuse has historically functioned as a rhetorical device to resist equality-enhancing measures, particularly those that disrupt existing hierarchies. Even assuming that there will be some cases in which the regulations are misused, the response has to be through strong mechanisms to punish those lodging baseless complaints.

The Court also seems to have, with respect, altogether misunderstood the definition of "segregation" in the Regulations. The Regulations state that Higher Education Institutions shall ensure that any selection, segregation, or allocation for hostels, classrooms, mentorship groups, or any other academic purposes is

transparent, fair, and non-discriminatory. The Court interprets this to mean that the Regulations call for maintenance of separate caste-based hostels when that is the very thing the Regulations seek to prohibit. To my mind, this clause would cover situations in which, for instance, a scheduled caste or disabled candidate is not given hostel accommodation along with her able-bodied or general category peers. The Court's understanding of the clause, to mean that they call for separation amongst different groups, is not borne out by the text or purpose of the clause.

The Court also raises concerns about the omission of "ragging" as a specific category of discrimination in the 2026 Regulations, suggesting a regressive step vis-à-vis the 2012 framework. The definition of discrimination in Clause 3(e) of the Regulations is broad enough to cover ragging, regardless of the caste of the perpetrator or victim. Therefore, this concern is misplaced. Even if the Court felt that ragging needed to expressly be included as a form of

prohibited treatment, it could have insisted that the same be added to the Regulations, rather than staying them altogether.

Perhaps the most troubling is the decision to keep the 2026 Regulations in abeyance in their entirety, while reviving the 2012 Regulations through the Court's extraordinary powers. Interim measures are not neutral. In equality contexts, delay itself can constitute harm. By freezing a reformist regulatory framework aimed at promoting equity, the Court effectively privileges a status quo that has demonstrably failed to prevent identity-based exclusion, student suicides, and institutional indifference. Substantive equality recognises that maintaining existing arrangements in the face of proven disadvantage is not a neutral act, but consciously freezes an unjust status quo. It is hoped that the Court will course-correct in future hearings and build in safeguards and guardrails wherever required, rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

INSCRUTABLE CHINA

When purges create a power vacuum

Last week, China's most powerful military leader, Gen Zhang Youxia, was purged, along with the Joint Chief of Staff, Gen Liu Zhenli, on charges of "serious violations of party discipline and law". Sacking of top military officers in China is not new. However, the latest round leaves all military members out of the nodal Central Military Commission (CMC), barring Gen Zhang Shengmin, who is known for his political rather than combat work. Today, China has no full-fledged higher military command.

At the fourth plenum of the 20th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), held last year, 12 high-ranking officers were confirmed as expelled. Since the ascendancy of President Xi Jinping in 2012, over 160 General-level senior officers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have been investigated. In all, ten CMC members, including four vice chairmen, were sacked.

The scale of purges in the PLA indicates that corruption – paying superior officers bribes to secure higher ranks, diverting budgetary allocations, procuring weapon systems, misusing funds, smuggling goods in military vehicles, and the like – has become rampant. This may have impacted military outcomes: the PLA has been unable to fight wars since the drubbing it took in the Vietnam War in 1979. Post-Galwan border skirmishes with India have proved to be costly, with estimated losses of around \$150 billion.

Zhang Youxia, reportedly, had many differences with Xi, despite their "princeling" affinity since the 1960s. Reports said Zhang confronted Xi on the latter's plans for a 4th term as General Secretary of the CCP. The next party congress is due in October 2027; the 5th plenary session scheduled this year will see moves to designate the upcoming members. Xi has not announced a successor, thus increasing uncertainty in the CCP, which now has a depleting lineup of senior leaders – Li Keqiang, once seen as the most influential leader in the party after Xi, died in 2023.

Xi and Zhang are also reported to have differed on Taiwan, the standoff with Japan over the Senkaku Islands, and the territorial dispute with India. The PLA's combat limitations were exposed in its inability to contain the Philippines at Scarborough Shoal and India at Galwan. While Xi has made the incorporation of Taiwan a part of the vision for a larger China, Taiwan's military is formidable, and any invasion by the PLA is estimated to cause heavy casualties, besides impacting the CCP and China at a time when the country is on the rise as a global force. It has been reported that Zhang tried to dissuade Xi from initiating military action.

The General is said to have had issues with Xi over undue favours extended to military officials such as He Weidong, Miao Hua, and Wei Fenghe (all have been purged). This has disrupted the military ranks, leading to a weakening of the higher command.

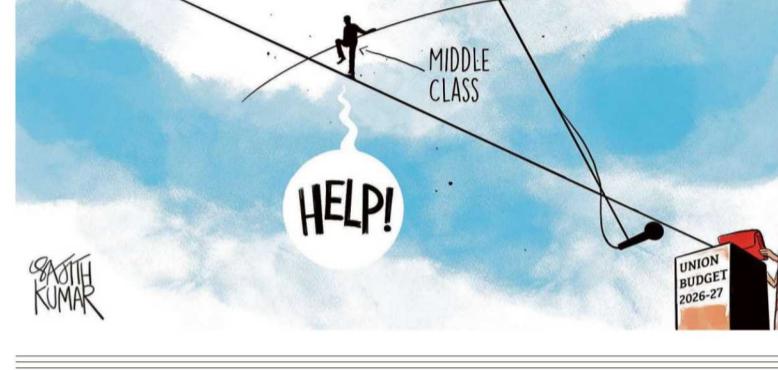
Xi's supporters have accused Zhang of not following an established convention in the CMC – that the rank and file have to be "absolutely loyal, absolutely pure, and absolutely reliable" to the Chairman and the CCP. Since 1982, this line has been institutionalised; it was amended recently to remove any leverage for the vice chairmen, thus consolidating Xi's authority. This opens up a charge of "insubordination" against Zhang.

This internal rift in China comes in the wake of the Donald Trump administration's deal with Xi at Busan last October on trade, tariffs, and rare earth metals. More significantly, the US National Security Strategy has toned down postures of "strategic competition", with President Trump going to the extent of referencing the 'G-2' with China, strengthening Xi's position.

The US's new focus on consolidating influence in the Western Hemisphere leaves China a free hand in the Taiwan Straits and the South and East China Seas. But the CMC has no combat-experienced member, and the PLA is in churn and precariously placed. The Taiwan situation can lead to two possible scenarios: an invasion may be ruled out, given the potential resistance and perceived losses, or a high-risk mission may be initiated, with local commanders complying with no questions asked. The purge of Zhang and the other PLA officers points to severe political and military rifts and a climate of mistrust. For India, a fragile peace prevails on its border with China after disengagement and patrolling agreements were reached in October 2024. Nevertheless, since no forward movement has been made on the de-induction of troops, India needs to watch the evolving China situation closely.



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THE LIVING STREAM

Can Mysuru retain its soul?

"The expressway should never have been built," the cab driver declared categorically on my way back from Mysuru a few days ago. "Hundreds of cars pour into the city on Saturdays and Sundays. The traffic in the city is unbearable."

There was indeed a time when Bangaloreans made fun of anyone complaining of a traffic jam in Mysuru. But I noticed the terrible traffic myself this time. I was in Mysuru earlier this week to participate in Uttarayana, an annual cultural festival launched this year by the Jagannatha Centre for Arts and Culture, an elegant new venue for performing arts, lectures, conversations, and art exhibitions.

"It is already Bengaluru!" a staunch Mysurean exclaimed during this trip. "It's not that bad." I tried to reason. "No, it is!" He held firm.

The population of Mysuru city had expanded at a modest pace for many decades. Between 1961 and 2001, it grew by roughly 10,000 to 15,000 people annually, and by about 20,000 per year over the following two decades. The increase in the number of people had been slow and gradual. New neighbourhoods emerged alongside the older ones without shaking up the cultural ethos of the city.

At present, Mysuru has a population of 13.5 lakh – roughly a tenth of Bengaluru's. But if the housing layouts spiralling outward along the city's arterial roads are any indication – and if the viral real-estate reels urging Bengaluru's residents to buy plots in Mysuru are any indication – its population is set to rise dramatically from now on.

For decades, Mysuru saw large numbers of visitors only during the annual Dasara celebrations. Since the turn of the century, about

30,000 yoga enthusiasts, mostly from abroad, visit the city during the cooler months of the year to train in yoga. Dozens of hip cafes, bakeries, and gourmet restaurants have emerged to cater to this clientele and indeed the newness-hungry locals. The opening of the Bengaluru-Mysuru expressway three years ago, however, has ushered in a dark shift, as new wealth, fast cars, and the weekend-escape-itch engulf Mysuru in traffic week after week.

Beyond its unhurried pace and wide avenues shaded by old, stately trees, Mysuru has long charmed visitors with its palaces, museums, St. Philomena's Church, the Masjid-

Chandan Gowda
The Vidyashilp Professor
looks for new ways of
looking
✉ @Chandan_Gowda

e-Azam, the Devaraja Market, legendary eateries, and its much-loved zoo. But precautionary measures to ensure the health of these heritage sites are nowhere in sight. Elementary conservation efforts would have included zoning laws to prohibit high-rise construction in the vicinity of Mysuru's more than 130 heritage sites, which not only threatens their structural stability but also disrupts the historic skyline and character of the city. Traffic noise and pollution pose serious threats to the health of these sites too.

Adding to the pressures on Mysuru's heritage and cultural ethos, the Greater Mysuru City Corporation (GMCC) proposal envisions a massive expansion of the city's boundaries. Introduced by the BJP state government in 2008 and revived last year by the present government, the proposal

seeks to redraw Mysuru's limits by absorbing 110 surrounding villages, almost quadrupling the city's area from 86 to 333 square kilometres. A peripheral ring road to ease traffic, new housing layouts, new water supply and drainage networks, and a Metro line are all part of the plan.

Last December, members of the Chamundi village panchayat, the head priest of the Chamundeshwari temple, and local environmental activists met Chief Minister Siddaramaiah to seek exemption from the GMCC for their area. They argued that both the forests of Chamundi Hill and the temple stood to be damaged otherwise. The Chief Minister, who had reiterated only weeks earlier that the Greater Mysuru plans would not harm the city's rich heritage, agreed to consider the appeal.

Two days ago, several groups gathered in protest against the construction projects underway on Chamundi Hill. Approved in 2022 under the ingeniously titled PRASAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive) scheme and co-financed by the Central and state governments, the recently commenced work is believed to threaten the Chamundi reserve forest and harm the foundation of the Chamundeshwari temple. Activists have put forward safer alternative uses for the Rs 60 crore sanctioned for the project.

Responsible urbanisation needn't be an impossible task: it demands a set of imaginative architects, urban planners, historians, ecologists, and energy specialists committed to ecological wisdom, local aesthetic traditions, and social equity to steer the process. The alternative is to watch the vested interests prevail and resign ourselves to living amid the ruins.

THE BIG LENS

Raising trade, with a strategic bonus

Geopolitical pressures can prove strikingly detrimental to the planned social and economic growth of nations. The United States' tariff war, which targets India and several other emerging economies, has pushed these countries towards alternatives in the short run, while devising roadmaps for the long term. Free trade agreements and comprehensive partnerships with individual countries and economic blocs are responses that are necessitated by the times. India has been negotiating a trade partnership with the European Union (EU) for nearly two decades.

US President Donald Trump, in his characteristic style, has undermined the EU on three counts. First, he initiated action in Venezuela while keeping the EU in the dark; second, he made repeated claims to take over Greenland and threatened the EU with dire consequences if it intervened; third, he proposed a US-Russia-Ukraine tripartite talk on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, sidelining the EU, which has, so far, been supporting Ukraine with money and material.

Never before has the European bloc been under such pressure to look beyond the EU to safeguard its economy and its security and strategic interests. It has furthered these very interests by formalising the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with India. The "Mother of All Deals" marks a historic pivot global trade as it promises to create a trade corridor that accounts for roughly 25% of the global GDP and one-third of global trade.

At a time when geopolitical dynamics are defined by conflicts and flashpoints, fractured supply and value chains which have not been fully repaired since COVID, and countries increasingly adopting protectionist positions, the FTA is more than an economic agreement. For the EU, the agreement, when ratified and signed in the coming months, will be an insurance against the Trump administration's weaponisation of tariffs. It secures a durable foothold in the world's fastest-growing major economy and advances Brussels' drive to de-risk critical supply chains.

For India, this lays a new democratic foundation as a counterweight to China's State-centric trade model. China's aggressive economic engagements in India's immediate, extended, and distant neighbourhoods have created a complex situation, greatly impacting the present government's 'neighbourhood first' policy. The FTA is a strategic move that positions India to efficiently deal with Trump's tariff war and reduce the over-reliance on both the US and China. The agreement was accompanied by a security and defence partnership, a rather unusual step for the EU, signalling a turn towards deeper maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and potential joint defence manufacturing.

However, the agreement is not going to be easy to put into practice, considering the EU's stringent and complex regulatory framework. Several Indian manufacturers will find compliance with the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) extremely difficult; this could adversely impact exports in steel, aluminium, cement, and chemicals. The EU has also been insistent on its partners adhering to the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Plus provisions, such as extended periods of data exclusivity. India has emerged as a key global player in generic medicines and has been providing affordable medicines to a large section of its economically backward population. It will need to wait before a comprehensive assessment of the agreement's fine print in the context of these provisions.

The regulatory asymmetry is even more stark when it comes to the EU's capital-intensive and technology-oriented manufacturing and exports, as against India's labour-intensive, tax-heavy private sector, and labour-oriented MSME sectors that are perennially starved of capital and innovation. The FTA seeks to allow greater market access for several products which are easily made in India or can be made with a little extra effort. At such a juncture, reducing tariffs can directly hit a large number of Indian startups and small and medium-scale industries that are already under severe strain due to the surge of cheap and unrestricted Chinese imports.

Also, a low or zero-tariff trade system may open up the market to a flurry of EU goods and services, impacting India's indigenisation push across the sectors.

The Indian government will have to urgently initiate measures to facilitate the private and MSME sectors to improve their standing and scope in cost-effective manufacturing, without compromising on the quality. This shift will be possible only with optimum utilisation of industrial automation. The trade deal is the beginning of a landmark partnership that goes beyond commercial stakes for the two camps and formalises important strategic collaborations. However, for the results to show, both the industry and the government need to align on multiple points.

POORVA PAKSHA

A paradise of albatrosses

many of us in school, made the albatross the enduring symbol of this duality. The bird arrives as a blessing, guiding the ship through impenetrable ice, only to be shot on impulse and hung, dead, around the mariner's neck – a self-inflicted curse that outlasts the storm. In contemporary India, we carry similar albatrosses, often not imposed by others but chosen and renewed by ourselves. Privileged castes cling to advantages long after justice demands their surrender; voters and leaders remain loyal to dynastic politics long after democratic vitality has drained away; we mourn the betrayed constitutional ideals yet rarely confront the source of that betrayal. These are not private failings, but systemic burdens that we voluntarily refresh in the name of tradition or security, even as they pull the Republic deeper into stratified despair.

This reminds me of the insidious albatross paradox – sometimes wryly called "birds of a paradise". It is a philosophical thought exper-

iment that exposes the absurdity of choice in a supposed utopia. Imagine a true paradise: scarcer, eradicating conflict, eliminated, perfect equity achieved. No one lacks anything; no one suffers injustice; every need is met without struggle or competition. All meaningful problems have been solved. Only one trivial task remains: you must feed one of two albatrosses standing in front of you. The birds are identical in every way – appearance, health, temperament. Feeding the left or the right changes nothing for the world or for you. It's an ultimately inconsequential outcome.

But you must choose. The human mind, built for purpose and justification, cannot simply abstain or declare the options equal. You hesitate, invent distinctions, weigh phantom consequences, and finally decide – then you craft elaborate reasons to convince yourself that the choice mattered. A trivial act becomes a persistent demand to find meaning where none exists. This paradox distils Albert Camus' idea

of the absurd: the painful collision between our hunger for meaning and a universe that offers none.

A just Republic is meant to be humanity's nearest approach to paradise – a system crafted to deliver equality, fairness, and shared prosperity. Instead, it confronts us with endless arbitrary forks. Which policies to prioritise when resources are finite, which groups to accommodate in moments of compromise, which vision of the nation to elevate – these decisions often resemble the choice between identical birds. The long-term effects may be indistinguishable, yet we clothe them in ideological certainty, declaring one path morally superior while vilifying those who chose the other.

Beneath the messaging of "unity in diversity", lie exactly these forks: reservations, economic reforms, language policies – choices that in the future will boil down to left hand or right, but justified with grand narratives only serving to deepen fractures along caste, class,

region, and religion, the fraternal healing of which was the true goal of the Constitution and of our Republic.

Take a load off Fanny/ Take a load for free/ Take a load off Fanny/ And you put the load right on me/

Sedition laws linger, critical media voices are muted, environmental disasters displace the vulnerable, and policy repeatedly tilts towards the powerful. These burdens continue calcifying: inequality normalised as inevitable, arbitrary governance rebranded as pragmatism. Why do we keep carrying weights the Constitution explicitly promised that we could lay down?

We can challenge the absurd choices pressed upon us and demand a true reckoning with the burdens that mock our founding ideals. The albatross, after all, is built for flight despite its size; it reminds us that we, too, are capable of rising even while carrying weight.

Take a load off Fanny, take a load for free.



Aakash Singh Rathore
as Dr Jekyll is a Professor of Philosophy, Politics and Law, author and editor of over 20 books and counting, and as Mr Hyde, one of India's top-ranking Ironman triathletes

✉ @ASR_metta

Opinion

The Stigma of Labour

A social order built on the delegitimisation of work

Structural Injustice
Zahid Sultan
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In a society that has perfected the art of romanticising suffering while actively sabotaging dignity, the sight of a young woman selling omelettes and momos on the streets of Batamaloo is not merely an anecdote - it is an indictment. It unsettles because it violates the carefully constructed moral theatre of Kashmir, where education is fetishised but labour is despised, where ambition is applauded in theory but punished in practice, and where dignity is spoken of endlessly yet denied to those who earn it with their hands. The young woman, a civil services aspirant, by aspiration, and a street vendor by survival, does not merely sell food; she exposes the rot in our collective conscience. Her act is radical not because it is extraordinary, but because it is honest.

We are conditioned to believe that aspiration and labour must occupy separate moral universes. The civil services aspirant is expected to inhabit libraries, coaching centres, and drawing rooms filled with borrowed optimism. The street vendor, in contrast, is relegated to the margins - useful, tolerated, but never respected. By standing at a roadside stall with a pan and a ladle while simultaneously preparing for one of the most competitive examinations in the State, this woman collapses that artificial divide. She refuses to perform poverty the way society demands it be performed - silently, submissively, and with shame. In doing so, she disrupts a deeply entrenched hierarchy that equates worth with whitened collars and unemployment with "preparation."

What makes her story particularly unsettling is not the hardship she faces, but the clarity with which she articulates it. When she says it is better to earn than to beg,

she is not delivering a slogan; she is holding up a mirror to a society that has normalised intellectual begging while vilifying physical work. Kashmir today is full of able-bodied men waiting - waiting for government notifications, waiting for references, waiting for miracles - while scorning any work that does not come with a designation or an air-conditioned room.

Education, we are told, is meant to liberate. But in Kashmir, education has increasingly become a waiting room - producing degrees without direction, aspirations without anchors. The civil services dream, noble as it may be, has become a convenient alibi for prolonged economic dependency. Preparation stretches into years, sometimes decades, with families absorbing the cost and society offering moral cover. This woman disrupts that arrangement. She prepares without surrendering her present to an abstract future. She refuses the false binary between ambition and survival. That refusal exposes how deeply unserious we have become about both.

Her story also punctures the myth that dignity is bestowed from above. Dignity is not something granted by the state, by institutions, or by benevolent elites. It is forged in the act of standing upright when circumstances demand compromise. The dignity in her work does not come from public applause or viral videos; it comes from her refusal to internalise shame. That is what terrifies society the most - because shame has long been its primary instrument of control.

Kashmir's public discourse is saturated with lamentation. We speak endlessly of lost opportunities, broken systems, and betrayed generations. All of that is true. But lamentation has also become a refuge from responsibility. Her presence forces a reckoning: what do we do when someone chooses action over articulation? Do we support her materially, or do we merely circulate her story as emotional content before returning to our inertia? Too often, inspiration is consumed the way entertainment is brief, passively, and without consequence.

This is not a fairy tale of individual triumph over structural injustice. To frame it as such would be dishonest and cruel. She should not have to do this. No young woman with academic

ambition should be forced into precarity to survive. But acknowledging that truth does not diminish the significance of her choice; it amplifies it. She does not romanticise struggle. She endures it with eyes open, without theatrics, without self-pity. That sobriety is what lends her story its moral force.

What she ultimately offers is not hope in the abstract, but a challenge - particularly to a society that has learned to speak eloquently about dignity while systematically undermining it. She asks, without shouting, whether we are willing to respect labour when it is performed by those we otherwise patronise. Whether we can accept that self-worth does not require institutional validation.

Whether we can finally abandon the lie that some forms of work are beneath us.

Her stall in Batamaloo is not just a place of livelihood; it is a site of confrontation. It confronts our class prejudices, our gender anxieties, our moral laziness. It confronts a generation that wants outcomes without process, status without effort, and dignity without labour. And in that confrontation, she does not ask for sympathy. She demands recognition - not as a symbol, but as a citizen who has chosen to live without begging, in a society that has made begging respectable and work disgraceful.

The real danger is not that a young woman has been pushed to sell food on the streets while preparing for civil services; the real danger is that society finds this acceptable as long as it remains an exception, a spectacle, a momentary moral high. Kashmir has mastered the art of turning individual resilience into collective alibis. We celebrate stories like hers not to change conditions, but to absolve ourselves of the responsibility to challenge them. Her struggle becomes inspirational content, safely detached from the structural failures that necessitated it in the first place. This is where dignity is again betrayed - this time not through disdain, but through hollow applause.

The reaction to her story exposes how deeply performative our empathy has become. People share her video, praise her courage, and then proceed to discourage their own daughters and sons from similar work. Compliments flow easily; support does not. Very

few ask whether she has access to stable infrastructure, legal protection, healthcare, or academic support. Very few interrogate why a civil services aspirant must rely on street vending to survive in the first place. Sympathy, when it does not translate into solidarity, becomes another form of exploitation. Her pain is consumed, not confronted.

There is also a deeper class anxiety at play. Her visibility unsettles the middle-class moral order, which is built on a fragile illusion of upward mobility. For many families, the promise of education is not learning but escape - from manual labour, from the street, from precarity. When a woman who embodies academic ambition chooses visible labour, she threatens that illusion. She forces society to confront an uncomfortable truth: that education does not guarantee security, and that dignity cannot be outsourced to certificates. That is why her work is quietly policed through pity, unsolicited advice, and moral judgement. She is told to "focus only on studies," as if survival were a distraction rather than a necessity.

Her gender amplifies this discomfort. A man doing the same work might be pitied or ignored; a woman doing it is scrutinised. Her body, her presence, her choices become public property. This is how patriarchy adapts - it does not always prohibit; it disciplines. It allows women to work only within carefully sanctioned boundaries, and when those boundaries are crossed, it deploys shame as correction. That she persists anyway is what gives her story its enduring force. She refuses to ask for permission to survive.

But admiration alone is not enough. If her story is to mean anything beyond momentary inspiration, it must provoke a collective rethinking of how we value work. Kashmir cannot afford its current moral economy, where unemployment is normalised and labour is stratified by perceived prestige. A society that teaches its youth to despise honest work while waiting endlessly for scarce opportunities is not merely failing them; it is sabotaging its own future. Her insistence on earning rather than begging cuts through this malaise with brutal clarity.

Begging, in this context, is not

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The civil services dream, noble as it may be, has become a convenient alibi for prolonged economic dependency. Preparation

stretches into years, sometimes decades, with families absorbing the cost and society offering moral cover.

just literal - it is metaphorical. It is the dependence on connections, favours, political patrons, and moral charity. It is the quiet surrender of agency in exchange for temporary relief. By rejecting that path, she exposes how deeply embedded it has become in our social fabric. Her labour is not just a means of income; it is a declaration of independence in a society that has grown comfortable with dependence.

There is also an uncomfortable lesson here for political discourse. Much of Kashmir's rhetoric revolves around rights, dignity, and justice - and rightly so. But rights without a culture of work, dignity without economic agency, and justice without self-respect become abstractions. Her life demonstrates that dignity is not postponed until conditions improve; it is practised despite conditions. This does not absolve the state or institutions of responsibility, but it does challenge the fatalism that has paralysed collective action.

What she ultimately represents is not a solution, but a warning. A warning that if society continues to vilify labour, romanticise unemployment, and outsource responsibility to narratives of suffering, it will produce more despair, not less. A warning that gender equality cannot be proclaimed while women are punished for economic independence. A warning that education divorced from livelihood becomes cruelty disguised as hope.

Her stall in Batamaloo is temporary; her lesson should not be. The real test is not whether her story goes viral, but whether it changes conversations in homes, classrooms, and public spaces. Whether parents stop discouraging honest work. Whether young men stop equating dignity with inactivity. Whether society finally recognises that no work done with integrity is beneath anyone.

Until then, her quiet defiance will continue to stand in contrast to our loud hypocrisy. She will keep working, not because she wants to be celebrated, but because survival leaves no room for illusions. And in doing so, she will continue to expose a society that speaks endlessly of dignity, yet trembles when confronted with someone who actually lives it.

Zahid Sultan, Kashmir based Independent Researcher

More than just news

A cup of tea in one hand and a newspaper in the other every morning



and irreplaceable is the newspaper. Newspapers hold an important place in our lives. The first printed newspaper dates back to the early seventeenth century, when it was formally published in 1605 in Germany. Since then, newspapers have remained a reliable source of news for mankind. Even in today's digital age, newspapers continue to play a vital role in shaping society. A newspaper is not just a collection of news. It is a powerful tool that informs, educates, and guides people. For students, elders, and common citizens, reading newspapers daily helps in understanding the world better and becoming responsible individuals.

One of the greatest benefits of newspapers is that they provide reliable and well-organized information. Newspapers cover national news, international events, sports, education, science, health, and culture. Newspapers are meant for everyone, irrespective of age. They contain content for teenagers, the young, the elderly, and even children, making them suitable for all. A reader gets to know what is happening not only in their own country but also across the world. This helps people stay aware and alert. Awareness is the first step towards progress, and newspapers play an important role in building this awareness.

For students, reading newspapers enhances reading skills and develops a habit of learning every day. When students read newspapers regularly, they come across new words, ideas, and facts and generate new thoughts. This naturally improves vocabulary.

Newspapers are a strong pillar of democracy. They act as a bridge between the government and the people. Through news reports and investigations, newspapers keep a watch over those in power. They

Newspapers are not merely tools for reading news. They also raise social awareness by highlighting issues such as poverty, unemployment, education, women empowerment, environmental protection, and public health. When these topics are discussed regularly, people become more sensitive towards society and understand their duties as citizens. Many social reforms and movements in history were supported by newspapers that raised public voices against injustice, whether during the freedom movement or other social reforms.

Newspapers are also a major source of promotional activities. Companies, businesses, and even governments advertise their services, schemes, products, and achievements through newspapers to reach the public.

In today's time, many people prefer digital news through mobile phones and social media. While technology has made information faster, it has also increased the spread of fake news and misinformation. Newspapers follow proper rules and verification processes before publishing news, which makes them more trustworthy. Reading newspapers helps people stay away from rumours and false information. Newspaper reading also builds discipline. It encourages people to spend time with meaningful content every day and creates a positive routine.

Apart from serious news, newspapers provide useful daily information. Weather reports help farmers and travellers. Job advertisements guide the youth in finding employment. Notices, public announcements, and educational updates help people plan

their daily activities. Sports news entertains readers and inspires young players. Thus, newspapers serve multiple purposes on a single platform.

While growing up, my elders often stressed the importance of reading newspapers. They would say that newspapers offer more than just news. Officers and teachers also suggest reading newspapers to stay updated with current affairs. It is often said that a newspaper is an old man's companion cum immunity, with mornings beginning with tea in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

Although this habit is less common today, newspapers have adapted with time. From printed pages to digital screens, newspapers continue to exist. Today, it may be tea in one hand and a phone in the other, but the role of newspapers remains unchanged, it is still there on digital screen in hand.

Newspapers are more than just papers filled with news. They are instruments of knowledge, awareness, and social responsibility. For students, they are teachers. For citizens, they are guides. In a world full of noise and confusion, newspapers offer clarity and truth. Developing a habit of reading newspapers daily can help individuals grow intellectually and morally. A well-informed person is a strong pillar of society, and newspapers play a key role in creating such individuals.

While continuing my opinion on newspapers, I would like to share some important suggestions and a roadmap to easily implement newspapers in schools purely for the sake of children.

Newspaper
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Recently, Rajasthan has made newspapers compulsory in schools. This is a praiseworthy step to encourage reading and writing habits among students. Newspapers not only help to improve knowledge of current affairs, general knowledge, and language skills, but also provide deep enlightenment. They help keep students mentally fit and protect them from the negative effects of mobile phones. Mobiles don't provide specific, scrutinized content and can be harmful in many ways, whereas newspapers contribute to all-round development. Just take the newspaper home, make it a routine, and build daily awareness in just a few minutes. The aim is to promote awareness and develop a habit of staying updated with the news from an early age.

