{ INCIDENTALLY }

Gopalkrishna Gandhi

A few silver linings on the South Asian horizon

That India and Pakistan continue to exchange lists of nuclear installations and facilities, and civilian prisoners and fishermen in their jails, is welcome. It suggests a laudable sense of responsibility towards citizens

Mani Shankar Aiyar is, in Tamil English, a "don't-care-master". He does not care a hoot about what others think and say of him or his views. This has worked to his detriment. He also has attributes that serve him well. One of these is his formidable memory. He remembers not just in the style of a strong memory that can reel off lines from Shakespeare or Tagore or Faiz Ahmed Faiz, but as one who remembers with a context and recalls in active conjunction with real-life issues and real-death issues. India-Pakistan relations and nuclear disarmament are among such subjects.

A little under a year ago, I wrote in these columns about his engaging book *The Rajiv I Knew* in which he has the following nugget about Prime Minister (PM) Rajiv Gandhi: 'He once told me, 'You know, Mani, if Pakistan does really have the bomb even I cannot stop India from going down the road to nuclear weapons'". Why "even I"? Because in the matter of nuclear weaponisation, Rajiv Gandhi was more his grandfather's than his mother's heir. He abhorred the idea of India hollowing its gut out to make weapons that can kill millions and maim millions more. Rajiv must have read Oppenheimer's celebrated quote from the *Bhagavad Gita* in which the great protagonist says, "I am become Death". Rajiv Gandhi did not want his government to become Death. He wanted it to restore life in the near-dead equations of the country with its neighbours. Mani Shankar Aiyar goes on to recall another conversation with Rajiv in which the then PM told him chillingly: "India and Pakistan already have the bomb." Mani was startled. How can that be? Continuing, Rajiv said to Mani, "The Canadians have gifted them to us. We have the Bhabha Atomic Centre reactor in Bombay, and the Pakistanis have the CANDU reactor in Karachi. All that it would take for a devastating nuclear explosion that would destroy both our commercial capitals would be for kamikaze pilots from either country to fly an aircraft straight into the reactor of the other."

This was said by a PM who was a pilot before he became a politician. He knew the technology of what he was saying. Kamikaze pilots do not abound, and both countries have systems enough to spot any aircraft flying without permission into each other's airspace. But nevertheless, what Rajiv was visualising was not fiction. It was grimly real.

And so, when on December 31, 1988, India's foreign secretary KPS Menon Jr. and Pakistan's foreign secretary Humayun Khan signed in the presence of PMs Rajiv Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto, an agreement on the prohibition of attack against nuclear installations and facilities, an answer was being found to Rajiv Gandhi's horrific visualisation of an apocalypse. Apart from and as part of the self-restraining of destruction or damage to nuclear installations or facilities, the agreement provided for an exchange on January 1 every year, a list of their nuclear installations and facilities.

Given our relations, this was amazement. After Rajiv Gandhi, all subsequent PMs in India have respected and honoured the agreement — from VP Singh, Chandrashekhar, PV Narasimha Rao, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh, right up to and including our present PM, Narendra Modi. Another amazement. On January 1 this year — yes, this year too — the practice has been observed, and lists have been exchanged. This is the 35th consecutive exchange. The sanity of shared interests in survival has prevailed over the insanity of death choreographed by terrorism. This is even more than an amazement.

We need to be thankful for this because of the guarantee it gives against the attacks in question. But we must know that attacks by non-State players using the same kamikaze method envisaged are even more likely. Getting access to our lists is not beyond the sly eyes and fanged fingers of those players. What can be done by both countries together to prevent that? This is the question that must bring both governments together again to confer on how terrorism is to be combated.

Hard!

We know that a set of ferocious terrorists targeting India does so from Pakistan's soil using the protection and patronage of different elements in Pakistan's establishment. If, despite that knowledge and despite India's emphatic response to Pulwama (February 2019) and then to Pahalgam (April 2025), and despite the scar left on Delhi itself by the fire ignited outside the Red Fort, the government of India has kept these two agreements active, it has to be because of two reasons. First, there are plinths in Pakistan's political architecture with which we can engage. Second, there are issues on which engaging with Pakistan is vital.

I would not have even tried to be optimistic about this had another remarkable step, another remarkable exchange of another set of lists not been taken or happened. This is the exchange of lists of civilian prisoners and fishermen held in each other's countries under a 2008 agreement on consular access. India has earlier this month given to Pakistan the details of 391 civilian prisoners and 33 fishermen, who are or are believed to be Pakistani, against data on 58 civilians and 199 fishermen from India or believed to be from India, held in Pakistan. This is a humanitarian step of no ordinary value.

This exchange of names must be followed up by a time-bound plan for the exchange of the prisoners themselves. Terrorism hurts and will continue to do so. It has to be met with unequivocal force. But alongside that use of force, there has to be use of a higher force, that of sanity, of humanity, to defeat the larger aim of terrorism, which is the deepening of fault lines, of hates and fears. This is hard, but the alternative is harder.

Not just "Don't-care-master" Mani Shankar Aiyar, but everyone in India and Pakistan should welcome the January developments in India-Pakistan relations and congratulate the two governments on their maturity. One must hope that at some time sooner rather than later, the terror scene improves sufficiently to let India revisit the abeyance of the Indus Water Treaty *mutatis mutandis*. Pakistan must do all it can and show what it is doing so that the Indus waters can flow again as nature intends them to.

Gopalkrishna Gandhi is a student of modern Indian history and the author of The Undying Light: A Personal History of Independent India. The views expressed are personal

Terrorism hurts and will continue to do so. It has to be met with unequivocal force. But alongside that use of force, there has to be use of a higher force — sanity and humanity — to defeat the larger aim of terrorism, which is the deepening of fault lines, of hates and fears. HT ARCHIVE

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar

Myanmar's junta and a farce of an election

The elections presently underway in Myanmar can only be described as a sham. Conducted in three phases, starting at the end of December and concluding at the end of this month, a sentence from a recent report by the BBC pithily explains why this exercise will not restore the country's democracy, snuffed out by a military coup in 2020. "With major political parties dissolved, leaders jailed, and with as much as half the country not expected to vote because of an ongoing civil war," this is a pointless exercise.

Six parties, including the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, are contesting elections nationwide, whilst another 51 parties and independent candidates are only fighting at the state or regional level.

But Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, which won sweeping majorities in 2015 and 2020, is banned. That one fact alone nullifies this election. Without her contesting, the election is a farce. Suu Kyi is in jail or house arrest and has been for nearly six years. Many of the other leaders of her party are in exile. The charges against Suu Kyi are politically motivated and designed to ensure her incarceration. She faces cumulative sentences of well over 20 years.

Yet Suu Kyi, for all her lapses and faults and the disappointment many have expressed with her performance as State Councillor before the junta takeover, remains the most popular politician in the country.

She spent 15 years under house arrest, separated from her husband and sons, struggling to restore democracy. That has not been forgotten. Nor the fact that she is a Nobel Peace laureate. Her countrymen still call her "Ma Suu".

Recently, the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Myanmar, Tom Andrews, criticised the election that is underway. It's worth recalling his words. They express the anger of friends of Myanmar who can only helplessly observe this electoral pantomime. "An election organised by a junta that continues to bomb civilians, jail political leaders and criminalise all forms of dissent is not an election — it is a theatre of the absurd performed at gunpoint."

Of course, the country's military rulers dismiss such criticisms. They've told the BBC the voting will be free and fair. The junta's chief, General Min Aung Hliang, denies he wants to continue to rule after the results are announced. "I am the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, a civil servant. I can't just say that I want to be president." But believe me, he does. And it's highly unlikely he won't be.

The silence from New Delhi suggests India has no reservations if Gen Aung Hliang continues to rule. If that's true, it would be unbecoming of the world's largest democracy. Our government has repeatedly and loudly expressed its concerns about the election that will be held in February in Bangladesh — it has criticised the banning of the Awami League — but it's kept silent about the ludicrous sham in Myanmar.

This can only damage our vaunted democratic credentials and lower our standing in South East Asia. Nothing that the junta in Myanmar has done or may do to restrain and curb militant groups that act in our Northeast warrants our silence and justifies the impact on our country's image.

Indeed, as a neighbour with Myanmar's best interests in mind, we should be supporting the forces that stand for democracy.

SUU KYI, FOR ALL HER LAPSES AND FAULTS AND THE DISAPPOINTMENT MANY HAVE EXPRESSED WITH HER PERFORMANCE AS STATE COUNCILLOR BEFORE THE JUNTA TAKEOVER, REMAINS THE MOST POPULAR POLITICIAN IN THE COUNTRY

Once upon a time, when we gave Suu Kyi the Nehru Prize, we did. But in later years, we distanced, or, at least, lessened our support.

When she came to power in 2015, she said that it had hurt her. After all, India is like her second home. She studied at the Convent of Jesus and Mary and Lady Shri Ram College. But she was willing to overlook this slight. Are we now repeating the mistake all over again?

One day, Myanmar will regain its lost democracy. Military rule cannot last indefinitely. But when that happy day dawns, will its people look upon India as a firm friend that stood by them in their years of trauma and tribulation or as a neighbour that closed its eyes to keep its peace with the country's dictators?

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

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker

Looking at cancer care, through the gender lens

A cancer diagnosis for women in rural areas throws up major challenges, the principal one being extreme financial stress. Treatment costs often drive families into poverty or massive debt, especially when the patient lacks public health coverage. Lack of awareness about symptoms, social stigma, and, often, abandonment by family impede timely and quality treatment for women from the lower income groups.

Fear of being ostracised or being seen as a burden leads women to hide symptoms and delay seeking care. Decisions to seek medical attention after the onset of symptoms and, following diagnosis, to go for treatment are often made by male family members, to the detriment of women's health. This leads to late-stage diagnoses and delays in confirmatory tests, by which time medical intervention is less effective. Today, the lakhs of Ayushman Aarogya Mandir (Health & Wellness Centres) set up across rural India as part of the primary health care can no longer afford to neglect cancer among women and are screening for oral, breast, and cervical cancers. Individuals with suspect symptoms are referred to higher facilities for confirmation, diagnosis, and treatment. The challenge is the uneven delivery of services due to lack of staffing, training and poor tracking. There are infrastructure gaps as well, alongside low community uptake and low awareness. Moreover, oncologists and nursing staff specialising in cancer care are also rarely available in rural areas.

Sanjeevani Life Beyond Cancer is a noteworthy effort in this regard, born from former bureaucrat Ruby Ahluwalia's deeply personal experience. Ahluwalia realised how little support — medical, emotional, social and financial -- underprivileged women had, after she was diagnosed with Stage III metastatic cancer. The gaps compelled her to start cancer support for women, with the realisation that true healing for women extended far beyond cancer remission and called for systems that enabled them to live a full life beyond this. Sanjeevani offers holistic cure, care and rehabilitation for underprivileged women in free centres in 33 government hospitals across 15 states. It has impacted 13.5 lakh patients, the majority of them women, since inception.

A research study commissioned by Sanjeevani and conducted by Nirmala Niketan College, Mumbai, on the significance of psychosocial support for cancer patients and survivors, highlights that women disproportionately experience anxiety, fear of recurrence, emotional distress, and social isolation. These challenges are often intensified by caregiving responsibilities, financial dependence, and cultural conditioning that discourages emotional expression. The study clearly establishes that unaddressed psychological distress adversely impacts treatment adherence, quality of life, and recovery outcomes. Reflecting on her own experience, Ahluwalia says, "The physical and psychological pain after the first chemotherapy became unbearable" — a sentiment echoed by thousands of women across the country. When Punita Solanki, 50, a stage III ovarian cancer patient undergoing treatment in an Ahmedabad hospital was introduced to Sanjeevani, she enrolled in a four-day online workshop conducted by the organisation. "It helped me understand that survival is not defined by treatment alone, but by courage, resilience, and mindset."

Sweety Parmar, 59, a breast cancer patient from Rajasthan says, "Receiving this diagnosis was overwhelming, bringing with it fear, uncertainty, and emotional exhaustion. I was searching not only for medical treatment, but also for strength, understanding, and hope. I am deeply grateful to be part of a community that stands beside cancer patients during treatment and in their journey toward life beyond cancer."

The views expressed are personal

When the going gets tough, the tough go superstitious

Émile Durkheim argued that ritual practices reinforce social cohesion. AFP

"You must eat 12 grapes at 12 under the table," a very handsome Hispanic young adult told my teenager on New Year's Eve. The teens and the young adults had occupied the dining room and monopolised the big bag of green grapes. Their infectious enthusiasm around this superstition reached us adults — most on the verge of retirement — and we scrambled for our own stash.

Nishtha Gautam

Balancing the bubbly and the bowl, we did the countdown and stuffed our faces with grapes. We ditched crouching under the table, mercifully retaining our dignity. The giant American grapes made it almost painful to swallow one piece per five seconds. I couldn't do more than five or six. The teen was thrilled at having accomplished the ritual correctly (and wisely, by choosing the smallest grapes from the pack).

Did I screw up my year by being stupid in its very first minute? What if the grapes were really supposed to do the trick? What if my inadequacy around the ritual now brings misfortune to my loved ones? I would be lying if I claimed the aforesaid thoughts didn't cross my mind as we walked back home that snow-stormy night.

The arrival of the New Year has long been accompanied by a dense array of superstitions, ranging from the consumption of symbolic foods to prohibitions against particular actions believed to influence fortune. While often dismissed as irrational residues of premodern thought, superstitions endure across cultures and historical periods. Their persistence suggests that superstition functions not merely as belief in the supernatural but as a meaningful response to temporal transition, uncertainty, and collective identity. Émile Durkheim argued that ritual practices reinforce social cohesion by making collective values visible and repeatable.

Superstitions emerge as structured practices that help individuals and societies negotiate the anxiety of beginnings. Is it any wonder, then, that some of the most widely accepted (even by non-believers) superstitions are around weddings, pregnancies, and acquisitions of assets? Don't talk about your pregnancy till it shows to avoid the evil eye. Don't get married under an inauspicious moon. Don't look at the bride before you marry her. Don't make the facade of the house "perfect". Don't drive a new car without adorning it with a totem, preferably the *nimbu-mirchi* one.

As Bronisław Malinowski observed in his studies of the Trobriand Islanders, superstition intensifies in situations of risk where technical knowledge is insufficient. These situations, where the old hasn't fully given way to the new, operate within what Victor Turner described as liminality: A threshold state in which normal structures are suspended, and the future is undetermined. These moments of existential risk invite practices that promise continuity and control. Superstition offers a way to act upon the future symbolically when rational control is limited.

Sigmund Freud viewed superstition as an expression of unconscious desires and anxieties, particularly those related to control and wish fulfilment. Research by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky on biases demonstrates that humans routinely infer causality where none exists, particularly in emotionally charged contexts. The illusion of control — the belief that one can influence outcomes through unrelated actions — is especially pronounced during periods of uncertainty.

But maybe it's these moments of uncertainty, those inexplicable freak accidents, and everything in between, that test our commitment to rationality and reason. It's the times that get tough in which our strength as evolved human beings needs to be summoned to dispel the darkness of superstitions.

Road accidents happen because of drivers and their machines, and not because of misaligned stars. Family members act "crazy" because of psychiatric disorders, and not Devi or the Devil's possession.

Marriages break for a million reasons; a widow's presence at the wedding is not one of them.

Superstitions, and *post facto* explanations for unfortunate events, merely fulfil emotional and social needs unmet by rational calculation alone.

Yes, eating the grapes amidst the messy and muffled cheers of Happy New Year is fun, but the months ahead are going to be happy or otherwise with no help from those humble green spheres.

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

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

India and EVs

This is with reference to "In the driving seat to beat pollution, build industry" by Ashok Jhunjhunwala (January 04). EV adoption is not rapid because of high costs, poor charging infrastructure and low resale value of the vehicles. Price sensitivity among Indians must be kept in mind when policies are planned to boost EV adoption.

Gurnoor Grewal

Language as an instrument of power

This is with reference to "Spin in speech lights up the conversation" by Karan Thapar (January 04). Adopting an artistic writing style with deep understanding of the subject allows language to become an instrument of precision and power.

Maithili Mishra

Bias-free justice in rape cases

This is with reference to "Sexual violence and the unevenness of justice" by Namita Bhandare (January 04). Courts must impart timely justice to women in rape cases, free from any political influence. Bail/parole orders must keep the sensitivity of the case in mind.

Abhilasha Gupta

Write to us at: **letters@hindustantimes.com**

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PRINTED & PUBLISHED BY MANHAR KAPOOR for and on behalf of HT Media Ltd. 18-20, Kasturba Gandhi Marg, New Delhi-110001 and printed at HT Media Ltd. Presses at Plot No.-8, Udyog Vihar, Greater Noida, Distt. Gautam Budh Nagar. (UP). Pin-201306.
BOARD: (011) 23361234 ● EDITORIAL: (011) 66561234 Extn. 1254, 1268 ● CIRCULATION: (011) 66561111 ● ADVERTISING: (011) 66561389 ● FAX: (011) 66561270.

EDITOR: JOSE MARTIN THARAKAN -

A smarter phone

#techtonic

GAGANDEEP ARORA

IN 2026, smartphones are set to cross a decisive threshold, marked not by dramatic redesigns or headline launches, but by the slow realisation that your trusty pocket rocket has officially become the boss computer of your life. Picture this: that screen you groggily poke first thing in the morning is about to pack monster batteries, console-crushing gaming power, sneaky-smart on-device AI and a price tag that winks and says, "Hey, I'm worth it. You can't live without me!"

Longer battery life, console gaming, foldables and regulated AI are set to redefine mobile phones as essential computing devices

This transformation will happen through a series of small, powerful upgrades that change how long your phone lasts, what kind of content it can run and how much of your personal data it silently protects in the background.

As companies like Samsung push foldables closer to the mainstream and weave AI into everything from notifications to system settings, 2026 will feel less like another annual refresh and more like a reset of what a smartphone is meant to be.

Against this backdrop, here's how the smartphone landscape is likely to evolve.

GET READY TO SHELL OUT MORE

Brace yourself, even basic smartphones are getting more expensive. Not flagship-expensive, but the era of ultra-cheap, compromise-heavy phones is fading fast.

The sticker shock's because of better displays, larger batteries, longer software support, stricter manufacturing standards and rising component costs. Brands would rather sell you a slightly pricier phone that lasts four years than a cheaper one you replace in 18 months. The upside? Entry-level phones will feel far less disposable. Smoother performance, better cameras and cleaner software will become standard, not luxury.

In short, you'll pay more upfront, but swear less at your phone later.

ERA OF 10,000 mAh BATTERY

For years, camera megapixels and charging speeds stole the spotlight. In 2026, battery capacity will take centre stage. 2025 has already seen 7,000-8,000 mAh batteries creep into mainstream phones. Leaks suggest brands are testing 8,500-9,000 mAh packs.

At least one OEM is working on a 10,000 mAh smartphone for early 2026, helped by high-density silicon-carbon battery tech that keeps phones relatively slim.

Combined with AI-driven power management and more efficient chipsets, this means two-day battery life won't be a talking point anymore, it'll be expected.

Ultra-fast charging? It might chill since brands care more about your battery living happily ever after. Power banks? Cute relics.

CONSOLE-LEVEL GAMING

If your console gets jealous of your phone in 2026, it will be for good reason. Current gaming and foldable flagships already ship with top-tier chipsets like Snapdragon's Elite-class SoCs and up to 16 GB RAM, pushing high-FPS and visually rich games smoothly.

In 2026, that hardware will be paired with larger batteries and high-refresh-rate displays (144 Hz and beyond are already being teased in upcoming trends). Foldables and big-screen devices will blur the line between handheld console and phone, especially as cloud gaming and desktop modes (like DeX-style setups) improve. Game on!

THE FOLDABLE WAVE

Foldables have been flirting with mainstream acceptance. In 2026, they may finally get serious.

Samsung's leaked roadmap shows it doubling down on foldables with Galaxy Z Flip 8, Z Fold 8 and even a more affordable Flip FE to pull more people into the category. These phones will have thinner bodies, stronger hinges, fewer visible creases and better battery efficiency. The focus will shift from showing off engineering to delivering reliability.

The bigger question is Apple. A possible foldable iPhone, if it launches, won't be about being first. It will be about getting it right with polished apps, durable design and seamless multitasking. If Apple enters the foldable market, everyone's folding. You bet.

AI INSIDE

Instead of flashy demos, smartphones will use AI subtly as it improves photos, predicts battery usage, summarises notifications, enhances calls and optimises performance in the background. At the same time, regulation will push companies to be clearer about what AI does and what data it uses. Smarter phones, yes, but also more accountable ones.

SECURITY, LONGEVITY TAKE PRIORITY

As phones become more powerful, they also become bigger targets. In 2026, security will be a selling point, not an afterthought. Hardware-level encryption, better biometric systems and longer security update commitments will become standard, even in non-flagship phones. Owning a phone for five years won't sound unrealistic anymore.

THE PHONE YOU TRUST

Your smartphone will feel dependable. Less flashy, more capable. A device that lasts longer, plays harder, folds smarter and does more in the background without demanding your attention. Smartphones in 2026 won't try to amaze you every day. They'll try to not let you down.

Bare bones of history

Shehnab Sahin's short stories on Assam distil collective memory & folklore

MANDIRA NAYAR

Shehnab Sahin's short stories are Assam beyond tea, but the gardens mark a continuous presence. ISTOCK

THIS is Assam beyond just tea. '*Colour My Grave Purple and Other Stories*' by Shehnab Sahin is a short story collection that tries to capture the long shadow of history and wrap it in fiction. Delicate like the *moonga/muga* silk that Assam is famous for and robust like the tea that grows on the slopes, Shehnab's stories are a deep dive into the diverse culture of the Northeastern state. From the Ahom kings to the Burmese invasion, to World War II, colonisation, the war against China and sweeping across various conflicts that defined Assam for years — Shehnab offers a whirlwind guided tour of the milestones of history that are deeply felt.

The book begins with a bang in 1858 with Assam on the edge: '*Two Leaves and a Bud*'. Samuel Addington, who has taken over as a surveyor on a tea estate, witnesses the ceremony of a man beheading a rooster on a full moon night and drinking the blood from the limp headless bird in his hand. It was a tense time on the estate. Maniram Dutta Baruah, the first to establish a tea garden in Assam, a loyal ally of the British, had been hanged for trying to reinstate Ahom rule during 1857. It was a public hanging and his legacy hung over his tea plantations.

It is in this rather uncertain year, when what was brewing in the gardens was not tea but ferment, that Samuel's wife Mei Hui, caught in her own haze of confusion, is heavily pregnant. After three miscarriages, Mei Hui, stuck in humid Assam, has lapsed into Cantonese, is forgetful and turning increasingly violent as her due date approaches.

Set in this foreboding atmosphere — the air thick with anticipation — Shehnab weaves together a story that is atmospheric. There are the bare bones of history, folklore, and a little bit of the supernatural thrown in for good measure to create a story that lingers in your head. The end is not neat — every story finishes with the messiness of life, leaving the reader's imagination to colour in what lies ahead.

Her stories capture lives at the cusp of change — in many ways like the home that she is writing about, caught up in events that were history in the making. Spread across time, if '*Two Leaves and a Bud*' is set after the first stirring of rebellion against the British, then '*Love is a Flimsy Kite*' focuses on the contemporary politics of 2019 with the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

"What was un-wild?" asks Rebo, a *bez*, a traditional medicine practitioner in Assam, in '*Bellows of a Wilted Poppy*'. "And what was wrong with the wild?" His dependence on opium as medicine is under threat by American missionaries. It is this question that echoes through the stories, as Shehnab navigates Assam's colonial experience, pitting belief and tradition against 'order' and 'civilisation'.

Shehnab grapples with ghosts of the past while exploring the fault lines — whether it is religion in alliances set after the Nellie massacre through the prism of friendship between Juri and Jamila, or the turbulent years of the students' movement. Her most personal story is '*Colour My Grave Purple*' about a father who dies young. A policeman, like her father was, Sara's pain in the story mirrors her own. The journals left behind help her understand the man she lost, the man she would never get to see grow old — and her grief leaps off the pages.

COLOUR MY GRAVE PURPLE AND OTHER STORIES
by Shehnab Sahin.
Niyogi Books.
Pages 257.
₹695

The characters she writes about are in flux, much like Assam, and are often standing at the edge of a new world that will sweep away everything they know. '*Freedom in My Blood*' has Mamoni locked in a room because she has started bleeding while playing hopscotch. "You see, when a girl becomes a woman, she must first look at a fruit-bearing tree," her mother tells her as she asks her to gaze out of the window. "The bigger the tree, the better is the capacity of her womb."

Mamoni is asked to spot a coconut or mango tree, but instead sees a betel nut tree. As Mamoni spends the next few days with her door bolted from the outside, all she can think of is whether she will get out to see Gandhi*ji*, who was to visit Guwahati on August 10, 1921.

There's Mamoni's indignation at the white men, as "white as the milk she throws away frequently", setting villages on fire if they didn't pay their share of crops, flogging tea workers, and her bewilderment at suddenly becoming a woman. "Weren't all girls women?" she asks and her desperation to be let out of the room is palpable.

In '*Ursula*', the rumblings of the war in 1943 are loud. Reliuyile, a Naga girl, encounters a *mem* for the first time, the colour of "rice powder" she pounds with her mother, with cloth wrapped individually on her legs. "They were told that the seas had to be crossed on vast ships where this *Memsahib* came from. But they knew neither sea nor ship and could visualise their village stream as a boundless body of water that started from the village but allowed no one to see the end."

It's based on the experience of Ursula Graham Bowers, the English anthropologist — and aunt of veteran journalist Mary Tully — who came to Laisong "to study people". 'The Naga Queen', Ursula went on to become a one-woman guerrilla resistant force against the Japanese with a reward on her head.

Tender and poignant, Shehnab writes movingly, not of the war experience, but weaves a story of the young Reliuyile seeing a camera and a photograph for the first time. Her favourite people, Reliuyile sees, are "hundred times smaller", "flat and stiff on paper".

The story is set when World War II engulfs Assam, and Shehnab recreates the past vividly, offering readers a glimpse into the world that existed — just before it was altered irrevocably.

It is this lived experience that makes the book special. '*Sunsets in the East*' captures Tezpur on the edge in 1962. "The town felt like a slow-dripping water tap." War was just round the corner. Supply-laden military trucks were a common sight. Arup, 21 years old and angry at his mother's death, is spoiling for a fight, the kind he couldn't have with his passive father. Part of the Youth Emergency Organisation, he is at war with his crotchety aunt Rupohi, who believed that she was protected by God.

As the war inches closer, tension mounts as Bomdila falls 50 km away. It is in weaving fact with fiction, translucent thin like silk, that Shehnab is best at offering another side to history — feeling.

"For long, both academic and non-academic writing about the North-East, specifically Assam, has lingered on the peripheries of 'mainland' work," she writes. This is an attempt to distil collective memory, folklore, stories that are carried within families to offer a whiff of the scent of home.

— The writer is a literary critic

CAPTION CONTEST 1544

VICKY

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

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR **CAPTION CONTEST 1543**

SPECTRUM JANUARY 4 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

The Pursuit of Happ(y)ness — Dr Khushpreet Singh via epaper, Ferozepur

Moment maker — Pardeep Bhalla, Ambala Cantt

Standing out, smiling in — Balbir Singh, Shamgarh village, Karnal

Show stopper — Lalit Kalia via epaper, Chandigarh

A step in the right direction — Rajiv Sharma via epaper, Amritsar

Gud pude, kheer and Lohri memories

HARPAL SINGH SOKHI

LOHRI has always carried a warmth of its own, and at the heart of it lay a ritual that felt almost sacred. As the fire crackled and laughter filled the air, *gud pude* would be made slowly, by hand. The aroma of jaggery melting into the batter drifted through the house, announcing that Lohri had truly begun. Those golden, soft *pude* were never served alone — these always arrived with a bowl of *kheer*, creamy and comforting. This year, I felt an urge to honour those memories by letting them evolve. I created 'fluffy souffle *gud pude*' made with honey and *khoya* — light in texture, yet rooted in tradition.

My memories are incredibly specific, almost cinematic. I can still hear my father casually say, "*Poh di magh khadi.*" My mother would prepare whole *urad khichdi* a day before the month of Poh ended. The next morning, as Magh began, that same *khichdi* would be served for breakfast with fresh curd. Simple food, but filled with rhythm, timing, and meaning — food that respected the calendar, the season, and nourished the body and mind. Sesame, for instance, is rich in calcium and known to replenish deficiencies that surface during the colder months. Across the country, it appears in many forms: *til-gud laddoos, gajak, chikki, halwa* — each shaped by regional hands and family traditions.

Winter has its own rituals. *Til gajak* made its annual appearance. Sometimes, my mother prepared *til ka halwa* at home. *Rewdi* was rarely homemade; it came from outside. I remember my mother-in-law making sesame *laddoos* in two ways — soft and hard. The soft ones are my daughters' favourites. Every time she made them, she packed some for the girls and sent them over — a quiet token of love, care, and continuity passed down through generations.

There's a beautiful saying in Maharashtra: "*Til-gud ghya ani god-god bola*" (Eat sesame and jaggery, and speak sweetly). It's not advice just for the palate, but for life itself — a reminder to begin the year with warmth, kindness, and gentle words. Our traditions understood nourishment long before nutrition labels existed. What we ate was never accidental — it was seasonal, purposeful, and deeply intuitive.

The memory of *gud pude* and *kheer* stays with me most vividly — humble, comforting, and quietly unforgettable. This recipe is my way of sharing winter as I remember it: slow, intentional, and full of heart.

— The writer is a chef & entrepreneur

FLUFFY SOUFFLÉ *GUD PUDE*

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE BATTER	
Milk	1 cup
Jaggery powder	½ cup
Fennel seed powder	1 tsp
Green cardamom powder	½ tsp
Vinegar	1 tbsp
Refined flour	1 cup
Baking powder	1 tsp
Baking soda	½ tsp
Ghee	2 tbsp
Khoya (grated)	¼ cup
Vanilla essence	1 tsp
FOR COOKING & SERVING	
Oil or *ghee*	For greasing
Water	For steaming
Butter	1 tbsp
Khoya	1 tbsp
Honey	1 tbsp
Pistachios (chopped)	1 tbsp

METHOD

- **Prepare the jaggery milk:** Warm the milk slightly. Add jaggery powder and stir until fully dissolved. Mix in fennel and cardamom powders. Let the mixture cool until lukewarm.
- **Activate the mixture:** Add vinegar to the jaggery milk and mix well. Set aside for 2-3 minutes.
- **Make the batter:** Sift refined flour, baking powder, and baking soda into a bowl. Add *ghee* and grated *khoya*; mix gently. Gradually, add the jaggery milk, whisking lightly to avoid lumps. The batter should be thick, smooth, and pourable — soufflé-like, not runny. Add vanilla essence and mix well. Rest the batter for 5 minutes.
- **Cook the *pude*:** Heat a non-stick pan on low flame and lightly grease it. Spoon batter onto the pan without spreading. Sprinkle 1 tbsp water around (not on) the pancakes. Cover with a lid and cook on low heat for 4-5 minutes.
- **Flip and finish:** Gently flip the *pude* using a spatula. Add a few drops of water again, cover, and cook for another 4-5 minutes until cooked through.
- **Serve:** Top with butter, *khoya*, and honey. Garnish with chopped pistachios. Finish with an extra dab of butter and *khoya*, if desired.

Opinion

SUNDAY, JANUARY 11, 2026

Players Sunil Chhetri (left), Gurpreet Singh Sandhu have raised their voices for revival of the Indian Super League PTI

Indian football needs to get house in order first

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

BE CAREFUL WHAT you wish for, you might just get it.

After taking their plea to such high offices as the Indian government and FIFA, the Indian footballers may have realised that the belated start of the Indian Super League (ISL) season — planned for next month — may not be an unmixed blessing.

The financial and commercial realities that have come into play have resulted in franchises asking them to take a pay cut for the league to stay viable.

The league was supposed to get underway in September but was in a limbo due to the expiry of the commercial rights deal between the All India Football Federation (AIFF) and Reliance's Football Sports Development Limited (FSDL) on December 8. That a country with ambitions to host the Summer Olympics after a decade can't even get a top division in operation wasn't great for the optics. Something had to be done, sooner or later, and everyone, including the players, had to pay a price to get the show on the road.

With fewer matches and less revenue in a truncated season, several franchises have asked players to take pay cuts of up to 25%.

Now, a drop in wages is never pleasant. Many organisations ask employees to make some financial sacrifices to tide over difficult circumstances, be it an economic downturn or the Covid crisis. As far as 'top' Indian footballers are concerned, the popular perception is that they are overpaid in relation to their performance on the pitch. What else could explain India failing to stay in contention for a 24-team Asian Cup which will feature more than half of the membership of the continental confederation, and its FIFA ranking in freefall. But with a dearth of top-level homegrown talent and a limit on the number of foreigners on the roster and the pitch, the best in the country command wages of more than a crore a year, amounts which they would be unlikely to get if they plied their trade overseas.

That may be the reason why, amidst all the angst expressed by the players throughout the impasse, there were hardly any reports of any players seeking pastures abroad even when the likes of goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu have had taste of club football in Europe. Even when franchises tried to reduce their wage bill in the absence of any progress regarding the resumption of action, all one got were expressions of helplessness and appeals to various agencies above them.

When Parth Jindal, whose JSW Sports owns Bengaluru FC, tells *The Indian Express* that part of the problem could be that "the players started getting too much money, and they lack motivation," his statement may not be totally devoid of merit.

Different priorities

The ISL franchises, like those in the Indian Premier League (IPL), while caring for the game and on-field results, always have the balance sheet at the back of their minds. They can endure heavy losses for some time, but not too long. We have seen IPL franchises cutting their ties with the league when the venture became unviable. Even recently, Royal Challengers Bengaluru, the defending champions, were said to be looking for an exit as the owners didn't see it as part of the group going forward.

There's a difference between a club and a franchise. The former is an organic entity, often born when a few like-minded individuals come together for a common cause. They may grow over a period of time and become big franchises and behemoths, but are identified with their roots, identity or the region they represent.

Franchises, on the other hand, are born big and are corporate in nature. They work as a business from the start with an eagle eye on the bottom line. Operating a sports team may be part of their corporate social responsibility, but they can decide to walk away if they don't get the intended outcome. That would be unthinkable for a Manchester United or a Liverpool, even if they incur heavy losses.

However, running any sport in the country should be the mandate of the National Sport Federation recognised by the government and the corresponding world body, not any private entity — even if it's owned by one of the biggest conglomerates in the world — or franchises.

If the AIFF can't conduct a regular football league – at all levels – and has to offload its responsibility to a corporation, in return for a sum of money, then it has to qualify as a pinnacle of inefficiency.

One doesn't need a league to be big, glitzy and glamorous. One has to learn to walk before one can run. India has to get the nut and bolts right and not get blinded by bright lights. Just ensure matches are held at regular times with all the rules and regulations followed. It can't be so difficult. After all, even before FSDL got involved, there was football in India, even if on a smaller scale, with promotion and relegation in place. That was before the custodians of the game in the country ran after money, TRPs, big names and glossy coverage.

Whose job is it, anyway?

Going ahead, Jindal moots an American sports-style draft recruitment system and no relegation in the ISL to hurt their commercial interests. That would make it a closed shop with no consequences suffered for poor on-field performance. It would be like Chennai Super Kings carrying MS Dhoni, when he is a shadow of his former self, just because he brings in crowds and sponsors. Deeper pockets rule. Meritocracy, take a hike! In fact, as the Bengaluru FC owner puts it accurately, "poor-performing teams are rewarded with higher draft picks, more allocation money. The idea is to promote competitive balance, not punishment."

When there is hue and cry over tiny nations like Curacao, Cape Verde and Haiti making it to the FIFA World Cup while India is nowhere close despite being the most populous country in the world, it's often observed that football is a major sport in only pockets of the country. But even the population of those pockets would be much more than many of the countries featuring in North America in the summer, most of whom would be making do with a basic football structure in place.

Indian football needs to get the foundation in place. That may not be financially rewarding in the short term, but those in charge of the sport in the country need to put the interest of football — not just the league and the franchises — before the balance sheet.

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram

India is isolated among the five founders of BRICS and from Europe. Despite the boast of Vishwaguru, India is losing voice and relevance in world affairs. As a former Indian ambassador said, 'what India said would not make a difference'

US President Donald Trump speaks with reporters on Air Force One, after Nicolas Maduro's capture AP

A new sheriff in town

TWO HUNDRED YEARS after the Monroe Doctrine was declared by the 5th President of the United States, and despite the widespread doubt about its power and efficacy, the doctrine was invoked by the 47th President of the United States. The present circumstances were, I think, not imagined in 1823.