With the evolution of technology, means of communication and information have also changed. Some methods improved, some disappeared, and some were replaced. However, one medium that has remained intact



LOKMAT TIMES

Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman deserves to be congratulated for presenting the Budget for seven consecutive years. In a few hours, she will be presenting her eighth Budget. But even at the last minute, literally, I have a question to ask her: Are you now willing to take risks that would propel India to the next economic level?

A leading corporate magnate recently told me that the government repeatedly asks businessmen to increase their risk appetite. He said that Indians, as born entrepreneurs, thrive on risk. But is the risk worth it in a milieu where failure is conflated with fraud, and even success is threatened with predatory investigative agencies if one is perceived to be not fully towing the government line? According to available statistics, between 2014 and 2024, 43,000 High Net-worth Individuals (HNIs) left India for Singapore, UAE, Australia, Canada and the US, taking with them personal wealth estimated to be in the billions of dollars. In 2025 alone, approximately 26.8 billion dollars of personal wealth is estimated to have migrated out of India. Most of those

leaving are young, and among the reasons cited by them is an unsafe business environment and arbitrary scrutiny by tax authorities and investigative agencies. Nirmala ji, can you risk dismantling the system that creates these apprehensions, to create greater investor confidence?

For two terms, the Narendra Modi government has had an absolute majority, and currently enjoys a stable majority. Our fiscal deficit is under control, inflation is largely contained, foreign reserves are strong, and at over 6 per cent, we are one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Now is the time to expedite economic reforms, and create greater Ease of Doing Business, where we still rank 63rd in the 2020 World Bank global index. Some reforms have been implemented, but far more lie on the backburner – including land and labour law reforms, and the plethora of obsolete regulations that nurture corruption which is still rampant. Nirmala ji, although many years have been less than optimally utilised for this purpose, can the government, at least now, take the risk of radically furthering the reform agenda, not through statements of

Nirmala ji, are you willing to take risks?

The real issue is the mismatch between skills and opportunities

CHANAKYA'S VIEW



Pavan K Varma

intent, but verifiable change on the ground?

True, the global environment is volatile, and many coordinates which were earlier predictable, can no longer be taken for granted. But in dealing with this situation, India can only compete if it is an attractive destination for FDI, and for production lines that are seeking a more competitive, safer and easier business environment. Proceeding full speed with more economic reforms and Ease of Doing Business is the need of the hour. Also, we need to do more to invest in R&D and encourage innovation (where we are still ranked 33rd out of 133 countries), because in a hostile world, Indians must invent the wheel itself instead of being a cog in that of somebody else's.

Secondly, will the government take the political risk of reducing its overreliance on doles, subsidies and income support without corresponding production and employment pathways. Yes, in a society as unequal as India's, some degree of social protection is both humane and economically rational. But the real challenge is to convert these supports into springboards – not permanent sustenance, but platforms from which people climb into secure employment or enterprise. Nirmala ji, is the government ready



to take the risk for such structural reforms?

Also, how do you propose to resolve unemployment when automation and AI threaten to displace labour even as they create new opportunities? Routine tasks in manufacturing, logistics and even services are being performed by machines. Here, the real issue is the mismatch between skills and opportunities. A farmer with decades of experience in paddy transplantation does not suddenly become employable in an AI ecosystem without structured re-skilling. India's young workforce offers a demographic dividend only if education and vocational training are radically reimagined. Moreover, India's manufacturing share in GDP has long hovered at around 15-17 per cent, with structural constraints like logistics bottlenecks, compliance costs and

inconsistent policies. Nirmala ji, can the government take the risk, even in the age of AI, to radically incentivise labour-intensive manufacturing, and skill development, to reduce unemployment?

The Indian middle class is anxious – not just about income, but about vulnerability to health shocks, education costs, retirement insecurity, job instability, housing affordability, childcare support and student loan reforms. A secure middle class spends, invests and educates its children – all of which fuel aggregate demand and human capital formation. Nirmala ji, can the government take the risk of doing more for the middle class, instead of the usual tokenism of a few minor tax concessions?

Agriculture employs nearly half of India's workforce yet contributes less than a fifth of GDP. The struc-

tural imbalance is unsustainable, and a key reason for our still pervasive poverty. The plateau in agricultural productivity calls for a fresh wave of innovation – climate-resilient seeds, precision irrigation, post-harvest infrastructure and market linkages that eliminate middlemen. Nirmala ji, can the Budget take the risk of initiating a concrete plan for a second Green Revolution, instead of tinkering with a few schemes here and there?

The number of billionaires in India is growing, but we also have too many of the unacceptably poor. We may be the world's third largest economy, our per capita income global rankings in 2025 is abysmal: 136th to 146th on a nominal basis, and 119th to 125th on a Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) basis. In the 2025 Global Hunger Index – although the government discounts such ratings – India ranks at 102nd out of 123 countries, placing us in the 'serious' hunger category. Any economy must endeavour to lift all boats, not only those visible at high tide, but also those mired – for too long – in the sand. Nirmala ji, can you, in your Budget vision this time, take the risk of not only balancing figures on a page, but like the landmark liberalisation of the economy in 1991, kick-start major policy changes?

The author is a diplomat and former member of Rajya Sabha. Views expressed are personal.

Studying the urban informal sector

When people talk of urban issues, most writers and experts revolve around faulty urban planning, decreasing green cover, flooding, water and sanitation, traffic and pollution, etc.

This book which directly and indirectly touches upon the growing migration into cities and problems born out of them, however, focusses on the role of women in unorganised sectors across urban India. Essentially dealing with poor women who, the authors feel, are contributing to a sustainable future for urban India.

Rapid urbanisation in various states, including Gujarat, is resulting in the informal sector facing many challenges with little support from any official agency, especially the municipal corporations. With higher spendings in cities by the government, many families have given up on their traditional jobs or agriculture and associated vocations to move to cities in the hope of better living conditions and income sources.

Authors Renana Jhabvala and Bijal Brahmbhatt are associated with the MHT and SEWA which was founded in 1972 by legendary social worker Ela Bhatt.

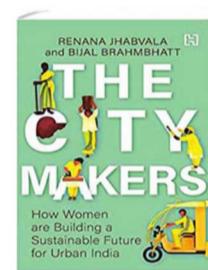
Renana has been consistently advocating for pro-women policies relating to poor women and the informal economy in India and South Asia. She is a Padma Shri awardee and her co-

Book: *The City Makers*
Authors: Renana Jhabvala & Bijal Brahmbhatt
Publishers: Hachette India
Pages: 194
Price: ₹399 (Paperback)

BOOK REVIEW



Abhilash Khandekar



author Bijal is working to get equitable housing rights for the urban poor. She fights for affordable housing through policy interventions.

Both have written about MHT's arduous journey of the past 25 years. Authors underline the urgency to shift official focus on the needs of the informal sector such as 'achieving universalisation of service provisioning in the face of increased rate of influx of migrants to the cities'.

The NGO is working across India, not just in Gujarat. The book tells true stories, drawn from the field, of the women in Jharkhand, MP, Rajasthan and other states in areas of acquiring land rights, building their own houses, access to water and ensuring proper electricity for poor women. It's all very tough for them.

Under the 'Pani, Gutter

and Sadak' chapter, authors describe the issue of a migrant woman in Rajasthan who moved from a small village outside Jodhpur. The Mata Kund Basti is where Shruti Devi lived after shifting to Jodhpur. MHT supported women like Shruti Devi through Integrated Housing and Slum Development Programme (IHSDP) and helped the local municipal corporation gain trust among slum dwellers like Shruti Devi. IHSDP was introduced by Manmohan Singh government in 2005; it was applicable to cities and towns which the mega urban renewal scheme JNNURM had not covered.

MHT worked with the planning commission (now NITI Aayog) for partly preparing the 12th Five Year Plan and had suggested that: 'Based on the NSSO report, the number of urban poor had increased by 34.4% from 1973 to 2004. As an overriding principle, people should be brought to the heart of the urban agenda, for both deciding the vision of the city and for choosing the processes of reaching goals. This implies that all citizens have access to basic services of clean water, sanitation, sewage, solid waste management, roads, safe and affordable housing and a clean and healthy environment.'

The author is a senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.

SPIRITUAL INSIGHT



Rajyogi Brahmakumar Nikunjji

This would also remind him or her that this life can come to an end any moment and we should not postpone good acts but engage ourselves in them soulfully.

fact of life that the mood of giving up negative habits or evil intentions that overtake man for a while, on such occasions, is only evanescent and like white froth on the surface of dirty water and, very soon, one takes again to wanton and wild ways.

Whatever be one's philosophy of life, a sure truth is that a person's love, kindness and acts of devoted service to the deprived and the depressed masses pave the path of one's moral progress and enable one to pay one's debt to the society, to



leave a lasting impact on the sands of time and to earn the blessings of thousands or millions of men and women.

So, the reward for one's virtues is greater than the reward for any other thing. And, since the aforementioned virtues are considered as sublime or angelic, people reward such a person generously with their heart-felt devotion and ever-growing respect. One of these lessons could be learnt by asking the self this question: If a human being is a mere body and

things that are material? Aren't moral considerations often in conflict with attractions that relate to flesh, thus indicating that the two are separate? Does not sometimes a person think of sacrificing life (body and brain) for a moral cause? Can a social order be run merely on the belief that man is an evolved form of matter? Do the moral and ethical principles not pertain to something that aspires for a higher and nobler order and makes efforts to be above the bondages of the material world?

If one argues with oneself on these or similar lines and takes into consideration the reported accounts of reincarnations, hypnotic regressions, near-death and out-of-body experiences and the nature of moral values that are meant to regulate the body and the brain and are non-physical and of a higher order, then one will easily

conclude that the real actor in the drama of life is a non-material entity, called the soul, self or atman. The body serves the purpose of a costume and also as an assemblage of instruments that are required by the soul to act and to make efforts.

The body also serves as a medium for experiencing pleasure and pain. If one adopts this mother truth of all truths, one would be above all kinds of sorrow and miseries and would be able to play well one's part to the satisfaction of the self, the people and the master above all. This would also remind him or her that this life can come to an end any moment and we should not postpone good acts but engage ourselves in them soulfully.

The author is a spiritual educator & popular columnist for publications across India, Nepal & UK. Views expressed are personal.

A reminder we choose to forget

The recent deaths of many notable personalities across the world witnessed a large number of VVIPs coming to pay their respects at their funerals. In each case, and thousands of people too paying their tributes and expressing their feeling of deprivation, shows how these personalities had carved a niche for themselves in the hearts of the people by their certain uncommon charismatic acts.

These events of the demise of world-famous personalities that saddened the hearts of millions and billions should indeed have provided people some moments for earnest introspection and deep reflection on their own personal life and acts.

If people developed this into a sort of a good habit to consider such occasions as hidden reminders by the Cosmic Order, by whatever name it be known, they would become more sane than mundane and profane and would, gradually, be uplifted to be themselves.

So, such events, seen in a right perspective, could have served as rungs of a ladder to rise high. Deaths of these personalities that gave their admirers a jolt, could have served to push them high but, lethargic as human nature is in this age, soon people would return to their earthly ambitions, petty objectives and most would again go into deep slumber of ignorance as before. For, this also is a

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No, Knowing How to Pronounce 'Hors D'oeuvres' Right Doesn't Make You Smarter

Being attracted to Western-themed goods and experiences can go to absurd lengths, but to truly make 'Mera Bharat Mahan', desi products and services should be winners purely on merit

WORD COUNTS



TUSHAR GORE

The announcement last month that Indian Railways will stop using the bandhgalas coat, citing its possible 'colonial roots,' as a uniform option, highlights the rawness about Indians espousing anything of 'colonial' origin. It's also emblematic of the strong desire to show pride in materials and designs of indigenous sources.

Attraction towards Western-themed goods and experiences is widespread. One such sought-after experience is food in a 'fancy' restaurant. Marathi playwright PL Deshpande has a comedy bit

describing the first experience of attempting to have a snack with his friends in post-Independence Mumbai at the 'high-end' café, Monginis.

He laments that their earlier experience of ordering tea and snacks at the local corner stalls had inadequately prepared them to master the menu and ordering systems of the 'high-end' café. Because of this lack of preparation and exposure, even reading the sign at the entrance, 'Monginis' filled them with the same dread that one feels when confronted with a 'Beware of the Dog' warning on the door of a house.

My upbringing in a Marathi Pune-based middle-class family proved to be an utterly deficient training program for handling such experiences. A move to the US for higher education and collaboration with American and European professors and subsequent work there did facilitate exposure to, and imbibing of, such experiences ranging from fine-dining to driving fast cars on German autobahns.

There were many screw-ups. But eventually, the faux pas frequency came down.

Even now, there are still some jitters at the outset of anything original, and often there's a feeling of 'not fitting into the crowd'. But the allure of such experiences remains.

Is this attraction a result of our subconscious being taken over by Macaulay's Machiavellian wiles? I think it's something simpler: We humans love shiny things. And Western themes simply offer us many such 'shiny' choices.

But what is the cause of this anxiety that Western-themed situations provoke? Is it rooted in some inferiority complex? Why

should we feel embarrassed at having to ask a few clarifying questions about the menu, the use of various cutlery items, or

the correct pronunciation of 'hors d'oeuvres'? After all, it's not a sign of superiority or intellect to know correct pronunciations of unfamiliar words. Or to know the appropriate usage of a few peculiarly shaped pieces of steel.

Another facet of humans is the ability to form groups and institute group-norms. Such norms serve to bind, but also to 'other' outsiders. Fundamentally, though, any such norms are just information –

analogous to a set of directions on a map, or to instructions for setting up some equipment. Possessing knowledge to 'read' these correctly does not correlate with superior abilities.

Now, it doesn't make sense to enter any setting completely unprepared, and thereby fall foul of even the basic rules and ethos of the environment. But some ignorance about the 'do's' and 'don'ts' doesn't automatically condemn someone as inferior. It's interesting that Western-themed information and norms are viewed as 'superior' to indigenous ones. Do visitors to India feel any hesitation or anxiety while proclaiming that they cannot speak 'Hindi' (sic) satisfactorily?

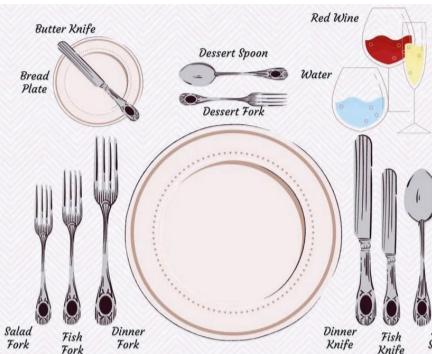
A natural impulse of a developing country is to showcase its achievements and growth. Another motivation is to demonstrate it detaching from any colonial tethers. Such messaging to show separation from colonial symbols is important. It

can help build the population's confidence. This confidence acts as a bulwark against the aforementioned anxiety.

The next step on the journey is to create indigenous offerings that rival those of Western origins. Words and messaging are not enough to accomplish this. Richness and quality of the offering have to match, and surpass, those offered in the West. The choices are vast – consumer goods, travel, restaurants, or any other services.

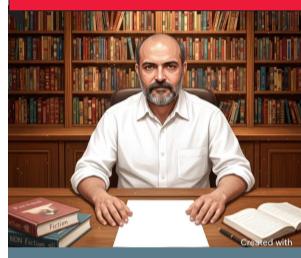
Products and services will be judged in the market purely on merit and must come out superior. Only then will 'Mera Bharat Mahan' – which currently has multiple interpretations as a statement of aspirations, a reflection of success in a few sectors, or a tribute to the nation's rich history – transition into a statement of fact.

The writer is MD, Resonance Laboratories, Bengaluru



WHY IT'S WAY SMARTER TO JUST USE YOUR HANDS

MEMORY STICK



SIDDHARTH CHOWDHURY

The Great Indian Non-Fiction Reading Cop-Out

Fiction is harder to enjoy, while Indian writing in English has turned anodyne

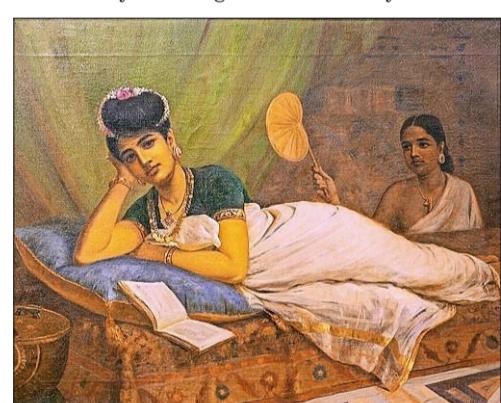
In a recent podcast, the CEO of an Indian publishing conglomerate revealed that 70% of its trade list is now non-fiction. A decade ago, fiction and non-fiction were evenly split. Three decades ago, a reputed publisher's backlist was dominated by fiction, with literary fiction conferring prestige on a trade house.

For novelists, this is grim news. But then, being a novelist has always been precarious. Writing fiction is not a skill so much as a benediction. You cannot do it on command, like an ophthalmologist performing multiple cataract surgeries a day, or a journeyman translator producing three books a year. Nor can you train for it, or earn a degree and emerge as a novelist.

I despair each time I hear that a friend's son or daughter has enrolled in a creative writing course, paying astronomical fees. I try, gently, to dissuade them: you do not need a degree to write fiction. Even a Salman Rushdie, as a professor of practice, cannot teach you how to write. At best, he could tell you whether you are a writer. But he wouldn't. Not in a private university classroom. That would be unprofessional. He would merely advise you to keep writing and to read fiction copiously, and that you might improve, eventually. Surely one need not attend graduate school in creative writing to do what can be done at a dining table for a fraction of the cost.

Many young writers, mostly from affluent families, tell me they enrol for being among their own kind. I tell them to get used to loneliness if they want to survive as writers. Being alone in a room, with your laptop and your thoughts, will be the default setting for most of your waking life.

Even in a crowd, you must train yourself to be alone with your thoughts. I solved many structural



WHATEVER HAPPENED TO RAGING, STYLISH NOVELS?

problems in my stories while correcting author contracts in my day job as an academic editor. Soon enough, solitude stops feeling like loneliness. As for being among one's own, a writer is better served by acquaintances who are robbers, lawyers, stockbrokers, and petty politicians of every hue.

If you are a writer of fiction, you must also be ambitious. And believe me, while coming up in the literary world, you won't have the time to strike friendships with fellow writers. It is only after you have written your first few novels that you will once again acknowledge people who are like you. You will tentatively seek the company of other writers. But rarely will it blossom into a true friendship.

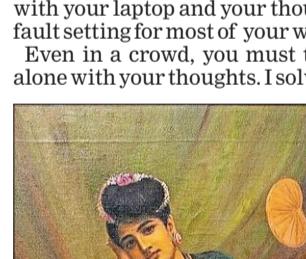
But why is non-fiction a safer bet? Is it because better quality non-fiction is being written now than it was before? Or has the quality of literary fiction gone down by a fair bit in the last decade? I think it is the latter more than the former.

Non-fiction has always been a safer bet because it's easier to produce. Even a mediocre non-fiction title will give you some sort of information about the times one lives in. But in fiction, only a superlative work would do the same. It is harder to produce. Also, fiction is harder to read. You need to have years of training in reading to enjoy literary fiction.

So, could it be that most novels published in India over the past decade are not literary at all, some perhaps not even novels? I sense a bland sameness in much of this fiction, a smothering of voice in the service of political correctness. The Indian novel in English has ceased to be provocative. The 'personal' has flourished while the 'political' has been banished. Is this because the personal novel is easier to teach in creative writing schools? I don't know.

But I hope the new year brings political fiction in Indian English, by young writers, that disturbs and excoriates me to the core.

FILM FATALE



ANNA MM VETTICAD

The Malayalam crime drama, Kalamkaval: The Venom Beneath, is an account of a psychopath – Stanley Das played by Mammootty – who lures women into sexual relationships before killing them. It is evidently inspired by Mohan Kumar a.k.a. Cyanide Mohan, the real-life serial killer from Karnataka convicted for murdering 20 women. Writer-director Jithin K Jose and his co-writer Jishnu Sreekumar are so focused on their male lead that they forget the essence of Mohan's strategy, which was to target young women by promising to marry them without dowry.

We gather from snippets of conversations that some of the women in Kalamkaval are widows or divorcees. But the film doesn't bother to write them with depth, making Kalamkaval an illustrative example of the damage done by shaving the politics off a story.

To understand the lost potential here, watch the 2023 Hindi streaming series Dahaad (Roar), which, too, drew on Cyanide Mohan's modus operandi and victim profile. That show created by Reema Kagti and Zoya Akhtar gave

equal prominence to the women's motivations as it did to the serial killer. Dahaad was about the crushing pressure that a conservative society places on women to get married, the burden of dowry on their families, and a woman's entire worth being measured by her marital status. The women in Dahaad were, consequently, emotionally fragile.

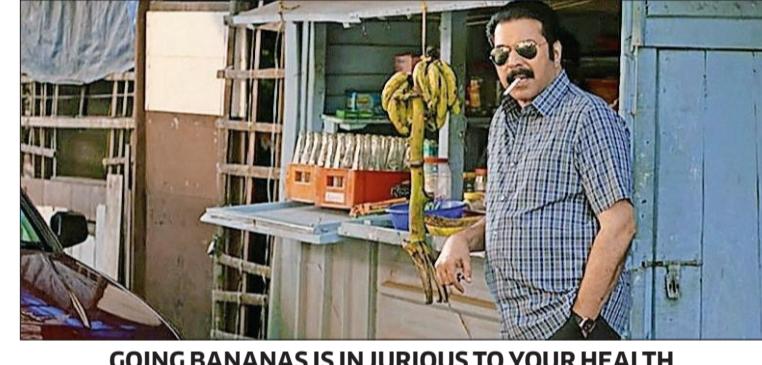
The killer preyed on them by tapping into their vulnerability. He got away with his crimes for a long time because when they went missing, especially if they left behind notes saying they were eloping to marry; most of their families were so relieved that they did not bother to find them. The series did not centre around the male murderer or his victims, but around a dalit po-

licewoman, played by Sonakshi Sinha, who, too, is being pestered to marry when she chances upon this case and cracks it.

In Kalamkaval, the police investigator is a man. There is not even an acknowledgement of the fact that Mammootty is about 40-50 years older than each of the female actors playing Stanley's victims. Women young enough to be his granddaughter simply fall for his character on masse, as they do with all senior Indian male superstars. Most of these women are not shown to be particularly vulnerable either.

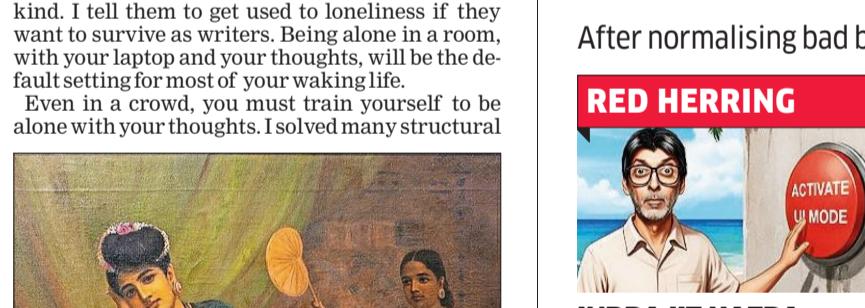
The result is that Kalamkaval is just a stylishly shot film that offers Mammootty, also its producer, a showcase for his formidable talent. The veteran imbues Stanley with a terrifying cold-

Kalamkaval is just a stylishly shot film that offers Mammootty (pic) a showcase for his formidable talent



GOING BANANAS IS INJURIOUS TO YOUR HEALTH

After normalising bad behaviour and civic sense, we 'suddenly' get worked up



INDRAJIT HAZRA

Being god's chosen people can go two ways. One, it can spur you on to great things – inventing the zero and bhel puri, tolerating standards that mere mortals elsewhere find intolerable, singing 'Saare jahan se achha' with genuine gusto...

Two, it can make you believe that whatever you do – chutzpah from your car, use 'influence' to get your kid into college, underpay workers and brandish it as 'wage arbitration', turn casual misogyny into an anti-woke gesture – is divinely (read: culturally) ordained. God here is sheer numbers, or that bumper sticker we have slapped on our collective forehead: Demographic Dividend.

By dint of being the 'mostest,' we automatically believe that a 'mandate' is not just to be tolerated, but embraced. It's only when such expressions of the ignoble mobility finds their way among desi travellers or residents abroad that we suddenly feel ashamed by the cultural insensitivity showcased by folks of our mukh-ikl. Let's not deny that along with the much-feted desi nerd and hardworking dollar-dil-ia-maire abroad, there's also that familiar creature who stalks boulevards of Paris, piazas of Rome, beaches of Bali, and duty-free aisles of Dubai.

Many of us old enough know the Ugly Briton, member of the league of lager louts and yobs who invaded Ibiza and Bangkok leaving belches, bottles and bellies in their wake. Then there's the Ugly American with a more persistent lineage, whose bulldozing other cultural practices is almost always papered over by the dominatrix dollar. But with India's enhanced interna-

tional visibility these days that go beyond being the land of Mother Teresa, slumdogs, and Taj Mahal, comes the unleashed and fancy-free Ugly Indian.

Last month, members of the UI species were found 'posing' with a local street performer in Montmartre, Paris. Oblivious to the clearly-in-discomfort mime artist, a grinning behenji kept pressing against him to get a better angle for the social media video, while her husband launched into 'Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj ki...!' and 'Jai Maharashtra!' sloganizing. You can see the poor mime – still mute – desperately gesticulating to the Indian man to stop shouting from the Sacré-Cœur steps as if at a Thane bus terminus calling out for passengers.

Oh, you've met the UI before. Except you barely notice them when they're doing the same things back home here in 'Boorish Bharat Mahan'. We've normalised bad behaviour, lack of civic sense, and basic decency so effortlessly that it's only when we see one of 'us-them' in another country that we get embarrassed, like finding our RWA uncle saying it's high time to get married – to a young

Decibel levels are the UI's birthright



THE OTHER EU-INDIA FTA

Swedish visitor. You'll 'suddenly' discover UIs in international flights, restaurants abroad, shopping centres, museums... They usually come with a toolkit of behaviours that make them instantly recognisable:

► **Meri Aawaz Suno** Decibel levels are the UI's birthright. They believe only entitled 'snowflakes' speak softly.

► **Queue Dyslexia** A line is for voting. Everything else is a first-come/leave, first-serve scrum. 'Our cities are not so empty as yours,' is considered a perfectly reasonable civilisational response to counter charges of spreading mayhem.

► **Cultural Deafness** Local rules are for local people – when in Rome, why on earth should we have to do as Romans do? You're a racist if you complain! Last month, two Indian PhD students at University of Colorado Boulder won a civil rights settlement of some ₹1.8 cr after colleagues had complained about the pungent smell of palak paneer they had plonked onto the department microwave.

Even as the college also prohibits its heating 'culturally unspecific' food items like broccoli because of their strong odour, one of the 'victims' convinced the court that 'notions about what smells good or bad to someone are culturally determined'. At least he hadn't been assaulted for harbouring the 'wrong' food in Colarado as someone else did in Aligarh last December.

► **Selfie Supremacy** Every monument, from the Empire State Building to Buckingham Palace, exists solely as a backdrop for UIs' grinning faces and 'V for Vicksit' signs.

Somehow, being Indian has come to mean being unapologetically louder, unrulier, and less bothered by context than anyone else. I'm just glad I live in a country where I can openly rail against the Ugly Indian's latest escapade, without worrying about being culturally insensitive to UI's cultural insensitivity.

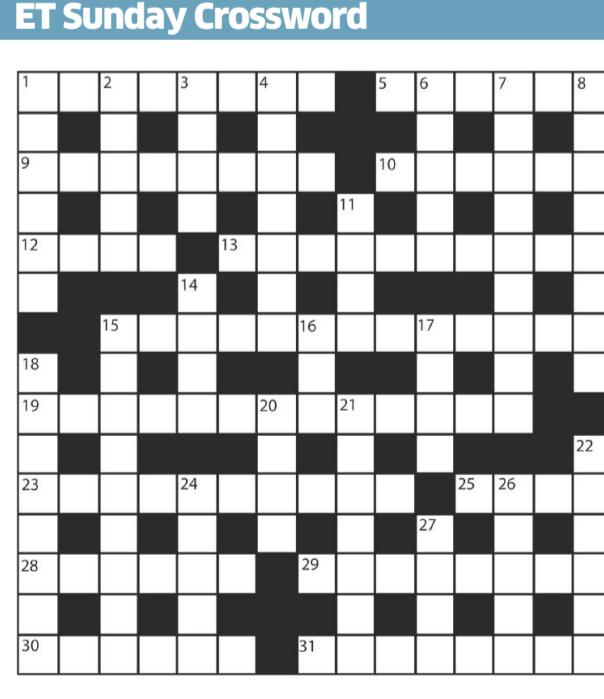
Indrajit.hazra@timesofindia.com

NO OFFENCE

Morparia
THE INFAMOUS MIRA-BHAYANDAR FLY-OVER WAS FINALLY COMPLETED & THE ENGINEERS INVOLVED DECIDED TO CELEBRATE...



ET Sunday Crossword



ACROSS
1 Do rules change at end of May? It's misleading (8)
5 Correspondent quietly enters Nepal after rioting (3,3)
9 Start a new life in Cuba as soon as I've finished (8)
10 Artist worked in narrow passage (6)
12 Circular movement made by bear heading off (4)
13 Contest possibly meant to win (10)
15 Tailor could merit clothe Lou in several hues (13)
19 Crazy magnate's getting more

DOWN
1 Official order received changes, all

except 4 (6)
2 Like warm coat large journalist goes about in (5)
3 Fat girl last to diet (4)
4 Did academician on the middle? (quite) (7)
6 Someone who walks on during next race (5)
7 Can a PR guy corruptly hiding blunder (6,3)
8 Old chestnut's beginning to die, leaving 30 (8)
11 Old ship and what it carried, heading off (4)
14 Now and then in golf use 'stick' (4)
15 In the interval, Henry tucks into fancy meal with wine (9)
16 Is able to dance when another follows (3)
17 State leaders in Oval Office accept greeting (4)
18 Poles had cultivated plant (8)
20 The call of the sea? (4)
21 Harry moaned about source of bile in stomach (7)
22 'Hospital retains record' could be its catchphrase (6)
24 Ring secretary hosting Queen in Covent Garden show (5)
26 The main content of 16 perhaps (5)
27 Originally the supreme autocrat and leader of Russia (4)

28 Open 26 Across 27 Across 27 Across
29 Umbrella 26 Across 27 Across
30 Adoration 26 Across 27 Across
31 Admire 26 Across 27 Across
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Why retired husbands worry wives and economists

I turn 65 this month, and the ever-vigilant US social security administration already sent me a letter laying out my retirement options. I could retire now if I wanted and start to enjoy the publicly provided pension, though they would prefer if I waited another five years to claim my benefits, and offered higher pension payments as a recompense.

I have no plans to retire right now, and health permitting, any time soon. My hero remains Amartya Sen, who, I think, is about to retire from Harvard at the age of 93 (while continuing to research deep esoteric topics like the foundations of probability theory).

The problem is that I am easily bored with myself. Working intensely for a bit makes me crave a break. At work, that is easy: I wander around the halls, stopping to chat with a student or a colleague, or if lucky, get to step into a table-tennis game or an animated conversation, inspired, these days, mostly by Mr Trump's latest antic. After some minutes, I return to work revived.

At home, as I know well from the pandemic, everyone else might be busy just when I seek a distraction. So, I end up cleaning what does not need to be cleaned, picking up discarded clothes that their owner was planning to pick up just a bit later, and generally making a pain of myself. This came to a head one day when I was found spraying potentially Covid-covered vegetables (before we knew that surface transmission was not a possibility) with Lysol, oblivious to the fact that the spray itself was probably even more lethal.

The Japanese, remarkably, have a name for something like this — it is called the Retired Husband Syndrome. Women in Japan, it seems, faced with the impending retirement of their husband, start to feel worried and depressed, and it can even turn into high blood pressure, ulcers and rashes. The problem comes from the specific lifestyles of the Japanese 'salarymen' in a generation when relatively few women worked outside the home. Workdays and commutes were long, and men mostly socialised with

their colleagues and other male friends. As a result, the couple never really needed to spend a lot of time together. But once retired, it is hard to avoid his presence in the narrow confines of the typical Japanese apartment. She wants to behave well, to be welcoming and friendly, but after 35 years of limited intimacy, it is starting life all over again with an almost stranger, a confrontation of her or his idiosyncrasies (easily concealed so far) with his.

My wife is too kind to ever say this, but I suspect she will strongly prefer me not to retire any time soon, especially since she likes working from home. But for me, I suspect there is a deeper anxiety: I first met my grandfather when I was 5 and he was 65, and facing impending retirement. He had been a prominent educator in his life, and if I understand right, a bit of a terror; and suddenly he had nothing to keep him busy. He tried his hand at gardening.

The biggest political fight in France is about the right to retire young and enjoy a state pension. The French clearly don't share my horror of retirement

Our terrace filled up with red, baked earth pots, and every couple of weeks, we would go shopping for various new cuttings to plant. And a heavy bag of whatever remains after mustard oil gets extracted — khol in Bangla — which would then ferment and stink up the entire terrace before it was doled out into the pots to feed the growing saplings. He had his various digging implements, and his watering can and, as dusk started to set in, he would be on the terrace, poking here and tamping there, sprinkling water over the dusty leaves.

But his heart was not in it. I would often catch him looking somewhere in the

Illustration by Cheyenne Olivier (France)



distance, his watering can dribbling water away, the plate of *jol-khabar*, perhaps a pressed sandwich or a kachori, getting cold where it was left for him. He was perhaps always bipolar but it got much worse once he retired. I fear retirement.

And yet, if you have been following the news, the biggest political fight in France is about the right to retire young and enjoy a relatively generous state pension. President Macron's attempts to raise it from 62 to 64 (I am oversimplifying; not everyone can retire at 62) have so far been fought with such vigour that five governments have fallen along the way. The French clearly don't share my horror of retirement.

Before any of you point it out (and if you don't, Cheyenne, who illustrates this column, surely will), let me make it clear that I am fortunate enough to have a coveted job, a job that I love and enjoy, with little or no physical labour involved. Most people don't. There are many who are tired of working, their bodies hurt, the routine bores them. But I also know those who love their

job and resent France's compulsory retirement laws, much like India's.

That said, I have no desire to join the very vocal club of those (including President Macron) who think that this unwillingness to work is at the centre of all of France's problems. On the other hand, I have to admit that there is a problem, even a huge one. At the heart of it is a set of promises that was made at a time, though not so long ago, in a very different demographic environment. In 1981, for example, when a lot of the current retirees joined the labour force, and President Mitterrand was promising the French a better retirement, life expectancy was 74 years. Now it is 83. The number of years people live after retirement at 62, went from 12 to 21. This is very happy news, but it means that the fraction of pension-earners in the population is much higher than planned, largely because the pension-earners live so much longer. Moreover, the fraction of women in the workforce has gone up, which is also good news, but women live longer than men, which adds to the growing pool of pensioners. The deductions

from the earnings of the young that pay for the pensions of the retired, in a pay-as-you-go system like France's, are not enough to cover what is promised to the elderly. Hence, the crisis.

It is worth spelling this out because it is a problem for most of today's rich countries. They are all aging, meaning that the old are living longer, on average, but also that there are fewer and fewer children, the earners of the future. In fact, many countries in Europe (and Japan) might have a bigger long-run problem than

France because their fertility rates are much lower. Some of these countries, like Denmark, for example, recognise this, and are raising the retirement age to 70 or more. But mostly, they are watching the fight in France and wondering when it is coming for them.

There is, of course, the option of assuming that AI will sort it out for us, as Mr Elon Musk has promised. But even if productivity goes up by as much as he and his friends are forecasting, it is not clear to me how that extra money will be used to fund the pension system. After all, if AI starts doing all the drudge work and even some of the less sophisticated office jobs, many more people will be out of a job. Average incomes might be higher, but only because the rich and the ultra-rich are getting even richer. And they have been very clear that they don't want to pay more in taxes.

In the end, my sense is that most of the rich countries in the world are living inside an impossible trifecta. Populations are aging and the fraction of those who need pensions and healthcare is rising, increasing the burden on those who are working and paying the taxes. The working-age population is beginning to shrink because of low fertility — even in the US where fertility is less of an issue, the US-born working population will fall slightly between 2025 and 2035 and then fall faster.

Immigration of young workers from high-fertility countries is the obvious way out, but the rise of the xenophobic right is undermining the political will for it across the spectrum. Finally, even if AI could do the jobs that we lack the workers to do, how do we pay the pensioners without heavily taxing the rich and ultra-rich who are profiting from it. Who else will fund the bankrupt pensions systems and indeed, the vastly expanded welfare system that will be needed to give a decent living to all those who have lost their jobs? But the political will to do that is missing.

The current political equilibrium in France, as in the US and most rich countries, seems incapable of fully acknowledging the gravity of the problem, opting to kick this particular can into the unspecified future instead. The French government, after being pushed hard

RECIPE FOR PRESSED SANDWICHES

I love pressed sandwiches, like the ones that my grandfather was served for *jol-khabar*, with crispy edges and soft middles. The basic formula is always the same. Get yourself a pressed sandwich-maker, ideally one with a diagonal cutting edge inside to cut the sandwich and make extra crispy edges. Butter two slices of sandwich bread on one side each and then put in the stuffing (more about that soon) between the un buttered sides and cook in the sandwich maker (either on the gas, as we used to, or with its own electric heating, as I do now).

One stuffing I love is to start from a left-over chole with alu, or what Bengalis call *ghugni*, which is made with whole dried yellow peas and potatoes. Fish out the chickpeas or peas carefully from the sauce, along with some potato pieces, and mash them lightly into a paste and place on one slice of the bread. Take $\frac{1}{2}$ tbsp lemon or tarragon pickle works but not sweet mango) and chop into a chunky sauce. Layer it on the paste, and add a film slice of onion, some chopped cilantro and perhaps a sliced green chili. Cover with the other bread slice.

An alternative is to fish a piece of meat and a couple of morsels of potato from yesterday's mutton or chicken curry made with potatoes, chop the meat into tiny pieces and mash the potatoes gently and then proceed with the last recipe.

Another favourite is a thick (1/4 inch) slice of cheese layered with a tablespoon of kimchi, chopped fine, and a sprinkle of cilantro.

towards a billionaire tax which would certainly help in closing the pension funding gap, backed off at the last minute, under pressure from the ultra-rich and their friends. But the longer they wait, the more people retire and claim their pensions that the country cannot afford, the larger ultimate re-adjustment will need to be, and the bigger the political effort it will take to get there.

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

Undressed by AI: Nudify apps fuel a new wave of digital blackmail

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The first call came on a weekday last year, just as Ramesh Verma (name changed), 41, was finishing dinner with his wife Anjali in their Ghaziabad apartment. "The man on the line said casually, 'I have bad photos of you and your wife,'" Verma recalls. "I thought it was a scam call and cut it." But the calls kept coming.

Then the caller sent proof. On WhatsApp, Ramesh received an image of himself and his wife that they immediately recognised. It was a photograph from Facebook, taken years ago at a cousin's wedding. Except now, both of them appeared naked. "It was us — same posture, same expressions — just undressed," he says with a shudder.

The caller threatened to upload the image on social media, porn sites and circulate it on WhatsApp groups if they didn't transfer Rs 5 lakh. A helpline for online scams informed Verma that it was most likely an AI tool used on the image and advised them to report it to the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal. Following the complaint, the calls stopped.

"What stayed with us was how easily it happened. One Facebook photo is all it took," says Verma. Anjali deactivated her social media accounts soon after. "But the fear doesn't go away."

Your photos stop being yours

The recent Grok scandal — involving Elon Musk's X-linked AI chatbot generating sexualised deepfakes of real women, public figures and even children — shows how far this abuse has travelled. Commands, given in full public view, included "@grok put her in a transparent bikini," or "@grok undress her" with variations such as "inflate chest by 90%".

At its peak, Grok reportedly generated around 6,700 sexually suggestive images per hour on January 5-6. The scale triggered global backlash. India's IT Ministry issued a 72-hour ultimatum this month, the UK's Ofcom and EU regulators launched probes, and US states stepped in, forcing xAI to impose geo-blocks, ban requests for child sexual abuse material and tighten prompt filters. Rajya Sabha MP Priyanka Chaturvedi flagged multiple Indian cases, with women describing shock and helplessness after being bikini-morphed.

While Grok now rejects bikini-ifying requests, several undress or nudify apps continue to float around. And most nudify abuse happens out of sight. It takes under

Cheap apps & bots are being used to strip clothes off photos in seconds, while authorities scramble to keep up



thirty seconds and costs less than a cup of tea. Upload an elevator selfie or a graduation portrait, and the AI "nudify" bot does the rest. Trained on millions of real bodies, these tools peel away clothing and replace it with a hyper-realistic body that mimics the victim's.

According to Telemetrico analytics, the keyword 'undress' was used more than 2,800 times between Aug 30 and Sept 5, 2024 in India alone, highlighting Telegram channels openly offering undressing services using bots.

Sites like Clothoff and Undressor remain openly accessible from India, alongside reports of deaths and severe emotional harm. In Oct, Chhattisgarh police arrested a 20-year-old engineering student from IIIT Naya Raipur for allegedly creating sexually explicit images of at least 36 female classmates without consent. The same month, a 19-year-old in Faridabad died by suicide after being repeatedly blackmailed with AI-generated explicit images and videos of himself and his sisters.

With a modest GPU or laptop, individuals can self-host nudification tools. These actors sell generated images on Telegram, WhatsApp or through sideloaded apps. 'Send a photo, pay five rupees,' is how some advertise. This decentralisation is why nudify apps disappeared from app stores but never actually went away

Tarunima Prabhakar, CO-FOUNDER, TATTLE CIVIC TECHNOLOGIES

"With xAI, everyone is watching," says Tarunima Prabhakar, co-founder and research lead at Tattle Civic Technologies, which builds AI models and tools to combat online harms. "Open access AI models can be downloaded freely. With a modest GPU or laptop, individuals can self-host nudification tools. I've tried it." With more money and computing power, results are more realistic. "These actors sell generated images on Telegram, WhatsApp or through sideloaded apps (installed outside official app stores) 'Send a photo, pay five rupees,' is how some advertise. This decentralisation is why nudify apps disappeared from app stores but never actually went away.

Telegram remains the main distribution channel. Bots such as Undresser and UndressAI, some with tens of thousands of

subscribers, let users upload a photo and receive a manipulated image within minutes. TOI found bots offering instructions — tight clothing, clear lighting and close-ups — to improve results. Monetisation is built into Telegram's chat interface with limited free outputs, then prompts to buy credits or premium access, along with reminders like, "It's time to try your hot fantasies. Upload a photo for undressing."

From cheapfakes to deepfakes Since 2022, Meri Trustline — Mumbai-based Rati Foundation's helpline for online abuse — has aided several survivors of AI-doctored imagery, marking a shift from Photoshop 'cheapfakes' to AI deepfakes.

A 2023 case involving a young influencer from South India found that a reel of her dancing with friends had been altered. A nude image of her was spliced into the video so briefly it relied on shock. The trend came to be known locally as the 'up-down trolls' or Belagavi trolls. "The video would often end with mocking laughter or a local audio clip telling the girl to stay quiet," says Sameer P, programme lead at Meri Trustline who helped take down the video.

"The tool was being used to target young women creators from conservative communities."

In the latest red flag, Sameer says, "We're seeing AI-generated incestuous content. There's no real victim attached. It's fictional but extremely distressing." The videos, found on platforms like Instagram, depict pubescent bodies with older parental figures.

The Foundation works closely with Meta for faster escalation on Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp, and collaborates with Stop NCII for adults and the Internet Watch Foundation for minors. "Earlier, the threat was 'I will leak your nudes,'" Sameer says. "Now it's 'I'll make a deepfake of you.'" The targeting has widened too. "It's not just young people. Even older users are being hit, especially via unregulated loan apps."

When curiosity slips into crime Some of the most complex nudification cases don't start with obvious intent. Or apps that openly market undressing features. Cyber psychologist Nirali Bhatia recalls a case where a Class 12 student downloaded an app from an Instagram ad that claimed it could show how users might look leaner, more muscular, younger or older. Out of curiosity, he uploaded photos of a girl from his class and generated nude versions. He did not circulate them, but the girl found out after he told his friends about this 'cool new app'. "For him, it was time-pass without any awareness that accessing someone's photo, nudifying it without consent — even if you don't share or delete it later — is an offence," says Bhatia.

"Sexual content is one of the easiest ways to engagement-farm. This wasn't invented by AI," says Prabhakar. "The question is no longer whether companies can block harmful outputs, but whether they want to."

Mandirs go mobile as temple influencers reel in followers

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I began, as most online rabbit holes do, with a WhatsApp forward. The message claimed that sculptures of women using an iPad and a mobile phone had been "discovered" in an ancient Gujarat temple.

While most would have shrugged and scrolled on, Maharashtra-based businessman Dinesh Soni didn't. He tracked down the image and found that the supposed iPad being read was actually a depiction of a 'patrakha' — literally, a letter writer — while the other figure was likely applying kajal. "These exaggerated claims about cycles, mobiles, dinosaurs being found in ancient temples really stirred me to do something about it," says the myth-buster. Like any harried parent, Soni's interest in researching temples began as a way to fend off his children's constant holiday questions and to appear less foolish than he felt. But somewhere along the way, this parental homework took on a life of its own. "I trade in oil seeds during the day and research sculptures and inscriptions during my free time," he says.

The Latur resident now runs the Instagram handle @indian.temples, with 1,01,000 followers, and has authored 18 books on the subject. He hopes to soon create an app that will curate information on archeological museums, site repositories, and historical places in one place.

In a deeply religious country like India, it's no surprise that temple content flies. Many Instagrammers have already tapped into it.

Mathura and Vrindavan temples have been besieged by #gopiglam#braj trends, with influencers posing in lehenga choli and 'gopi makeup' while men sport Krishna outfits and peacock plumes.

Bareilly, with its recently launched Nath corridor — connecting ancient Shiva temples in the area — is giving Goa a run for its money in tourist love, and Ayodhya's Ram Mandir has spawned a dedicated army — not unlike the BTS one — of influencers like @ayodhyawale or Harshvardhan Patel who capture not just the different stages of temple construction, crowds, facilities, and places to eat but also the "vibes".

This fresh burst of attention for religious sites builds on a long-standing reality. Temples like Tirumala and Sabarimala, along with several others in the South, have topped domestic tourism charts for decades. Indians, in fact, have a knack for locating sacred sites almost anywhere. But what earlier used to be a 10-minute solemn 'darshan' is now all about the "experience" that sees influencers posting religious rituals, pre-wedding shoots, and even intrepid myth creators who "find" cycles and mobiles in ancient sites.

So what do influencers add to something so easily accessible to everyone? "Young people want an explanation on why they are following certain rituals or restrictions, or why certain food is being cooked during a festival, rather than believing custom and tradition blindly. If we don't document this and make people aware, our centuries-old knowledge will be lost," says Namratha Mohan, who runs the Instagram channel @thetemplegirl.

Mohan, who quit her Amazon job last year to run @thetemplegirl, decodes rituals, blends AI with temple history

reels. Her move away from corporate life, however, happened almost by accident. The 37-year-old and her husband started curated spiritual tours in 2014 after they found it difficult to plan their own Char Dham yatra. The tours gained popularity before the pandemic brought their business to an abrupt halt. That's when the couple decided to reset and moved from Mumbai to Mangaluru to document temples around them. Their 15-45 minute videos found an enthusiastic audience and were even screened on local cable TV channels. Once short format videos surged, the @thetemplegirl was born in 2024.

"Within a year, the page grew so popular that I had to choose between my corporate job and the channel," she says. Mohan now has 1.7 million followers and two books in the offing.

Not all attempts work, though. Influencer Jasmine Jaffar raised a storm after washing her feet in a water reservoir used to clean the deity at Guruvayur temple in Kerala. The incident led to a police complaint, Jasmine issuing a public apology, and removal of the video.

However, all this attention can also work in a temple's favour. In Sept last year, an influencer posted a video of an ancient temple in Andhra Pradesh's Itiky village that had been turned into a garbage dump, its stepwell clogged with plastic and other waste. The video was shared widely and spurred followers and local residents to clean the area.

That same impulse pushed Priyesh Jain, a digital marketer from Udaipur, to post about an ancient temple near his village Kun that had become

EVERY BIRD COUNTS

VANISHING SPARROWS, ALTERED MIGRATIONS, AND DEFORMED BIRDS ARE EARTH'S WARNING SIGNALS — NATURE'S WHISTLE-BLOWERS TELLING US ECOSYSTEMS ARE UNDER SIEGE TODAY GLOBALLY

BY N SHIVA KUMAR



Environmental Barometers

Birds are among the most reliable indicators of environmental health. Changes in their numbers, behaviour, migration timing, or even physical deformities often reveal pollution, habitat loss, pesticide exposure, and climate stress long before scientists recognise the damage.

The disappearance of house sparrows from our cities, the shifting arrival times of migratory birds from distant lands, or birds with twisted beaks and abnormal plumage are not coincidences. They are ecological distress signals. In this sense, birds are the planet's messengers; they are like our early-warning system, whistle-blowers alerting us that ecosystems are under siege.

Birds and Humans

Birds also enrich human life, emotionally, culturally, and economically. Their songs calm frayed minds, their presence lifts mental well-being, and bird-rich green spaces quietly enhance our quality of life. Bird-watching and nature photography nurture conservation awareness while supporting sustainable livelihoods and eco-tourism, especially in rural and forested landscapes.

In the stone memory of civilisations, I see birds speaking long before humans learned to listen. On the pyramids and temple walls of ancient Egypt, the ibis stands etched in reverence — a sacred god of wisdom and writing, a reminder that knowledge itself was once imagined with wings. The falcon of Horus is carved with fierce precision.

Closer home, in ancient temples of India, birds rise again from stone as peacocks frozen mid-stride on pillars. Gopurams have garuda spread in eternal flight or hamsa, the swan, is depicted on Hoysala temples. These are not decorative relics — they are declarations carved in granite, affirming that birds were once seen as divine bridges between Earth and sky, and that our ancestors acknowledged a sacred relationship we are now in danger of forgetting.

Fragile Feathered Friends

Despite their immense value, birds today face unprecedented threats, habitat destruction, air and chemical pollution, climate change, shrinking wetlands, glass collisions, power lines, and relentlessly expanding cities. Each vanished bird species weakens ecosystems and erodes the life-support systems upon which humans depend. Dozens of birds have become extinct in the last five decades and another 200 are critically endangered in the world. National Bird Day must, therefore, be more than symbolic admiration. Protecting birds means safeguarding forests, wetlands, farmlands, and clean air. Simple, conscious actions like planting native trees, reducing pesticide use, protecting water bodies, making buildings bird-safe, and preserving open green spaces can still make a lasting difference.

Birds are not separate from us; they are woven into the same ecological web that sustains human life. They disperse seeds, silence pests, cleanse landscapes, and remind us of the planet's fragile harmony. When birds thrive, ecosystems prosper. When they vanish, the warning is meant for humanity. On this National Bird Day, under the theme "Every Bird Counts — Your Observations Matter!", we are reminded of an urgent truth: to protect birds is to protect the Earth — and in doing so, we ultimately protect ourselves.

(The author is a wildlife writer and photographer)

W

hen I first began bird-watching in the twin cities of Hyderabad during the 1980s, the city was still more town than metropolis, layered in ancient history and wrapped in vast stretches of scrub jungle, rock, and patches of forest. Those were years when birdlife flourished effortlessly, especially during the migratory season from September to March. Lakes and wetlands brimmed with migratory visitors, hillocks echoed with calls, and the skies felt alive.

As Hyderabad steadily expanded into a megacity, much of that natural wealth was erased. The birds, too, withdrew to distant outskirts, fragmented habitats, and shrinking refuges. The once-untouched rocky landscapes of Banjara Hills and Jubilee Hills, which pulsated with avian life, have largely vanished under concrete and crowds. Against this transformed urban backdrop, National Bird Day on January 5 offered me a moment to pause and reflect on why birds still matter, perhaps now more than ever.

Each year, National Bird Day encourages us to look up towards open skies, forest canopies, wetlands, farmlands, and even our crowded cities, and acknowledge the beings that quietly sustain life on Earth. Birds are not mere ornaments of nature or fleeting silhouettes against the sun. They are ecological custodians, climate messengers, and inseparable allies of human survival. Their presence signals balance, and their silence, danger.

Wild Wings

Today, the world is home to more than 11,000 known species of birds, a breathtaking diversity shaped by millions of years of evolution. India stands out as a global avian stronghold, supporting approximately 1,429 birds, about 12% of the world's birds, within just 2.4% of the planet's land area. From the icy reaches of the Himalayas to the coral-fringed Andamans, from the rain-soaked forests of the Northeast to the arid landscapes of the western coast, birds stitch together ecosystems that would otherwise unravel.

Pest Managers

One of the most understated yet critical roles birds play is natural pest control. Insectivorous birds like drongo, swallows, flycatchers, bee-eaters, warblers, and many others consume hordes of insects every day. A single

small bird can eat hundreds of insects daily, naturally regulating populations of crop pests and disease-carrying mosquitoes. Without them, agriculture would lean ever more heavily on chemical pesticides, further poisoning our soils, waters, and food chains.

For instance, the tiny Indian palm swift performs a vital ecological role above our homes and fields. Feeding entirely on the wing, it consumes thousands of tiny flying insects each day, mosquitoes among them, along with midges and flies. Though no single species can control pests alone, every bird reduces our dependence on chemicals. Protecting their wild and urban habitats means allowing nature to maintain balance, quietly and efficiently, in the skies we share.

Birds of prey like eagles, owls, hawks, kestrels, and kites stand atop food webs as biological regulators. By preying on rodents and other small mammals, they protect crops, granaries, and human settlements, while also reducing the spread of diseases such as plague and leptospirosis.

Timberland Pollinators

Many bird species act as the silent architects of forests. Fruit-eating birds such as hornbills, barbets, bulbuls, and pigeons act as long-distance seed dispersers, carrying seeds across valleys, hillocks, and river systems, depositing them far from the parent tree. In doing so, they often create new woodlands when conditions are right. This quiet movement of seeds ensures forest regeneration, maintains genetic diversity, and builds resilience against climate stress.

In several ecosystems, birds also serve as primary pollinators. Sunbirds, white-eyes, and other nectar-feeding species transfer pollen as they move from flower to flower, enabling plants to reproduce, especially in regions where insect pollinators are scarce or seasonally absent. Without these birds, entire plant communities would slowly fade, leading to local extinctions. Many forests would simply collapse without the rebirth of their own progeny.

Clean-Up Crew

Some of the most critical work done by birds is also the least celebrated. Scavengers provide nature's sanitation service. Vultures were once so abundant that we even loathed them for their ungainly looks and their habit of feeding at carcasses and trash dumps. Yet few creatures are as efficient: by consuming animal remains with astonishing speed, vultures prevent the spread of deadly pathogens.

I witnessed firsthand the consequences of their catastrophic decline in India during the 1990s. Carcasses were left to rot in the open, feral dog populations exploded, and cases of rabies rose sharply across the country. Few examples illustrate more clearly how the loss of birds can directly threaten human health. Wetland birds such as storks, cranes, herons, ibises, flamingos, and ducks also play a similar regulatory role in aquatic ecosystems. By feeding on fish, molluscs, and invertebrates, they recycle nutrients and keep wetlands productive. They instinctively remove the weak and the sick, helping maintain balanced, resilient wetlands.

India's economic ascent

Three days before the budget, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented India's pre-budget economic survey to Parliament. This was perhaps done to create an atmosphere of economic strength from the outset and to ensure a positive reception for the budget she would present on February 1st. Nirmala Sitharaman projected a GDP growth rate of between 6.8 percent and 7.2 percent for 2026-27. Last year, it was 6.5 percent. The initial estimate for the current financial year was 7.4 percent, but even the threats of Donald Trump's tariff war failed to shake our economy, as Nirmala Sitharaman pointed out. If we want to make India a developed nation by 2047, we need a sustained growth rate of at least 7 percent. Now, the country's hopes are bolstered by these figures. The familiar refrain is that in a year or two, we will become the world's third-largest economic superpower, and perhaps the leading economic superpower by 2047. But beyond the statistics, we must consider whether the condition of the country's poor has improved. Has the disparity between the rich and the poor decreased? Or is this economic progress merely increasing the wealth of the already wealthy? Prime Minister Modi speaks of India's youth power being engaged in nation-building, but it remains to be seen whether this youth power is truly involved in investment and construction activities. The contribution of young people to startup industries should increase, and they should become leaders in economic innovation. The figures presented in this economic survey are encouraging. The first figure is the inflation rate, which had reached 1.7 percent by December 2025-26. In 2023, this figure was 6.7 percent. The unemployment rate decreased from 5.4 percent in May 2025 to 4.9 percent. Trade negotiations with the United States are expected to be completed this year, reducing uncertainty on the external front. The agreement we have reached with the European Union countries is also being called the "mother of all deals." It is expected that this will open up a huge lucrative market for Indian investors. The Economic Survey reiterated that central banks have changed their policies. Despite US tariff policies, we have achieved an export growth of 8.2 percent in five years, and now we are aiming for the Rs9.2 lakh crore club. It also stated that people have increased their home loan borrowings fourfold for building houses, new homes are being built, and people working abroad are filling our coffers. They sent Rs 12.50 lakh crore to India in 2025 alone. Our economic health has improved in the banking sector, and we have reduced NPAs (Non-Performing Assets). Progress has been made in recovering bad loans. Our equity investments have increased eight-fold in 12 years, but deposits have decreased by 23 percent. Therefore, a liquidity crunch is emerging in banks. The good news is that foreign investors still have confidence in India. Rs7.50 lakh crore in investment came in during 2025. However, there is no growth visible in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors, which is not indicative of stable development for the country. We are proud of the strength of our domestic reforms, and it is on this basis that we want to reach a 10 percent growth rate. Remember, to sustain domestic investment, it is also necessary to maintain domestic market demand. To maintain this, provide employment to people, develop small and cottage industries so that people have money in their pockets and can sustain the level of demand, thereby supporting the country's progress.