President James Monroe's eponymous doctrine warned *European* powers against interfering in the affairs of newly independent nations in the Americas. On the night of January 2/3, 2026, President Donald Trump transgressed every basic tenet of the doctrine. He used *USA's* military power to invade a sovereign country in the *Americas*, capture the elected President, and whisk him away to be tried by a criminal court in New York. It was an astounding enlargement of the Monroe doctrine. No foreign power had interfered in the affairs of Venezuela. The people of Venezuela had elected Nicolas Maduro as President, although the outcome of the election was bitterly contested. Mr Maduro may have turned undemocratic and authoritarian but he is not the first elected ruler to have done so.

Hegemonic presidents

The new doctrine deserves to be called the Bush-Trump doctrine. The closest parallel was the US' interference in Panama (1989). Under President George Bush Sr, the US military invaded Panama, defeated the Panamanian forces, forced President Noriega to seek refuge in the Vatican's Embassy, and eventually surrender. The declared goal was regime change. With that military action, the US became the new Sheriff in the Americas.

President Bush Jr became Sheriff in Iraq and three Presidents (Bush Jr, Obama and Trump), successively, became Sheriff in Afghanistan. In the case of Iraq (2003), a fake threat of Iraq possessing WMD (weapons of mass destruction) was invented and, in the case of Afghanistan (2001-2021), troops were sent as part of the 'war on terror' against al Qaeda and the Taliban regime. Both wars were spectacular failures. In the latest case of Venezuela, the US accused President Maduro of drug trafficking and conspiring to smuggle narcotics into the US, but they are still charges unsupported by any public evidence.

From Mr Trump's pronouncements, it is clear that Mr Maduro was a casualty in the pursuit of the goal to control Venezuela's oil wealth. Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world and was pivoting toward China in oil exports, arms imports and foreign investment. The US is determined not to allow any other country (especially Russia and China) to acquire economic interests in Venezuela (especially oil wealth) which are 'reserved' for the United States. Shortly after the capture of Mr Maduro, President Trump candidly said that large US oil companies will be allowed to "produce and sell' Venezuelan oil and 'make money'.

India losing relevance

The 4-hour operation, coded *Absolute Resolve,* was a demonstration of the US armed forces' vastly superior technology, machinery, intelligence, planning and execution. To enter another country in the middle of night and snatch the Head of State from a heavily-protected presidential house — and without suffering any casualty — belonged, we thought, to fables and fantasy, but America proved that its military could do it. The US military is the most lethal war machine built in the history of the world. Alarmingly, there is also evidence of the making of a new Sheriff of the World, barring China.

India went unnoticed before and after *Absolute Resolve*. Mr Trump has already snubbed Mr Narendra Modi twice with his claims: *once*, on ending the India-Pakistan war and *next*, on India reducing its imports of Russian oil to please Mr Trump.

The government is so scared of earning Mr Trump's wrath that the official statement on Venezuela did not condemn the capture of President Maduro or even mention the role of the United States.

The statement referred to "recent developments in Venezuela", and called upon "all concerned to address issues peacefully through dialogue", as if it were counselling on a dispute over the score at a football match!

On this issue, India is isolated among the five founders of BRICS and from Europe. Despite the boast of Vishwaguru, India is losing voice and relevance in world affairs. As a former Indian Ambassador said, 'what India said would not make a difference'.

Free pass to imperialism

Absolute Resolve has, I am afraid, given a free pass to Russia and China. Mr Trump has hinted that he will grab Greenland. The resolution of the Russia-Ukraine war — if it happens — will involve Ukraine ceding territory to Russia. China will be tempted to take its 'One China' policy to its logical conclusion. If China makes another attempt to intrude into India's northern border or Arunachal Pradesh, India will be left to fend for itself. After seizing control of Venezuela's oil reserves, the US has less interest in concluding a trade agreement with India. Mr Trump can manipulate India's export of goods to the US — allow more or less into his country — by playing with tariffs *without* a trade agreement.

Donald Trump II has proved to be the most interventionist president in US history. The tally includes Palestine, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Nigeria and now Venezuela. This is the ugly face of the self-appointed new Sheriff. We may not shed a tear for Mr Maduro or his wife, but we should mourn the return of imperialism and the demise of sovereignty of nations.

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INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR

Random selection

The surprise appointment of Nitin Nabin, 46, the relatively inexperienced MLA from Bihar, as BJP working president is the upshot of a long-standing tug-of-war between the RSS and the two-member BJP high command as to who should lead the party. The RSS wanted a president who would keep the Sangh in the loop. Its preference was Nagpur boys Nitin Gadkari or Devendra Fadnavis, or a senior leader of stature like Shivraj Singh Chouhan.

Amit Shah's choice was ministers Dharmendra Pradhan or Bhupendra Yadav, both in their 50s, who proved their mettle as his efficient deputies in challenging Assembly polls.

The name of G Kishan Reddy, Shah's former deputy, also came up.

JP Nadda overstayed as party chief far beyond his three-year term due to the stalemate.

Last month, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat met Shah in the Andamans and Nabin's name cropped up — a choice so random that neither side raised objections. According to insiders, the idea was that Nabin, largely unknown outside his home state, would be first tested as a working president and the name of the full-time president decided later.

But BJP's media managers immediately announced his name and even offered reasons for his selection: He was much younger than any other contender and did not come from a dominant caste. Factors that should ordinarily have worked against him!

Pawar dynamics

Gautam Adani, the government's favourite billionaire, inaugurated the new AI educational centre at Baramati, the Pawar family's home ground, last month.

Adani, who has funded the centre, is working to reunite the feuding Pawar family camps. Already, the rival NCP factions are contesting local polls together in some districts, such as Pune.

Adani recently met Ajit Pawar in Mumbai and Sharad Pawar in Delhi to suggest a compromise: Ajit's MLAs would support Sharad Pawar's re-election to the Rajya Sabha in April.

In exchange, Supriya Sule is willing for the NCP(SP) to merge formally with the NCP(AP), provided her father officially heads the united party, even if Ajit calls the shots in Maharashtra and would be acknowledged as his uncle's heir.

Ajit is yet to agree to the second proposal. Adani is an old friend of the Pawars. Although very few MLAs still remain with Sharad Pawar, the BJP realises his important role as a respected mediator in the INDIA bloc, placating allies disillusioned with Rahul Gandhi's leadership.

Obtuse moves

There is growing disenchantment in the Congress over some recent party decisions, perceived as downright obtuse.

In Maharashtra, Prakash Ambedkar's VBA was allotted a generous 62 seats as an ally for the Mumbai civic polls, although his political relevance has eroded.

In fact, at the last moment, he surrendered 20 of the earmarked seats since he could not muster enough candidates. In Tamil Nadu, DMK leader M K Stalin is furious over party leaders close to Rahul criticising the DMK's fiscal policies, hardly the best tactic for arriving at a cordial seat-sharing formula.

In J&K, during the final stages of a PIL hearing calling for the eviction from government accommodation of former state legislators, it emerged that one of three favoured politicians the L-G's administration had permitted to continue unauthorisedly in his residence for seven years was the high-profile Congress chief spokesperson Ravinder Sharma.

Disgruntled state Congresspersons grumble about a BJP sleeper cell in the state party.

Demand outstrips supply

Someone in the Department of Posts clearly goofed up while releasing the commemorative stamp to mark the RSS's centenary celebrations last October.

Normally, a first day cover of a ₹5 stamp sells for between ₹10 and ₹15, depending on whether it has a postal stamp. Currently, the RSS centenary stamps are being sold by the e-post office website for an astonishing ₹300. The stamp shortage is despite the fact that 2.06 lakh stamps were printed.

Either the department did not calculate the demand or did not reserve a quota for the group being honoured, as is customary.

Gogoi's outreach

With the Assam Assembly polls approaching, Gaurav Gogoi, Rahul's trusted aide, is on an outreach mission. He recently met Sushmita Dev, the feisty daughter of the late Central minister Santosh Mohan Dev. Sushmita quit the Congress in 2021 to join the TMC and was rewarded with a Rajya Sabha seat. The Congress is nervous about its standing in Assam's Barak Valley, despite the large number of Muslim voters because of extensive SIR voter revisions.

Regd. No. DL-21048/03-05. R.N.I. No. DELENG/2001/21855. Printed and Published by Ramesh Chander Malhotra on behalf of The Indian Express (P) Ltd and printed at The Indian Express (P) Ltd Press, A-8, Sector-7, Noida - 201301 and published at The Indian Express (P) Ltd, Mezzanine Floor, Express Building, 9 & 10, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: 0120-6651500. (Cover price: Patna: ₹12,; Raipur: ₹12, Srinagar ₹15). Chairman of the Board: Viveck Goenka, Editor: Shyamal Majumdar, Editor (Delhi): Shobhana Subramanian* (*Responsible for selection of News under the PRP Act)

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Forgotten Courage

For decades, the 1962 war has occupied an awkward place in India's national memory. It is recalled more for strategic failure than for individual courage, more for loss and less for resistance. In that shadowed landscape, certain stories were left to fade ~ not because they lacked meaning, but because they complicated a narrative of defeat. The battle at Rezang La is one such story, and its recent return to public attention through Bollywood, more than 60 years after Chetan Anand's classic Haqeeqat, is a reminder that courage is not always remembered, even when it is extraordinary.

Rezang La does not fit neatly into triumphalist storytelling. There was no victory, no turning of the tide, no dramatic rescue. What it offers instead is something far starker: a small group of soldiers, ill-equipped, poorly acclimatised, and vastly outnumbered, choosing to hold their ground in conditions that were almost certainly fatal. Their stand did not change the outcome of the war, but it did alter the moral geography of it. It demonstrated that even in a losing campaign, courage and discipline did not collapse.

That this episode remained marginal for so long tells us something unsettling about how nations curate memory. Heroism that emerges from strategic miscalculation is uncomfortable. It forces an honest reckoning not just with external aggression, but with internal failure ~ political, logistical, and institutional. It is easier to remember victories than to confront the cost of poor preparation. Rezang La, by contrast, asks difficult questions about leadership, planning and the price paid by those at the bottom of the chain.

The renewed interest in this battle arrives as India's relationship with its northern neighbour remains tense. The temptation is to read the past through present rivalry, but Rezang La resists instrumentalisation. It is not muscular nationalism; it is endurance, loyalty, and the dignity of duty.

There is also a deeper lesson here about how societies process defeat. Countries that only commemorate victories risk developing a brittle patriotism, one that cannot absorb complexity. By contrast, remembering Rezang La allows for a more mature national self-image - one that can hold together bravery and blunder, sacrifice and short-sightedness. It acknowledges that soldiers do not choose wars, but they do choose how they fight them.

In the end, the value of revisiting Rezang La lies not in stirring sentiment, but in restoring proportion. It reminds us that national history is not a ledger of victories and defeats, but a record of choices made under pressure. Some of those choices fail. Others endure. The men who fought there did not shape grand strategy, but they shaped the moral boundaries of service.

Remembering them is not an exercise in nostalgia. It is an assertion that courage should not be buried because it emerged from a painful chapter. In acknowledging Rezang La, India is not rewriting 1962; it is refusing to let bravery be erased by embarrassment. That distinction matters, because it allows pride and respect without denial.

Procedural Overreach

The controversy over the notice issued to Nobel laureate Amartya Sen is not really about a clerical error or an age mismatch. It is about the collision between mass administrative processes and individual dignity in an increasingly politicised environment. When a Nobel laureate becomes the face of a bureaucratic notice, the issue ceases to be technical and turns instantly symbolic.

At one level, the explanation offered by electoral authorities ~ that the notice was auto-generated due to a "logical discrepancy" and later resolved through a home visit ~ appears procedurally sound. Large-scale data exercises inevitably throw up anomalies, and systems are designed to flag them. But governance is not only about systems; it is also about judgement. The inability to distinguish between a genuine case of inconsistency and an obvious, easily verifiable entry error exposes the limitations of mechanised administration.

What has sharpened the reaction is the context. The Special Intensive Revision exercise in West Bengal has already generated deep unease, with millions of names dropped from draft rolls and political parties trading accusations of manipulation. In such an atmosphere, every administrative act is read through a political lens. Even routine verification begins to look like targeting, and even technical corrections acquire ideological colour.

This is why the Sen episode has resonated so widely. It is not because he is above the law, but because his case dramatises a fear many ordinary citizens harbour: that they too could be caught in a process they do not fully understand, asked to prove what they have long taken for granted, and left to navigate opaque procedures with little guidance. If someone of his stature can be unsettled, what does that mean for the less visible? The political reactions ~ ranging from demands for apology to allegations of harassment ~ may be hyperbolic, but they are not irrational. They draw energy from a growing distrust in institutional neutrality. Electoral bodies survive on credibility, not coercive power.

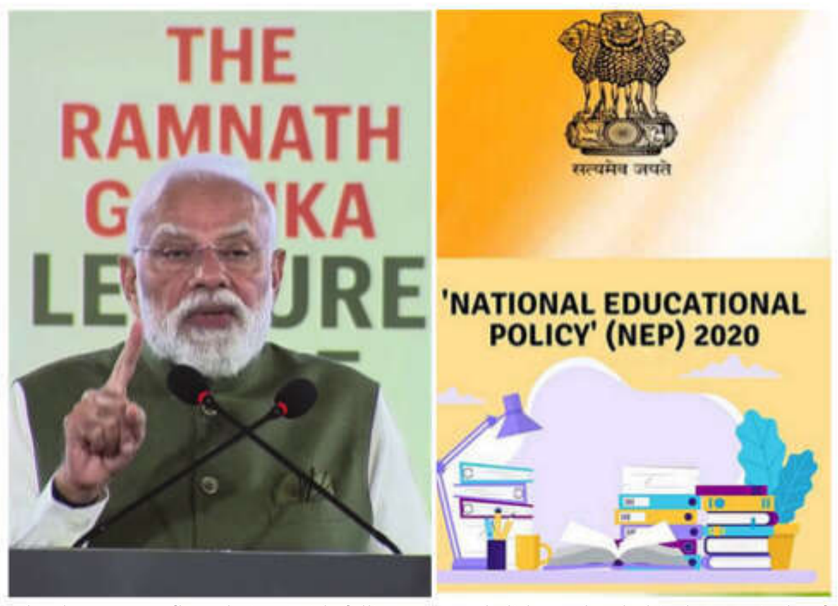
Once the perception takes hold that verification exercises are being used, or could be used, as instruments of pressure, the integrity of the process comes under question. This is not an argument against voter roll cleansing. Democracies need accurate rolls. Ghost voters, duplicates, and outdated entries undermine electoral legitimacy. But accuracy cannot come at the cost of proportionality. There is a difference between tightening systems and hardening them, the difference between scrutiny and suspicion.

The lesson here is simple but uncomfortable. Automation cannot replace discretion. Uniform procedures cannot substitute for context. Institutions must build filters that recognise age, public record, and obvious human realities. Otherwise, they risk becoming efficient but insensitive, correct in process but careless in impact.

In the end, this episode is less about one individual and more about the kind of administrative culture India wants. A democracy does not prove its strength by how strictly it applies rules, but by how intelligently it applies them. When rules begin to overshadow reason, the system may still function ~ but trust quietly erodes.

Sorry state of education

The National Education Policy 2020 rightly aims to introduce vocational education at all levels, by integrating vocational education into mainstream education. However, implementation of NEP 2020 seems to be running far behind schedule; NEP had envisaged that by 2025, at least half of the students would have vocational exposure, through school and higher education. The problem in implementation of NEP appears to be of finance and resolve; the NEP document requires that 6 per cent of GDP be spent on education, while we are spending less than half that



Addressing the Sixth Ramnath Goenka Lecture on 17 November 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi slammed Macaulay's 1835 education policy for instilling a 'slavery mentality' in India. The PM set a ten-year deadline to exorcize Macaulay's ghost ~ in the 200th year of publication Macaulay's Minute on Education. The PM's speech triggered a debate on Macaulay and his education policy, which was enthusiastically joined by politicians of all hues.

Sadly, few of the debaters, if any, chose to discuss, even in passing, the current state of education in India ~ which would have been much more relevant ~ because much is wrong with our present education system. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024, a survey of 6.5 lakh children revealed that 76 per cent of Class 3 students, 55.2 per cent of Class 5 students, 32.5 per cent of Class 8 students still cannot read Class 2 level texts, and over 66 per cent of Class 3 and Class 5 students, struggle with simple maths.

Also none of our 1,338 universities figured in the top 100 of the QS World University Rankings, 2025. Aiming at a Gross Enrolment Ratio of 100 per cent by 2030, and a current 88.4 per cent pass rate in twelfth board examinations, with 1.1 lakh students scoring above 90 per cent in CBSE alone, secondary education appears to be doing better. This façade is ripped away at engineering and medical examinations; the qualifying score was 20.56 per cent at the JEE Advanced Examination, and 18.75 per cent, in NEET. Probably, it would be unfair to blame Macaulay for this sad state of affairs, 166 years after his death, or the British, seventy-eight years after their exit from India.

The neglect of education by successive Governments can be gauged from the fact that till today, Government schools established by the British, more than a century ago, are the backbone of our education system. Due to neglect over the years, most Government schools are now floundering, with falling buildings, and a huge shortage of teachers, affecting education of the majority of students in the country. A viral video from Bihar showed five primary Government schools operating from a single room, with five teachers writing on a single blackboard, to a roomful of bemused children. Obviously, education imparted in such schools would be of an abysmal standard, yet, despite pontifications at the highest levels, no efforts are visible for the improvement of Government schools.

The much-reviled British-era education system was successful in promoting upward mobility on a truly large scale. Many icons of modern India like President Abdul Kalam came from disadvantaged backgrounds, had their education in Government schools, and went on to excel in their chosen fields. The system ran smoothly; in small cities, all children right from the Collector's son to his peon's son, went to the same Government school, where practically no fees were charged. The same was true of universities, medical colleges and engineering colleges; once you got admission, the least of your worries was paying for your education.

Slowly, the system disintegrated. The first casualty was primary education. Almost unanimously in the 1960s, all State Governments decided that English should no longer be taught in primary schools. English, however, continued as the language of high society, business and finance, as also of prestigious examinations like IAS and NDA. Quite naturally, educated parents pulled their children out of Government schools.

Secondary education was the next victim. Initially, each State had a Secondary Education Board with healthy competition between various State Boards. Slowly, however, vested interests ensured that the education mafia displaced genuine educationists at crucial levels; examination malpractices became rampant; Bihar Board achieved widespread notoriety when photographs were published of parents scaling walls to "help" their wards. This notoriety was reinforced when videos emerged of Bihar toppers fumbling to answer basic questions. The once respected UP Board did not lag behind; one-sixth of examinees dropped out, when the Government got tough with the copying mafias. Moreover, most State Boards are prone to change their syllabus and teaching policies with a change in Government.