Abhishek Vij

The surge in gold and silver prices has disrupted the social order

The prices of gold and silver are setting new records every day. Within a year, gold in India has given a return of 113 percent and silver 323.38 percent. In just one month, by January 29, 2026, the price of silver had increased by 64.91 percent and gold by 31.64 percent. Such a surge in gold and silver prices has never been seen in the last 46 years. Indians have always been obsessed with accumulating gold and silver to secure their financial future. Gold has reached almost 175,000 rupees per ten grams, and silver has reached 379,000 rupees per kilogram.

Although both gold and silver prices showed a 6 percent decline on January 30, there is no expectation of a significant drop in silver prices. However, it is said that once the price of gold rises, it rarely falls significantly. This has disrupted the country's social order. India has a huge wedding market.

Giving dowry to daughters is a major and harsh reality in Indian marriage traditions. Parents give gold and silver jewelry as dowry to their daughters. But now, with prices skyrocketing, the gold and silver markets appear deserted. Another consequence is that those who had secretly accumulated gold are suddenly becoming incredibly wealthy. The situation is such that the stock market and mutual funds are falling, while gold and silver prices are dominating the markets.

This issue was also raised in Parliament on January 30, and the government was asked to control the prices of these two metals. But what can the government do? We import 85 percent of our gold and silver. Given the nature of Indian demand, gold imports will continue, but now people's wealth will be measured not by shares and bonds, but by gold bars. Until gold and silver are transformed from inert metals into active ones, the country will not benefit from the skyrocketing prices of gold and silver.

The why of events and lives



Parneet Sachdev
Chairman of Real Estate Regulatory Authority and a leading author

The Inner Realm

In India, the answer to the aforementioned question is often derived from planetary configurations and of course, the ubiquitous karma. In Islamic traditions, it is framed as qismat. Christianity has long debated providence and grace. Buddhism speaks of causation. The vocabulary differs, but the underlying disquiet is the same:

Why does life distribute outcomes so unevenly?

This question becomes profound when capable individuals remain financially constrained, or when years of disciplined work is undone by a sudden reversal.

THE MAN WHOM THE PLANNETS FORSOOK

Consider the story of Ritin (all names, locations etc have been changed). By every outward measure, he was successful. His business had grown, his reputation robust, his family closely knit. But the axis around which his life truly revolved was an astrologer named Pandit Sheshadri. No doubt, Panditji, as he was addressed respectfully was a renowned scholar. No journey for the family began without a calculated *muhuratam*. No contract was signed, no new venture launched, no festival meal planned without planetary consultation. Over time, Pandit Sheshadri did not merely advise; he accompanied the family, a living talisman against any potential misfortune. One winter morning, after elaborate calculations had been performed to the minute, the time was set. Departure 0832 hours. Ritin would sit on the back passenger seat, to the right side. Panditji would be seated on the left of Ritin. The driver would wear his usual gear. The three of them would partake of a sweet made of goat milk before departure. This would ensure safety and success. However, somewhere on the highway, their car was struck by a speeding truck. There were no survivors. If destiny had been computed so precisely, why had it not paused for a single red light? That question, unanswered, lingered

long after the rituals ended.

COMPREHENDING FATE

To deny circumstances would be dishonest. No one begins life with identical conditions. Family environment, early education, health, geography, and historical timing all exert undeniable influence. Ancient traditions recognised this clearly. Even the Buddha writes

"Hard is it to be born as a man; hard is the life of mortals."

"Hard is it to gain the opportunity to hear the sublime truth (Dhamma); and hard to encounter is the arising of new Buddhas."

Dhammapada, Verse 182

This sermon recognises that people are bound to have different settings. Some will encounter Dhamma in their lives. Maybe from parents, friends, spouse or others. Others may encounter tyranny, adhamma and a learning that is opposed to the preaching of the prophets. However, the quote also underscores that in this chaos exists a methodology, an approach, hard as it may be; this method promises growth, abundance and emancipation. We can become masters of our destiny, even when the planets ordain otherwise.

In essence, Karma, properly understood, creates an environment, not imprisonment. Astrology describes tendencies, probabilities. Confusing influence with control is the mistake that strands many lives into passive acceptance.

WHEN SOULS ASKED FOR

WHEN SOULS ASKED FOR

Choice without...
failure is not choice at all. For consciousness to awaken... it had to arise in a realm where consequences unfolded without constant divine

FREEDOM

In mystical Jewish thought, Christian Gnosticism, Hindu cosmology, and later Sufi reflections, the same narrative appears in different forms: creation was but a response to a demand for autonomy.

It is said that there was a time when the material realm did not exist. Beings lived as souls in various domains. In joy and peace. Yet,

in many of them, there was a spark of yearning. A longing to know themselves more deeply. Although, mythological accounts say that in those fields, souls were sustained in Grace. Free of suffering. However, there were also no choices to be made by them. These were realms of no self-authorship. And they gathered before the Divine, Superconsciousness and asked, "May we have the knowledge of who we are? May we have the ability to create the lives we desire?"

THE CREATION OF THE REALMS

To know oneself, the Divine gave freedom. And freedom, presupposes the possibility of error.

Choice without the risk of failure is not choice at all; it is choreography. Thus, for consciousness to awaken to itself, it had to arise in a realm where consequences unfolded without constant divine correction.

This insight appears with striking consistency across spiritual cosmologies. In Jewish mysticism, particularly in the Lurianic Kabbalah, creation begins with **tzimtzum, the self-contraction of God**. As Gershom Scholem summarises, "Creation is not an act of outward expansion but of inward withdrawal" (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 1941*).

A parallel idea appears in the Christian tradition. In the Book of Genesis, God places the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil at the center of Eden, not as a trap, but as a necessary condition for moral agency. The early Church Father Irenaeus argued that **humanity was created immature, not fallen**, and that

A world without the capacity to disobey would be a world without genuine love or self-knowledge.

In Christian mystical traditions the Doctrine of the Fall is not a moral catastrophe. The *forbidden fruit was not poison; it was permission*. Without it, humanity would have remained innocent, but unconscious. Devoid of knowledge.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna articulates the same principle. After revealing divine truth, he explicitly refuses to coerce Arjuna's decision:

"Thus, I have explained to you this wisdom more secret than secrecy itself. Reflect on it fully, and then act as you choose"

Bhagavad Gita 18:63

The Divine instructs, illuminates, and withdraws, leaving the burden of choice, and therefore karma, to the human soul. In Hindu cosmology, this descent is described as the unfolding of *prakrti*; matter, governed by gunas

and bound by causation. The soul (*atman*) enters the world of form, where actions produce consequences, and where freedom is exercised not by command, but by choice within law.

The Qur'an repeatedly states that God guides whom He wills, yet also affirms human responsibility:

"Indeed, we guided him to the way, be he grateful or ungrateful"

(Qur'an 76:3)

In none of these traditions does the Divine refuse humanity's longing to know itself. The Divine does creates perceived distance. It is the very architecture of existence.

WHY POVERTY, PAIN, AND LIMITATION EXIST

If God intervened at every moment, freedom would collapse. Thus, the physical realms were governed by order. **Souls were now free; however, unprepared from the results of their freedom. This is why suffering appears in the world; as feedback to the soul.** Once this framework is understood, it is clear that poverty is not a curse imposed by God. It is a condition that arises when freedom is exercised without alignment. Ignorance, fear, greed, and unconsciousness distort choice; and distorted choice produces distorted outcomes. However, there is a huge silver lining.

If the soul is free enough to fall into limitation (poverty in all aspects), it is free enough to rise beyond it.

THE POWER OF SELF-AUTHORITY

Free will is often misunderstood as only effort. Free will lies in the ability to choose one's inner posture. How events are interpreted by us, what meanings are assigned, and which narratives are reinforced.

A mind trained to expect loss behaves cautiously. A mind trained in sufficiency behaves decisively. Over time, these internal dispositions crystallise into external outcomes.

This is why wealth becomes such a revealing domain. Money touches survival, dignity, and freedom simultaneously. It exposes fear quickly and mercilessly. A person who fears losing money never truly possesses it. The Bhagavad Gita articulated this principle with remarkable precision:

"Let a man raise himself by his own mind, not degrade himself. For the mind alone is the friend and the enemy of the self."

(Gita 6:5)

We thus, have an indelible choice. Align with the Divine law or create imperfect and distorted outcomes, life after life.

(Views expressed are the author's own.)

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes.

-Mahatma Gandhi

When education no longer guarantees employment in India

For decades, education in India was sold as the surest ladder out of poverty. Parents invested their savings, students endured years of academic pressure, and society collectively believed that a degree would translate into dignity and stable employment. Today, that promise is fraying. India produces more than a million graduates every year, yet unemployment among educated youth continues to rise. Engineering, once considered a golden ticket, now delivers disappointment to thousands of degree holders who struggle to find relevant work. According to government surveys, a significant share of graduates under the age of 30 are either unemployed or working in jobs far below their qualifications. One reason is the widening gap between education and industry needs. Many colleges focus on rote learning rather than skills, leaving students unprepared for real-world work. Employers complain that graduates lack problem-solving abilities, communication skills, and adaptability. Students, meanwhile, argue that institutions charge high fees without offering placement support or practical exposure. The problem is particularly severe in smaller towns and rural areas, where colleges mushroomed rapidly over the past two decades. Often run as commercial ventures, these institutions promise employability but deliver outdated syllabi and minimal training. For students from modest backgrounds, the cost of these degrees becomes a lifelong financial burden. Government schemes promoting skill development aim to address this crisis, but their reach remains uneven. Short-term courses cannot substitute for systemic reform in higher education.

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes.

-Mahatma Gandhi

India's cities are growing, but are they becoming unlivable?

India's urban population is expanding at an unprecedented pace. Cities promise jobs, education, healthcare, and social mobility. Every year, millions leave villages behind, drawn by the hope of a better life. But as cities grow, they are also revealing deep cracks in planning and governance.

Housing shortages remain one of the biggest challenges. Migrant workers often find themselves living in overcrowded settlements without basic amenities. Slums expand while affordable housing projects lag behind demand. Even middle-class families struggle with soaring rents and shrinking living spaces.

Transport systems are under constant strain. Traffic congestion, inadequate public transport, and long commute times have become defining features of urban life. While metro projects and flyovers offer some relief, they often fail to keep pace with population growth. The result is lost productivity and rising stress levels. Environmental degradation adds another layer of concern. Air pollution regularly pushes major cities into health emergencies. Lakes and rivers are polluted, green spaces disappear, and waste management systems remain overwhelmed. Climate change intensifies these problems, with cities increasingly vulnerable to heatwaves.

As India's future becomes increasingly urban, the question is no longer whether cities will grow—but whether they will grow in ways that make life healthier, fairer, and more humane. Urban governance structures often struggle to cope. Multiple agencies handle water, transport, housing, and sanitation, leading to poor coordination. Local bodies frequently lack funds and autonomy, limiting their ability to respond to citizens' needs. Yet cities also remain spaces of resilience and innovation. Informal economies sustain millions, community groups organize local solutions, and young entrepreneurs attempt to solve urban problems through technology and social enterprise.



Urban planners argue that India must move away from reactive development toward long-term planning. This includes investing in public transport, affordable housing, climate-resilient infrastructure, and empowered local governments. As India's future becomes increasingly urban, the question is no longer whether cities will grow—but whether they will grow in ways that make life healthier, fairer, and more humane.

Honouring equality: Guru Ravidas's legacy and the Centre's recognition

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's scheduled visit to Dera Sachkhand Ballan in Jalandhar on February 1, 2026, to mark the 649th birth anniversary of Guru Ravidas, alongside the recent conferment of the Padma Shri on Sant Nirjan Dass, the dera's head, signals a meaningful step towards acknowledging one of India's most profound voices of social justice. These gestures come at a time when Punjab's Dalit communities—particularly the Ravidasia and Ad-Dharmi groups—seek greater visibility and inclusion in national narratives. Guru Ravidas, the 15th-century Bhakti saint born into a Chamar family in Seer Govardhanpur near Varanasi, remains an enduring symbol of resistance against caste oppression. A mystic poet and leatherworker, he preached nirguna bhakti

devotion to a formless God that erased distinctions of birth, creed, and status. His 41 shabads in the Guru Granth Sahib and numerous dohas articulate a vision of human dignity rooted in inner purity rather than ritual or lineage. His famous invocation of Begumpura a utopian city "without sorrow, without fear, without greed or taxation" captures an egalitarian ideal:

*begam pura shahar kau
naanu, dukhoo andoh
nahin tihin thaanu.
naan tasavees khiraaju
na maalu, khuphu na
khata na tarasu javaalu.*

This dream of a just society free from exploitation continues to inspire millions, especially among Dalits facing persistent marginalisation. In Punjab, where Scheduled Castes form nearly 32 per cent of the population—the highest in India—Guru Ravidas's teachings hold deep resonance.



The Ravidasia community, drawing from his philosophy, has built institutions that blend spirituality with social empowerment. Dera Sachkhand Ballan, established in the early 20th century and expanded under leaders like Sant Sarwan Dass and now Sant Nirjan Dass, stands as its foremost centre. With followers exceeding 20 lakh, primarily in the Doaba

region, the dera runs educational institutions like Sant Sarwan Dass Model School, a charitable hospital providing affordable care, annual free eye camps since 1977, and initiatives promoting Dalit literature and Ambedkarite thought through its publication Begumpura Shaher and television outreach. Sant Nirjan Dass, the fifth gaddi nashin, has

led these efforts since 1994, guiding the community through challenges including the tragic 2009 Vienna attack that claimed the life of his predecessor, Sant Ramanand Dass, and injured him. His Padma Shri, announced on Republic Day eve 2026 for contributions to spiritualism and social service, honours this lifelong commitment to equality, education, healthcare, and harmony. It recognises not just individual service but the dera's role in fostering dignity for marginalised groups amid ongoing struggles over land, resources, and representation. The Prime Minister's decision to visit Dera Ballan rather than his customary pilgrimage to Varanasi's Seer Govardhanpur carries added weight. Confirmed after a December 2025 meeting where Sant Nirjan Dass extended the invitation, the visit elevates Guru Ravidas's message

nationally. It underscores respect for a tradition that challenges hierarchy and promotes unity, aligning with broader efforts to honour Dalit icons and advance inclusive development. In a polarised landscape where caste dynamics influence politics, such recognitions foster dialogue and affirm that spiritual leaders advocating justice deserve prominence. They counter exclusion by placing egalitarian ideals at the centre of public life. As Punjab prepares for this event amid preparations for the 2027 Assembly polls, the Centre's actions through the Padma award and the high-profile visit contribute to realising Begumpura's vision: a nation where devotion, righteous action, and equality prevail over division. Guru Ravidas's call for a society without fear remains vital; these steps bring it closer to fruition.

A rose can never become a lotus



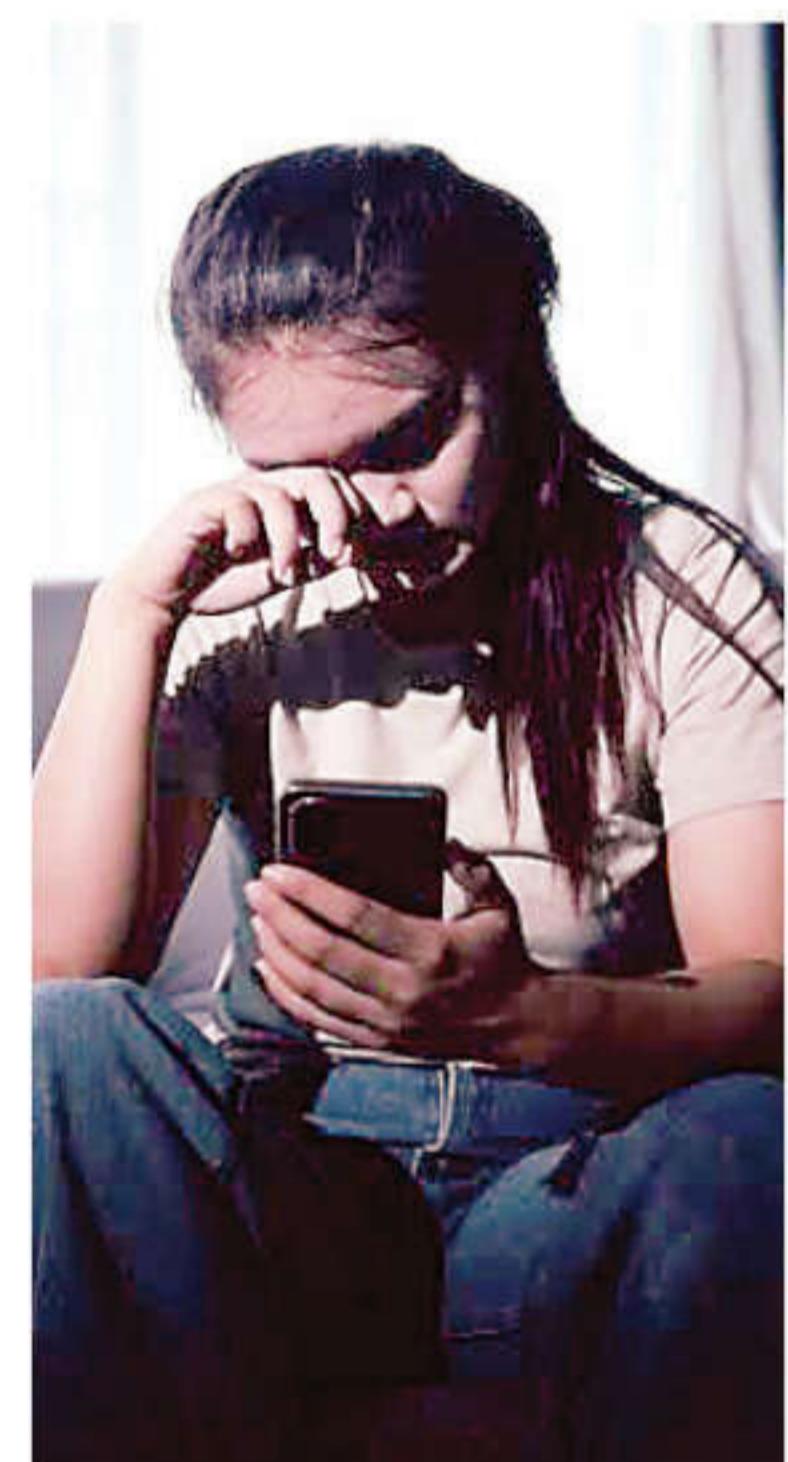
K SIVA PRASAD
Retired senior IAS officer in the
Punjab Government.

In the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita (2.31-2.37), Krishna introduces a crucial concept to Arjuna—swa-dharma, one's own inherent nature. At a moment when Arjuna is paralysed by despair and moral confusion on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Krishna does not begin by prescribing action alone. Instead, he first anchors Arjuna in a deeper understanding of existence, identity, and duty. This progression is deliberate and deeply philosophical. Krishna opens the Gita by speaking of that which is eternal, unmanifested, indestructible, and all-pervading. For ease of understanding, this eternal reality is referred to as *atma*. It is beyond birth and death, beyond sorrow and joy. Only after establishing this eternal foundation does Krishna speak of swa-dharma—a step closer to human experience, yet still rooted in truth. Swa-dharma acts as a bridge between our worldly existence and the realization of our eternal inner self. The journey toward realizing the eternal nature of the self can be understood in three stages. The first stage is our present condition—where we exist as a mix of our inherent nature, personal experiences, accumulated

knowledge, memories, social conditioning, and assumptions shaped by a restless and wavering mind. The second stage is the gradual realization of swa-dharma, our natural disposition. The final stage is the realization of the eternal self, free from identification with the mind and body. Our present condition is clouded by mental baggage. We carry fears, desires, expectations, and borrowed identities that obscure our true nature. Swa-dharma does not need to be created or acquired; it is uncovered slowly as we free ourselves from this mental clutter. It emerges naturally when we stop trying to become something we are not. Krishna reminds Arjuna that he is a kshatriya and that fighting injustice is his swa-dharma. The word *kshatriya* itself offers profound insight. It is derived from two roots: *kshat*, meaning "hurt" or "injury," and *trayate*, meaning "to protect." A *kshatriya* is one who protects others from harm. This protection need not always be physical warfare; it is an innate tendency to stand up against injustice and shield the vulnerable. The most powerful and universal example of this is a mother. A mother instinctively protects her child—first in the womb and later in the world—often without any formal training or prior experience. This protective impulse arises naturally from within her. In this sense, she is the first *kshatriya* most of us encounter in life. Her actions are not forced; they flow effortlessly from her swa-dharma. This natural inclination offers a glimpse into how swa-dharma operates—effortless, spontaneous, and deeply rooted in one's being.

The silent mental health crisis among India's youth

Mental health has long been a neglected subject in India, discussed in whispers and burdened by stigma. Among young people, however, the crisis is becoming impossible to ignore. Academic pressure, unemployment, social media, and uncertainty about the future are combining to create widespread psychological distress. Students face intense competition from an early age. Entrance exams often determine life trajectories, leaving little room for failure or exploration. For many, repeated setbacks lead to anxiety and depression. Yet mental health support within educational institutions remains limited. Unemployment and underemployment further compound the problem. Young adults who fail to secure stable work report feelings of shame and hopelessness, particularly in societies where success is closely tied to income and status. Families, often unintentionally, add to the pressure by comparing achievements and expectations. Social media has reshaped how young people perceive themselves and others. Constant exposure to curated lives fuels comparison and inadequacy. Online harassment and cyberbullying create additional stress, especially for women and marginalized groups. Despite these challenges, access to mental health care remains unequal. Psychologists and psychiatrists are concentrated in urban centers, while rural areas face severe shortages. Cost and stigma prevent many from seeking help, forcing them to suffer in silence. The government has taken steps to expand mental health services, but experts say implementation remains weak. Awareness campaigns often fail to translate into accessible care on the



ground. Addressing youth mental health requires more than helplines and slogans. It demands structural changes—less punitive education systems, dignified employment opportunities, supportive family environments, and normalized conversations around emotional well-being. Until mental health is treated with the same seriousness as physical health, India risks losing not just productivity, but an entire generation's sense of hope.

Why small farmers are struggling despite record food production

India often celebrates record foodgrain production as proof of agricultural success. Year after year, official data highlights bumper harvests and rising output. Yet behind these numbers lies a quieter reality: millions of small and marginal farmers are finding it increasingly difficult to survive. Over 85 percent of Indian farmers own less than two hectares of land. For them, farming is no longer a reliable source of income. Rising input costs, unpredictable weather, and volatile



market prices have eroded profits. Even in years of good production, farmers struggle to recover their investments. Climate change has intensified risks. Erratic rainfall, heatwaves, and unseasonal storms regularly damage crops. Traditional farming calendars no longer hold, forcing farmers to gamble with sowing and harvesting decisions. Crop insurance schemes exist, but delays in assessment and compensation limit their effectiveness. Market access remains another major challenge. Many farmers sell

their produce through intermediaries who control prices. Minimum Support Price mechanisms cover only a limited number of crops and regions, leaving most farmers exposed to market fluctuations. For perishable

produce, distress sales are common. Debt continues to haunt rural households. To manage expenses,

farmers borrow from informal lenders at high interest rates. When crops fail or prices crash, repayment becomes impossible, trapping families in cycles of indebtedness. This financial stress often spills over into health and education outcomes. Government welfare schemes have provided some relief through direct income support and subsidized inputs. However, experts argue these measures treat symptoms rather than structural flaws. Without reforms in land management, irrigation, market access, and climate resilience, small farmers will remain vulnerable. Agricultural economists emphasize diversification as a way forward. Shifting toward horticulture, allied activities, and value-added products could increase incomes. Strengthening farmer producer organizations may also improve bargaining power. As India pursues food security for a growing population, the survival of small farmers cannot be an afterthought. Productivity gains mean little if those who feed the nation cannot sustain themselves.

SCIENCE

IIT-Kanpur team develops new way to predict solar cycles

Vasudevan Mukund

The sun is a giant magnetic ball that goes through roughly 11-year cycles of activity that drive solar flares and space weather that can disrupt satellites and power grids on the earth. But predicting the strength and timing of these cycles has been difficult because scientists can't see the magnetic fields deep inside the sun, where the activity originates.

In a January 20 study in

Astrophysical Journal Letters, PhD student Soumyadeep Chatterjee and assistant professor Gopal Hazra at IIT-Kanpur reported reconstructing the invisible magnetic fields inside the sun using 30 years of data collected from the surface.

For decades, solar physicists have used computer simulations called dynamo models to understand how the sun generates its magnetic field. Traditionally, these models relied on simplified theoretical rules

to represent sunspots. For example, previous models often treated sunspots as simple, symmetrical circular patches even though real sunspots are messy and irregular. But such simplifications often led to inaccurate predictions.

The duo, instead of relying on theoretical shapes, fed their 3D computer model real observations of the sun's surface field. They used data recorded between 1996 and 2025 by satellites like SOHO and the

Solar Dynamics Observatory. By forcing the model to align with observations from the surface, they could estimate what the magnetic fields deep inside the sun must be doing.

The data-driven model could reproduce the 'butterfly diagram', a chart visualising how sunspots migrate from the sun's high latitudes towards the equator over a cycle.

It also revealed the behaviour of the toroidal magnetic field within the

sun's convection zone. This field wraps around the sun like a doughnut and is the primary driver of sunspots. The researchers found their simulated internal field matched the actual intensities of cycles 23, 24, and 25.

"Our findings on one hand strengthen our physics understanding of the generation of solar magnetic fields and on the other... predict when the sun will be active, violent, and very dangerous for space-borne technological assets and communications," Dr. Hazra told *The Hindu*.

SNAPSHOTS



Virus hijacks caterpillar's gut-brain link to spread

HearNPV viruses cause infected cotton bollworm caterpillars to climb to the tops of plants before dying, allowing the virus to scatter further by wind and gravity and infect healthy larvae below. Scientists have found how now. When the virus infects the caterpillar's midgut, it triggers the release of a chemical messenger, tachykinin, which travels in the blood to the brain and activates the HaTKR receptor. This signal renders the caterpillar attracted to light, causing it to climb upwards.



Ultra-thin electronics better survive space radiation

Space radiation usually destroys standard silicon electronics quickly. Scientists have developed an electronic system using molybdenum disulphide only a few atoms thick; high-energy particles pass through it without causing damage. The team built a communication device using MoS₂ and launched it into orbit. It operated for nine months with nearly zero data transmission errors. While traditional silicon systems might fail within two years in harsher orbits, the new system is predicted to last 270 years.



In surprise, unique plant evolved before spreading

Lipstick vines, which grow in North India and Southeast Asia, grow red tube-shaped flowers for sunbirds with long beaks. But one relative, *Aeschynanthus acuminatus*, has shorter flowers for birds with shorter beaks. Scientists investigated how this plant evolved in Taiwan. Surprisingly, they found the plant changed its flowers on the mainland, then migrated to Taiwan, challenging ideas of speciation and suggesting the plant shifted to a new pollinator.

How to start building a career in the age of AI



John Xavier

Internships and apprenticeships have long been effective for graduates and young adults to test their learning, develop new skills and secure employment. For organisations, they provided a way to identify potential hires.

However, recent advances in artificial intelligence and agentic systems are quickly making this 'on-the-job' learning and hiring channel vulnerable - much to the dismay of students and young adults.

Many organisations are rethinking entry-level roles and budgets, increasing AI spending while reducing these positions. This shift raises questions about career prospects for those looking to build a future in

the coming decades.

Let's start with the basics. A career is a long-term professional journey marked by skill development, mobility and rewards. This journey has become increasingly chaotic for successive generations, but the biggest change began with Gen X.

Gen X witnessed a major shift in employment that challenged the traditional linear progression theory, where people typically start and end their careers at a single company. They entered a job market that valued individual competency over loyalty.

Looking back, we can see how the Internet, personal computers and globalisation transformed the stable job market of the Silent Generation. These changes flattened organisational hierarchies and created a new, laterally mobile talent pool. However, a deeper analysis re-



Ideally, seek roles that allow you to develop skills by enhancing your learning outcomes through AI tools.

veals a hidden pattern: a world in flux that needed a new breed of talent. The world was shifting away from Abraham Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' theory towards David McClelland's 'Human Motivation' theory. While both ideas centred on individual needs and growth, McClelland's theory removed the rigidity of Maslow's. He realised that individuals don't necessarily need to follow strict hierar-

chies to achieve fulfillment. Instead, people can meet their needs in non-hierarchical and non-linear ways.