DEVENDRA SAKSENA

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The problems facing Government schools are aggravated by the tyranny of local administrations, which commandeers Government school teachers, whenever the Government needs extra manpower. Government school teachers are called for census operations, elections of all kinds, spreading awareness about Government schemes etc. Government school buildings are regularly requisitioned for police deployment, elections and other contingencies. Students are called in to swell crowds at all manner of Government programmes. Ours is a leading economy of the world; surely, we can hire ad-hoc volunteers to carry forward Government schemes, and leave teachers to teach. The Government could also ensure that Government schools are not used for non-educational purposes. To stem the rot in Government schools, the Government may appoint able and motivated persons, with sufficient financial and administrative powers, as heads of Government schools.

Even in the times of AI, the right kind of university education is necessary for top jobs, because it develops essential skills like analytical thinking, active learning, and complex problem solving. Despite PM Modi declaring that "hard work is more powerful than Harvard," college graduates with the right skillset are paid more, and employed at the highest levels. This would explain why eight lakh students appear for the 16,000 IIT seats, and admissions to some Delhi colleges require 100 per cent marks in the Twelfth Board.

Mutatis mutandis, the IIT story is replicated in NEET. Private universities, which charge a bomb for their courses, are burgeoning, because students graduating from these institutions can easily land a good job. The icing on the cake is that an alumnus of IIT/IIM can, one day, become the CEO of some top US corporate.

On the other hand, most universities, including run-of-the mill engineering colleges teaching outdated syllabi, struggle to fill their classrooms. The obvious solution of updating syllabi that will make their educational courses relevant for contemporary needs ~ and prevent wastage of educational resources ~ somehow appears to have eluded our planners. In this scenario, a student of ordinary means faces a cruel dilemma. After completing his school education, he has little capital, skill or experience to strike out on his own. Not having the talent, or resources, for admission to a top-notch college after wasting several years of his life, and his parent's money, he would get some low-paying job after graduation, perpetuating inequality.

Ideally, education should be linked to jobs, which would entail popularizing vocational courses, and establishing a sufficient number of colleges offering vocational education. This is not an untried idea; one-half to nearly two-thirds of students pursue vocational education in countries like Germany and Switzerland.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 rightly aims to introduce vocational education at all levels, by integrating vocational education into mainstream education. However, implementation of NEP 2020, seems to be running far behind schedule; NEP had envisaged that by 2025, at least half of the students would have vocational exposure, through school and higher education. The problem in implementation of NEP appears to be of finance and resolve; the NEP document requires that 6 per cent of GDP be spent on education, while we are spending less than half that. Further, changeover to NEP would require teacher re-education, new infrastructure and a complete overhaul of the education system ~ which is easier said than achieved.

Industry and businesses are offering high-paying jobs for specialists in every field, who may not be college graduates e.g., horticulturists, nannies, vaccine specialists, customer marketing managers etc. An easily verifiable manifestation of this trend is the remuneration of drivers in Government and PSUs, who often earn more than fresh graduates. Probably, a small beginning can be made by colleges to offer courses that develop specialization in emerging fields.

The Government can also rethink its Institutes of Excellence (IoE) initiative, which has hit a roadblock, with only 12 institutes (out of 20) being granted the IoE tag, and funding of Rs.3,200 crore, out of Rs.10,000 crore, being utilized. Currently, the Empowered Expert Committee for IoE is lying defunct for more than two years, making any action on IoE unlikely. Probably, the unutilized funds of Rs.6,800 crore of IoE can be used to establish good vocational colleges in all districts, and thereby kickstart vocational education.

Finally, to learn, we must understand the importance of education. As Mahatma Gandhi had said: "Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever."

The Daily Star

Venezuela attack: When a president is abducted, sovereignty becomes conditional

The United States' overnight assault on Venezuela and the seizure of President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, are being sold as an anti-drug mission and a law enforcement action. Yet the White House has already described the aftermath in the language of control, not custody.

Trump spoke of the US "running" Venezuela, rebuilding its oil sector, and keeping the option of "boots on the ground" on the table. He also blamed Venezuela for stealing US oil interests, saying Washington would take them back. In essence, a raid marketed as an "arrest" is being packaged for a geopolitical reset with economic spoils.

This is not a semantic dispute; it goes to the heart of the post-1945 trade-off between states, under which borders became legal facts protected by international law, not negotiable obstacles to be overcome by force. The UN Charter's baseline rule is explicit: states must refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. The exceptions are deliberately narrow: UN Security Council (UNSC) authorisation, and self-defence after an armed attack. By those standards, Washington's legal story reads more like a post hoc alibi. International law experts, including Geoffrey Robertson KC, stated that the attack on Venezuela violated Article 2(4) of the UN Charter and constituted the crime of aggression, regarded as the gravest offence under international law.

A Member Of The ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

According to international law, drug trafficking and gang violence are criminal activities that do not meet the accepted threshold for armed conflict that would justify military force, and a criminal indictment does not itself authorise armed force to depose a foreign government. Experts criticised the US administration for trying to describe the operation as both a targeted law enforcement mission and a potential prelude to long-term US control of Venezuela. If force can be recast as policing, then the prohibition on force becomes a technicality, and any powerful state can claim it did not "invade"; it merely "arrested." The world should not turn an invasion into due process simply by attaching handcuffs at the end.

The way the operation was executed compounds the damage. Congress was not notified in advance, and Trump defended secrecy by arguing that lawmakers might have leaked the plan. In a democracy, oversight exists to slow down reckless force and provide clarity about aims, costs, and exit routes.

Here, the constraint is treated as the threat. For smaller states, the lesson is stark: even Washington's internal guardrails can be switched off when a foreign target is politically useful, and the public relations dividend is large.

International reaction has been swift. The UN secretary-general's spokesperson called the developments a "dangerous precedent" and stressed the need for full respect for international law, including the Charter. Many states have also reacted strongly. Spain rejected an intervention that violates international law, while Mexico explicitly cited the UN Charter in condemning unilateral military action. Brazil's president warned that attacking countries in flagrant violation of international law is a first step towards a world where the law of the strongest prevails. These are not abstract anxieties. They are a recognition that once this threshold is crossed, it will be crossed again.

Some leaders, particularly in Latin America, have also celebrated Maduro's removal, while others are seeking urgent multilateral action, including UNSC engagement. This is how the hemisphere is dragged back into a geopolitics of camps, clients, and punishments, the dynamic that has historically produced coups, proxy violence, and lasting institutional trauma.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Self-centred

Sir, This refers to the report, "Donald Trump says tariffs could rise quickly over India's Russian oil imports, praises PM Modi" (January 6). US President Donald Trump's sarcastic remarks about imposing further tariffs on India, made aboard Air Force One while traveling from Florida to Washington D.C., are an indirect threat.

It is India's prerogative to decide how much oil to buy from Russia, at what price, and for how long. The US has already imposed a 50 per cent tariff on several Indian goods since August 2025.

This calculation includes a 25 per cent tariff linked to India's purchase of Russian oil. If the US does not remove this punitive tariff, the trade deal will prove detrimental for India. The failure to reach a conclusion after six rounds of talks over nine months reflects the US's obstinate behavior.

The US, aiming to kill two birds with one stone, intends to put economic pressure on Russia to play a key role in ending the Russia-Ukraine war, while simultaneously increasing its own revenues.

While the Modi government has reduced the quantity of Russian oil purchased for its own reasons, and India has strategically entered a gray zone, President Trump's self-centered nature is increasing the risk of a deterioration in Indo-US diplomatic relations. Indian immigrants in the US should come forward to protect the reputation of their homeland and their ancestors' birthplace.

Yours, etc., Yugal Kishore Sharma,
Faridabad, January 6.

Audit needed

Sir, Apropos "When water kills," it is a huge blot on India's cleanest city that 20 people died and hundreds fell ill due to contaminated tap water. After Indore, Gujarat's Gandhinagar witnessed a similar incident of sewage mixing with drinking water. It should be noted that a water supply system was recently laid in the capital city of Gujarat. Authorities must ban the use of tap water in affected areas and supply tested and safe drinking water.

An immediate technical inspection of drinking and sewage pipelines is essential to find out leakage and ensure separation. Continuous chlorination, regular laboratory testing and phased replacement of old pipelines are critical to fix the core infrastructure issue. All those who are guilty should be punished for playing with lives of innocent people for as basic a need as potable water. Last but not the least, if this can happen in Indore or a capital city, we can just imagine the plight of citizens in other Tier-2 or 3 cities. It is high time a thorough audit is undertaken by all municipal authorities to check the health of their pipelines so that we can avoid tragedies like the ones witnessed in Indore and Gandhinagar.

Yours, etc., Bal Govind,
Noida, 7 January.

The battle against superstition

DEBAPRIYA MUKHERJEE

At the initial stage of my six-year involvement in uplifting society through skill-based initiatives, particularly by promoting handicraft work and teaching students to think creatively and independently, my efforts were partially jeopardized by deep-rooted superstition and resistance to rational learning.

Superstitions exerted a deeply adverse impact by encouraging unquestioned belief, fear, and blind conformity instead of reasoning and evidence-based understanding. In society, superstition often sustains harmful practices, social discrimination, exploitation by self-styled godmen, and resistance to scientific or social reforms, thereby weakening rational decision-making and slowing progress.

When such beliefs penetrate the educational environment, students gradually lose the habit of asking "why" and "how," accepting explanations based on fate, omens, or divine intervention rather than observation and logic. Initially learners became hesitant to challenge me despite my wrong interpretation of any law, less capable of evaluating information critically, and more vulnerable to misinformation and pseudoscience. As a result, genuine efforts toward social upliftment were obstructed, and the transformative power of education - which could empower individuals economically and intellectually - was weakened by fear-driven beliefs that stood in direct opposition to progress and rational thought.

In many communities, illnesses are still attributed to evil spirits or curses rather than treated as medical conditions. I have witnessed educated people postponing important decisions—marriages, journeys, even hospital admissions - because an astrologer predicted an "inauspicious" time, showing how fear governs rational minds.

While teaching students science and mathematics, I have clearly observed how superstition acts as a hidden barrier to learning, critical thinking, and intellectual confidence. Many students come to the classroom already conditioned to believe that success or failure depends on luck, planetary positions, or divine favour rather than effort, practice, and understanding, which directly contradicts the scientific spirit. I have seen students hesitate to perform experiments or solve numerical problems on certain "inauspicious" days.

In mathematics, some students label themselves as "weak by birth", which creates fear and anxiety even before attempting a problem, turning a subject of logic into a source of emotional stress. In science classes, explanations based on natural laws sometimes clash with supernatural beliefs, and students struggle to accept evidence because it challenges what they were taught at home or in society. This conflict confuses young minds and prevents them from fully trusting experimentation, data, and proof.

Worse still, superstition nurtures dependency - students wait for miracles instead of practicing problem-solving, revision, and conceptual clarity. Over time, this mindset damages curiosity, reduces confidence, and limits innovation, making science and mathematics appear difficult, frightening, or irrelevant. Many science teachers themselves do not sufficiently emphasize the need to question or ignore such irrational beliefs and often remain limited to textbook facts and exam-oriented learning, leaving little space to challenge superstition directly. When teachers avoid discussing superstition, they unintentionally reinforce the idea that scientific reasoning and superstitious beliefs can coexist.

To overcome superstition and effectively impose critical thinking among students, I have inculcated the process to create a classroom

culture where questioning was encouraged and fear of being "wrong" was removed. Students were taught how to think, not what to think, by consistently using the scientific method - observation, hypothesis, experimentation, evidence, and conclusion - in both science and mathematics lessons. I have deliberately challenged superstitious beliefs through simple demonstrations and hands-on experiments that allow students to see cause-and-effect relationships for themselves, helping them replace belief with proof.

Many so-called "tantrik shows" that appear supernatural can be clearly explained and exposed through basic scientific principles, making them powerful tools to fight superstition among students. For example, acts where a tantrik places a hand or tongue briefly in fire without injury rely on short contact time, moisture on the skin, or low heat transfer from alcohol-based flames rather than divine power.

"Miracles" like ash or oil repeatedly appearing from hands or idols involve concealment or simple physical and chemical tricks. When these tricks are demonstrated openly in classrooms or science programmes and followed by clear scientific explanations, students quickly realize how easily perception can be deceived and why evidence, experimentation, and critical questioning are far more reliable than blind belief.

Linking concepts to daily life - such as explaining probability to counter ideas of luck, or biology to explain illness instead of supernatural causes - makes rational explanations relatable and convincing.

Another unique example that I faced in my life is presented here. About 10 years ago, when I entered my new house, I did not organize traditional rituals that many consider essential for peace and prosperity. My relatives believed that without them prosperity would be blocked. Later on, I could not utilise the entire space of my newly purchased house for earning money, largely because I chose not to perform certain rituals. While this decision may have limited my financial gains to some extent, I do not consider it a failure in the true sense.

I feel deeply satisfied that my son and daughter have received proper education and are now well settled in their employment, which, to me, is a far greater achievement than any ritual-driven expectation of wealth. My belief has always been that a house should not merely be a source of income or superstition-bound anxiety, but a space with social purpose. Instead of rituals, I strongly feel that the unused portion of my house should be devoted to running tutorials for poor and underprivileged students, where knowledge, critical thinking, and self-reliance can be nurtured. This conviction gives me inner peace and reinforces my faith that education and service to society are more meaningful measures of success than material profit alone.

Though I have succeeded to some extent, this success has not been complete due to the persistent influence of superstition.

(The writer is a former Senior Scientist, Central Pollution Control Board.)

The Soul in the Machine

SINDHUNIL BARMAN ROY

The intellectual landscape of Bengal has historically been a dialogue between the "Red Flag" and the "Ochre Robe," a dialectic between Karl Marx's historical materialism and Swami Vivekananda's Vedantic humanism. While their 19th-century frameworks seemed diametrically opposed - one rooting reality in the economic base and the other in the transcendental spirit - the digital dawn of 2025 has forced a surprising convergence. As we navigate the era of Generative AI and algorithmic governance, the question of what constitutes the "human" has moved from the realm of abstract philosophy to a crisis of survival.

Marx famously argued that it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. In the contemporary context, this "social existence" is increasingly defined by the algorithm. We are witnessing the rise of a "Digital Materialism," where human thought is harvested as raw data to fuel the expansion of silicon intelligence.

If the factory was the 19th-century site of alienation, the smartphone screen is its 21st-century successor. Here, the individual is reduced to a "data-proletariat," whose cognitive labour is extracted to build a digital architecture that eventually seeks to replace the very mind that fed it. This represents a new kind of "Metabolic Rift" - not just between man and nature, but between the human subject and his own cognitive essence.

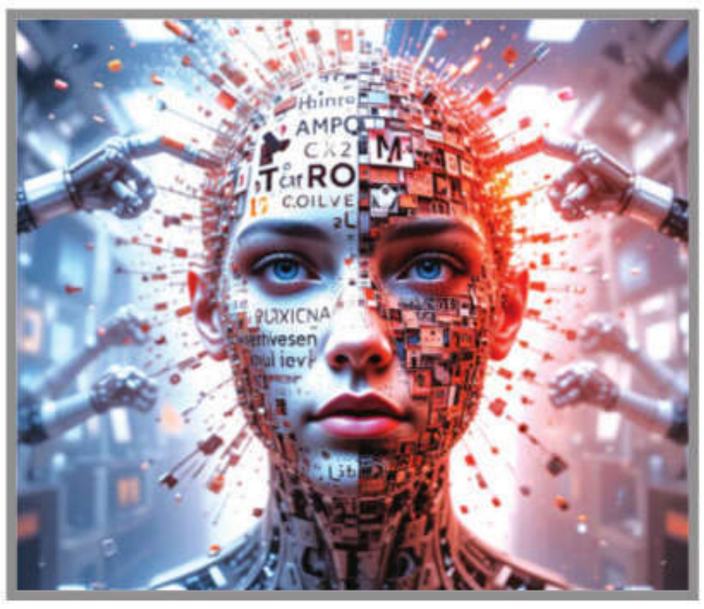
However, it is precisely at this juncture of digital colonization that Vivekananda's "Man-making" philosophy offers a radical defence. Vivekananda warned that any system based solely on material redistribution, without a corresponding "redistribution" of character, would merely replace one form of tyranny with another.

In the age of AI, this warning takes on a technical dimension. If we view the human being merely as a biological computer - a materialist assumption shared by both classical Marxism and modern Silicon Valley - then the replacement of the human by the machine is inevitable. But the "Monk" insists that the human is not a machine to be optimized, but a manifestation of the Atman, an infinite consciousness that remains fundamentally non-computable.

Modern physics, particularly the burgeoning field of quantum biology, provides a startling vindication of this spiritual intuition. The prevailing materialist view that consciousness is an "emergent property" of complex computation is being challenged by theories suggesting that sentience may be rooted in quantum gravitational effects.

The Orch OR theory, proposed by Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff, suggests that consciousness arises from orchestrated quantum processes in microtubules within neurons. If consciousness is indeed a quantum phenomenon, then binary silicon chips - no matter how fast - can never truly "see" or "feel." They lack the "Observer" status necessary to interact with the fundamental fabric of reality. The machine can simulate the "Shudra's" labour or the "Merchant's" logic, but it cannot access the "Monk's" intuition, because it lacks the quantum architecture of a living soul.

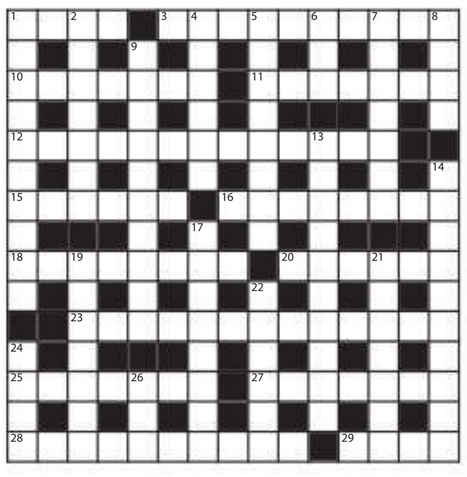
Ultimately, the challenge of the late 2020s is to build a "Scientific Socialism" that is spiritually grounded. We need a Marxist critique to



dismantle the digital monopolies that exploit our data, but we require a Vedantic understanding to ensure that we do not lose our sense of Self in the process. The goal is a society where technology solves the material problems of the masses, but the "Man-making" education of Vivekananda remains the primary architect of the human future. In this synthesis, the revolutionary and the monk find their final meeting point: the liberation of the human spirit from both economic chains and digital illusions.

(The writer is Distinguished Professor, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Educational and Research Institute, Belur, and a Visiting Professor at IIT, Mumbai.)

Crossword | No. 293346



Last Sunday's Solution

C	O	W	P	A	T	S	■	D	I	P	L	O	M	A
L	■	I	■	G	■	N	■	E	■	E	■	N	■	D
I	N	N	E	R	M	O	S	T	■	P	A	T	I	O
N	■	D	■	E	■	W	■	E	■	P	■	H	■	P
K	O	I	■	E	N	F	O	R	C	E	M	E	N	T
E	■	N	■	■	■	A	■	S	■	R	■	B	■	E
R	U	S	S	E	L	L	■	■	H	O	W	A	R	D
■	■	T	■	N	■	L	■	I	■	N	■	C	■	■
S	P	R	I	N	G	■	■	C	H	I	C	K	E	N
K	■	U	■	O	■	S	■	E	■	■	■	B	■	E
I	M	M	O	B	I	L	I	S	E	D	■	U	S	E
F	■	E	■	L	■	E	■	T	■	R	■	R	■	D
F	U	N	G	I	■	E	M	O	T	I	O	N	A	L
L	■	T	■	N	■	P	■	R	■	F	■	E	■	E
E	N	S	I	G	N	S	■	M	A	T	U	R	E	D

ACROSS

1 Halfwit caught flies in pile of sand (4)
3 Commotion as American seen in Yorkshire city with bear (10)
10 Motorboat is trapped in Corfu weir every so often (7)
11 Reportedly overprotecting young fish (7)
12 Suitable pen-friend? (13)
15 Front page story: priest punches hack (6)
16 Happen to pass former electrical store on Parisian street (4,4)
18 European guided by reputation decorated in New York (8)
20 Part of TV detective associated with Lewis, primarily (6)
23 Layer of molluscs damaged porthole frame (6-2-5)
25 Vote against regular cycling rally (7)
27 Prince (as he was formerly known) originally acquired uniform in red (7)
28 After month in recession, gave angry tirade about store's termination being certain (10)
29 Long drain beginning to dry out (4)

DOWN

1 Flapper somewhat consoles sick cider-drinking revolutionary (10)
2 Dicky learnt uranium is lacking noticeable colour (7)
4 University exercises right to be included, but it's not ready (6)
5 One who permits suckers to get rinsed, essentially, by old rector (8)
6 Rotten fish is sent back (3)
7 In Irish province, Nationalist is wanting Trident (7)
8 Disabled beggar's topless sex party (4)
9 Stan messes about in test (10)
13 Look at father and important financial figures close to agreeing – amazing! (3-7)
14 Hearty emotion produced in telephone call: "Lay off, that's disgusting!" (5,5)
17 Principle covering boyfriends in flat (8)
19 Shot in back procuring a toxic gas (7)
21 Over the phone, picture best wild plant (3,4)
22 Run into thicket to laugh uncontrollably (6)
24 Nearly learned to inject cocaine and heroin (4)
26 Time in therapy (3)

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

NOW AND AGAIN

OLYMPIC-LEVEL BENGALI SKILLS

SHOVANLAL CHAKRABORTY

Bengalis run their households with such skill that a Wall Street banker would probably start weeping. These are not mere 'habits'; they are an art form – teachings passed down through generations.

It is the unwritten rulebook of every Bengali family, and these rules cannot be broken. Nothing truly dies in a Bengali kitchen - it simply returns in a new and nobler form. Jam and coffee jars have never seen a recycle bin. Scrubbed clean, they ascend to the glass-bottle pantheon, reborn as containers for achaar, ghee, or lentils in dazzling hues.

An empty whisky bottle is too regal for the trash. It either chills as an elite water bottle in the fridge or becomes a zero-cost vase for a thriving money plant. Our tea leaves refuse retirement after breakfast. Instead, they are washed and sprinkled into pots as plant superfood, keeping the money plant in that noble whisky bottle both thriving and happy.

The Bengali living room is a gallery with one rule: look, but do not touch. Every home has a TV remote that remains eternally "new", sealed in its original plastic wrap or given a new plastic cling wrap. It is a sacred shield against dust, oily fingers, and cosmic forces that erase buttons. Behind the shelf with sliding glass lies a set of gold-rimmed crockery reserved for mythical guests - the Queen of England or that judgemental aunt from Honolulu, Delhi,Mumbai or Bengaluru. For the family, the dented and mismatched steel plates will do just fine.

Every home hides treasure troves of "someday". There is a universal law that a butter cookie tin shall never contain cookies. It is a decoy. Open it, and you will find a tangle of buttons, thread, a lone screwdriver, and medicine strips from as early as 2000.

Once, every home had a giant plastic bag stuffed with smaller ones. Today, the "Tower of Quick Commerce" reigns - Blinkit and Instamart paper bags are stacked high, destined to line dustbins with quiet dignity. A branded T-shirt begins as party wear, fades to lounge-wear, and then becomes Holi attire. Its final, noble form is the pocha (neta, in Bengali, which spells the same as neta, the political leader, pun intended) - the humble mopping rag. This is not an end for the rag; it is moksha.

These habits are not about thrift; they are heirlooms of ingenuity, proof that sustainability is embedded in our DNA. We were eco-conscious long before it became a hashtag. So, the next time you see someone attacking a toothpaste tube with a rolling pin to extract its final breath, do not laugh. You are witnessing genius. You are witnessing the soul of the Bengali household.

If "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" were an Olympic sport, the Bengali middle class would not just win gold - they would take home the silver and bronze medals, melt them, and make jewellery out of them.

News Items

LORD READING'S FAREWELL

CALCUTTA PAGEANT STRIKING SCENE AT BELVEDERE CROWDED STREETS

With sincere regret Calcutta yesterday bade farewell to their Excellencies the Viceroy and the Countess of Reading, after a picturesque ceremony at Belvedere, where His Excellency held an informal reception and inspected the Guard-of-Honour. The route to Howrah Station, where train was taken for Delhi, was crowded with people eager to pay tribute to the popularity achieved by Lord Reading during his term of office.

THAMES RECEDING

HOME SPORT FIXTURES CANCELLED

(British Official Wireless).
Leafield (Oxford), Jan.

The Thames at Windsor has fallen eight inches in the last twenty-four hours. The weather to-day was fine over most of England, although the outlook is unsettled. Some racing fixtures and many dozens of week-end football matches were cancelled owing to the floods.

ITALIAN MISSION

EARLY DEBT TALK WITH MR. CHURCHILL

(British Official Wireless)
Leafield (Oxford), Jan.

Count Volpi, Italian Finance Minister, and the Debt Funding Mission will reach London next Wednesday morning and conversations at the Treasury with Mr. Winston Churchill, Chancellor of the Exchequer, are expected to begin on the following day. The departure of the mission from Rome was delayed through the death of the Italian Queen Mother.

The Pioneer

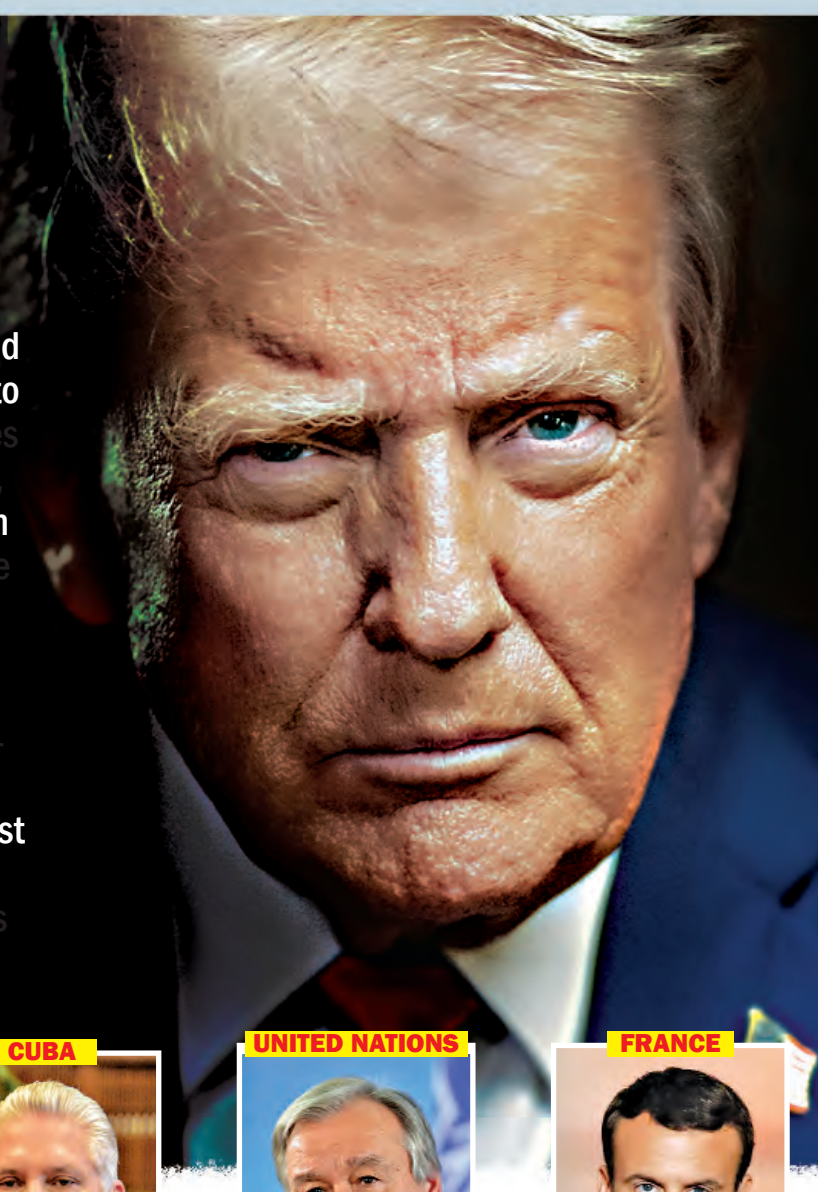
AGENDA

New Delhi

January 11, 2026

Loyalty to country ALWAYS. Loyalty to government, when it deserves it'
– Mark Twain

THE BIG BULLY

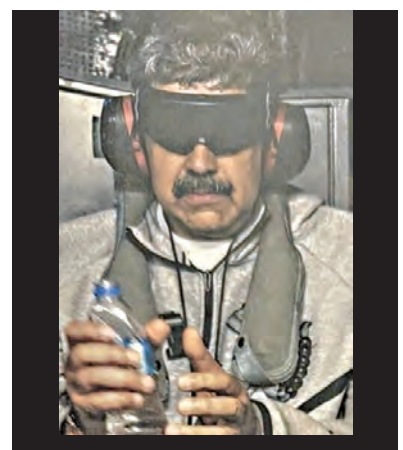


From economic coercion and regime-change operations to military strikes and extraterritorial arrests, the United States is once again asserting itself as the ultimate arbiter of global order. This posture is profoundly reshaping contemporary geopolitics- hardening blocs, shifting alliances, deepening mistrust among major powers, and creating conditions for conflict across the world

The Monroe Doctrine returns in the 21st century

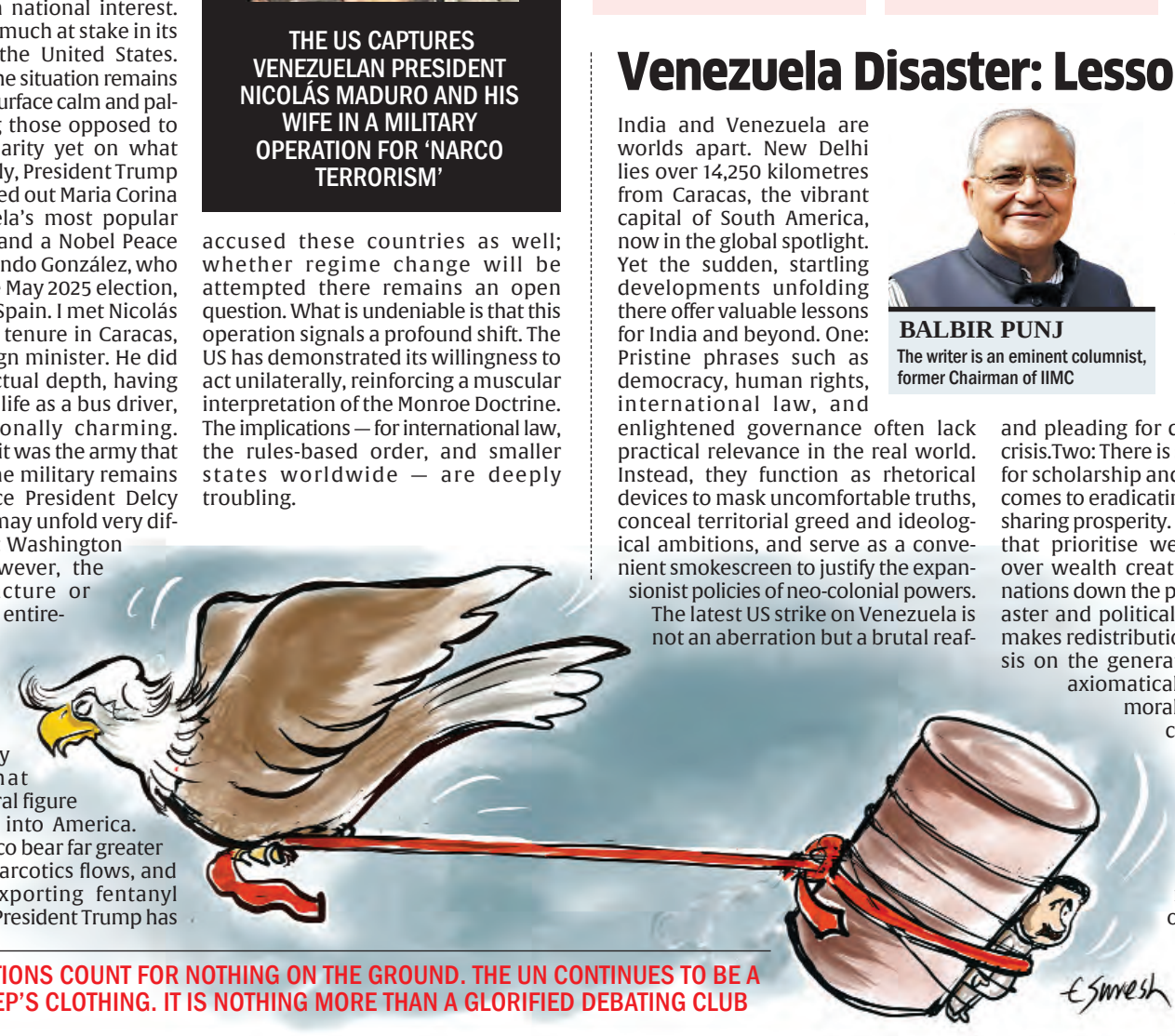
YASHVARDHAN KUMAR SINHA
Former Indian Ambassador to Venezuela

The United States' abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is not entirely surprising. For months, Washington's intent to engineer regime change in Caracas was evident, accompanied by what appeared to be one of the largest US military build-ups in the Caribbean, effectively encircling Venezuela. What unfolded overnight was a highly precise and coordinated military operation — clearly a calculated move to extract President Maduro from power. How exactly this was achieved will only become clear with time. Even Vice President Delcy Rodríguez has reportedly sought proof that they are alive.The larger and more consequential question, however, is how the Venezuelan military reacts. Maduro's grip on power rested almost entirely on military backing. As long as the armed forces supported his repressive regime, he remained secure — even to the extent of denying electoral victory to the genuine winner, Edmundo González, in the 2024 elections. Once Maduro is removed from the scene, Venezuelan politics enters uncharted territory. I see no realistic possibility of the military restoring him to power, but how internal alignments evolve will determine the country's immediate future.From India's perspective, this episode raises serious concerns. The US appears to be reverting to an era when it acted with impunity in its South American backyard. History offers uncomfortable parallels: the abduction of Manuel Noriega from Panama under the guise of 'rendition,' the invasion of Grenada, and the overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile, followed by the installation of General Pinochet. If such unilateral actions go unchallenged, any superpower with sufficient military strength may believe it can act without restraint. This opens a Pandora's box for international law. Where, then, is the world order? The United Nations today appears moribund, with a Security Council unable to take meaningful decisions. India, understandably, has been cautious in its response — much as it has been on Russia's invasion of Ukraine — balancing principles with national interest. There is simply too much at stake in its relationship with the United States. Within Venezuela, the situation remains uncertain. There is surface calm and palpable relief among those opposed to Maduro, but no clarity yet on what follows. Interestingly, President Trump appears to have ruled out Maria Corina Machado, Venezuela's most popular opposition leader and a Nobel Peace Prize winner. Edmundo González, who reportedly won the May 2025 election, remains in exile in Spain. I met Nicolás Maduro during my tenure in Caracas, when he was foreign minister. He did not project intellectual depth, having begun his working life as a bus driver, but he was personally charming. Ultimately, though, it was the army that sustained him. If the military remains unified behind Vice President Delcy Rodríguez, events may unfold very differently from what Washington anticipates. If, however, the armed forces fracture or compromise — as is entirely possible — the Venezuelan constitution could mandate elections within 30 days. I am also unconvinced by the US claim that Maduro was a central figure in drug trafficking into America. Colombia and Mexico bear far greater responsibility for narcotics flows, and China's role in exporting fentanyl cannot be ignored. President Trump has accused these countries as well; whether regime change will be attempted there remains an open question. What is undeniable is that this operation signals a profound shift. The US has demonstrated its willingness to act unilaterally, reinforcing a muscular interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine. The implications — for international law, the rules-based order, and smaller states worldwide — are deeply troubling.



THE US CAPTURES VENEZUELAN PRESIDENT NICOLÁS MADURO AND HIS WIFE IN A MILITARY OPERATION FOR 'NARCO TERRORISM'

WITHIN VENEZUELA, THE SITUATION REMAINS UNCERTAIN. THERE IS SURFACE CALM AND PALPABLE RELIEF AMONG THOSE OPPOSED TO MADURO, BUT NO CLARITY YET ON WHAT FOLLOWS



THE UNITED NATIONS COUNT FOR NOTHING ON THE GROUND. THE UN CONTINUES TO BE A SHEEP IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING. IT IS NOTHING MORE THAN A GLORIFIED DEBATING CLUB

COLOMBIA

President Gustavo Petro

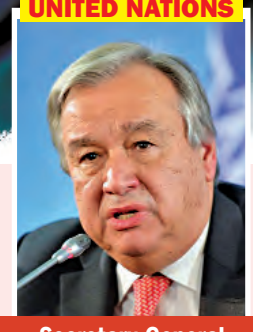
The government of Colombia rejects the aggression against the sovereignty of Venezuela and of Latin America. Internal conflicts between peoples are resolved by those same peoples in peace.