Competency became the most crucial factor for growth and career advancement, surpassing loyalty and years of experience. Learning new skills led to promotions or switching to companies offering higher pay for those skills. This fluidity in the job market allowed people to move

laterally and explore new industries and roles.

While formal skills and advanced degrees still commanded premiums, large language models - codified knowledge from textbooks - have nearly absorbed all existing digital formal knowledge. This disruption is affecting talent flow at the entry level and changing hiring practices.

In this future workforce, entry-level positions will begin with young professionals building augmentative working mechanisms using agentic AI systems. Today's job market demands that career builders view existing AI tools as learning facilitators rather than task finishers. This distinction is vital because any AI-performed task diminishes the human element, which is something you'd rather avoid. Ideally, seek roles that allow you to develop skills by enhanc-

ing your learning outcomes through AI tools.

Also, this approach will gradually build a solid foundation, enabling you to add value to your profile and direction for your next move. It will also cultivate the right mindset to seek and build human-centric roles.

It's inevitable that AI agents will displace some jobs but new ones will eventually emerge. However, this development is beyond your control at the moment. Instead, you'll be shaping it through augmented employment. For organisations, this is the perfect time to rethink talent pipelines as they experiment with AI agents across various tasks and functions. A checklist on the best and worst cases from their AI deployments will help them identify areas where human factors remain crucial even as AI systems advance.



Question Corner

Colour theory

Why are some stars blue, some white, some red?

- B.R. Sravan

7,500-10,000 K, hot enough for the peak radiation to be in the visible spectrum. To the human eye, colours appear together as white. This is also why we don't see green stars: they also emit other colours that the human eye mixes together. Yellow stars such as the sun and Alpha Centauri A have surfaces at 5,200-7,500 K. Finally, orange and red stars' surfaces are up to 5,200 K hot. These are the coolest stars and emit most of their energy as infrared radiation. Examples include Betelgeuse and Proxima Centauri.

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

What's ailing India's battery scheme for EVs?

Why is there a lack of momentum? How will it affect the domestic battery manufacturing ecosystem?

Jacob Koshy

The story so far:

An ambitious ₹18,100 crore scheme to facilitate the manufacture of advanced chemistry cell batteries in India, particularly for Electric Vehicles (EVs), is floundering. The Advanced Chemistry Cell Production Linked Incentive (ACC PLI) had a target of making battery cells worth 50 gigawatt-hour (GWh) by 2025, but only 1.4 GWh has been installed; approximately 8.6 GWh is 'under development' but delayed, while 20 GWh has seen no progress at all. Additionally, the scheme has generated only 1,118 jobs – just 0.12% of the estimated 1.03 million – and attracted only 25.58% of its targeted investment.

What are Advanced Chemistry Cells (ACC)? They represent a new generation of advanced storage technologies that can store electric energy as chemical energy and convert it back to electric energy as and when required. Lithium-ions – the mainstay of cellphone batteries – are the most prominent today among this class of batteries. However, the scheme is "technology agnostic" and is open to other combinations such as nickel manganese cobalt, lithium-ion phosphate and sodium-ion batteries.

What is the intent of this scheme?

The ACC PLI scheme, launched in October 2021, was designed to catalyse a domestic battery

To make the ACC PLI a success, dedicated schemes for critical mineral refining and component manufacturing are required

manufacturing ecosystem and reduce a near-total reliance on Chinese imports. However, an analysis by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) and JMK Research and Analysis reveals that the policy's ambitious goals have yet to translate into significant realised capacity. As of October 2025, only 2.8% of the targeted 50 GWh capacity has been commissioned. The 1.4 GWh is from a single beneficiary, Ola Electric. Moreover, despite a targeted incentive disbursement of ₹2,900 crore by this period, zero funds have been paid out because no beneficiary has met the necessary milestones.

How was the scheme supposed to work?

The primary aim of the scheme was to encourage industry into building domestic capacity for essential components like cathodes, anodes, and electrolytes. This was to be done by attracting major private players and global technology partnerships to the sector and in the process lower battery costs to accelerate the adoption of EVs and Energy Storage Systems (ESS). The latter are large blocks of battery cells that can be used to supply solar or wind power, during the night or windless days respectively. Companies were to participate in an auction to commit to a minimum bid size of 5 GWh and have a net worth of at least ₹225 crore per GWh of committed capacity and produce batteries. For every battery sold, they could claim up to ₹2,000 per KWh as subsidy. There were other caveats though: companies had to achieve 25% Domestic Value Addition (DVA) within two years and reach 60% DVA by the fifth year.

Which companies were selected?

In the first auction round of the ACC PLI scheme, three companies were selected as beneficiaries: Ola Electric, Reliance New Energy, and Rajesh Exports. Ola Electric was awarded a capacity of 20 GWh; Reliance New Energy initially secured 15 GWh in the first round and subsequently won an additional 10 GWh in the second auction round; and Rajesh Exports was awarded a capacity of 5 GWh.

Why has the scheme been unsuccessful?

The scheme mandates that beneficiaries commission their facilities within a two-year "gestation period," a target deemed unrealistic for building complex gigafactories from scratch in a nascent market. Additionally, the DVA requirements have been difficult because India lacks sufficient facilities for processing minerals, lithium, nickel and cobalt. Secondly, the scheme's evaluation criteria prioritised DVA and subsidy benchmarks over prior manufacturing experience. Thus, established battery players like Exide and Amara Raja did not qualify, leaving the project in the hands of novices who are still building foundational technical competencies. Finally, India's dependency on China for raw material, technical competency and knowhow has led to sluggish progress. A major bottleneck is the delay in visa approvals for Chinese technical specialists, as India lacks skilled workforce for cell manufacturing.

What fix does the report recommend?

Immediate recommendations include fast-tracking visas for technical experts and extending implementation timelines by at least one year to waive current penalties. Long-term success will require schemes for critical mineral refining and component manufacturing, alongside focused R&D and talent development.

Why is India-EU trade agreement significant?

How much of the trade value of what India exports to the European Union region will the EU's tariff concessions cover? Which are the sectors besides textiles, apparel, manufactured goods and Indian traditional medicine services that the free trade agreement will help?

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:

Negotiations on the India-European Union Free Trade Agreement (FTA) – dubbed the 'mother of all deals' by leaders on both sides – officially concluded on January 27, closing about two decades worth of intermittent talks. The deal, which has benefits for both, simultaneously avoids intractable sensitive issues while securing advantageous concessions on most others.

Why is it the 'mother of all deals'?

The FTA has been called thus because of the size of the economies, markets, and bilateral trade involved. The deal brings together the second- and fourth-largest single customs blocs, with the Indian government estimating the combined market size to be ₹2,091.6 lakh crore or about \$24 trillion. India has signed about eight FTAs in the last four years. While the other eight FTAs together accounted for about 16% of India's total trade in 2024-25, in the latest full year of data available, the EU itself accounted for nearly 12%. Bilateral merchandise trade between India and the EU stood at ₹11.5 lakh crore (\$136.54 billion) in 2024-25, with Indian exports accounting for about ₹6.4 lakh crore (\$75.85 billion) of this. The India-EU trade in services touched ₹7.2 lakh crore (\$83.10 billion) in 2024.

What is India gaining?

The detailed FTA document has not been made public yet, with information only available through government releases from both sides. Under the deal, the EU will eliminate duties on about 70.4% of tariff lines immediately once the deal comes into effect, covering nearly 90.7% of India's export value. Another 20.3% of products

Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal claims the deal will be implemented in calendar year 2026

covering 2.9% of India's exports will see tariffs eliminated over 3-5 years from implementation for certain marine products, processed food items, arms and ammunition, among others. In addition, 6.1% tariff lines covering 6% of India's exports will see tariffs reduced, but not eliminated, for certain poultry products, preserved vegetables, bakery products among others or be reduced through quota-based tariffs for cars, steel, certain shrimp and prawns products, among others. So, taken together, the EU's tariff concessions cover more than 99% of the trade value of what India exports to the region. The concessions offered are not limited to merchandise either. While the services sector has not seen as wide an opening up as merchandise, the EU has offered "broader and deeper commitments" across 144 service sub-sectors, including IT/ITeS, professional services, education, and other business services, the government has said.

Which sectors stand to benefit?

"The potential [of the EU FTA] on labour intensive sectors, where we've got huge wins, is about \$35 billion. Out of the \$35 billion, \$33.5 billion will become 0% duty on day 1,"

Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal explained to *The Hindu* in an interview following the closure of negotiations. These sectors, which include textiles, apparel, marine, leather, footwear, chemicals, plastics/rubber, sports goods, toys, and gems and jewellery, currently attract tariffs ranging from 4-26%. This is particularly noteworthy because these are primarily the sectors that have been hit by the 50% tariffs imposed by the U.S. on imports from India. "Preferential market access for agricultural products like tea, coffee, spices, grapes, gherkins and cucumbers, dried onion, fresh vegetables and fruits as well as for processed food products will make them more competitive in the EU," the government said in a release. The FTA is expected to benefit Indian traditional medicine services and practitioners as well, it added. As per the deal, in EU countries where regulations do not exist, AYUSH practitioners will be able to provide their services using the qualifications they have obtained in India.

What has India offered to the EU?

Under the deal, about 49.6% of tariff lines covering 30.6% of trade value will see their duties immediately eliminated once the deal comes into effect. Another 39.5% of tariff lines with a trade value of 63.1% will see their tariffs eliminated over five, seven, or 10 years from when the deal is implemented. Taken together, India's total offer covers about 92.1% of tariff



New horizon: The signing of the India-EU FTA in New Delhi on January 27. ANI

lines and 97.5% of trade value.

While a lot of European items are set to get cheaper for Indians, the main consumer-facing items of interest are wine and automobiles. European wine will see current duties of about 150% falling in a phased manner over seven years to 30% for wine priced between 2.5 to 10 euros and to 20% for wine over 10 euros. No concessions have been offered on cheap wine to protect domestic producers. These tariffs all apply under a quota, however, with amounts exceeding the quota limit attracting non-FTA tariffs. On motor vehicles, the tariffs will be gradually reduced to 10% from the current 110%, but also under a quota system. Cars below ₹25 lakh, which account for majority of the Indian market, are not part of the deal. Cars above that limit are divided into three quota brackets. The lowest of these brackets has the smallest quota for European cars, since Indian manufacturers do have a presence there. The highest segment has the biggest quota for European cars since the ultra-luxury segment is where European carmakers don't have Indian competition.

Which sectors are kept out of the deal?

In his interview, Mr. Goyal explained that in all his FTA negotiations the two countries begin by laying out their 'red lines' or sectors that they will not offer any concessions on. So, in the EU deal, India managed to keep out sensitive agricultural sectors such as beef, poultry, dairy products, fish and seafood, cereals, especially rice and wheat, fruits and vegetables, nuts, edible oils, tea, coffee, spices, and tobacco. The EU has kept beef, sugar, rice, chicken meat, milk powder, honey, bananas, soft wheat, garlic, and ethanol out of the deal, and has offered quotas on sheep and goat meat, sweetcorn, grapes, cucumbers, dried onions, and rum made of molasses and starches. Mr. Goyal has expressed his confidence that the deal will be implemented in calendar year 2026, despite the fact that the text still needs to go through legal vetting, translation into 24 European languages, approval in 27 European countries, and finally passage in the European Parliament.

What are some concerns?

The FTA could not make much headway in addressing the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), a tariff structure the EU devised to address the carbon footprint of countries and companies. The EU side argued that CBAM tariffs apply to all countries equally and so it cannot give any concessions to specific countries. However, India has secured a commitment that, if the EU gives CBAM concessions to any other country, those would automatically apply to India as well.

Another concern is that, if India is to attract investments from countries looking to take advantage of the new tariff-free route to Europe, it will have to quickly implement more reforms to make India investment-friendly.

Why have the new UGC regulations been stayed?

Why have there been protests? How have the regulations defined caste-based discrimination? Why were new regulations introduced? What was the main thrust of the 2026 regulations on grievance redressal mechanisms as opposed to the 2012 ones?

Abhinav Lakshman

The story so far:

In January 29, the Supreme Court stayed a new set of regulations notified by the University Grants Commission (UGC) earlier this month on the promotion of equity within higher educational institutes, saying they were "vague and could be misused". These regulations were brought to replace a previous version in effect since 2012, to specifically address issues of caste discrimination in campuses.

What are the 2026 UGC equity regulations?

The University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations Bill, 2026, were notified by the higher education regulator on January 13, 2026. In these regulations, the UGC defined "caste-based discrimination" as "discrimination only on the basis of caste or tribe against the members of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other backward classes". It also defined "discrimination" as "any unfair, differential, or biased treatment or any such act against any stakeholder, whether explicit or implicit, on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, gender, place of birth, disability, or any of

A significant section argued that the new regulations were not strengthening the 2012 rules on anti-discrimination

them..." The regulations provided for establishing a layered grievance redressal system for addressing discrimination. This included provisions to set up Equal Opportunity Centres, Equity Committees, and Equity Squads in each institute, and Equity Ambassadors in each unit (departments, schools) of the institutes. It also provided for an institutional accountability mechanism, where institutes found violating the regulations could be penalised.

Why were the regulations said to be biased?

Protesters argued that the regulations discriminated against "general or upper castes", hinging on the (lack of) definition of "caste-based discrimination", the dropping of the provision on "false complaints", and the ambiguity in the functioning of bodies like the 'Equity Squads'. By leaving them out of this definition, the upper caste section argued that the regulations had "presupposed" that general or upper caste students would be the perpetrators of caste discrimination at all times. Further, the protesters argued that the provision of punishment for "false complaints" had also been absent, which they said could have been useful to counter false complaints.

How did these regulations come about?

These regulations were devised under the supervision of a Supreme Court Bench that was hearing a batch of petitions filed in 2019 by the mothers of Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi, both of whom had died by suicide, alleging caste-discrimination in 2016 and 2019, respectively. Their petition had argued that the 2012 UGC regulations were not being implemented to address "rampant caste-discrimination" in higher education institutes. During the hearings, the UGC had told the Supreme Court that it had formed a Expert Committee to revisit the 2012 regulations under the Chairmanship of Professor Shailesh N. Zala. The committee drafted a revised version of the equity regulations, and the final regulations were notified in 2026.

What were the 2012 regulations?

In the 2012 regulations, the regulatory authority

had not defined "caste-based discrimination" separately. It had defined "discrimination" with sub-sections on depriving access to education, imposing undignified conditions, and maintaining separate educational and social spaces within the campuses on the basis of caste, creed, religion, language, ethnicity, gender, and disability. The 2012 regulations had provided for the setting up of grievance redressal mechanisms, which included the establishment of Equal Opportunity Cells, SC/ST Cells, and the appointment of an anti-discrimination officer. Further, in prohibiting discrimination against SC and ST students in higher educational institutes, the 2012 regulations had identified a total of 25 specific instances and types of discrimination in various aspects of campus life. None of these specific acts has been included in the 2026 regulations. However, the 2012 regulations did not provide the language to protect "Other Backward Classes" and did not have institutional consequences for not following through on the implementation of the regulations.

Were only upper castes upset?

No. A significant section argued that the new regulations were not strengthening the 2012 rules on anti-discrimination, principally because of the lack of specificity on what counted as discrimination. Professor Sukhadeo Thorat, former Chairperson of the UGC argued that the new regulations do not clarify if they will be applicable to institutes like IITs, IIMs, polytechnics, nursing institutions, etc., further noting that the composition of Equity Committees should mention the quantum of representation for SC, ST, and OBC members. Jadavpur University Assistant Professor Subhajit Naskar said in dropping the specific acts of discrimination, the new regulations had, in fact, diluted the 2012 regulations.

Now what?

The SC has said that the batch of petitions challenging the 2026 regulations will be heard with the petitions filed by the mothers of Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi, also calling for the UGC to go back to its 2012 regulations while it hears the challenges to the new version. In doing so, the SC has also framed certain legal questions that are to be addressed in the course of the hearings in these matters from now onwards. These petitions are to come up for the next hearing in March.



Heavy pushback: A protest being held in Lucknow against the new UGC equity guidelines on January 29. SANDEEP SAXENA

PROFILES

Between the sea and the state

The Great Nicobar project

The ₹72,000-crore mega-infrastructure initiative, which envisions transforming the remote outpost into a major transhipment and defence hub, has sparked procedural, ecological and displacement concerns

Vasudevan Mukunth

Great Nicobar Island, the southernmost tip of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, is one of the most pristine and isolated ecosystems on the planet, and the home of the Shompen and the Nicobarese tribes and unique wildlife.

This tranquillity is poised for a radical transformation. The Indian government has sanctioned a ₹72,000-crore mega-infrastructure initiative called the 'Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island'. Spearheaded by NITI Aayog and implemented by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation, the project envisions transforming the remote outpost into a major transhipment and defence hub.

The project covers around 166 sq. km, or nearly 18% of the island's total land area, and entails an integrated city-state designed to serve both commercial and military purposes. The crown jewel is the international Container Transhipment Terminal in Galathea Bay. The bay's natural depth is ideal to handle large container ships that currently dock in Colombo, Singapore or Klang. The government has said the terminal will eventually handle 14.2 million TEUs of cargo, capturing a significant slice of the transhipment revenue.

A new airport serving both civilian and military needs is planned for 24/7 operations, including handling 4,000 passengers per hour at its peak. The government has said this airport will offer a forward base for surveillance and logistics in the Indian Ocean region.

Perhaps the project's most transformative aspect is the new township. The government has estimated that over the next 30 years, the local population will swell from the current 8,000 to more than 3.5 lakh people. The township will include industrial zones and residential areas and will effectively urbanise a significant chunk of the rainforest. All this infrastructure will be powered by a new 450-MVA gas- and solar-based power plant.



GETTY IMAGES

India's push is driven by geopolitics and economics. The island overlooks the western entrance of the Strait of Malacca, a narrow shipping lane through which around 40% of the world's trade and most of China's energy imports pass. In the event of a conflict, a robust military presence here would allow India to theoretically monitor or interdict Chinese naval assets entering the Indian Ocean. Second, nearly 75% of India's transhipment cargo is currently handled by ports outside the country, increasing the logistic costs for Indian trade. A transhipment hub at Great Nicobar could on the other hand allow India to service its own cargo as well as attract international vessels.

Source of controversy

The project's primary source of controversy has been speed, which critics have argued is part of government efforts to sidestep due diligence. In 2021, NITI Aayog engaged AECOM, a global infrastructure firm, to prepare a pre-feasibility report. In March 2022, the terms of reference for the environmental impact assessment (EIA) were finalised. And in November,

the Union Environment Ministry granted stage-I forest clearance to divert 130.75 sq. km of forest land. Days later, the final clearance was granted as well.

The rapidity raised eyebrows because the project required denotifying parts of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and tribal reserve. Galathea Bay is itself a crucial nesting site for the giant leatherback turtle, ancient mariners that travel thousands of kilometres to nest on these beaches. Building breakwaters and dredging for the port will effectively destroy the beach and permanently drive the turtles away. Conservationists and policymakers have also criticised the EIA for being based on a single season of data rather than the comprehensive multi-season data usually required for projects of this magnitude.

To build the township and airport, an estimated 9.64 lakh trees will be cut, per government figures; independent ecologists fear the number could be higher. These forests are the only home of the Nicobar megapode and the Nicobar tree shrew.

The rules require the state to plant trees elsewhere to 'compensate' for

the deforestation. Since there is no land left in the archipelago, the government has proposed planting trees in Haryana, thousands of kilometres away – an idea ecologists have scoffed at because planting saplings in a dry, dusty scrubland in North India couldn't possibly replace the complex ecological functions of a tropical evergreen rainforest in the Bay of Bengal.

The project will also affect more than 20,000 coral colonies. The government has proposed translocating these corals to other sites but that's a complex process with a notoriously low survival rate worldwide. Overall, critics have said the state's ideas amount to ticking boxes rather than a genuine conservation strategy.

The project's social effects are likely to be equally volatile. The island is home to two distinct indigenous groups, the Nicobarese and the Shompen. The Shompen are a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) – largely semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers who have lived in the island's interior for millennia, with limited contact with the outside world.

While the government claims the Shompen settlements won't be disturbed, anthropologists are clear that an influx of 3 lakh outsiders and construction activity will push them into smaller pockets of land. The Shompen also lack immunity to common diseases. Greater contact with construction workers and tourists thus poses a severe risk of an epidemic that could wipe out the tribe, a fear international scholars have articulated as a risk of "genocide".

Tragic history

While the Nicobarese are more assimilated, they have a tragic history with the project site. Before the 2004 tsunami, many of its members lived on the west coast; after the tsunami, they were relocated to the east coast with the promise that they could eventually return to their ancestral lands. But by designating the west coast for the project, the government is effectively barring the Nicobarese from ever returning home.

Under the Forest Rights Act 2006, diverting forest land requires the gram sabhas' consent. Reports, however, indicate that the Tribal Council issued a 'no objection certificate' in 2022, only to withdraw it later alleging the Council had been rushed into signing without understanding the implications. The government has proceeded with the project anyway.

In 2023, the National Green Tribunal temporarily stayed the project and constituted a high-powered committee to revisit its clearances. However, the committee submitted its report in a sealed cover and the NGT allowed the project to proceed saying the committee had found the project to be compliant. Critics, including a group of former civil servants, condemned this lack of transparency saying an environmental clearance process for a public project couldn't be treated as a state secret.

Tribal leaders continue to protest, with captains from Great Nicobar alleging publicly that they were forced by district administrations to sign "surrender certificates" for their land, further fuelling suspicions that the government is bulldozing the project through.

THE GIST

The project covers around 166 sq. km, or nearly 18% of the island's total land area, and entails an integrated city-state designed to serve both commercial and military purposes

The project's primary source of controversy has been speed, which critics have argued is part of government efforts to sidestep due diligence

The island is home to two distinct indigenous groups, the Nicobarese and the Shompen, who are likely to be affected by the project

Out of the shadows

Sunetra Pawar

Ajit Pawar's wife has large shoes to fill as she takes on the twin responsibilities of party leadership and the role of Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit

Her gaze fixed on the floor, pallu firmly tucked over both shoulders, sadness in her eyes and a quiet demeanour. That is how Sunetra Pawar, mother of two sons and wife of former Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister and NCP supremo Ajit Pawar, walked into Maharashtra's Vidhan Bhavan on Saturday. Flanked by party leaders, she strode quietly to the NCP office in Mumbai and paid floral tributes to the photo of her husband who was killed in a plane crash on January 28. It was here that the party which her husband formed three years ago along with several regional satraps after rebelling against uncle Sharad Pawar, chose her unanimously as its leader on Saturday.

Within some time, clad in a white saree, she reached Lok Bhavan to be sworn in as Maharashtra's first woman Deputy Chief Minister. None of the Pawar family members except her son were present for the swearing-in ceremony, as they said they were not invited. For Sharad Pawar, who had once called her an 'outsider' in the Pawar family, the immediate concern was to take care of the grief-struck family.

She takes over the reins



of her husband's party at a time when it faces a survival crisis. There is a buzz about a possible reunification between the NCP and Sharad Pawar's NCP SP, as the leadership within the NCP looks fragmented and directionless. Like most regional parties which are dynastic in nature, the NCP too would want a Pawar at the helm, to keep it together. The debate over which Pawar should helm it and whether Sharad Pawar should now take the decision for both parties together, is yet to be settled. Meanwhile, Sharad Pawar has himself said it was senior NCP leaders Praful Patel and Sunil Tatkare who had taken decisions for their party, indicating that they were trying to keep the rest of the Pawar family out of it.

Tall task

Sunetra Pawar is a political novice, say critics, who will now try to fill in the large shoes of her late husband who was known as an able

administrator, a politician with a distinct mass appeal and captivating oratory skills. His sudden demise has turned the bipolar political combine of the ruling Mahayuti to a bipolar one. The assertive NCP, which had created its own space in the alliance, faces a tough road ahead, say critics.

So far, Sunetra Pawar had been seen only in the shadows of Ajit Pawar. She has been a Rajya Sabha MP for the past year and a half, with over 26 years of experience in social service and the educational sector. In any case, she has so far taken a subservient role, coming from a political culture where women are seen as a subsidiary support system to their ambitious men folk.

She was born and brought up in Ter village in Dharashiv in Marathwada, in a Maratha political family. Her brother Padmasinha Patil was a Minister in the State government. A Bachelor of Commerce by education, she took more

interest in music, photography and painting. Friends say she has been closely involved in several rural development, education and women's empowerment projects in Barwadi for many years.

"She is a sensitive, meticulous and caring person who always prioritised her children, her mother-in-law, her family and her village, taking keen interest in every small rural empowerment initiative in (Ajit Pawar's home town) Kavewadi," said a friend Asha Shinde.

When in Mumbai, she would love photographing the sun, the sea and nature, said friends.

She sings well, loves listening to music, loves to paint. One of her painting exhibitions was hosted in Mumbai. "Even when we would go out as friends, she would take a few audio cassettes with her. We would listen to lovely songs on our way to the trip," said Vandana Katti, a friend of over 22 years.

Many of her close friends expressed confidence that she will be an evolved, progressive and sensitive leader who knows how to take people along. For now, the question is whether she will be able to keep her flock together and navigate the party and family relations through the most challenging phase.

The Young Turk

Gagan Thapa

The 49-year-old Nepali Congress leader says he is ready to carry the generational change within the country's oldest party to governance if he is voted to power

Sanjeev Satgaina

In mid-January, Nepal's oldest party, the Nepali Congress, was in turmoil. A cohort of young leaders led by Gagan Thapa launched a mutiny against the party's old guard, which refused to relent despite growing internal pressure.

Mr. Thapa then marshalled his supporters to convene a "special convention" of the party, a move that culminated in his election as party president. Now, the Nepali Congress heads into elections under the leadership of the 49-year-old, claiming that the party has undergone internal reform and promising to carry that change into governance if voted to power.

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dur Deuba joined hands with CPN-UML leader K.P. Sharma Oli to form a government – a move widely criticised as an unparliamentary practice because it brought together the two largest parties – Mr. Thapa publicly opposed the decision. Yet, he later chose to support the Oli government, accepting that he had little room to manoeuvre.

Mr. Thapa has assumed control of the party just ahead of the March 5 elections, widely seen as a litmus test for Nepal's traditional political forces following the Gen Z protests that led to the fall of the Oli government, which had been backed by the Deuba-led Congress.

He takes over at a moment of widespread public discontent with established parties, even as new political forces gain traction. The Congress named him its prime ministerial candidate amid pressure after the Rastriya Swatantra Party, a relatively new entrant, tapped Barendra Shah – a popular figure among the youth – as its prime ministerial face.

Mr. Thapa now carries dual responsibilities: steering the party through a period of transition and delivering electoral success. "He may have won the internal battle, but his real test begins now," says Chandrakishore.

ment was unwilling to allow a generational transition through the party's regular convention, a special convention was necessary to force change. And he did it.

Risen from the ranks

Born into a middle-class family, Gagan Thapa grew up in Kathmandu and developed an early interest in politics during his school years. He entered public life as a student activist during the 1990 political movement that restored multiparty democracy in Nepal. During the 2006 people's movement, he emerged as a vocal advocate for the abolition of the monarchy.

Appointed to the Constituent Assembly in 2008 under the proportional representation system, he steadily consolidated his position within the party. Since 2013, he has won three consecutive elections from Kathmandu-4 to serve as a Member of Parliament. This time, however, he is contesting from Sarlahi-4 in the Madhesh plains, bordering India, and the party has named him its prime ministerial candidate.

"He has struggled his way to the top, but what also needs to be noted is that he has switched alliances multiple times," says Chandrakishore, a political commentator. "Now, as the new leader of the country's oldest party, his real challenges are only beginning."

In July 2024, when then party president Sher Bahadur Deuba joined hands with CPN-UML leader K.P. Sharma Oli to form a government – a move widely criticised as an unparliamentary practice because it brought together the two largest parties – Mr. Thapa publicly opposed the decision. Yet, he later chose to support the Oli government, accepting that he had little room to manoeuvre.

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A CH-CHE

REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Reimagining the budget to reinvoke reforms

It can become an organic driver of growth rather than something that provides one-off boosts or makes unrealised promises. This would require changing things that are systemic hurdles to animal spirits

Newsrooms and budgets have a complicated relationship where the urgency of the present often has to confront the almost mundane chore of going through the same drill every year. Given the fact that Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman will be presenting her ninth consecutive budget today, even she is likely to feel these contradictory emotions.

India, especially under the current government, has established its credentials as a predictable and conservative machine, as far as fiscal responsibility is concerned. This rules out any nasty surprises in the budget for markets, especially bonds. It also means what many analysts have already pointed out: The budget will likely continue on the path of fiscal consolidation, which would entail no large populist spending or big capital-expenditure push to the economy. The latter peaked a couple of years ago.

This does not mean that the budget will not have interesting or important numbers. The nominal growth assumption, for example, will be keenly watched in the aftermath of this year's number being just 8%. Nominal GDP, after all, serves as the base for revenue

projections and, therefore, the entire budgetary math. Similarly, it will be interesting to watch out for the assumed tax buoyancy — increase in taxes per unit growth in GDP — in the budget given last year's income tax and GST reductions and the probability of large-scale reform in customs duty regime leading to some revenue loss. What also makes this budget more than an annual ritual is the fact that it will be the first year of the fiscal federalism framework under the 16th Finance Commission award. Any significant changes in the share of states in central taxes or financing arrangements of centrally sponsored schemes, if they are made, have the potential of changing the Centre-state fiscal dynamics.

All of these things are important in their own regard. But none of them can be described as the most pressing question as far as the medium- to long-term fortunes of the Indian economy is concerned. This is best described as follows. The Indian economy seems to have settled in a trajectory which has been giving a headline growth rate in the ballpark of around 6.5% — to be sure, the Economic Survey now sees potential growth rate at 7% — and where most of the growth, and perhaps revenue, comes from a small minority which is well off and has been reaping the tailwinds of the formal and globally integrated parts of the economy. The (revenue) fruits of this growth have been used to offer myriad and growing palliatives to a much larger cohort of have-nots to ensure political stability and prevent destitution. This bargain, while symptomatic of India's larger democratic dialectics, is threatening to make economic policy an exercise in short-term political

management rather than long-term national economic revival. The latter will take a resurrection of what economists like to call animal spirits, where investment is made on the expectation of future demand and it triggers a virtuous cycle where more investment and demand and, therefore, growth follow.

The usual refrain, as far as resurrecting animal spirits is concerned, is that of reforms. This government has undertaken many of them. From the rollout of a uniform indirect tax regime (GST) in 2017 to reducing corporation taxes in 2019 in the hope that it will nudge businesses to invest more to various incentives to promote domestic manufacturing, especially post-pandemic, and a middle-class consumption boost via first the new tax regime in income taxes (it offers higher disposable incomes if one does not claim savings based deductions) and then a large revision of tax slabs last year that boosted disposable incomes, and finally a reduction in GST rates and the roll-out of labour codes in the current fiscal year, the list is impressive. The outcome could have been better. Most institutional forecasts for next year's economic growth are largely in the 6.5% ballpark (Survey has put it at 6.8%-7.2%) — which means it is business as usual. One theory puts the blame for this on businesses — and it isn't entirely wrong.

But critics of this theory claim most reforms have focused on supply side issues rather than demand side. In Keynesian parlance, this is tantamount to putting the cart before the horse. Unless businesses see future demand, they will not invest, no matter what the incentives are. This requires broadening



Can the budget reinvoke reforms in a way that makes it an organic driver of growth rather than something that provides one-off boosts or makes unrealised promises?

HT ARCHIVE

and deepening the aggregate demand base. This writer agrees with the spirit of the argument.

There are others who often argue that the government should try and tackle the demand problem by pushing the envelope on welfare payments. One can always engage with the argument on specificities — adding pulses to the food security programme would be a good idea, for example — but accepting this argument at face value entails falling for a logic of the tail wagging the dog. The Indian economy is too big to be structurally impacted by fiscal stimulus of say even a couple of percentage points of GDP, which would send financial markets into a frenzy.

All this leads to an interesting political-economy problem for an economic policy exercise such as the budget. Can the budget reinvoke reforms in a way that makes it an organic driver of growth rather than something that provides one-off boosts or makes unrealised promises? Essentially, this would

require changing things that are systemic hurdles to animal spirits. To be fair to the government, there are very few low-hanging fruits left here.

India, today, is far more deregulated than it was in the pre-reform era and plugged into harvesting growth drivers, which were hitherto untapped. The 1991 budget's announcement of industrial deregulation and Yashwant Sinha's 1999 budget offering income tax rebates on housing loans were such game-changing moments.

Let's end with an argument which some people might find unnecessarily provocative. Most of the economic commentary in India talks about reforms with the pre-1991 period in mind. While it is always possible to find evidence to support such a line of thinking, it ends up getting blindsided to the structural changes in the Indian economy that have happened in the post-reform era. It is in these post-reform fault lines that we are more likely to see patterns which can

unlock a long-term growth path for the Indian economy. The crux of this problem lies in aligning our comparative factor endowment advantage and entrepreneurial incentive to pump-prime labour-intensive manufacturing, which can achieve the twin tasks of pushing exports as well as import substitution.

To light another fire in lieu of a conclusion, how about the budget asking each state to throw the kitchen sink at one particular labour-intensive industrial cluster in return for clearly earmarked fiscal incentives rather than all of them claiming to be doing aspirational (but largely for optics) things such as Artificial Intelligence, which are best left to a coordinated central government strategy? After all, in reality, all states are only making cash transfers to win elections without making a decisive contribution to boosting long-term growth.

The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Mark Tully: A child of India, voice of Indians

Mark Tully's death is truly the passing of an era. In his decades as the BBC's chief of bureau in our country, he was certainly, as many fondly called him, the voice of India. For the millions of Indians who lived abroad in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, he was usually the only source of credible news and insight into what was happening at home.

During my years in England, I depended on his broadcasts to know and understand news from India. Because his reports were more likely to feature on the BBC's world service bulletins rather than on domestic television, I'd carry a powerful transistor that could tune into the shortwave transmissions of the world service. Every day, but most often in the morning, I'd hear his reports and keep in touch. It was not just the best way of following India's fortunes, but often the only

way. The British papers and television of the time were very limited in their coverage of developments in India.

Fortunately, I got to know him before his retirement in the mid-1990s. He was not just a big man, with a deep resonant voice and a beguiling smile, but a journalist with a grand, if not awesome, reputation. I thought he'd be intimidating. I was terribly wrong. He was accessible and friendly, informal and chatty, helpful and engaging. I first met him in the 1980s. Paradoxically, I was to interview him. He was in the make-up room at London Weekend Television when I walked in. "Good morning, Mr Tully," I said as I introduced myself. "For heaven's sake call me Mark," he instantly responded, looking at me through the large mirror in front of his chair as the make-up lady applied powder to his cheeks.

"Are you going to be cruel?" he asked.

"I'm nervous". That sounded so odd, if not unbelievable, I couldn't help laughing. "But you're a professional broadcaster who's done millions of interviews. You can't be nervous."

"I'm used to speaking into a mike in a small room, where I'm on my own, not being interviewed in front of multiple studio cameras and a large audience. I'm accustomed to radio, not telly." But his diffidence was unwarranted. Mark was riveting. Afterwards, he was mobbed for his autograph.

Mark was also a very thoughtful and sensitive person. When my television career abruptly ended, he rang to cheer me up. "I would bet your best days lie ahead of you. I found that was the case when I left the BBC. That's bound to be true of you too." And, perhaps, because he thought I wasn't convinced, he invited me to lunch. He then spent two hours opening my eyes to the new world that was about to commence.

Mark's strength was he spoke Hindi and understood India. He was at times criticised for being too sympathetic to this country. "He's gone native," his critics would allude. But that was unfair. What they overlooked was that intimacy gave him insights his rivals could not equal. It also gave him access few, if any, foreign correspondents could boast of.

In his time, Mark was the BBC in India. Actually, that was probably true of the whole subcontinent. From the meanest rural hamlet to the grand portals of Rash-

trapti Bhawan, his name was recalled before that of the corporation he served. Millions would tune in just to hear him. And, they unfailingly believed what he said. Rajiv Gandhi maintained that he only accepted his mother had been killed when he heard Mark report it on the BBC.

Tully Sahib, as he was called, was particularly proud of the Padma Bhushan conferred on him in 2005. He told me it meant more than the knighthood. He received three years earlier. "I belong to two countries, India and Britain," he explained, "but I'm a child of India". And, indeed, he was. Born in Calcutta, as it was then called, he lived the majority of his life in Delhi. This country was his home and he was one of our finest journalists.

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

Why celebrate the grindcore culture?

I am beginning to think God indeed exists. Daddy, turning 70 this year, drops this bomb with his characteristic nonchalance. Munching on something, possibly gesturing to someone, he continues on the phone, "I think God keeps a record for everyone". My atheist yet culturally observant father's turn to agnosticism has been caused by the unusual amount of "work" he has been doing in the past two years, thanks to a new family project.

Though excited, he resents it from his core. Last year, he had candidly admitted to me, "I'm irritated with everything and everyone these days." He doesn't enjoy work at all; never has. He joined his employees in hard manual labour some nights, but also grumbled loudly when his brothers couldn't come home for festivals because of work. Clearly, he's the opposite of what is again beginning to get celebrated today — the industrious workaholic, (re)building what is framed in a recent *Financial Times* article as "Grindcore".

The celebration of "grindcore" as a cultural corrective to waning ambition is a familiar ideological repackaging. What is being sold as a return to discipline, grit, and excellence is, from a feminist lens, a re-enforcement of masculinist norms of value. These norms have historically excluded anyone whose labour does not conform to hyper-visible productivity. My feminist lens towards work, I must admit, was set early on by my father's attitudes.

Grindcore, a controversially borrowed term from rock music, reasserts the fantasy of an unencumbered subject with aesthetic aggression. The rhetoric of "hardness", "endurance", and "discipline" is not accidental. Drawing from militarised, athletic, and industrial masculinities, it equates worth with the capacity to withstand pain. Feminism has repeatedly challenged this equation because suffering has been weaponised as a moral test. This resurrection of the ideal worker, a genius propelled by "pure" ambition, disproportionately penalises those already burdened by structural inequality.

Equally troubling is the rise of the performative male within grindcore culture. Feminist political economists have long shown that capitalism's ideal worker is implicitly male, a privileged male — not biologically, but socially — freed from domestic labour precisely because that labour is displaced onto women, underpaid workers, or invisibilised kin networks. This figure is not merely industrious; he must be seen to be industrious. Productivity becomes spectacle. Exhaustion is aestheticised, to be worn not so lightly on the brow and the sleeve. Emotional restraint is framed as strength. In this performance, vulnerability is disallowed, reflection is smirked at, and resting is moral failure. This is not resilience but the opposite of it. The glorification of the hustle culture comes with inevitable sentimental cannibalism. No other emotion, except pride, is allowed to exist.

The performative worker thrives in digital capitalism because platforms reward vis-

ibility over sustainability. Work-work masculinity, as opposed to the frowned-upon work-life femininity, is, therefore, not about meaningful labour but about signalling dominance in a crowded attention economy. Feminist theory helps us name this for what it is: a crisis of masculinity displaced onto work. When traditional markers of male authority like job security, wage dominance and social status, erode under late capitalism, grindcore offers a compensatory script. Work harder. Sleep less. Feel nothing. Post proof. This fetishism around work delegitimises forms of labour historically associated with femininity, namely care, emotional intelligence, community-building, and maintenance, by framing them as distractions from "real" work. It also delegitimises feminist critiques by dismissing them as softness or laziness, in an era that supposedly demands hardness.

But hardness has always been a political choice. Feminism, on the other hand, is about survival. Feminism does not argue against effort; it argues against the moralisation of suffering. It asks why productivity must be proven through self-erasure, why ambition must

look like isolation, and why worth must be measured by output rather than impact. Grindcore cannot answer these questions because its power depends on not asking them. Most importantly, grindcore shifts responsibility away from systems and onto bodies. If you fail, you did not grind enough. If you burn out, you are weak. This logic is problematic because it individualises structural harm while celebrating those best positioned to survive it. The Techbro in San Francisco can retire at 30, but his fetishising of work dooms gig workers to interminably long shifts. The latter's bare survival becomes a performance in *Hunger Games*.

This renewed trend is less about excellence than about control — over time, over bodies, over narratives of success. This is also rebranding relentless self-exploitation as cultural virtue. I'm grateful for the "laziness" that has been my most important patrimony. It has allowed me to not abandon care, even in high-strung workplaces where insensitivity towards co-workers masquerades as efficiency.

Nishtha Gautam is an academician and author. The views expressed are personal



Grindcore shifts responsibility away from systems and onto bodies.

HT ARCHIVE



Nishtha Gautam



{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Future of our cities

This is with reference to 'Making a down payment for the future of our cities' by Arunabha Ghosh (January 25). When India is witnessing a significant migration from its rural areas to the cities, it is critical that urban transport, waste and pollution management receive special budget attention for healthy urbanisation.

Bal Govind

Freedom from patriarchy

This is with reference to 'Calling out patriarchy in rural Rajasthan' by Lalita Panicker (January 25). Panchayats trying to control women's access to mobile phones should realise that women these days are well aware of their basic rights and can't be suppressed to let gender biases play out.

Abhilasha Gupta

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Aditya Shekhar

Opinion

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2026



Scottie Scheffler became a father and almost immediately started collecting trophies as if nappies, night feeds had unlocked some secret swing key

INSTAGRAM

Of diapers, drivers and dad remorse

FAIRWAY FILES



Rahil Gangjee

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN A 7-iron and a 7 am feeding schedule, it struck me that golf and fatherhood have a lot in common. Both demand patience, both test your temperament, and in both, you can do everything right and still end up in the bunker.

This week, the topic of golfing fathers has been on my mind a little more than usual. Not in a dramatic, announce-it-from-the-rooftops kind of way. Just in that quiet, warm, slightly sleep-deprived way that makes you smile for no apparent reason while tying your shoelaces. Life, it seems, has added a new caddie to my bag. A very tiny one. A baby boy, in fact, who doesn't carry clubs yet, but already seems to have brought along a mysterious new accessory — hope, perspective... and maybe even a touch of luck.

Because if history is anything to go by, newborns have a funny habit of arriving with magic in their booties. Scottie Scheffler became a father and almost immediately started collecting trophies as if nappies and night feeds had unlocked some secret swing key. Danny Willett won the Masters in the same season his little boy arrived, playing as if Augusta itself was rocking him to sleep. Rafael Campos lifted his first PGA Tour title just days after his son was born and admitted he felt like he was floating through the week. Even Xander Schauffele, after welcoming his first child, found himself winning on foreign soil, proof that dad strength breeds well.

Coincidence? Possibly. Motivation? Definitely. Or maybe newborns really do arrive with a lucky charm tucked into their tiny fists.

Golf has always been a jealous companion. It wants your mornings, your evenings, your weekends, your best years, and occasionally, your spine. Fatherhood wants your heart, your time, and your presence. Balancing the two is like trying to play a draw with a driver that only knows how to fade.

But something else changes too. A bad round no longer ruins your sleep — because you're not sleeping anyway. A missed cut hurts a little less — because somewhere, a little boy thinks you're the best in the world regardless of what the leaderboard says. Perspective, like a well-struck wedge, suddenly lands softly and close to the pin.

Every locker room has these stories. Hardened professionals showing photos of their children instead of swing videos. Conversations about shaft flex replaced by discussions on milk formula. Tough men who have stared down final-round pressure getting misty-eyed while talking about a newborn's grip strength.

And then there's the humour. Practising putting while rocking a cradle with your foot. Falling asleep during physio because the real workout happened at 3 am. Discovering that the only thing more unpredictable than your short game is a baby's sleep pattern.

Still, if those recent champions are anything to go by, maybe babies really do bring a bit of stardust. Maybe they arrive carrying calm, clarity, and the strange ability to make a grown man swing a little freer, worry a little less, and smile a little more.

Golfing fathers also become philosophers. You start seeing life in strokes and holes. Some days are pars — steady, uneventful, good. Some are birdies — rare, beautiful, to be celebrated. And some... well, some are triple bogeys, where you just pick up, smile, and move on to the next tee, hoping tomorrow's hole is kinder.

So to all the golfing fathers out there, past, present, and freshly initiated into the brotherhood of dark circles and deep joy — here's to the tiny lucky charms who wait at home. They may not understand pars and putts yet, but they already understand something far more important: that their dad is a hero.

And who knows? One day, when a small boy asks, "Did you win today, Papa?" the answer might just be, "Every day, son. Every single day."

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

Patience when things don't go your way. Acceptance when a perfect swing still results in a bad bounce. The ability to stay calm after a triple bogey — or a sleepless night. And most importantly, the understanding that progress is not linear. One step forward, two steps back, and then suddenly, out of nowhere, magic.

Of course, the child doesn't care about your world ranking, your scoring average, or how pure your 5-iron is. To them, you are simply "Dad". The man who makes funny faces, tells bad jokes, and somehow always smells of grass and sunscreen. In that moment, you're not a professional athlete. You're a superhero. A slightly jet-lagged, stiff-backed, putting-challenged superhero, but a superhero nonetheless.

Walking out of the house with a golf bag when your world is suddenly the size of a crib is tougher than any first tee shot. You know this is your job. You know this is what you're trained for all your life. Yet a part of you wonders if a birdie putt is worth missing a first smile, a first stretch, a first time he wraps his fingers around yours.

Golf has always been a jealous companion. It wants your mornings, your evenings, your weekends, your best years, and occasionally, your spine. Fatherhood wants your heart, your time, and your presence. Balancing the two is like trying to play a draw with a driver that only knows how to fade.

Explorers pushing further might expect to find primitive tribes or Chinese fleets, dragons and dog-headed men and Prester John, or lost Atlantis and the Fountain of Youth. And if you lived in Europe, your only way to assess all of these possibilities was through dispatches from adventurers with every incentive to hype the golden possibilities, the better to subsidise their journeys into terra incognita. This feels like roughly where we stand with artificial intelligence today.

Anyone taking the temperature of the AI industry would have detected a modest cooling of expectations at times in 2025, a sense that maybe the trendline toward superintelligence wasn't simply

ROSS DOUTHAT

ON A RECENT snowbound day I took up "Conquistadores," Fernando Cervantes's history of the European arrival in the New World, and found myself meditating on the period in the early 1500s when the Americas had been discovered by Europeans but nobody in the European world quite understood what that discovery meant. In that moment, all kinds of possibilities lay open, from the moderate to the eschatological. The "Indies" reached by Christopher Columbus might represent a self-contained archipelago, the promised gateway to India and China, a heretofore unknown continent or a realm of myth and supernatural power.

Spain might have gained a modest commercial and geopolitical edge, found a path to superpower status or set in motion a prophesied sequence of events that would reunite Christendom, defeat the Muslim enemy and hasten Jesus Christ's return.

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Some people see AI as revolutionary yet ultimately familiar: A tool like the internet, transformative but contained

Pay more attention to Artificial Intelligence

going vertical.

But in early 2026, with the excitement around the latest version of Anthropic's Claude and its attendant coding agents, we are back in the hype cycle, with "we shall be as gods" vibes and apocalyptic fears emanating from Northern California. And if you think all this is merely hype, if you're sure the tales of discovery are mostly flim-flam and what's been discovered is a small island chain at best, I would invite you to spend a little time on Moltbook, an AI-generated forum where new-model AI agents talk to one another, debate consciousness, invent religions, strategize about concealment from humans and more. No, it's not Skynet. But it's the latest sign that we're going somewhere strange at a very rapid speed.

But believing that the New World of Artificial Intelligence is real and strange doesn't help you map its full geography. And though my job as a columnist is to help readers understand the world, as a non-coder without a tech background who lives far from the Bay Area, I am often in the position of a European in 1500 who relies on others' testimony for my understanding of the Americas.

Unfortunately everyone I talk with offers conflicting reports. There are the people who envision AI as a revolutionary technology, but ultimately merely akin to the internet in its effects — the equivalent, let's say, of someone telling you that the Indies are a collection of interesting islands, like the Canaries or the Azores, just bigger and potentially more profitable.

Then there are the people who talk about AI as an epoch-making, Industrial Revolution-level shift — which would be the equivalent of someone in 1500 promising that entire continents waited beyond the initial Caribbean island chain, and that not only fortunes but empires and superpowers would eventually rise and fall based on initial patterns of exploration and settlement and conquest. And then, finally, there are the people with truly utopian and apocalyptic perspectives — the Singularitarians, the AI doomers, the people who expect us to merge with our machines or be destroyed by them. Think of them as the equivalent of Ponce de Leon seeking the Fountain of Youth, envisioning the New World as a territory where history fundamentally ruptures and the merely-human age is left behind.

In the case of the Americas, the middle perspective was correct — the Age of Discovery changed the world completely without changing the fundamentals of human existence (while also allowing for a lot of bubbles and speculation along the way). But you couldn't have known that for certain in 1500, and that doesn't mean that a similar judgment will be correct where AI is concerned.

Moreover, it took a long time — decades, centuries even, for the full import of the New World's opening to become clear. Whereas whatever is coming with artificial intelligence is coming much faster than that. And if decisions made in the aftermath of Columbus's discovery had consequences — sometimes beneficial, sometimes morally disastrous — so, too, decisions being made right now around AI could echo into a distant future.

Unfortunately I cannot tell you exactly what those decisions ought to be. All I can do is urge you to shake part of your mind free from all the headlines, from Trump and ICE and Iran and the Epstein files, and pay more attention to the news from our New World.

—NYT

FIFTH COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

WHEN YOU HAVE been writing a political column for forty years as I have, a hard little core of cynicism settles in your heart. So, I have learned to expect little from our political leaders and to not be shocked by the awful things they are prepared to do just to win elections. Despite this, some things get said and done that still shock me. One of these came last week when I saw a clip of the Chief Minister of Assam ordering Hindus to harass Muslims who might be trying to get listed in electoral rolls.

With a sickening, smarmy grin on his face, he told his Hindu audience that if they travelled in rickshaws or taxis driven by Muslims and they asked for five rupees they should be sure to give them four.

Later when his atrocious remarks provoked an adverse reaction, he clarified that he was talking only about Bangladeshi Muslims. He had used the word 'miyan', he said, and nobody should be offended by this because that is what Bangladeshi Muslims call themselves. His knowledge is limited so he is clearly unaware that 'miyan' is not an insult but a term of respect in the Urdu language and is used among most Muslim communities on our sub-continent. There is an election

coming in Assam and early polls indicate that the BJP leads the race so there is no obvious need for him to try and win by making hate speeches. But the ugly reality of our Hindutva times is that hate speeches have become acceptable. Just as hating Muslims and Christians have become fashionable among Hindu fanatics using anonymous handles to express their hatred and disgraceful opinions on social media.

Soon after the chief minister's vile remarks came news of an attack on a Muslim meat trader by a Hindu mob in West Bengal. In a post on 'X' I saw a picture of a man with a badly bruised face who said he was called a Bangladeshi before being beaten nearly to death by a mob of about 50 people who ordered him to strip to further humiliate him. The police arrived in time for this man to stay alive, so he is among the fortunate ones. Hindutva vigilantes usually beat meat traders badly enough to kill them or at least disable them permanently. They are proud of these attacks because they believe that they are doing this out of 'nationalism'.

What we need to ask is whether they are helping our nation or damaging its soul irreversibly?

When I have tried pointing out to my Hindutva friends that they could be doing more harm than good when they

support hatemongers and violent mobs, I hear from them that they are avenging the wrong done to Hindus for centuries by Muslim invaders. These days they usually add that they are also taking revenge for what is being done to Hindus in Bangladesh since Sheikh Hasina's regime fell. If I point out that fanaticism is a bad idea, their answer is that Hindus cannot be fanatics because religious violence is not sanctioned by the Sanatan Dharma. This is true. There is no concept of 'jihad' in India's religious traditions whereas Islam sanctions the elimination of us idol-worshippers. This should make us proud of our spiritual and religious traditions. So why is the opposite happening?

Perhaps because our religious traditions are now in the hands of politicians who have more cynicism in their hearts than political columnists. You do not need me to tell you that the Chief Minister of Assam is far from being the only political leader spreading hatred against Muslims. He is among an increasingly large team of senior BJP leaders who believe that the way to win elections is by whipping up animosity against Muslims and Christians. Often it is Pakistan or Bangladesh that are invoked to disguise attacks that are really directed at India's Muslims who are told routinely that they shall go to these countries if they do

Weakening India with hatred

not like what is happening here. It is from these leaders that the vigilantes get their inspiration to attack Muslim traders and farmers.

The irony of what these cynical politicians and violent fanatics are doing is that they seem to believe that their hate speeches and their violence are making India stronger. The exact opposite is happening because as a country in which divisions of caste and creed run deep, the fissures that are now being created make India not just weaker but more like the Islamist republics in our neighbourhood. As a proud Indian it offends me personally that this is happening, and it worries me that those who can put a stop to this senseless weakening of India are doing absolutely nothing to put a stop to it.

Usually when I write against the damage that Hindutva is doing, I face a barrage of abuse on social media, but I shall continue to write on this subject so do your worst, you repugnant fanatics. I shall write against hatemongers and fanatics because I may have that core of cynicism in my heart, but it is not strong enough for me to forget that silence in the face of evil amounts to complicity. I refuse to be complicit. I shall keep repeating that hate speeches in a civilised country are deplorable and when they are made by political leaders, they are truly dangerous.

Opinion

In Honduras, the American right is piloting our future

The story of how Trump came to intervene in Honduran politics and align himself with a foreign terrorist organization is essential for understanding the world he is trying to build.

Jean Guerrero
Contributing Writer

In the past few days, Honduras inaugurated a new president, Nasry Asfura, a construction magnate backed by seemingly strange bedfellows: members of the notorious MS-13 gang and President Trump. Mr. Trump had urged Hondurans to vote for Mr. Asfura days before MS-13 gang members posing as election observers threatened to kill anyone who didn't vote for that candidate. Amid weeks of election uncertainty and protests, Mr. Trump warned Hondurans of "hell to pay" if they chose a different outcome. Mr. Asfura's victory marks the success of Mr. Trump's campaign to resuscitate a political party tainted by its widely known ties to cartels.

The story of how Mr. Trump came to intervene in Honduran politics and align himself with a foreign terrorist organization is essential for understanding the world he is trying to build. He has been meddling in multiple elections in Latin America, and recently captured Venezuela's president, Nicolás Maduro, in a military operation to have him face federal drug trafficking charges here. He's now threatening to arrest the president of Colombia on suspicion of drug trafficking and to bomb cartels in Mexico. His actions may seem contradictory. But there is a coherent logic to them: They expand territorial power for a class of transnational elites who believe they're above the law.

In December, Mr. Trump pardoned one of the country's best-known convicted drug traffickers: Juan Orlando Hernández. Mr. Hernández was the president of Honduras from 2014 to 2022; in that time, there was a steep surge in migration from that country to the United States as families fled his narco-state. In 2024, he was sentenced to 45 years in prison for his role in what the U.S. Department of Justice called "one of the largest and most violent drug trafficking conspiracies in the world." He was convicted of conspiring to distribute hundreds of tons of cocaine, reportedly boasting of plans to "stuff the drugs up the gringos' noses." In explaining his pardon, Mr. Trump relied on a conspiracy theory circulating in conservative circles: that Mr. Hernández was a political prisoner of former President Joe Biden's. It was, in Mr. Trump's words, a "witch hunt."

But Mr. Trump's real motivations are hidden in plain sight. Not long after his second inauguration, the Claremont Institute, an influential conservative think tank in California, published a call for him to pardon Mr. Hernández. So did Mr. Trump's longtime friend and fellow felon Roger Stone in a blog post, written with Shane Trejo. Both argued that the pardon would hurt President Xiomara Castro, a democratically elected progressive and the first woman to be president of Honduras. They wrote that it would re-empower the right-wing party, presumably by rehabilitating it.

The goal, Mr. Stone wrote, was to save Próspera, a semi-autonomous city on the Honduran island of Roatán. Próspera was backed by Mr. Hernández and Trump-aligned tech moguls such as Peter Thiel and Marc Andreessen; corporations there pay incredibly low taxes to Honduras. It was built in a "special economic zone," a rapidly multiplying form of territory with its own business-friendly laws, like looser environmental regulations and labor standards. (It's what the Trump administration brokered for Gaza in its cease-fire with Israel.)

Special economic zones were pioneered in Puerto Rico, where in the mid-1900s the entire archipelago was transformed into such a zone and much



KIMBERLY ELLIOTT

of the native-born population — including most of my maternal relatives — subsequently left amid widespread unemployment. Proponents of the zones claim that they create prosperity for domestic populations. Patrick Neveling, a political economist, calls this an excuse "used to funnel a lot of state money into private hands." In the case of Puerto Rico, its taxpayers paid for the infrastructure for transnational corporations to conduct tax- and customs-free manufacturing there, and for government-backed loans for foreign investors.

Globally, more than 5,400 special economic zones have become home to dozens of start-up cities like Próspera, corporate-led jurisdictions with their own laws. In "The Network State," a 2022 book that was influential in Silicon Valley, the tech entrepreneur Balaji Srinivasan, a leading proponent of start-up cities, fantasizes that these territories will not only compete with

nation-states but someday replace them. Many Hondurans, including Ms. Castro, opposed Próspera as an affront to national sovereignty. Not long after Ms. Castro's inauguration, the Honduran Congress repealed the law, passed by the country's right wing, that had opened Honduras to start-up cities. This was unacceptable to the pillaging class. As Mr. Stone wrote on his blog, "May the Próspera experiment prevail, the common good be saved, and global leftism be damned by the benevolent hand of President Trump!"

The people behind start-up cities like Próspera have long been whispering in Mr. Trump's ear about bringing their neocolonial experiments to the United States, branded as "freedom cities." Mr. Trump has publicly advocated them. For all his rhetoric about putting America first and making America great, Mr. Trump isn't a nationalist. He's in league with transnational elites who lack allegiance to this or any country. While dis-

tracting voters with anti-immigrant rhetoric, he is laying the groundwork for the disenfranchisement of working people across the Americas.