CUBA

President Miguel Díaz-Canel

Cuba denounces and urgently demands a reaction of the international community against the criminal attack by the U.S. on Venezuela... Our Zone of Peace is being brutally assaulted.

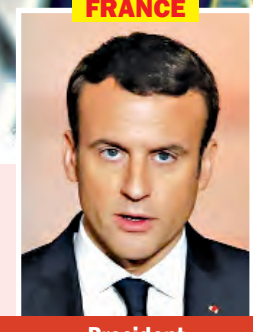
UNITED NATIONS



Secretary-General António Guterres

'Deeply alarmed' by the strikes as this action could 'constitute a dangerous precedent' for international peace and security.

FRANCE



President Emmanuel Macron

Any transition must be 'peaceful, democratic, and respectful of the will of the Venezuelan people' and stressed that external solutions cannot replace domestic political processes.

Venezuela Disaster: Lessons for India & Beyond

BALBIR PUNJ
The writer is an eminent columnist, former Chairman of IIMC

India and Venezuela are worlds apart. New Delhi lies over 14,250 kilometres from Caracas, the vibrant capital of South America, now in the global spotlight. Yet the sudden, startling developments unfolding there offer valuable lessons for India and beyond. One: Pristine phrases such as democracy, human rights, international law, and enlightened governance often lack practical relevance in the real world. Instead, they function as rhetorical devices to mask uncomfortable truths, conceal territorial greed and ideological ambitions, and serve as a convenient smokescreen to justify the expansionist policies of neo-colonial powers. The latest US strike on Venezuela is not an aberration but a brutal reaffirmation of a timeless doctrine that continues to govern global affairs – might is right. Worse, it is safe to assume that civil society would be doing nothing about it – except pontificating about the need to ensure peace in the region and pleading for dialogue to end the crisis.Two: There is simply no substitute for scholarship and hard work when it comes to eradicating mass poverty and sharing prosperity. Policies and rhetoric that prioritise wealth redistribution over wealth creation ultimately lead nations down the path of economic disaster and political subjugation. What makes redistribution, sans any emphasis on the generation of production, axiomatically dangerous is its moral absolutism – which can push democracies to drift inexorably, slowly, and legally towards economic chaos and ruin. When inequality is framed not as an outcome of complex systems but only as evidence of theft and corruption by entrepreneurs, making money becomes illegitimate and morally degrading in popular public perception. Soon, those warning of fiscal prudence are labelled elitist, stooges of capitalists, and demonised. Defending markets is painted as working for modern Shylocks. Three: The United Nations and global public opinion count for nothing on the ground. By the early twentieth century, it was widely believed that civilisation had finally risen above the barbarism of war. History, however, proved otherwise. The First World War (1914–18) devastated humanity. In its aftermath, the League of Nations was created to safeguard peace, but it soon collapsed. The Second World War (1939-45) followed with even greater ferocity. Only then, in 1945, was the United Nations established with the stated aim of preventing future global conflicts. But has that objective truly been achieved? The UN continues to be a sheep in sheep's clothing. It is nothing more than a glorified debating club. Four: Most countries have their own quota of leaders who are in a mindless pursuit of power and come up with bizarre plans that promise the moon to ordinary people, fooling them into voting them to power. For understandable reasons, these leaders fail to deliver and then shapeshift overnight into ruthless dictators. Venezuela has had leaders who have ruined the country through their quixotic policies, and it is now fast heading towards becoming a US colony.

CONTINUED ON >> PII

The American Interventions that destabilised nations and imposed its hegemony

World politics is not governed by laws and public opinion, but by national interests. It is power that decides the conduct of a nation, not its ideology. The Monroe Doctrine provided the ideological basis for such interventions – the United States had to remain a dominant force in the Western Hemisphere, and so it treated the region as its fiefdom. This has been the crux of US foreign diplomacy. For over a century, the United States has intervened in the internal affairs of countries across the globe-changing regimes, meddling in elections, and imposing sanctions. Across these varied cases – from Cuba and Panama to Iran, Chile, Iraq, and now Venezuela – a consistent pattern emerges: interventions often begin under security, ideological, or economic pretexts, yet result in deep political turmoil, weakened institutions, and enduring misery for the people.

Cuba and the Caribbean

US involvement in the Caribbean began in earnest following the Spanish-American War of 1898. After defeating Spain, the United States established significant influence in Cuba, maintaining a military presence and shaping Cuban politics under the guise of defending Cuban independence. During the Cold War, the US supported covert operations to overthrow Fidel Castro's government – most notably the Bay of Pigs invasion – reflecting deep ideological competition with communism.

Panama (1989): Operation Just Cause

One of the most direct military interventions in Latin America occurred in 1989, when the United States launched Operation Just Cause to remove General Manuel Noriega, then the de facto ruler of Panama. Noriega had previously been a US intelligence asset but was accused of drug trafficking and corruption. US forces invaded, deposed him, and reinstated democratic governance.

Iran (1953 Coup)

In the early Cold War period, the US (through the CIA) and British intelligence engineered a coup to overthrow the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, after he moved to nationalise Iran's oil industry. This restored power to the Shah, whose repressive rule eventually fuelled anti-US sentiment and contributed to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, reshaping Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Chile (1973 Coup)

In Chile, the US government covertly supported actions to destabilise the socialist government of Salvador Allende, elected in 1970. Through CIA operations and economic pressure, the groundwork was laid for the 1973 military coup that brought General Augusto Pinochet to power – ushering in years of repression and trauma for Chilean society.

Afghanistan (2001-2021)

After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the United States invaded Afghanistan to dismantle al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban from power. Two decades of conflict saw profound devastation, political fracturing, and humanitarian crises before US forces ultimately withdrew.

Iraq (2003 Invasion)

The 2003 invasion of Iraq, justified by the US government on the basis of alleged weapons of mass destruction, toppled President Saddam Hussein but unleashed years of sectarian violence, insurgency, and regional instability.

Venezuela (January 2026)

In January 2026, the United States conducted a major military operation in Venezuela, striking targets in Caracas and capturing President Nicolás Maduro and his wife – actions announced by US officials as part of law-enforcement and anti-narcotics objectives. The US administration also stated its intent to temporarily administer Venezuela and control aspects of its oil resources to fund reconstruction and counter narcotics flows – triggering widespread international condemnation as a violation of national sovereignty and international law.

Jai Sriram...Raghavan! An Anti-War War Movie, With Meta Help from Paaji & Asrani

Ikkis, thankfully, isn't a film that tries too hard to set itself in opposite to more strident, bellicose narratives about nation-love and evil enemies—it encourages our empathetic side with aplomb

VOX OFFICE

JAI ARJUN SINGH

Ikkis, it was understood by most well-informed Sriram Raghavan fans, was going to be different from Andhadhun, or Ek Hasina Thi, or Johnny Gaddaar. It was going to be more sober, perhaps, self-consciously respectful, being a dramatisation of the real-life story of Arun Khetarpal, martyred hero of the 1971 India-Pakistan war.

And yet, nervous about the possibility of this being an impersonal project anyone else might have helmed, I felt on safe ground the moment an Asrani tribute appeared just before the film–alongside one to Dharmendra. 'Hum aapke qaidi hain,' says the text, below an image of Asrani as Sholay's jailer. That was Raghavan's voice all right. The boyish cinephile.

The two veteran actors, who died a month apart, appear together on-screen when Dharmendra, as Khetarpal's old father, visits Pakistan to see where his son had died. With Asrani playing an Alzheimer's patient here, this moment works within the diegesis of a narrative about memory and forgetting (or letting go). But for a movie nerd, it also operates as a sentimental swansong to two major performers of an earlier age.

Watching Dharam and Asrani, I thought about the first time they shared screen space, in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's Satyakam – and of the moment in that heartfelt, hopelessly idealistic film where the Asrani character, clowning about, sings, 'Aadmi hai kya? Bolo, aadmi hai kya?' (What is a man? Go on, what is a man?) And Dharam, all solemn, replies that man is an elevated creature capable of love, friendship, and compassion.

Those higher human potentials are the warp and weft of Raghavan's film, too. I was worried that Ikkis would try so hard to be 'humanist', to set itself in opposition to more strident, bellicose narratives about nation-love and evil enemies, that it might feel contrived. Well, as a war film that is also an anti-war film, encouraging introspection about the better angels of our nature – especially in moments where *individuals* get a chance to bond – Ikkis *is* everything you'd expect.

IT'S NOT THE KIND OF FILM YOU THINK IT IS! OR IS IT?

It ticks boxes that would make liberals feel fuzzy inside, with (over-simplistic?) ideas about universal brotherhood and fair fighting on both sides in 1971. But what could have been cloying pacifism is treated here so matter-of-factly that it works. It focuses consistently on the small picture. The war scenes give us not large statements about what Pakistan and India are doing to each other, or about deeper histories of Hindu-Muslim conflict, but a ground-level view of soldiers, thrust into surreal situations, driving armoured vehicles across dusty terrain.

The war scenes give us a ground-level view of soldiers, thrust into surreal situations

Taking and passing of orders, staying in the moment, razor-sharp focus as one does one's job for the motherland – all this is part of the film's DNA. As it is in more aggressive war films, one difference being we see the same impulses play out on the other side too, with the 'dushman' also speaking the language of patriotism, duty, and 'god on our side'.

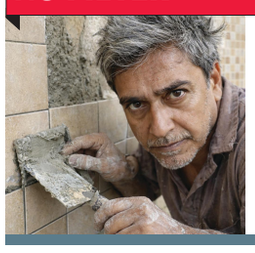
Ikkis felt honest – apart from one scene that came across as pat, where Deepak Dobriyal, as an embittered Pakistani soldier who loathes Indians, is quickly won over by a few gentle words. This felt like idealism taken to extremes. Surely, a film otherwise so empathetic and mournful about war could allow some space to *one* character who isn't willing or able to forgive?

But one big reason why I couldn't stay wary about Ikkis was that, speaking as a Dharmendra acolyte, his presence was central to the film's effect. Here is a real-life story about an actual former brigadier who travels across the border. But this man is played by one of our most beloved stars at the end of his career.

The real story merges somehow with Dharmendra's reputation as a 'son of the soil' who as a child had known undivided India, a Sikh who has written poetry himself in Urdu (one of the poems used movingly in the film). It was impossible not to be sentimental about his scenes. I couldn't dissociate them from that scene in Satyakam where Dharmendra's Satyapriya says: If we don't have idealism, what do we have left?

So, I'm happy to endorse Ikkis, with a shout of 'Jai Sriram... Raghavan!' But not before I channel Utpal Dutt's gleeful exclamation in Guddi: 'Jai Dharmendra!'

NO FILTER



RUCHIR JOSHI

Ever-Protesting, Never-Protestant Work Ethic

Timelines be damned, contractors and repairmen march to their own drum

Zulfi, the man who's been fixing tiles in my flat, has a problem with his left testicle. No, seriously. I was told it's a serious problem. He's not supposed to squat, lift any weights, or put any pressure on it. Which is why, the contractor tells me, Zulfi cannot work today. He will come two days later. If not, the contractor will bring Krishna, another good tilesman. Except Krishna is finishing bathrooms in another house, trying to get them done before the client's grihapravesh (home-inaugurating puja).

Come the day after that tomorrow, the contractor shares further details of Zulfi's progress. The fool is laid up in bed. 'Of course, you will ask, dada, why is he laid up in bed? I will tell you. Yesterday, his wife turned around and found him gone, his bike also gone. He went to the market to buy fish, even though the doctor told him not to touch that bike.'

I live in an old building. It was completed in 1978, when construction was construction. Despite my ambitions, I've only been able to do justice to one bathroom. But recently, I convinced myself I needed to repair the other two.

A friend sent me the contractor's number. We met. He seemed nice, and he knew what he was talking about. The estimate was, of course, a bit high. But we negotiated it down. How many days, I asked. The contractor thought deeply before answering, 'About 10 days, dada.' I provided my own subtitles to that – 15 days. 'Fine. Okay,' I said, uttering the two most foolish words to ever leave my mouth.

Almost a month later, I know exactly how difficult it is to break old-school tiles and how corners can be cut, and the work made more shoddy without saving time. Now I not only have a detailed biography of Zulfi, but also of Gobindo, the plumber.

TILES AND TIDE WAIT FOR ALL

'Gobindo, you see, is good at his work, dada. But on some days, he's not in a good mood. And on those days, you have to watch him.' After watching Gobindo through a 3-week-long fog of tile dust and chaos, I feel I now understand him. Over this time, Gobindo has missed about 7 of the 12 days he was required to come in. At first, the excuse was stomach pain, which, if you live in West Bengal, is a watertight alibi.

On the fourth non-Gobindo day, the contractor went into sharing mode again. 'You see, it's his liver, dada, Gobindo's liver. Aar kichhu na (nothing else), he just has a bad drinking habit. He drinks cheap liquor. He's had jaundice, but he still doesn't listen.'

There were days when Gobindo worked badly. On others, he did imperfect, but acceptable work. Zulfi's replacement fixed the tiles—not as well as Zulfi, but he managed to put them up. Every time I started going manic at delays or shoddy craftsmanship, I reminded myself that these men were living in conditions that I couldn't imagine. I also tried – and failed – to imagine what it must be like for Zulfi and Gobindo to come into the houses of people varying from the under-rich like me to medium-rich, and work on the clients' whims and fancies, directed by their crazy boss.

By the time the work neared completion, I was getting desperate. Each day the circus dragged on was infuriating. On the almost-final day, Gobindo again failed to show up. 'He has pain in stomach,' said the contractor. When Gobindo appeared the next day, I was familiar enough to ask, 'What happened yesterday? Stomach or drink?' Gobindo shook his head as he poured a bucket of dirty water into the brand-new commode. 'Arre, no sir, my nephew was visiting, so I took him around to show him the city.'

I looked for outrage, but found myself laughing.

Forget Greenland, Come Over to Kalitala

With Trump in an expansionist mood – and US gone to pot – why not invite him to 'run' your neighbourhood and fix its road?

RED HERRING

INDRAJIT HAZRA

As the United States, in its 250th year of existence this year, swiftly but surely turns into something in between a 'shithole' and an Epstein island, I am regularly checking up on friends in the US to see whether they're alright. Some 20 years ago, if there was a bomb blast in Delhi, or an earthquake that made the ceiling fan wobble, I would get (expensive) smses from abroad checking whether I was buried under a rubble or not. Over time, living under a 'fascist regime' also became a genuine concern for well-wishers living abroad.

Now, it's only fair I return the favour when the US in the news (ICE agent shooting a – White! – woman through her car windshield) isn't quite matching with the US in the minutiae of movies and TV shows (white picket fences, panoramic skylines). Mamata Banerjee chasing after raiding ED officials is downright hippie chic in comparison.

I'm also reaching out to people who may have contacts of energy exploration companies. As a dual citizen of Kolkata and New Delhi, I spend most of my time in the autonomous territory of Kalitala on the edge of Kolkata. The air here is cleaner than in Delhi (but dirtier than in Chicago). If I stay home, I'm surrounded by greenery and bird chirps of the sort that you'd associate with conservationists, not climate change conversationists.

But outside our gated citadel, it *is* a Trumpian shithole. The lane leading Kalitala out to Kolkata may be the most secular, socially harmonious stretch after Brooklyn. But it's a physical nightmare that makes a lunar landscape seem an autobahn. It's perennially dug-up, the 'final' repair work (sic) comprises exposed brick chips that turn to dust under a cycle wheel, and navigating this 4-min stretch is what a Third World Squid Game looks like.

But falling as it does in the 'autonomous' territory of South 24 Parganas – Kolkata de facto, but not de jure – it's as much a concern for civics authorities as a boil in the armpit is to a cardiac surgeon. Which is why, after Trump reiterated his interest in far-flung territories like Greenland this week, I'm trying to get in touch with energy exploration companies. If Kalitala has something under it – oil looks unfeasible – rare earths, silica, natural gas, plutonium, kryptonite, anything but gunk, I could get the real estate developer-president to be interested in 'running' our blighted but beautiful neighbourhood.

If Kalitala has something under it—oil looks unfeasible—rare earths, silica, kryptonite...

PROMOTER-JI IS HERE!

Do I wish Kalitala to be an American colony? Hell, no! What do you take me for? One of those brown sahibs in Bengal or Tolly Club reminiscing how the trains ran on time, Perry Como more popular than songs from Paglu 2, and G&T wasn't just F&B before the non-Venezuelan communists turned Victoria's memorial into a monument of urban decrepitude? Not at all. I'm proposing that since the man is in an expansionist mood, Trump facilitate a US company to 'run' Kalitala – much like Indonesia's Salim Group was supposed to run Nandigram before then-opposition leader Mamata Banerjee made that plan go all TATA Nano.

This is *not* me being (a much misunderstood) Mir Jafar inviting Robert Clive to jettison the mad, bad, and incompetent Siraj-ud-Daulah using East India Company, the Big Tech of that time. This is me, more like 2025 Nobel Peace Prize winner María Machado, seeking a foreign power to help out my 'countrymen' and me – to have a decent road to walk and drive on.

There was a time when 'Going to America' was a thing. Now, 'Having America down here' would be the better GCC-type option for all parties. For Kalitalans, no random ICE deportation. No MAGA ire against the smell of fish curry wafting out of our kitchens. No American jobs taken over by people with a Protestant work ethic and Sanatan sense of salaried wealth. No clash of cultures for outsourced 'infrastructural administrators' to deal with. This would be America© Swiggy-Zomatoed home without the growing heartburn.

Frankly, I would prefer the Japanese 'running' Kalitala. But it's Sergio Gor who'll be reading this column – and every other item published in Indian newspapers about his boss – on his first day at work as US ambassador to India tomorrow. Now to go out and check once again whether there are any diamonds dredged out of our lane's drain.

indrajit.hazra@timesofindia.com

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

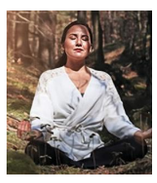
Star Bathing

(Humming) *Stars shining bright above you…Night breezes seem to whisper, I love you...*

Oh, someone's in a good mood. What gives?
Nothing. Just getting ready for some 'star bathing'.

I don't see any towels?
This is not bathing like in the literal sense. It's like forest bathing that has been all the rage since the last five years. You know, shinrin-yoku?