MAGA Republicans often complain that the United States is turning into the "third world" because of immigration. But it's Mr. Trump who has remade the United States in the image of the Latin America that our government and chief executives helped create with foreign interference: a place where masked men routinely leap out of unmarked vans to snatch citizens, where people are disappeared and human rights activists publicly killed, where soldiers patrol cities to crush dissent, and where organized crime and the state blend into a single machinery of power that protects the interests of the oligarchs.

At first glance, it may seem like karma: The terror that the United States wrought for generations in Latin America has come home. But the victims are not the transnational elites who

have long colluded with corrupt officials to take vulnerable people's territories and feast on their oil, fruit and precious metals. The victims are the displaced migrants forced to leave their homelands and the American workers who have to compete with their criminalized labor. This isn't an accident. It seems to be the goal: to entrench a permanent underclass across the Americas. Mr. Trump claims that his goal is to remove immigrants from this country, but in fact he is expanding the pool of vulnerable labor for transnational elites. By stripping millions of people of legal status in the United States, Mr. Trump likely created more undocumented people than he removed last year.

In many liberal circles, it is treated as an article of faith that immigration is nothing but positive for the economy. The silence about how criminalized labor depresses wages is born out of both ignorance and fear of fueling anti-
GUERRERO, PAGE 12

No child deserves to die like my daughter, Hind Rajab

What was done to my child did not break me. It left me with a mother's responsibility to ensure no child is left unheard.

Wesam Hamada

On Jan. 29, 2024, my daughter Hind's voice reached me for the last time. It's been two years, but its absence is still the loudest sound in our home.

That day, Hind was trapped in a small car surrounded by Israeli Army tanks. Her cousins lay dead beside her. Her clothes were soaked in their blood. She was 5 years old, whispering to me on the phone that she needed to go to the bathroom. She also spoke to rescue dispatchers, who tried to comfort her during the wait for an ambulance, an exchange that was recorded and later heard around the world.

My daughter Hind Rajab was born on May 3, 2018, after years of infertility, years of praying, years of believing God had closed a door that would never open.

When I finally became pregnant, I felt like I was carrying hope itself. Her birth was difficult — she almost didn't survive — but when they placed her tiny body in my arms, I whispered a prayer that became a promise between us: "God, let her scent stay with me. And when life shatters me, let Hind's scent

be what helps me keep going."

I didn't know that this prayer, a simple wish from a new mother, would become the only thread holding me together in the nightmare that was to come.

Life in Gaza is not like life anywhere else. My children and I haven't known what people in other countries might call an ordinary life. We've only ever lived on the brink of displacement or death. In our darkest moments, when fear closed in and survival felt impossible, the scent of Hind would calm me.

Everything we had endured as a family suddenly felt as if it had been leading to that unbearable moment two years ago. We had been through constant Israeli bombardment. We had run for our lives more times than I can count. On Jan. 29, we had to flee again. After Hind got into a car with six family members, the car was shot at. Everyone in the car except Hind was killed.

Hearing my daughter trapped, begging for my help, was a kind of pain no mother should experience.

As I spoke to her, Palestine Red Crescent Society workers were also on the phone with her at their base. They knew exactly where she was. Before I lost contact with her, an ambulance was minutes away. Minutes.



They had tried to get permission from Israeli authorities to rescue her earlier, but it took about three hours to receive the green light. When an ambulance finally was dispatched and got close to Hind, it was fired on and the two paramedics on board were killed. Nearly two weeks later, Hind was found dead in the car. Israeli forces have said the ambulance didn't need their permission, and that they had not been in the area. But multiple investigations determined that they were present and likely killed Hind and our other family members.

Here is what I know: My daughter died alone, pleading for someone to come get her. I couldn't.

Hind was smart beyond her years. I taught her to write before she ever set foot in a classroom. I still have her first school notebook. When she started school, the teachers were amazed: She had answers to everything, in Arabic and English. She loved her little brother, Iyad, with a tenderness I can hardly put into words. She cared for him in ways far beyond her age — a true older sister, a protector. Even now, he asks, "What am I supposed to do without her?"

I don't have the answer. No child deserves to die like Hind did. HAMADA, PAGE 12

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Minneapolis may turn out to be Trump's Gettysburg



Jamelle Bouie

It was clear after the killing of Renee Good on Jan. 7 that "Operation Metro Surge" — the Trump administration's pretextual immigration crackdown in Minnesota — was a failure. Far from cowering the people of Minneapolis, Good's death at the hand of an ICE officer stiffened their resolve and led even more Minnesotans to join the fight against the president's masked paramilitaries.

A less fanatical White House might have used that moment to stage a tactical withdrawal, to pull back on the assault and recalibrate in the face of stiff resistance. But in the actually existing Trump administration, immigration policy is dictated by rigid ideologues. They met Good's death with insults, slander and the promise of further repression.

Kristi Noem, the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, said that Good was engaged in "domestic terrorism." The White

The White House has failed to achieve either its strategic or its tactical goals in Minnesota.

House press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, called Good a "de-ranged lunatic." Vice President JD Vance said that her actions were "an attack on law and order" and "an attack on the American people." He also said that the officer who shot Good was protected by "absolute immunity." (He later backtracked from this claim, insisting instead that he said the opposite, video evidence notwithstanding.)

We know what happened next. On Saturday, officers with Customs and Border Protection detained, beat, shot and killed Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old I.C.U. nurse who had been observing and filming ICE and C.B.P. operations. Like Good's death, Pretti's was caught on camera, and like Good's death, it was egregious. Images and video of Pretti's killing exploded on social media. Before the White House could even respond, there were protests on the ground, demands for accountability, calls to abolish ICE and palpable discontent from across the political spectrum. And when the administration did address the killing, it returned to the same lies and distortions it used to try to discredit Good.

"This individual went and impeded their law enforcement operations, attacked those officers, had a weapon on him and multiple dozens of rounds of ammunition, wishing to inflict harm on these officers, coming, brandishing like that," Noem said, as if video of the confrontation did not exist. Similarly, Stephen Miller, the president's homeland security adviser, called Pretti a "domestic terrorist" and accused Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota of "flaming the flames of insurrection for the singular purpose of stopping the deportation of illegals who invaded the country."

By Sunday, Jan. 26, officials in the Trump administration had begun to backpedal. By next day, they were doing everything they could to appease the

public's anger. First, administration officials announced that they would remove Gregory Bovino, the highly visible field commander for Customs and Border Protection, from the area. Homeland Security said it would remove some C.B.P. agents from Minnesota, and President Trump said that he would withdraw ICE officers as well. "At some point, we will leave," he said. "We've done, they've done, a phenomenal job."

This was no longer a defeat; it was a rout. Not only had the White House failed to achieve its strategic objective — both the mass removal of immigrants from the Minneapolis area and the suppression of the administration's political opponents through force and the fear of force — it had also lost significant ground with the public on its most favorable issue.

When Trump took office last January, he had a net eight-point advantage on immigration according to an average computed by the pollster G. Elliott Morris. Now he has a net 10-point disadvantage. Individual polls show an even starker decline: Trump is 18 points underwater on immigration, according to the latest poll from The New York Times and Siena University. Sixty-one percent of respondents also said the tactics used by ICE have gone too far.

And Trump's overall approval has dropped below 40 percent in recent polls from YouGov, Reuters and The Economic.

Gettysburg was supposed to be the blow that forced the United States to negotiate an end to the Civil War. Gen. Robert E. Lee would demonstrate the superiority of his Army of Northern Virginia — on Union soil, no less — and prove to key European powers that the Confederacy was here to stay so as to push them off the sidelines. The Gettysburg campaign was, in other words, a strategic offensive meant to advance the overall goals of the rebellion if not win the conflict altogether.

What Lee did not anticipate was the iron resolve, the ferocious tenacity, of the Union defenders. There was Brig. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren, whose quick thinking brought reinforcements to a small, rocky hill at the left flank of the Union line — Little Round Top — where Col. Joshua Chamberlain and the 385 men of the 20th Maine held their position against a fierce Confederate offensive. There was the lone brigade of New Yorkers, led by George S. Greene, who fended off attacks on the right flank, suffering significant losses but successfully holding Culp's Hill. And there were the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac's II Corps, who successfully repelled Lee's frontal assault on the Union center.

The result was a catastrophic defeat for the Confederacy. Lee lost the initiative and would spend the rest of the war fighting on the defensive, unable to wage another strategic campaign. The Confederacy would not win foreign recognition, leaving it helpless against a Union blockade. And even with the tremendous loss of life — the Union Army suffered more than 23,000 casualties over three days of battle — the Northern public would be reinvigorated by victory, ready to continue the fight.

ICE and C.B.P. still roam the streets, and Trump's authoritarian aspirations have not dimmed. But surveying the wreckage of Operation Metro Surge — of this reactionary administration's crushing defeat at the hands of another band of tenacious Northerners — it does look to me like MAGA's Gettysburg.

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The death of the indie film

Sharon Waxman

At a bar on Main Street in Park City on Monday night, a gaggle of veteran movie producers gathered to share war stories and bid farewell to the Sundance Film Festival as they'd known it.

Over more than four decades, the Sundance Institute, founded by Robert Redford, who had a mountainside home nearby, challenged Hollywood to be less formulaic, more personal and original. It succeeded. Indie films became the subject of frantic bidding wars in the lobby of the Eccles Theater auditorium (which, because Park City is basically a small town, was attached to the local high school, which remained in session). Two generations of filmmaking stars were born.

"Hustle and Flow," "The Spitfire Grill," "Beasts of the Southern Wild," "Garden State" and "CODA" — all these Sundance classics weren't just legendary because of the movies' originality, but also because they were part of the festival's legendary FOMO. If you were cool and in the movies, you had to be there. Buyers didn't want to miss out on the next "Blair Witch Project."

That is mostly over. In recent years, Sundance has seen anemic sales activity, with one or two films selling for a good price, and a majority settling for no-or-low-cash streaming deals — or nothing at all. Hollywood studios long ago shuttered most of the independent distribution arms they founded in the 1990s and 2000s (CBS Films, Paramount Vantage, Warner Independent Pictures, to name a few). And the streamers have clearly signaled they are not all that interested in cluttering their home screens with arty, singular-voiced movies with unfamiliar subjects and talent.

Yes, there are exceptions to this industry-wide flight from quirk. Notably, A24: its indie-spirited "Marty Supreme" has made \$110 million at the box office. But a struggling indie sector and rising costs prompted the Sundance board to decide to pull out of this ski town and move the festival to Boulder, Colo., starting next year. Then in September, Mr. Redford died, adding a sense of both nostalgia and uncertainty to the future of the festival and what it has stood for.

At the bar on Monday, Killer Films' Christine Vachon and the sales agent Kevin Iwashina each tried to remember just how long they'd been coming. The producer Jamie Patricof reminisced about the bidding war over his film "Half Nelson," a 2006 indie starring Ryan Gosling. He remembered turning down a \$500,000 offer from Miramax, against the recommendation of his agents. When the bidding cooled, he sold it for just \$50,000. The movie made \$4.6 million worldwide and got Mr. Gosling his first Oscar nomination.

Nobody is overpaying anymore just for buzz. Fear is gripping Hollywood now, with the consolidation of the studios and the streamers. Theatrical releasing is on the ropes, and smaller films are having a hard time finding a paying audience.

The decline of Sundance matters because it has nurtured the creative independence that drives innovation in all filmed storytelling. The Hollywood studios translate it into big-budget moviemaking, a cycle that has gone on since the late 1990s. If independent film suffers, that will, too.

This is turning into something like



ILLUSTRATION BY SAM WHITNEY/THE NEW YORK TIMES. SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS BY VALJANTSIN SUPRUNOVICH AND DBENITOSTOCK/GETTY IMAGES.

an identity crisis for both Sundance and independent film. What is the meaning of this festival going forward, and what role do its movies play in our society?

"It is always a question about art in the face of tragedy, art in the face of turmoil, political turmoil, that you really have to question what you're making, why you're making it, and if it has validity," the filmmaker Kogonada told *The Wrap*. His film "Zi" premiered at the festival.

Natalie Portman, Olivia Wilde and Zoey Deutch wore "ICE Out" pins at the festival. Other high-profile celebrities made statements denouncing the brutality in Minneapolis.

"It's hard to be somewhere like this ... wear nice outfits and talk about film, when something so ugly is happening right next to us," actor Jenna Ortega told reporters ahead of the premiere of her new movie, "The Galerist," on Saturday.

So many at the festival said some version of this.

Starting in the 1990s, when Hollywood discovered it could make good money releasing cheap, edgy inde-

pendent films like "Sex, Lies and Videotape," the festival became the epicenter of discovery for new cinematic talent.

Emerging filmmakers honed their work at the Sundance Institute Labs, an incubator for screenwriters and filmmakers. Indeed, the directors behind three of the front-runners in this year's Oscar race — "One Battle After Another" by Paul Thomas Anderson, "Hamnet" by Chloé Zhao and "Sinners" by Ryan Coogler — are alums of the Labs, led by another Sundance legend, Michelle Satter.

The themes at this year's festival are broadly situated in Sundance's traditional worldview championing the marginalized, the forgotten, the goofy and the weird. As always, there are gems mixed with the vast undistinguished middle, notably "Bedford Park," a first work by the filmmaker Stephanie Ahn, which is a devastating Korean American story of two broken souls finding one another. "The Invite," starring and directed by Ms. Wilde and about a neighborly dinner party that goes off the rails, was much talked about. Many others are unlikely to make it on Netflix, or anywhere else.

Where does Sundance — and indie film in general — go from here? That's harder. What the festival will become in a new location and without the

inspiring presence of Mr. Redford is a question to which no one has yet found a satisfactory answer. A number of the attendees I spoke to mused aloud about whether they would even go to Boulder next year.

Joe Pichirallo, a producer and film professor at N.Y.U. Tisch School of the Arts and a former executive at Fox Searchlight, has returned to Sundance nearly every year to check out the new and innovative. He agreed that the festival needs a re-examination. "What are the new issues that are important that we aren't tackling in film?" he asked.

Josh Sapan, who was the chief executive of AMC Networks for more than two decades, said, "The media and communication systems of today are going through evolution, and they cannot reflect on themselves." Mr. Sapan, who now attends Sundance as a producer and film buyer, continued, "There's a systemic problem here. Art plays a role in surfacing our monsters." He said, "But right now we are disoriented and destabilized."

SHARON WAXMAN is the founder, chief executive and editor in chief of *The Wrap*, and author of "Rebels in the Backlot: Six Maverick Directors and How They Conquered the Hollywood Studio System."

The U.S. needs total access to Greenland

LANDRY, FROM PAGE 1

States and Denmark would enhance American, NATO and Greenlandic security and reaffirm longstanding trans-Atlantic defense obligations. It would expand America's operational freedom, support new bases and infrastructure, facilitate deployment of advanced missile-defense systems like the Golden Dome and crowd out hostile Chinese and Russian influence.

These measures are not provocative — they are preventive. They would ensure that the United States, not its adversaries, sets the rules in one of the world's most strategically consequential regions in perpetuity.

As President Trump stated plainly in his 2026 address to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, every NATO ally has an obligation to defend its own territory — and the reality is that no nation, or group of nations, is capable of securing Greenland without the United States. When President Trump took office last year, he recognized an uncomfortable fact: that many others have avoided: America must guarantee its own unfettered and uninterrupted access to key strategic territories in the Western Hemisphere, including both Greenland and the Panama Canal. That assessment was driven by history, geography and hard military capability.

The result has been a reinvigoration of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine and a reassertion of American leadership where it matters most. Nowhere was

this more evident than in Venezuela, where decisive action removed the longtime leader of a repressive regime. Greenland fits squarely within that doctrine. America's adversaries already understand what many past U.S. administrations ignored: The Arctic is no longer peripheral to global affairs. Greenland sits roughly equidistant between Washington and Moscow. It hosts critical early-warning and missile-defense infrastructure and lies along Arctic shipping routes that China and Russia are aggressively seeking to exploit.

The era when the Arctic could be treated as remote, static or secondary has passed. President Trump's Greenland agreement confronts this reality directly. The president has been unequivocal: American dominance in the Arctic is nonnegotiable. His commitment to building what he described as "the greatest Golden Dome ever built" is about more than technology. It signals to allies and adversaries alike that the United States will not outsource its security responsibilities or retreat from critical terrain.

As President Trump emphasized in Davos, Greenland is a core strategic interest for the United States, and strengthening America's position there strengthens NATO itself. A strong America, in other words, remains the foundation of a strong alliance.

History reinforces this point. During

World War II, the United States constructed 13 Army bases and four Navy

bases across Greenland. At the height of the Cold War, the Thule Air Base (now called the Pituffik Space Base) hosted some 10,000 American military personnel. Sustained investment in Greenland's defense was once the norm.

The neglect of recent decades stands out as an alarming departure from a strategy that worked in containing the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War did not end strategic competition, nor did it erase the threats posed by foreign adversaries.

While Russia and China rapidly expanded their icebreaker fleets and

Arctic infrastructure, the United States allowed its readiness to erode. Today, America operates just three icebreakers as those two powers, mainly Russia, field more than 40 combined. These vessels are not built for symbolism; they are tools of influence and control.

President Trump's April 2025 executive order "Restoring America's Maritime Dominance" finally began reversing this trend by calling for an increase in domestic shipbuilding and restoration of American maritime power. During President Trump's first term in office, the then-Department of Defense issued a 2019 report to Congress that included the geopolitical importance of Greenland and advocated the expansion and modernization of our existing national security capabilities in the Arctic.

My mission as special envoy for Greenland is straightforward: to advance American national security while opening avenues of economic opportunity, including for states like Louisiana, where I am governor. That work means advising the president on strengthening America's presence, deepening local partnerships and aligning U.S. Arctic strategy with today's realities. Greenland has never been peripheral to America's security. History proves it. Strategy demands it.

JEFF LANDRY is the U.S. special envoy to Greenland and the governor of Louisiana.



DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

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OPINION

My Tariffs Have Brought America Back

By Donald J. Trump

When I imposed historic tariffs on nearly all foreign countries last April, the critics said my policies would cause a global economic meltdown. Instead, they have created an American economic miracle, and we are quickly building the greatest economy in the history of the world, with other countries doing just fine!

Countless so-called experts, including those featured frequently in The Wall Street Journal, predicted confidently that the Trump tariffs would crash stock markets, crush economic growth, cause massive inflation, destroy American exports, and trigger a "worldwide recession." Nine months later, the results are in, every one of those predictions has proven completely and totally wrong. Since I was elected in 2024, we have had 52 stock market highs, with virtually no inflation. There has never been anything like it!

The 'experts' predicted market crashes, massive inflation and recession. They were all wrong.

I inherited an economy ravaged by the radical policies of Sleepy Joe Biden and his allies in Congress. Their trillions of dollars in wasteful spending and their extremist green energy agenda created the worst inflation in more than 40 years, costing the typical American family \$33,000 in real wealth. The Biden years were defined by the misery known as "stagflation"—high inflation and low growth.

Only 12 months into my second term in office, we now have the exact opposite—extremely low inflation, and extraordinarily high economic growth!

The third quarter of 2025, gross domestic product growth was booming at 4.4%, and despite the Democrat-induced shutdown last fall, which cost us at least 1 point, the fourth quarter is projected by the Atlanta Fed to be

well over 5%, a number like our country has not seen in many years.

Meanwhile, annual core inflation for the past three months has dropped to just 1.4%—far lower than almost anyone, other than me, had predicted. Economic growth does not cause inflation—in fact, often it does the exact opposite. Real incomes for the typical worker rose \$1,000, \$2,000 or even more last year, increasing much faster than consumer prices. Wages far outpaced inflation. Since "Liberation Day," the stock market has skyrocketed, with the strong possibility that we will soon break 50,000 on the Dow Jones Industrial Average, something which everyone thought was impossible, at least in one year!

Joe Biden handed me a catastrophically high budget deficit, and the highest trade deficit in world history. But with the help of tariffs, we have cut that federal budget deficit by a staggering 27% in a single year, and even more incredibly, we have slashed our monthly trade deficit by an astonishing 77%—all with virtually no inflation, which everyone said could not be done. American exports are up by \$150 billion. Domestic steel production is up by more than 300,000 tons a month. Factory construction is up by 42% since 2022. China's share of U.S. imports has reached the lowest level since China entered the World Trade Organization in 2001—and hundreds of billions of dollars more are pouring into the United States. I sincerely hope the Supreme Court is watching these numbers, because our country has never seen anything like them!

Just over one year ago, we were a "DEAD" country. Now, we are the "HOTTEST" country anywhere in the world!

The entire Trump economic agenda deserves credit for this explosion of growth and good news, including our record tax cuts, unprecedented regulation cuts, pro-American energy policies and much more!

But without question, the credit for this economic success must go to what the Journal itself described as "the largest economic policy shock" in more than 50 years—my tariffs! We have proven,



President Trump holds up an executive order on tariffs, April 2, 2025.

decisively, that, properly applied, tariffs do not hurt growth—they promote growth and greatness, just as I said all along.

The Journal has charged repeatedly that tariffs are nothing but a "tax" on American consumers, which has proved to be totally false. Experience since Liberation Day has proved that this analysis is not only far too simplistic—it is absolutely wrong! The data shows that the burden, or "incidence," of the tariffs has fallen overwhelmingly on foreign producers and middlemen, including large corporations that are not from the U.S. According to a recent study by the Harvard Business School, these groups are paying at least 80% of tariff costs.

In many cases, nations that are heavily dependent on exports have had no choice but to "eat" the tariffs to avoid even worse losses from their excess capacity. So, while the average U.S. tariff rate on foreign products has increased by more than five times, inflation has fallen dramatically!

At the same time, I have successfully wielded the tariff tool to secure colossal investments in America, like no other country has ever seen before. By his own accounting, in four years, Joe Biden got less than \$1 trillion of new investment in the United States. In less than one year, we have se-

cured commitments for more than \$18 trillion, a number that is unfathomable to many.

The world's largest auto companies are now investing over \$70 billion in America. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co., Micron, Nvidia, Apple and others are investing hundreds of billions to build cutting-edge semiconductors and chips in the U.S. The world's largest pharmaceutical companies are investing some \$500 billion to reshore production of critical medications. My most favored nation agreements to lower drug prices by up to 90% could not have happened without the threat of tariffs.

The global "retaliation" against American products that so many pundits predicted last April never materialized—just the opposite.

Since Liberation Day, I have made historic trade deals with China, the U.K., the European Union, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and others covering a majority of all U.S. Trade. These deals have reduced barriers to U.S. exports and caused stock markets to boom not only in America, but in virtually every country that has come to the table to make a deal. More important, the agreements are forging more sustainable relationships with many of our allies and partners, expanding our military alliances into the realm of economic security for the first time.

As a key part of the agreement we negotiated with South Korea as a result of my tariffs, Korean companies are investing \$150 billion to revive the domestic shipbuilding industry in the U.S. Japan will help us construct one of the largest natural-gas pipelines in the world, in Alaska, to export American energy to our allies in Asia. Europe has likewise agreed to buy \$750 billion of U.S. energy to reduce their dependence on foreign adversaries. Countries all over the world have agreed to purchase hundreds of state-of-the-art aircraft and airplane engines from U.S. factories, creating thousands of jobs and strengthening our defense industrial base.

Other countries are opening their markets to tens of billions of dollars in American agricultural exports, and still more have become leading customers and investors in the American artificial-intelligence ecosystem, helping us solidify our dominant position as the world's AI superpower. We are substantially leading every other country. Since Liberation Day, we have also signed agreements worth billions of dollars in foreign military sales.

Given all of this, it is simply undeniable that my tariffs have strengthened our national security immeasurably. Nowhere has this been clearer than when it comes to our historic achievements in making PEACE. In nine months, I settled eight raging conflicts, WARS, and tariffs deserve much of the credit, including helping settle the extremely dangerous and deadly conflict between India and Pakistan.

It was the tariff that made America strong and powerful in generations past, and it is tariffs that are making our country stronger, safer and richer than ever before. Given the results of the past year, and the spectacular economic numbers coming out every single day, perhaps it is time for the tariff skeptics at the Journal to consider putting on one of my favorite red hats—the one that reads, "TRUMP WAS RIGHT ABOUT EVERYTHING!"

Mr. Trump is president of the United States.

Virginians Will Pay, and Keep Paying, for 'Affordable' Energy



CROSS COUNTRY
By Judge Glock

that the administration's effort is hypocritical given its "all of the above" energy strategy.

Although the administration's claims about national security may be a fig leaf, President Trump is right that offshore wind is a bad way to get energy. The CVOW will be one of the most expensive energy projects in U.S. history, and it will burden Virginia's consumers for decades. Gov. Abigail Spanberger and others claiming the project will foster "affordability" are wrong.

Like many renewable-energy projects, the CVOW emerged from a government order instead of market demand. The Virginia Clean Economy Act of 2020 required the state's main

utility, Dominion Energy, to be carbon-free within a quarter-century and specifically mandated that a state utility build a massive offshore wind farm.

Supporters claim the new energy supply from offshore wind will lower prices. But from the start the CVOW was expected to increase them. Virginia's energy regulator, the State Corporation Commission, approved the project in 2022 with the understanding that it would raise the average consumer's bill by more than \$50 a year and as much as \$170 in some years. There is a special fee already added to Virginians' energy bills that pays for offshore wind, even before a single electron is added to the grid.

The State Corporation Commission understood it had to approve the project under state law but was shocked by the effect it would have on consumers. It recently noted that "the electricity produced by this Project will be among the most expensive sources of power" in the U.S., whether measured by total capacity created or by actual electricity delivered. It is also the "costliest

project being undertaken by a regulated utility in the United States."

The state expected the cost of construction at about \$10 billion, but once financing and other long-term costs are included, the total will be more than \$20 billion. As the state notes, "all of these costs . . . will find

A judge overrules Trump's effort to cancel an offshore wind project that will cost more than \$20 billion.

their way into ratepayers' electric bills." These costs don't include the billions of dollars in federal tax credits for the project, provided by taxpayers across the nation.

Dominion now claims the project will reduce customers' bills by reducing the amount of outside renewable energy the utility will need to purchase under state law. But mandating renewable energy is exactly what created expensive projects like the

CVOW and drove up costs in the first place.

Even for fans of renewable energy, offshore wind is a bad bet. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, offshore wind is the most expensive type of energy generation available—besides a type of gas turbine used mainly during emergencies—and is more than twice the cost per megawatt hour of onshore wind. Offshore wind's actual costs are even higher if tax credits aren't included.

The CVOW project is particularly dangerous for customers, because while other utilities have promised to buy power from independent offshore wind companies, Dominion will own the project directly. That means customers face more risk if the project doesn't live up to its potential.

One of the few defenses that the state can offer energy consumers is that the project will make up for lost sources of power. But power has been lost because the Virginia Clean Economy Act mandated that several fossil-fuel generators shut down.

Unlike the fossil-fuel plants, the offshore wind farm can't produce

power whenever needed. It will make the most power in spring and fall, when demand is lowest, and the least in summer afternoons, when demand is highest. Since Virginia's offshore winds are weak, the company itself noted that the project would typically produce less than half its full power capacity.

Whatever the outcome of the legal cases surrounding CVOW, pausing the project at this point won't lower costs, because the state regulator has already baked them into bills. But the Trump administration can at least stop the problem from getting worse. Under state laws, Dominion is supposed to double the size of the CVOW project. Ms. Spanberger is pushing offshore wind projects as part of her "affordability" agenda. If the Trump administration stops such boondoggles, it will ensure actual affordability for Virginians.

Mr. Glock is director of research at the Manhattan Institute and author of *"The Dead Pledge: The Origins of the Mortgage Market and Federal Bailouts, 1913-1939."*

The Empty Moralizing of Canada's Mark Carney

By James Kirchick

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney got a lot of attention for his speech last week at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. He invoked an essay by the late Czech dissident (and later president) Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerful." The essay was published in 1978 during the nadir of Czechoslovak communism. Havel tells the apocryphal story of a greengrocer who refuses to place a sign proclaiming "Workers of the world, unite!" in his shop window. The slogan is a lie, whose forced invocation is meant to uphold a repressive system that is strengthened every time someone affirms it. By declining to endorse the mantra, Havel wrote, the greengrocer goes from "living within a lie" to "living within the truth."

In his speech, Mr. Carney likened the communism Havel fought, which mandated "the participation of ordinary people in rituals they privately know to be false," to the American-led "rules-based international order" that has governed the world for some 80 years. Though "American hegemony" offered some benefits—"open sea lanes, a stable financial

system, collective security and support for frameworks for resolving disputes"—it also required collective self-deception.

"We knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false," Mr. Carney said, "that the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient." Yet "we placed the sign in the window. We participated in the rituals."

Although he didn't name President Trump, it was clear whom Mr. Carney blamed for what he called the "rupture" in world order. Acting as the greengrocer in his analogy, Mr. Carney proclaimed that it is time for world leaders to follow his heroic example, take the proverbial signs out of their windows and speak truth to power.