Nah! And here I was hoping it's some pap expose of famous people in showers. Hey wait, even the Lux ads are about stars bathing!
Let me stop you right there! Shinrin-yoku or forest bathing doesn't involve taking a bath in the forest. Neither does star bathing. It's an old Japanese wellness practice where you immerse yourself in the atmosphere of the forest using all five senses to improve wellbeing. It reduces stress and connects you with nature. Some even call it 'forest medicine'.



So star bathing is similar but with stars?
Bingo! Here you immerse in the quiet beauty of a clear, dark night sky. It's a little more intense than stargazing because it's more mindful. And you don't need any knowledge of constellations or astronomy. In fact, not knowing what you're looking like makes it an easier activity for mindfulness.

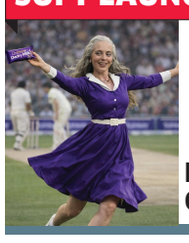
Sounds a bit floopy.
It's not. When was the last time you actually looked up at the night sky? In the city the light pollution and just general pollution obscures the sky. Stargazing requires effortless attention, also called soft fascination, where you can observe something without actively thinking. So you use stargazing as a form of meditation and wellbeing. At the end of the day, it's skychology.

Now you are just making words up...
No, skychology is a legit field of study which tries to find a link between looking at the sky and mental health. Apparently, it has many benefits from reducing stress to improving sleep.
Text: Team Sunday ET

From Marlboro Men To Hands-On Dads

Ads are now far more gender-neutral and less seen or created via the male gaze

SOFT LAUNCH



KANIKA GAHLAUT

Tanishq ran a full-page ad recently, celebrating the Indian women's cricket team, featuring a gold ring on each player's finger. The image quietly skews several stereotypes – from Beyoncé's commitment-demanding song 'Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It),' to the male-centricism of international cricket. Remember, if you're old enough to remember the'90s, the last time advertising, women, and cricket collided was when the Cadbury girl danced her way onto the pitch to the jingle-tune of 'Asli swaad zindagi ka' to hand a bar of chocolate to her bats*man*-beau.

The distance between the Tanishq and Cadbury advertisements is striking. It shows how far gender-neutral advertising has travelled in a few decades.

For years, advertising worldwide built male-only/for-men universes. 'Live Life Kingsize' and the Marlboro Man didn't merely sell products. They also normalised a world where men enjoyed, roamed and consumed freely.

When women did appear, they were slotted into a narrow template--the Nirma woman scrubbing clothes in a bucket so that the iconic girl in a pristine white frock can keep twirling, or Surf's Lalitaji buying the 'right' detergent from the market. Essentially, cleaning clothes, or scolding and haggling for every rupee. Men lived expansively. Women economised, laboured, and were expected to find fulfilment in self-sacrifice.

In the 2000s, exclusion persisted. The 'BlackBerry Boys' jingle, once catchy and aspirational at the dawn of the smartphone age, now reads like a tidy indictment of women's absence from corporate culture, even though the Vodafone-BlackBerry ad was an ironic take with the line, 'Not just for the office guys' – and having non-suited-booted folks, including women, join in and essentially shunt out the 'BlackBerry Boys'.

Visuals matter. Unlike films or novels, advertising doesn't tell long stories. It sells an aspirational self in a few seconds. In doing so, it also defines boundaries of belonging. Advertising places us inside a crowdsourced 'average' of desire and normalcy. We either measure up-- or we don't fit. In industry terms, this is often celebrated as 'capturing the zeitgeist'.

Empowerment, though, is also signalled through false flags, rather than lived shifts. In the early 2000s, a brief spurt of 'feminist' advertising portrayed women as punitive or predatory. In one campaign of innerwear company Rupa, a man played by Zulfi Sayed is ambushed with lipstick marks after straying into a women's restroom. In another, two women secretly spy on a man walking around his home in briefs in a VIP ad.

These campaigns don't linger in public memory because they misread women's realities. They were narratives imagined through the male gaze – how a roomful of men might assume women would behave in a 'feminist' world. Consent is misread, distorted, trivialised. Because that is how power has long functioned in a man's world.

Women economised, laboured, and expected to find fulfilment in self-sacrifice

NO MORE SERF

Contemporary urban advertising looks different. Men and women share baby baths and kitchen duties. Ariel's 'Share the Load' was among the early hits. Fathers make breakfast for daughters – without a watchful female spouse in the background to reward them.

Today, such depictions are presented as normal. Sometimes the balance is so perfect it feels more like a mathematical exercise than a household. But that, too, is advertising. When creative leadership and decision-making remain uneven, representation can race ahead of power.

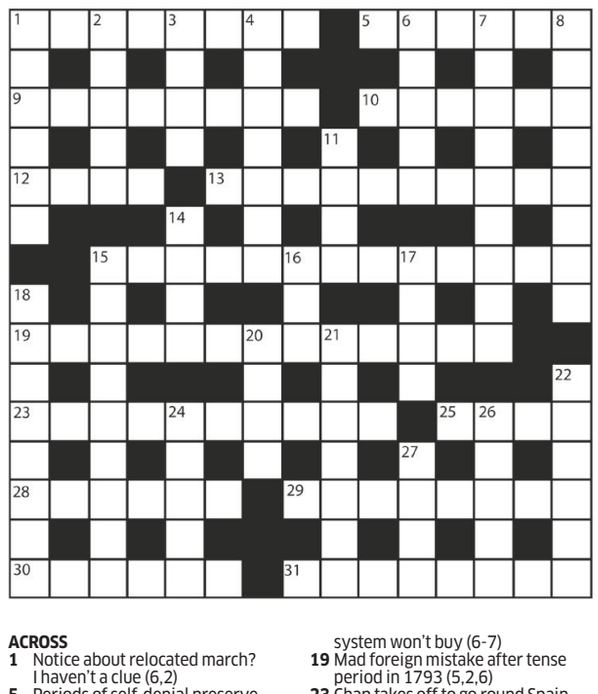
Taken together, these shifts form a cultural narrative of gender struggle. They show how social change and narrative move alongside each other, each nudging the other forward. Which one leads and which follows may still be debated. But for anyone denying women's historical subjugation – or resisting equality – advertising's evolving imagery offers a mirror that invites uncomfortable reassessment.

Does this mean the work is done? Hardly. Progress on the ground moves slowly, filtering unevenly through layers of society. And here's the spoiler: the glass ceiling of patriarchy is always invisible in the present moment. Gains are real, yet partial. Perhaps the next question for advertising isn't whether women are fully included in a man's world, but whether the world itself is allowed to become more feminised.

Every social justice movement sounds unreasonable before it becomes normal. Women's inclusion was once dismissed as impractical, excessive, even dangerous. That historical amnesia is precisely why progress is always celebrated – and challenged – at the same time.

NO OFFENCE — *Morparia*

ET Sunday Crossword 0150



ACROSS
1 Notice about relocated march? I haven't a clue (6,2)
5 Periods of self-denial preserve energy for banquets (6)
9 Cold current in a grave? Lots of those here (8)
10 Parent swallows a gin, not one big bottle (6)
12 Cockney's hirsute and nonchalant (4)
13 He's not welcome in Pinter role sadly (10)
15 Penny-pinching aspirant is after PC system won't buy (6-7)
19 Mad foreign mistake after tense period in 1793 (5,2,6)
23 Chap takes off to go round Spain, miserly man (10)
25 Bird's over in corner window (4)
28 Poirot for instance disrupts hustle (6)
29 Small points put right about government indicator (8)
30 Commits foul after money's stolen in TV show (6)
31 Sentimental, we'd returned to Yarmouth to see duke (4-4)

DOWN
1 In this way spies start to learn to get friendly (6)
2 Performer brought over some carrot cake (5)
3 Nut tree seen in one county after another (4)
4 Souvenir crew concealed in battered tome (7)
6 Message recalling some Members of Parliament (5)
7 Seaside bird sounds abrasive to some Londoners (9)
8 A few soldiers come up carrying brown hat (8)
11 Observe fellow turning up to get wages (4)
14 Senior churchman doesn't begin immediately (4)
15 E. Heath worked with (5,4)
16 Comedian with Henry left (3)
17 Oxford Amateur Rowing Society's leading members (4)
18 Flowers occur everywhere over southeast Sweden (8)
20 Forged iron, about a kilogram (4)
21 Couple curtailed entering E9 get in a twist (7)
22 Joined team (6)
24 Somewhere to organise barbecue in anticipation (5)
26 It's spacious, with running water, some say (5)
27 It's a sin in the navy oddly to doff hat (4)

SOLUTION TO NO 0150:
ACROSS: 1 Search me. 5 Feasts. 9 Catacomb. 10 Magnum. 12 Airy. 13 Interloper. 15 Window shopper. 19 Reign of terror. 23 Cheapskate. 25 Wren. 28 Sleuth. 29 Signpost. 30 Sitcom. 31 Dewyeyed.
DOWN: 1 Social. 2 Actor. 3 Coco. 4 Memento. 6 Email. 7 Sandpiper. 8 Sombrero. 11 Fees. 14 Anon. 15 White heat. 16 Wit. 17 Oars. 18 Crocuses. 20 Fake. 21 Entwine. 22 United. 24 Patio. 26 Roomy. 27 Envy.

A tribute to OP Nayyar, a composer who never compromised, on his birth centenary

ARTS PAGE 3

The Sunday Tribune

SPECTRUM

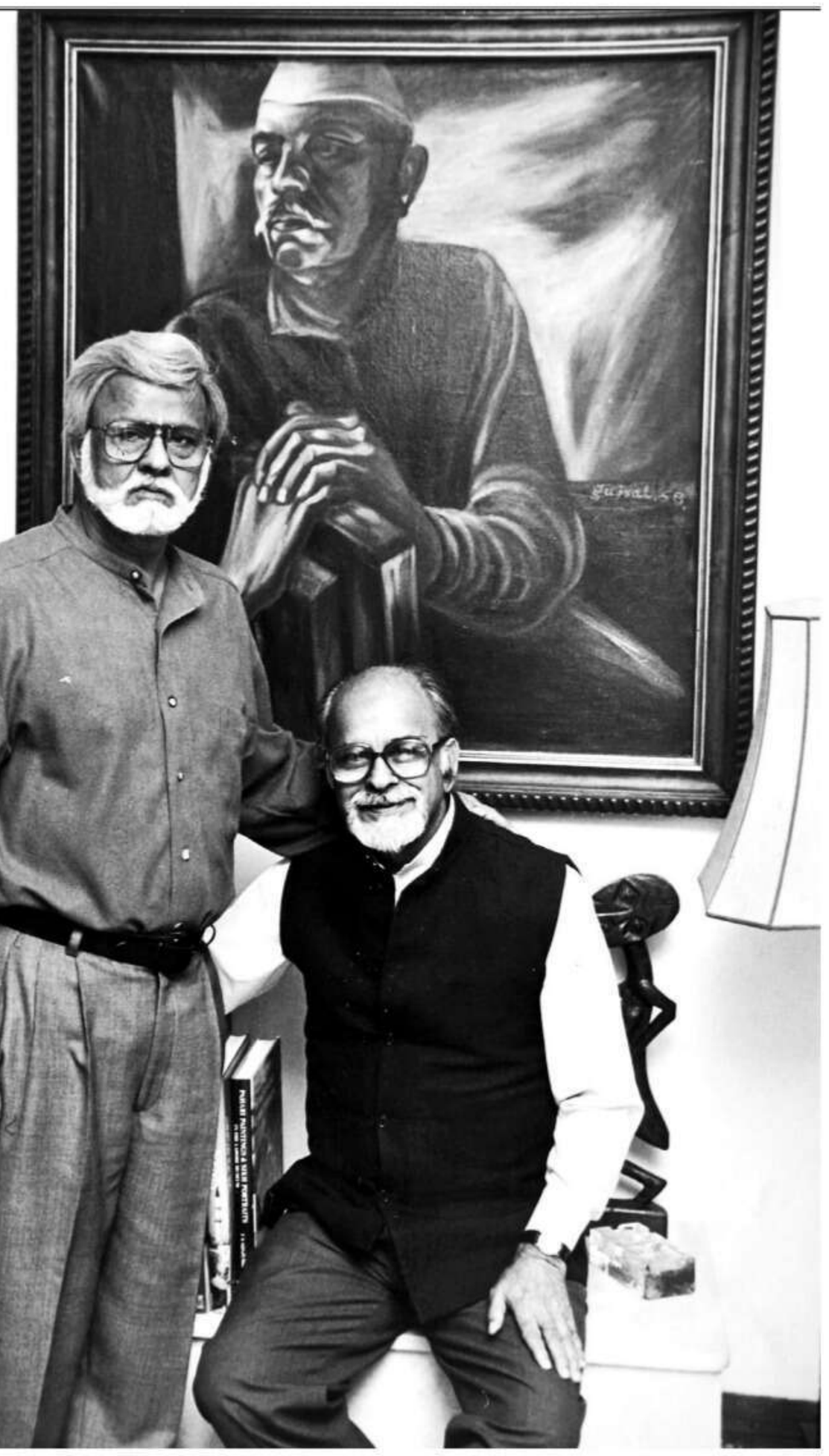
'Place' by Ananya Vajpeyi is contemporary history written in walking shoes

BOOKS PAGE 4

CHANDIGARH | 11 JANUARY 2026

Painter, sculptor, muralist, architect and interior designer — the late Satish Gujral was them all. **Mohit Gujral** pays tribute to his illustrious father on his birth centenary

LIVING WITH SILENCE



Satish Gujral with brother (former Prime Minister) Inder Kumar Gujral to his right.

GROWING up with Satish Gujral as a father was not an apprenticeship in fame. His name had entered public memory long before I entered the world, but at home that reputation rarely intruded. What shaped our lives was not the public figure but the man — deeply sensitive, instinctively extrovert, and uncompromising in the seriousness with which he lived and worked.

Having lost his hearing early in life, silence became part of the natural rhythm of our household. Yet it never felt like absence. Silence, in our home, was textured and expressive. We learned to observe closely, to read expressions, to sense intention and mood. My father listened with his eyes, and when he responded, it was with precision and intensity. Approval, displeasure, humour — all were conveyed without excess. A glance across the room could carry instruction; a raised eyebrow could serve as both reprimand and encouragement.

A self-portrait by Satish Gujral.
PHOTOS COURTESY: MOHIT GUJRAL

He was always outward-facing — deeply engaged with people and alert to the world around him. His sensitivity expressed itself in warmth rather than reserve. He possessed a sharp, affectionate sense of humour that put people immediately at ease. This is the quality most consistently recalled by those who knew him: his ability to make people feel seen, regardless of who they were.

One memory captures this vividly. Ved Mehta would often visit our home, and the two of them — one blind, the other deaf — would sit together in animated conversation, debating which was the greater loss: sight or sound. It was never morbid, but lively and ironic, an exploration of perception, wit, and resilience. For us as children, it was an early lesson in how disability, when met with intellect and humour, could become a shared language rather than a limitation.

Another episode revealed his determination. During the construction of the Belgian Embassy, he broke his leg at a critical stage of the project. Refusing to stay away from the site, he had a palanquin specially made so he could be carried across the grounds to inspect the work. For him, physical limitation was never an excuse for disengagement; commitment, once made, was absolute.

He also loved cars, despite never being able to drive. At one point he bought an Adler vintage sports convertible, drawn to its form rather than its function. I remember him treating it as a canvas, painting it himself and allowing me, still a child, to join him. It was my first experience of making something alongside him — playful, unselfconscious, and quietly formative.

As a younger man, he carried a measure of suppressed anger. It surfaced occasionally, born of frustration with a world that did not easily accommodate difference, and of the relentless standards he set for himself. With time, children, and stability, that edge softened. Life became less of a confrontation, though never less exacting.

At the centre of this transformation was my mother, Kiran. She was far more than his partner; she redefined his relationship with the world. Where he could be intense and demanding, she brought warmth, perspective, and connection. She was his closest companion and his most honest critic — the one person he listened to instinctively. In our childhood, she was also the emotional bridge between us and our father, translating not just words but moods and silences, making our relationship with him feel natural and secure.

Restlessness defined my father's creative life. He could never remain in one medium for long. Painting, sculpture, murals, architecture — each was simply another language through which he thought. He resisted being fixed to a single style or identity. For him, stagnation was a kind of failure. Over the decades, his work responded directly to what he lived through. The trauma of Partition left a permanent imprint, surfacing in compressed forms and scarred surfaces. The years of the Emergency and later communal violence sharpened his engagement with power and suffering; the work grew darker, more confrontational, and monumental. In later life, a near-death illness, followed by the disorienting experience of a cochlear implant, altered his relationship with sound, silence, and memory.

Our home reflected this continual evolution. It was never just a residence but a living studio. Canvases leaned against walls, sculptures occupied corners, drawings appeared unexpectedly. Projects overlapped, unfinished and ongoing. Art was not an event; it was the environment.

My earliest memories are of my father using the garage at our Tilak Marg house as his studio, and of playing with clay in the Okhla workshop where he created his ceramic murals. My mother worked alongside him on her own ceramics. At that age, art was less an idea than a tactile pleasure — of clay, surface, and form.

Much of our schooling was at boarding school, so our engagement with his artistic life was necessarily intermittent. We witnessed exhibitions being assembled and styles shifting, but largely from the periphery. It was only later that a more direct dialogue emerged. As adults, we began to engage critically with his work, offering appreciation and disagreement alike — both of which he received with patience. Those exchanges marked a shift in our relationship, from observation to engagement, and eventually to mutual respect.

Despite the intensity of his working life, my parents were deeply social. Their home became a centre of gravity in Delhi's cultural life, bringing together politicians, diplomats, artists, writers, journalists, and businessmen — often in combinations that would rarely have met elsewhere. These evenings were not about status but about conversation. A young artist was offered the same attention as a visiting dignitary.

Our sense of family extended well beyond the immediate household. Much of our childhood was spent at our grandparents' home in Jalandhar, surrounded by cousins — an intimacy that continues to bind us. During school terms, when my parents travelled abroad for exhibitions, we stayed with my uncle Inder Gujral. Moving between households felt seamless. These bonds, shaped by a generation that had lived through Partition, were marked by loyalty and constancy.

A mural by Satish Gujral at the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh.

Top: Nandi, Bronze, Satish Gujral.
Below: Satish Gujral with wife Kiran Gujral.

Born on December 25, 1925, Satish Gujral passed away in 2020.

My sisters' lives took different paths. Raseel rebuilt her life with quiet resolve. Alpana chose to remain close, taking on the responsibility of caring for our parents with characteristic steadiness.