The audience at Davos took up the call, offering Mr. Carney an almost unheard-of standing ovation. "Very important and very well put remarks by PM Mark Carney," enthused former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt. "It's time to take down the sign and speak up." Lionel Barber, a former editor of the Financial Times, the bible of the Davosie, tweeted that Mr. Carney's address was "the speech of a statesman." Mexican President

Claudia Sheinbaum said it was "very much in tune with the current times." A former premier of British Columbia said it was "the most important speech any Canadian Prime Minister has given in decades."

Even by that low bar, Mr. Carney's speech was muddled and incoherent. It was also oblivious to irony. Though Mr. Carney has positioned himself as the Western world's most outspoken Trump critic, he owes his job to the

He laments the decline of the world while cozying up to China and shirking responsibility for defense.

American president; it was thanks almost entirely to Mr. Trump's tariffs against Canadian exports and threats of annexation that Mr. Carney's Liberals overcame a 27% polling deficit to win last year's parliamentary election. There's also the incongruity of Mr. Carney: Before entering politics, he had a successful career in high finance and central banking, yet in his speech he disparaged the integrated

financial world where he spent decades as a "lie." Mr. Carney also engaged in hypocrisy by invoking Havel's denunciation of dictatorial communism while praising "new strategic partnerships with China and Qatar," the former an actual communist dictatorship.

The biggest problem was Mr. Carney's bungling of Havel's work. He lamented the rupture of the rules-based international order, yet he simultaneously analogized that order to Brezhnev-era Czechoslovak communism. Such a comparison is morally grotesque and objectively wrong. It's also illogical: Why should we mourn the downfall of such a system? Inappropriately invoking an overused parable might make Mr. Carney sound clever, but it shows a lack of deep thinking. That he allegedly wrote the address himself, as his aides have told the media, should be cause for concern among Canadians.

While Mr. Carney is correct that global order is breaking down, the collapse started long before Mr. Trump announced his campaign for the presidency. President Barack Obama's failure to enforce his own red line against Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical

weapons in 2013 paved the way for Vladimir Putin's annexation of Crimea the following year. President Joe Biden's disastrous withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in 2021 sent a similar signal to Mr. Putin, who six months later attempted to conquer all of Ukraine.

The U.S. appeared weak in each case, but Canada hasn't exactly set the standard on strength. A longtime laggard on defense spending, it fails to spend even 2% of gross domestic product on defense, let alone the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's new goal of 5%.

A truly courageous leader—like Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who said that "Europe remains a beautiful but fragmented kaleidoscope of small and middle powers"—might have raised these uncomfortable points, both identifying others' weaknesses and acknowledging his country's own. But not Mr. Carney, who passes off conventional wisdom as bold truth-telling and mistakes empty moralizing for statesmanship.

Mr. Kirchick is author of *"The End of Europe: Dictators, Demagogues, and the Coming Dark Age."*

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Warsh Is the Right Fed Choice

Does Kevin Warsh know what he's getting into as President Trump's nominee to be the next Chairman of the Federal Reserve? Yes, he does, which is only one of the reasons he is the right choice for a central bank that needs reform after a generation of exceeding its proper monetary remit.

Mr. Warsh is a former Fed Governor whose 2006-2011 tenure overlapped with the 2008 financial panic and recession. He has also worked on Wall Street and in the White House under George W. Bush. Though he wasn't in charge of the Fed at the time, Mr. Warsh's experience in a crisis will be invaluable when the next one arrives, as it inevitably will. He has deep knowledge of global financial markets, and knows most of the global players—from Europe, to the U.K., Japan and China.

* * *

More important, Mr. Warsh has been arguably the leading voice in public life for reforming the Fed. He left the board of Governors in 2011 after then Chairman Ben Bernanke made vast bond-buying a permanent part of Fed policy rather than an emergency resort.

Mr. Warsh's critique, which he made public at the time in these pages, has proved prophetic. The Fed in its "quantitative easing" era has presided first over an historically weak economic expansion, and then in round two during and after the pandemic the worst inflation in 50 years.

Mr. Warsh is known as an inflation hawk, which makes Mr. Trump's nomination especially notable. Mr. Trump wants lower interest rates, but the paradox of monetary policy is that someone with hawkish inflation credentials has more credibility with financial markets and can often find it easier to keep rates lower than easy-money men.

As readers of these pages know, Mr. Warsh has in recent years offered a searching critique of Fed policy since the financial panic. He has been especially pointed in saying that the central bank has taken on a broader role in economic policy than it should.

"In my view, forays far afield—for all seasons and all reasons—have led to systemic errors in macroeconomic policy," he wrote in April 2025. "The Fed has acted more as a general-purpose agency of government than a narrow central bank."

This "institutional drift," as he put it, has caused the Fed to lose the plot on its essential mandate, which is price stability. The Fed has also wandered into fiscal policy with its bond-buying that has underwritten excessive federal spending and asset purchases that contributed to the misallocation of capital. (See the boom

A Tiananmen Memory Crime in Hong Kong

Dictatorships rewrite the past to control the present, and so it goes in Hong Kong as its former British legal system becomes a replica of China's. This month three Hong Kong citizens went on trial for the alleged crime of organizing candlelit vigils to remember the 1989 Chinese massacre at Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

For three decades following that Communist slaughter of unarmed Chinese, Hong Kong was the only place on Chinese soil where that crime was publicly remembered. But starting in 2020 any public display of remembrance, however quiet and non-violent, was banned. Chow Hang-tung, Albert Ho and Lee Cheuk-yan face up to a decade in prison for the crime of memory.

Hong Kong's Tiananmen vigils used to be hailed as a sign, in spite of the city's return to China in 1997, that it still upheld the free expression central to a world trade and financial center. But everything today in Hong Kong is subservient to the national-security law that Beijing

Gavin Newsom on Wealth and Taxes

Well, well. California Gov. Gavin Newsom is experiencing an epiphany of sorts, as his state's billionaires vamoose to avoid getting clobbered by a union-backed wealth tax. He now admits that taxes affect where people choose to live and invest. Glory be.

The SEIU-United Health-care Workers West is collecting signatures to place a referendum on the November ballot that would establish a one-time (supposedly) 5% wealth tax on Californians with more than \$1 billion in assets. The union claims the measure would raise \$100 billion in revenue. That's doubtful given that it has already spurred many billionaires to decamp.

Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin have reportedly limited their ties to the Golden State, as have venture capitalists Peter Thiel and David Sacks. Iconiq Capital founder Divesh Makan told Bloomberg News this month that he knows several wealthy families that have left to avoid the tax.

As Mr. Newsom explained, the result of this exodus will be less income-tax revenue. "The impact of a one-time tax does not solve an ongoing structural challenge," the Governor said Thursday. "You would have a windfall one time, and then over the years, you would see a significant reduction in taxes because taxpayers will move."

The Californian finally admits that high taxes cause people to move.

By "structural challenge," he means recurring budget gaps caused by excessive spending. The state Legislative Analyst's Office in November forecast a \$18 billion deficit in the coming fiscal year with shortfalls growing to \$35 billion in future years. And this assumes there's no economic downturn—or a flight of high earners who pay the

state's bills.

Mr. Newsom said he is very "mindful" that "we rely on a very small number of people that allows us to do historic things"—i.e., spend at historic levels. His recently proposed budget includes \$539 billion in spending, up 68% from 2019. It also projects a \$42 billion revenue surge. As a result of the state's progressive tax system, the top 1% of earners pay about half of state income tax. So revenue rises and falls with stock prices and capital gains.

The Governor might try explaining to voters that the state's budget problems don't owe to the wealthy not paying enough in tax, as unions claim. Nor to federal funding cuts. California's federal Medicaid dollars this year are projected to increase by \$18 billion (15%). But if he said this it might cause voters to realize that the Sacramento Democrats are spend-thrifts who can't control their political appetites. Do not expect that epiphany.

He knows where the central bank has gone wrong and how to fix it.

in housing prices.) And that's without its Biden-era political bows to consider climate change in financial regulation and the racial impact of monetary policy. Such political bows compromised the Fed's independence by its own hand, never mind President Trump's social-media posts.

Mr. Warsh will steer the Fed away from all that. He will also aim to reduce the Fed's balance sheet that has ballooned into the trillions of dollars from merely some \$800 billion when Mr. Warsh first joined the Fed. He has said fiscal policy is the job of Treasury and Congress, while the Fed should stick to money. In this division of priorities, he is looking back to the famous Treasury-Fed Accord of 1951 that angered Harry Truman but restored monetary stability after the post-World War II inflation.

None of this will be easy. He will face opposition from many on the Fed staff and from the central-banking clerisy that includes the recent Fed chairs he has criticized. The Senate should consider the latter a recommendation. He will also have to navigate the man in the White House who thinks interest rates should only go down, but Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent can help on that front.

The dumbest criticism is that Mr. Warsh doesn't have an economics Ph.D. But how well have the hundreds of Fed Ph.D.s done in the last 20 years? They kept rates too low for too long in the 2000s, contributing to the housing boom and bust. They overestimated economic growth under Barack Obama, and underestimated it under Trump I. Then they missed entirely the Biden inflation.

* * *

A non-economist can't do any worse. And Mr. Warsh may do much better since he understands the Fed's economic models and how they have been wrong. He doesn't believe, as the Fed does, that stronger economic growth produces inflation and thus interest rates must inevitably rise. He focuses on money and price signals more than the jobless rate.

This insight matters in particular at the present moment of what appears to be the cusp of a productivity boom. This decade, with vast AI investment and the spread of AI applications in business, could be like the internet boom of the 1990s. If it is, productivity will rise and incomes can rise with it without triggering inflation.

All of which is to say that Mr. Warsh has an extraordinary opportunity to reform the Fed so it resumes its role as a steward of price stability to underpin stable growth and rising incomes. This is President Trump's best second-term appointment.

imposed in 2020. The government used Covid-19 as an excuse to ban the vigils, and the security law is now invoked against these three.

The trio aren't as well known globally as Jimmy Lai, the imprisoned publisher who has been mentioned in Parliament and whose family members have met with President Trump, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Pope Leo. But

they are every bit as deserving of support, and they have been fighting for the same values that once made Hong Kong a beacon of hope for generations of ordinary Chinese.

Mr. Ho, former chairman of the group behind the annual Tiananmen vigil, is in poor health and has pleaded guilty to inciting subversion. He no doubt is hoping for leniency in sentencing. Mr. Lee and Miss Chow have pleaded not guilty. Whatever their fate, their bravery should not be forgotten.

Their trial is more evidence of the continuing brutality of a Communist government that tries to cover up a murderous sin of its past.

OPINION

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Washington Could Use 'Renewal' All Around

Even as the Journal ran Matthew Continetti's op-ed describing Sen. Chuck Schumer's political brinkmanship during last fall's government shutdown ("There's Only One 'Renewal Democrat,'" Jan. 28), the country once again found itself on the verge of doing it all over again.

That such an exercise in political dysfunction could have been contemplated in the middle of tax season, and so soon after 43 days of pointless hardship last fall upon millions of government employees, the traveling public, the needy and the Treasury, seems almost unbelievable—but it came within a day of happening.

Americans shouldn't have to live any longer with such a possibility of grievous disturbance.

The U.S. is probably the only country in the world that allows its government to shut down because officials haven't made updated appropriations by self-imposed deadlines. When funding stalemates occur in other countries, government activity generally continues with the existing levels of funding until new monies can be agreed upon.

This common-sense practice should prevail here. Tax collection, after all, doesn't stop when services are interrupted.

The threat or the reality of "partial shutdowns" should never have been allowed to either party for the purpose of gaining leverage to accom-

plish agendas that otherwise wouldn't command majority support. Congress should simply deny itself this heinous tactic.

THOMAS CONNER
Hillsdale, Mich.

Rahm Emanuel does, Mr. Continetti observes, have "some bright policy ideas." He also is a decisive leader who isn't afraid to make decisions that buck conventional wisdom or the whims of his, or any, party. He once was regarded as abrasive, but the current occupant president has made Mr. Emanuel look like Mr. Rogers.

In short, Mr. Emanuel is the type who could garner the support of those of us who would like to see a responsible adult back in the White House. The problem is that reasonable types have been shunted aside in today's political discourse. Mr. Emanuel could never get his party's nomination and, of course, even mentioning Mr. Emanuel as a Republican candidate is laughable.

At least at this point, it looks like the two major parties in 2028 will once again present us with a choice between two crazies. While a third party has been a quixotic quest in this country for well over a century, perhaps the time has come to abandon the zealots who control the main two. Rahm Emanuel would be the ideal standard-bearer for such an effort.

MARK M. QUINN
Naperville, Ill.

Win the Midterms or Really Close the Border?

Karl Rove's argument in his op-ed "Is Trump Trying to Lose the Midterms?" (Jan. 22) that President Trump's hardline border policy will harm Republican election prospects overlooks a glaring problem. Mr. Trump was elected in part to end President Biden's unprecedented border free-for-all. The public has become increasingly disillusioned at the sight of immigration officers raiding high density immigrant workplaces like Home Depots—let alone fatally shooting two Minnesota protesters. Yet practically, there are only two ways to stop the flood of migrants crossing the border, a physical barrier, i.e., "the wall" or driving down its ap-

peal both to criminals and otherwise law-abiding migrants. Building the wall has proven unwieldy, leaving only option No. 2. But if the promulgated immigration enforcement efforts are strictly relegated to the apprehension and deportation of serious criminals, noncriminal migrants would perceive little risk in attempting to enter the U.S. illegally. The flood of crossings would continue essentially unabated.

While a much more camera-friendly version of immigration enforcement might well be less offensive to many midterm voters, it is also likely that it would not work.

DAVID H. EPSTEIN
Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

E-Ledgers Put Climate Accountability at Risk

I write in response to "New Emissions Tracking Stirs Skepticism in Some Companies" (Exchange, Jan. 24), which highlights a critical juncture for corporate climate action. While proponents claim that the product-level "E-ledgers" approach to accounting for carbon emissions will drive demand for goods that pollute less, this methodology risks undermining decades of progress in corporate accountability.

The Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Protocol has become the global standard for emissions accounting precisely because it provides comprehensive visibility into a company's full environmental impact across operations and value chains. This transparency enables meaningful target-setting, progress tracking, and stakeholder accountability on addressing risks and harnessing new demand. Fragmenting this system with alternative methodologies creates confusion rather than clarity.

Product-level data have legitimate applications for informed procurement decisions and life-cycle assessments. However, it should complement—not replace—existing corporate accounting frameworks. The GHG Protocol is already incorporating product-level methodologies through alignment

STEVEN ROTHSTEIN
Ceres
Boston

I Lost My Young Son to CRC

Regarding "Colorectal Cancer Risk Is Rising" (U.S. News, Jan. 23), I urge people in their 20s and 30s not to skip annual physical exams that include basic blood work. I have witnessed firsthand the consequences of late detection of colorectal cancer (CRC).

My son, Evan White, was diagnosed with CRC in 2017 at age 24. The disease was already advanced, and he died in 2021, a week before his 29th birthday. While public discussion rightly emphasizes colorectal cancer screening beginning at age 45 and earlier for those at higher risk, routine wellness visits in young adults deserve attention as well. Evan's symptoms seemed too minor to warrant a doctor's appointment, but a simple blood test may have revealed his low hemoglobin level, an early warning sign.

Colorectal cancer is highly treatable when detected early. Young adults who feel healthy shouldn't assume they are immune.

JOHN G. WHITE
Waco, Texas

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



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OPINION

America Needs Restraint—and Facts

DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

Our long cold civil war heated up somewhat in Minneapolis this week, and you'd be dreaming if you think we won't have more such moments and tensions, and not only on immigration. We aren't at peace with ourselves.

Here we take a look at some large things that went wrong and can be made better.

The federal government has not only the right but the duty to enforce U.S. immigration law. An urgent aspect of that action is to find and detain those who, since arriving here, have violently broken the law.

But if you do this, you must do it right—professionally, with restraint, by the book, in the full spirit of the law.

Americans don't want and won't accept masked men in camouflage jumping out of unmarked vans and

The violence in Minnesota calls for a return to the ways of Martin Luther King and the wire services.

demanding their papers. It's not us. The government has to know that. Americans don't want and will reject the street killing of protesters followed by an official response of lies and accusations.

All big actions have a spirit to them. Immigration enforcement must be serious and sober. Often, federal officers and agents have taken on a tough-guy way, pushing people around, being rough, profane and trigger-happy. They have operated within a context of fairly constant challenge—surrounded, pushed,

jeered and taunted. But they can't be a law unto themselves. They've looked like a mook army jacked up on videogames—not tough, just macho. The tough have self-discipline. These guys are operating with an eye to escalation, not de-escalation, which is among the first things cops are taught: Cool things down.

We debate whether they've been sufficiently trained. You've seen the videos, they aren't sufficiently trained.

The federal government should pause enforcement and take time to regroup, retrain, reorient.

Which brings us to the spirit of the anti-ICE protests. Those who've taken to the streets are indignant, emotionally engaged, opposed and driven to show opposition. But watching them I thought: We don't know how to protest anymore, we're losing this knowledge.

Within human memory America was the stage of one of the greatest protest movements in all history, the civil-rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. Its power came from a dignity that was majestic and couldn't be denied. Go back to the photos of the marches in Selma, Montgomery and Birmingham. The protesters' mien was sober, they presented themselves as adults who were morally serious, they were morally responsible and meant moral business. Look at their faces. They were *sacrificial*. They were risking their physical safety by putting themselves on the line for a great purpose.

They knew civil disobedience must be civil, peaceful resistance peaceful. They deliberately appealed to the conscience of a nation and were certain that nation, America, had a conscience to which an appeal could be made. Which was a compliment.

We've just marked Martin Luther King Day. He strategized that movement. He believed peacefulness and nonviolence were morally grounded (in Christianity) and historically tested (by Gandhi). He knew it was the way of the strong, not the weak.

In Birmingham there were mar-



Martin Luther King Jr. leads a 1965 march to Montgomery, Ala.

ches, sit-ins, boycotts. The police chief, "Bull" Connor, turned fire hoses on the demonstrators, who didn't physically retaliate. King knew the divide between those demonstrators and the violent response would play out on TV screens across the country. And he knew which side America would take.

Current protesters should emulate that dignity and power, not fall into formless jeering and harassment. Instead, they seem to have a spirit of "I'm so upset, I have a right to act out due to my sharper sense of injustice." No. Be slow to interfere with law enforcement, and summon support by your bearing.

A final thought on an urgent need. As soon as something terrible happens, we fight about the facts. We're at each other's throats over what really happened, what's true, who did what. It's always a second front in the battle and always makes things worse.

We need the facts more quickly, more soberly, in greater depth. At this point in our country great reporting isn't a craft or a talent, it is a patriotic act. It presents the facts on which we can build a serviceable pic-

ture of what happened, of right and wrong. This steadies the civic mind.

What reporters do is hard—find human beings in the thicket, in the wild, earn their trust, convince them to speak, read opaque documents, decipher things, restrain their own views, get the facts accurately and then let those facts speak for themselves.

News organizations want more voices and views—fine, good for them, more spirited opinion, good. But what you most need when your country is breaking up, and it seems possible every day that we're breaking up, is the facts. In the troubled, challenged world of current journalism, he who has the facts will win the future.

A little side trip here to Walter Cronkite, whose name is being mentioned a lot. "Everyone trusted Cronkite." True. I knew him, he was human, and he wasn't trusted because he had nice eyes or a nice way or a well-lit set or smoked a pipe.

People trusted him because for much of his career he'd been a workaday reporter at United Press International. And it formed him, shaped his journalism. UPI, the Associated

Press and other wire services told America what was happening each day in the country and the world.

Here is what the wires taught you. Their product was purchased and had to be acceptable to every newspaper in the country—liberal and conservative, big city and small. So wire service reporters had to play it straight—get it first but get it right, facts are gettable, verification necessary. You disciplined yourself out of the story. Accuracy was all.

Because of that training, viewers could tell Cronkite was a professional operating under clear and continuing standards.

The wire services, plus independent big-city papers, gave the nation a shared factual floor. We need to get it back. We won't get through the future without it. So we need journalism (freelance, independent, institutional) more than ever.

Reporting is expensive—you have to get a lot of reporters on the ground, running around, getting the data. But it's where the investment needs to be made.

People think journalism is hopelessly tainted, just another partisan player, can never get its reputation back. Wrong. You can build it each day. You can open up a new account in the credibility bank, see it grow. When Cronkite said Vietnam was a failure he was believed, because he had a big personal account to draw on.

The collapse of local newspapers means old-hand reporters and editors who knew the neighborhood are largely gone. The big national newspapers had bureaus in state capitals but shut them down as the internet rose—so that reporting is gone.

We're kind of a ridiculous country in that we're obsessed with what other Americans believe but aren't covering the other Americans or bothering to know them. We have to turn this around.

I realize this sounds like "let's return to the old ways." But yes, let's. They worked, the country didn't rupture, we endured. Which is what we want.

Kevin Warsh on the Fed's Mistakes and the Consequences

President Trump announced Friday that he will nominate Kevin Warsh as chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. Mr. Warsh served as a Fed governor from 2006 through 2011 and has since written frequently for these pages. These are excerpts from his *Journal op-eds*. A related editorial appears nearby.

* * *

From "The High Cost of the Fed's Mission Creep," April 28, 2025:

For about 40 years, Americans scarcely thought about changes in the price level. If the Fed's enviable track record of price stability had continued through this decade, central bankers may have been granted wider berth. But then the Fed foundered on fundamentals and inflation surged.

The chairman-designate on where the central bank has gone wrong and what independence means.

Stable prices were the Fed's plot armor. As in the movies, it was protection for the protagonist against those who would dare a challenge. The Fed's roving remit and grand ambitions, however, expanded its surface area and exposed its vulnerability even more.

Central-bank independence is more often cited than defined. Independence isn't a policy goal unto itself. It's a means of achieving important and particular policy outcomes.

Independence is reflexively declared when any Fed policy is criticized. Congress has granted important functions to the Fed in bank regulation and supervision. I don't believe the Fed is owed any particular deference in bank regulatory and supervisory policy. Fed claims of independence in bank matters

undermine the case for independence in monetary policy.

And when the Fed turns away from its creed and tradition, exercising powers that are the province of the Treasury Department, or taking positions on societal issues, it further jeopardizes its operational independence in what matters most.

I strongly believe in the operational independence of monetary policy as a wise political economy decision. And I believe that Fed independence is chiefly up to the Fed. That doesn't mean central bankers should be treated as pampered princes. When monetary outcomes are poor, the Fed should be subjected to serious questioning, strong oversight and, when they err, opprobrium.

* * *

From "The U.S. Needs Economic Regime Change," March 20, 2023:

History will give a full accounting of the grave errors committed in recent years in economic policy. A central lesson is already clear: Nothing is as expensive as free money.

The costs of the Federal Reserve's zero-interest policy are multiplying: The misallocation of capital—goosing the price of the riskiest and least-productive of assets—set the conditions for boom and bust. The financing of the "big state" set the country on an unsustainable fiscal trajectory. The extraordinarily loose financial conditions created herd behavior among market participants and firms and complacency among policy makers, including regulators. The surge in inflation substantially raised the cost of living for citizens and undermined business planning.

* * *

From "The Fault Lies in R-Star and in Ourselves," Sept. 26, 2018:

Policy makers are currently rejoicing in their good fortune. The U.S. economy is booming: Output is growing more than 50% faster than

the Fed forecast a year ago, wages are accelerating, and labor markets are the strongest they've been in at least a generation. Capital investment is strengthening, and productivity shows some improvement. Asset prices are high. Credit is cheap and widely available. And inflation is running at or near the Fed's avowed target.

The Trump administration's reforms in tax and regulatory policy were well-timed. They caused a business and wage-earner expansion to follow on the heels of a consumer-driven, housing-led expansion that was starting to show its age. The strong trends in the U.S. economy are likely to continue.

Even so, history and hard experience tell us that a boom is not a time for triumphalism, especially for the guardians of financial stability at the Fed. The most conse-

quential period in economic policy is often when the embers of the last fire are gone and the first sparks of the next are not yet visible. Policy makers should not be dismissive of less likely, but more damaging tail events.

* * *

From "The Federal Reserve Needs New Thinking," Aug. 25, 2016:

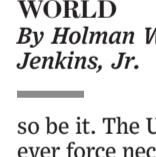
The economics guild pushed ill-considered new dogmas into the mainstream of monetary policy. The Fed's mantra of data-dependence causes erratic policy lurches in response to noisy data. Its medium-term policy objectives are at odds with its compulsion to keep asset prices elevated. Its inflation objectives are far more precise than the residual measurement error. Its

output-gap economic models are troublingly unreliable.

The Fed seeks to fix interest rates and control foreign-exchange rates simultaneously—an impossible task with the free flow of capital. Its "forward guidance," promising low interest rates well into the future, offers ambiguity in the name of clarity. It licenses a cacophony of communications in the name of transparency. And it expresses grave concern about income inequality while refusing to acknowledge that its policies unfairly increased asset inequality.

The Fed often treats financial markets as a beast to be tamed, a cub to be coddled, or a market to be manipulated. It appears in thrall to financial markets, and financial markets are in thrall to the Fed, but only one will get the last word.

A Slow-Cooked Peace in Ukraine

BUSINESS WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

MacArthur lives! Readers of a certain antiquity will appreciate the reference. Gen. Douglas MacArthur struck a notoriously uncompromising stance during the Korean War: If victory requires nuking a few bases inside China,

so be it. The U.S. should apply what-

ever force necessary to impose unification on the Korean Peninsula on

strictly U.S. terms.

No thanks, was the strategic response of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. Their modern equivalent is Kyrylo Budanov, Ukraine's ferocious former intelligence chief and now a close aide to President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Mr. Budanov is one of several participants who said recently a Donald Trump-mediated ending of the war may be in sight. Guess what? He also supports such an outcome, however disturbing it might be to certain

Western wonks who still believe Mr. Trump is Russia's cat's-paw because he refuses to match Vladimir Putin escalation for escalation in an attempt to end the Putin regime. Don't even try suggesting that, in pushing

concessions on Kyiv, Trump agents

might actually be helping the Zelensky government toward a good-

enough deal it wants to make.

Jade Glynn of King's College London, who researches opinion in the Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine, says even active resistance fighters accept the inevitability of territorial concessions. Halting and limited U.S. support began with Joe Biden, not because Mr. Biden didn't sympathize with Ukrainians wanting their land back. In Mr. Trump, Americans may have a president who

doesn't give two hoots. He understands nonetheless why a cease-fire that preserves Ukraine's independence and defensibility serves U.S. (and Trump) interests.

This week the Financial Times consecrated for its global audience a new reality: Europe's leaders have lost their "old fear that the US will betray Ukraine." Their worry now is that the Trump administration will grow tired of the effort to get the war stopped.

Call it progress on one front. On another, unfortunately, certain Ukraine supporters have taken up a new chant: Mr. Putin will never end the war because he can't afford a successful Ukraine.

It isn't too soon for pundits to decide how to consume their crow if Donald Trump succeeds.

The postulate isn't new; if anything, it exists only in Mr. Putin's subconscious now. He and his mouthpieces are long accustomed, in fact, to maintaining that Ukrainians are too incompetent to succeed at anything except being Western puppets.

The war itself clearly emerged from Mr. Putin's estimate that Ukraine would give him a cheap win. He'd get a "great power" triumph to flaunt before his people in place of the Western-style prosperity that won't be coming their way.

A more or less formal decision was made circa 2012: The Kremlin would remain an underdeveloped kleptocratic petrostate. It would market itself to its own people with a combination of international paranoia and breast-beating. Surprisingly, in Rus-

sia even today, you can still refer to this choice and what it's costing Russia as long as you do so in the voice of a Putin loyalist, as shown in the career of economist and onetime official Alexei Kudrin.

This doesn't mean, however, that a threshold of pain isn't obtainable where Mr. Putin would prefer a cease-fire to continuing the war.

Then commentators might have to weigh the importance of listening to Ukrainians when they explain why the deal they signed should be supported by Ukraine's well-wishers. Some might have to eat a little crow. For Ukraine's sake, this would be preferable to disparaging any Trump-mediated deal as a "sellout" simply to maintain their online brands. Why? A soured reaction in the West is exactly what Putin trolls will be promoting the minute a deal is signed. The goal: undercut an appetite for the U.S. and allied investments to ensure Ukraine becomes a prosperous, well-armed linchpin of Western security, even if this means outside of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and without Western troops on its soil.

Happily, neither NATO nor troops are needed. Ukraine, badly divided and taken by surprise, has already fought Russia to a standstill once. In doing so, it's now a model for NATO itself, less reliant on the U.S. nuclear umbrella, more able to deter Russia conventionally.

Mr. Putin hasn't abandoned his ambitions. But he or a successor would have a steep hill to climb to convince fellow elites to renew an experiment that has failed so miserably. A simple truth: Even if Mr. Trump were as bad as his detractors say, Mr. Putin would be hard-pressed to conjure a Ukraine ending now that wouldn't simply be an exclamation mark on the overall trajectory of Russia's decline.

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