My own relationship with my father found its strongest expression through architecture. Initially dismayed that his son could not draw particularly well, his response was practical: I was enrolled in drawing classes so I could qualify for architecture school. What began as correction became foundation. Architecture gave us a shared language, and over time that language evolved into collaboration.

For nearly two decades, we worked together. There was resistance within the architectural fraternity to an artist entering the discipline, but I stood beside him with formal training, and gradually the work was allowed to speak for itself. He approached architecture as a sculptor, thinking instinctively in terms of mass, light, and movement. He took deep satisfaction in this phase of his life, reinforced when he was honoured as a Fellow of the Indian Institute of Architects, and later when he received the Order of the Crown from the Belgian government. Recognition was something he approached on his own terms. Earlier in life, he declined a Padma honour, believing that acknowledgment must arrive at the right moment. Years later, he accepted the Padma Vibhushan with quiet pride — not as personal vindication, but as recognition of his life's work as an artist.

Later came the possibility of a cochlear implant. It was approached with anticipation, despite warnings that learning to hear as an adult would be difficult. For a time, there was excitement. But the silent world he had inhabited for decades was suddenly disrupted. Eventually, he chose to have the implant removed. It was neither rejection nor defeat. Silence was something he understood.

As we mark a hundred years since his birth, I do not see a legend. I see a man of immense sensitivity, humour, discipline, and conviction — someone who lived his values rather than articulated them. His work endures, but so does the life he built around it, and the sensibility he passed on without ever needing to name it.

— Mohit Gujral is a noted architect

From private portraits to public trauma, photography stitches our stories into collective memory

Visual impact

NEELAM MANSINGH CHOWDHRY

(Clockwise from above) From *'Time and Transience'* by Prof Bhupinder Brar; Pushpamala N, *'Abduction/The Pond'* (2012), from the project *'Avega — The Passion'*; Diwan Manna, *'Shores of the Unknown'*.

"To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."

— Susan Sontag, 'On Photography'

I HAVE a studio picture of my grandmother wearing a georgette *sari*, perched on the wooden wings of a chair. My grandfather is seated on a chair, his white beard cascading on his well-stitched *achkan*. A portrait of marital bliss, structured and constructed around the ornate chair. Bathed in sepia tones, this image ignited an interest in photography. Many of us may have memories of going to a village fair and getting photographed according to a fantasy backdrop — the Taj Mahal or the favourite hero of the times.

Digital-era smartphones and social media have turned everyone into a photographer. Instagram zombies with filtered selfies turn pictures of eating or dancing at a wedding or in a restaurant into personal billboards.

Photography, to me, has always been both reportage and art — only the balance has shifted dramatically over time. In the beginning (1830s-1940s), photography was a documentary tool. It was the first medium that could freeze reality with mechanical precision and was pressed into service as evidence, news, record-keeping: war photography, crime scenes, studio portraits of the wealthy. The idea of it being "art" was controversial.

Early sceptics dismissed it as a soulless craft, while rebels like the Pictorialists, a term attributed to a way of working where the photographer manipulated a photograph rather than simply recording it, protested against this simplified labelling. As each photograph involved intervention, the status of photography went through a shift, and it began to be recognised as a legitimate form of fine art.

Post-World War II, Henri Cartier-Bresson emphasised on capturing the "decisive moment". Known as the father of modern photojournalism, he was one of the most influential street photographers of 20th century. He was globally recognised for his coverage of Mahatma Gandhi's funeral in 1948. His pictures became pictorial essays that elevated reportage to something poetic and subjective. The 'decisive moment' wasn't just capturing reality — it was composing it.

Photography didn't kill 'realism' in painting, it unchained it. Impressionists like Monet and Renoir ditched photo-perfect realism with the dictum to paint what one perceives rather than what one sees. No more portrait drudgery in stuffy studios. Canvases and easels were taken outdoors and painters captured the changing light and fleeting shadows — Van Gogh's swirling clouds, Cezanne's geometric mountains, Gauguin's primal dreams.

The axiom that a picture is worth a thousand words rings true. Several iconic photographs from India's history capture profound human pain and have become symbols of larger socio-political tragedies, highlighting issues like industrial negligence, communal violence, colonial oppression, and forced displacement. Some photographs sear themselves into our minds and heart, embodying an entire tragedy in a single frame.

Images of Partition haunt. Refugees cramped in every available space in trains along with a caravan of humanity; children and the elderly carried by their families; their scant belongings — these photographs leave an imprint far beyond the frame.

The image of a mud-caked child, the face barely visible, captured the horrors of the Bhopal gas tragedy. It became an abiding image stamped on the consciousness of the nation. Similarly, the desperate pleading of a Muslim man amid the Gujarat riots distilled the violence of this dark chapter into one unforgettable moment. These images don't just document personal suffering but have shaped public memory and discourse around accountability, justice and reconciliation in India's socio-political history.

My desire to write about photography stems from a recent book launch: of Prof Bhupinder Brar's *'Time and Transience'*. It captures through a photographic narrative a 'stillness' and 'waiting' that comes from personal loss and grief. The book captures fleeting moments of human vulnerability and the raw realisation of forgotten moments. The book doesn't merely record reality, but makes us pause, observe and connect with the extraordinary hidden silently within the everyday.

Artist Pushpamala N has also intrigued me. Known for her performative photography and video works, she frequently engages with Hindu mythology while drawing stylistic inspiration from theatrical traditions, including Parsi theatre.

She creates photographic works where she embodies both photographer and performance artiste, blurring the lines between subject and object. In her series *'Phantom Lady'* (1996-1998), shot in Bombay, she plays a masked Zorro-like figure attempting to rescue her twin sister from the mafia. This cheekily referenced Fearless Nadia (Mary Ann Evans), the pre-Independence stunt woman, iconic for the film *'Hunterwali'*. In this 1935 film, a masked Nadia portrayed a vigilante princess seeking justice.

Pushpamala treats each frame as a meticulously crafted *mise en scene*, turning the static medium of photography into a dynamic intersection of theatre, performance and storytelling. Her photographs are elaborate productions: she researches, scripts, designs costumes with painted backdrops, often casting herself as the central performer. Her photographs resemble a frozen stage play.

She re-enacts or subverts mythological narratives, performing archetypal roles from epics like *'Ramayana'* and *'Mahabharata'*. *'Avega — The Passion'*, a 2012 series, is a tableaux-based photo-performance exploring three female characters from the *'Ramayana'* — Sita, Surpanakha and Kaikeyi.

Her practice overall treats photography as a theatrical stage, subverting mythological and historical tropes with wit and chutzpah. Often referred to as 'the most entertaining iconoclast of contemporary Indian art', she attempts to subvert the dominant discourse through her photo and video performances.

The celebrated photographer of Chandigarh, Diwan Manna, wears many hats. Beyond his lens, he has shaped the cultural landscape of Chandigarh as the artistic curator and administrator of the Lalit Kala Akademi. His work reflects his vision that gets epitomised in the truism — "You don't take a photograph, you make it." Photography, for him, rejects the passive aim-and-shoot mentality. It demands a deliberate arrangement of reality, where light, composition and intent sculpt the fleeting into the eternal.

Manna's images hover between surrealism and spirituality, laced with an estranging whimsy that defies easy categorisation. A wild field of grass with a length of white cloth fluttering in the breeze, languid women bathed in diaphanous light; silhouette swaying across cracked walls and shadows lurking furtively blur the line between what is visible and what is imagined.

His signature negative-positive manipulations — flipping tones to merge dark and light — suggest an inner gaze turned outward in silent contemplation. These works feel haunting, sometimes ghostly, as if peering into parallel realms.

For Manna, the camera is no mere box but a mirror reflecting the multidimensional world he inhabits. It forces you to see beyond the surface, where everyday objects — discarded *saris*, rusted bicycles, silent benches — become portals to existential musings. His process is meditative: long exposures capture breath-like movements, while double exposures layer realities.

Photography is definitely an art form that enriches the artistic pantheon, and like the sepia portrait of my grandparents endures not as a relic, but as a genteel memory of an era gone by. From Bhopal's anguish to Brar's grief, Pushpamala's myths to Manna's quirkiness — photography stitches our stories into collective memory.

— The writer is a theatre director

The music composer who never compromised

Despite being untrained, OP Nayyar had an innate sense of music. A tribute to the maverick music director on his birth centenary

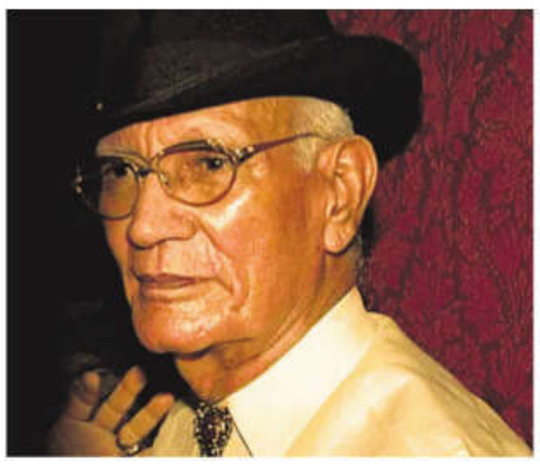
SUMIT PAUL

OLD-TIMERS are aware of how the great Sahir Ludhianvi and SD Burman permanently separated after the grand success of *'Pyaasa'* (1957). Guru Dutt's classic was a hugely successful film in all departments and its music was superlative. But when the irrepressible and a tad irreverent Sahir said that it was the lyricist who was more important than the composer, Sachin*da* didn't like it and they fell out, never to come together.

The legendary composer Omkar Prasad Nayyar, whose 100th birth anniversary falls on January 16, was also of the same view but despite being a trifle haughty, he gave equal importance to everyone for the success of a song. He believed that a lyricist's profound words, a composer's immortal and hummable tune and a singer's perfect rendition create an unforgettable number.

Despite never using Lata Mangeshkar's magnetic voice and being musically untrained, OP had an innate sense of music. He'd often say, "*Dhunein soojhti hain, dhunein banayi nahin jaati* (Tunes strike, they're not made or created)." That's the reason OP composed the immortal song *'Preetam Aan Milo'* for CH Atma at the age of 19 in 1945, which turned out to be the foundation stone of his career as a music director.

Since he was born in Lahore, OP's music was deeply infused with the spirit of Punjab. A connection forged in his early life in Lahore and Amritsar, it made him a celebrated composer who brought the region's verve, vibrancy and vivacity to Hindi films. He came to Bombay in 1951-1952 drawn by an offer from producer Dalsukh Pancholi to compose music for *'Aasman'* (1952). It was his friendship with Mohammed Rafi, who also hailed from Amritsar's Kotla Sultan Singh, that lent a touch of Punjab to OP's music, suffusing and subsuming it with *joie de vivre* and sprightliness. So, there's no ennui or enervation in OP's music.



What set OP Nayyar apart was his belief in his capabilities.

It's really admirable when you consider that when OP was composing in the golden era of Hindi films, there were redoubtable composers like Naushad Ali, SD Burman, Roshan Lal Nagrath, Chitragupt, Ravi, Madan Mohan, Shankar-Jaikishan, Jaidev, Khayyam, to name but a few. OP carved a niche for himself and composed nearly 600 songs for 70-odd films, no mean feat.

When a reporter asked how he could succeed in proving his mettle in a world where competition was tough and survival was uncertain, OP, who loved Urdu poetry, quoted Sartaaj Barelvi: *"Woh agar khaas hain apni jagah/Kuchh kam makhsoos nahin main bhi* (If they're special in their sphere/I too have substance in me)." This audacious belief in his own capabilities differentiated him from others. "My music gets me work. I don't go to the producers and beg," OP would say.

Listeners loved his foot-tapping and fast-paced music that had an inexpressible appeal. What he disliked was monotony and repetitive style. Listen to the songs from his signature film, *'Kashmir Ki Kali'* (1964). Even a casual listener can discern how differently he composed *'Ye Chaand-Sa Roshan Chehra, Zulfon Ka Rang Sunhara'*, *'Isharon-Isharon Mein Dil Lene Wale'* and that beautifully sombre *'Hai Duniya Usi Ki Zamana Usi Ka'*.

A disconcertingly outspoken man, critics are of the view that had he been less candid, he'd have been able to compose many more songs. OP worked on his terms. He also didn't like others to suggest, let alone dictate, terms to him. OP believed in spontaneity. He loved his compositions and didn't like anyone else tampering with them. He believed that the first tune was the best, the most original.

When Shevan Rizvi wrote *'Dil Ki Aawaaz Bhi Sun Mere Fasane Pe Na Jaa'* for Joy Mukherjee's *'Humsaya'* (1968), OP created the composition in no time and the number became immortal. Rafi sang it so beautifully. OP recorded over 200 songs with Rafi, and among the women, Asha Bhosle was his lucky mascot whom he mentored and recorded more than 300 songs with.

Sadly, OP fell out with both and rued it, admitting that his treatment of a thorough gentleman like Rafi was certainly ungentlemanly on his part. Rafi had come late for the recording and OP had rebuked him. His career finished after his break-up with Asha in 1972.

He composed some of the finest songs for Rafi such as *'Banda Parvar Thaam Lo Jigar'*, *'Laakhon Hain Nigaah Mein'*, *'Pukarta Chala Hoon Main'*, and, the icing on the cake, *'Aapke Haseen Rukh Pe Aaj Naya Noor Hai'*. Picturised on Dharmendra, *'Aap Ke Haseen Rukh Pe'* from *'Baharein Phir Bhi Aayengi'* (1966), with lyrics by Anjaan, was considered by Dharmendra as one of the three best songs picturised on him.

OP didn't just mentor Asha, he brought her on a par with her elder sister, Lata. How can one forget *'Chain Se Hum Ko Kabhi Aap Ne Jeene Na Diya'* that he created for Asha? An epiphanous number, a fine creation, it also marked the end of OP and Asha's long association. OP received the Filmfare Award for this song on Asha's behalf but threw away the trophy while returning. With it, his career also began to fall apart. Could he have managed to salvage his career if he had tried to approach Lata Mangeshkar to render his songs?

OP was a man of principles. Even if that thought may have struck him, he didn't approach Lata. He was also appreciative of other composers' work. He appreciated the simple and catchy tunes of Shankar-Jaikishan.

The legend's last days were not very happy or comfortable. Yet he held his head high. OP was a man made of different stuff, a quixotic genius whose magnificent compositions will continue to warm the hearts of his countless fans and admirers.

— The writer is a freelance contributor

AAO HUZOOR TUMKO

YE CHAAND-SA ROSHAN

YUN TOH HUMNE

ZARA HAULE HAULE

AAPKE HASEEN RUKH PE

LAAKHON HAIN NIGAAH MEIN

Unofficial maps that define cities

SONALI GUPTA

IT'S the sort of book you open "just to sample" and then, several hunger pangs later, realise you've not only missed lunch but also sworn off your navigation app because clearly, you've been walking through life all wrong. Ananya Vajpeyi's 'Place: Intimate Encounters with Cities' is part travel writing, part intellectual history, part emotional archaeology, a manual for those of us who trust pavements more than politicians.

On paper, 'Place' is a set of essays on a few cities written over 25 years. Yet it reads less like a checklist and more like a layered field diary in which each city becomes an archive of memory and power, accessed through streets and riverfronts rather than state repositories.

Vajpeyi brings a historian's precision to this looser form. But here, the archive has escaped its shelves: metro stations, immigration counters, protest marches and old neighbourhoods become sources. The result feels like contemporary history written in walking shoes.

As an anthropological archaeologist, I found 'Place' intensely familiar. I was trained on the phenomenology of landscape. Christopher Tilley showed how people experience terrain: the landscape, in that tradition, is never neutral; it is humanised by stories and power. Vajpeyi takes that intuition, gives it caffeine, and pushes it into the city. Where Tilley trudges over moorland and cairns, she navigates Delhi's ceremonial avenues, New York's post-9/11 streets, Varanasi's *ghats* and Venice's canals, asking who can linger, who is watched, who is turned away.

PLACE: INTIMATE ENCOUNTERS WITH CITIES
by Ananya Vajpeyi.
Women Unlimited Ink.
Pages 239. ₹625

Tilley works with alignments of ridges; Vajpeyi with CCTV cameras, police barricades and riverside "beautification", but the mischief is familiar.

From an archaeological trench, one can only grin at the deja vu. This way of reading place is not new to my profession, yet here it walks free of technical jargon and seminar rooms. Vajpeyi has written phenomenology with traffic, and with better prose.

What lifts 'Place' beyond a worldly memoir is the author's audacity in letting her own life show. She writes of being a young scholar in New York before and after 9/11, of love and illness, of the difficulty of staying honest in dishonest times.

These are not decorative anecdotes but integral to her method. The private and the public collide: break-ups tint skylines, political shocks rearrange friendships, new passports alter how a street is walked. Any ethnographer who has ever slipped a personal confession into field notes will recognise the courage of making that vulnerability visible.

In New York, the shift from pre- to post-9/11 unfolds through the body, the tightening of queues, the changed way one scans a skyline, the sensation of being tagged by an anxious state. In Varanasi, getting down to the river and climbing back up into the city becomes a moral rehearsal, devotion and hierarchy embedded in burning calves.

For a reader in Chandigarh, a city proud of its sectors and symmetry, there's provocation here. 'Place' insists that no matter how immaculate the masterplan, cities are always rewritten by fear, friendship, protest and small acts of refusal, the unofficial map that never appears in government brochures.

In a world where Instagram makes bucket lists, this book quietly burns the bucket. It asks you to slow down, reread, and sometimes close the book because a paragraph has reminded you of a place you've avoided, and you don't yet know why.

If you are someone who senses that your city is more than a backdrop for selfies, 'Place' will feel both accomplice and challenge. It extends, accessibly, a way of seeing landscape and proves that streets and skylines deserve attention.

By the end, two things happen. You walk your own city differently, more slowly, more suspiciously, aware of your footsteps, wishing there was more writing that treated 'Place' with such affection, mischief and intellectual honesty.

For someone like me, who has always revisited cities only to find they hand back a mirror, of what was and what is, of how to navigate life, reclaiming the "I", and how both the city and my perception of it have quietly shifted — this book feels less like a new obsession than a long overdue companion.

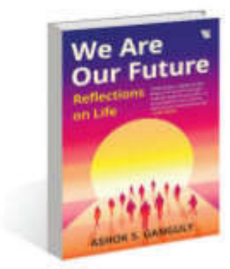
The good news is that there are still editors who let such obsessions spill into print. The better news is that 'Place' is already on shelves. If this review has worked, you're halfway to ordering it, and perhaps mildly annoyed that the conversation about cities and the lives we build in them must pause here instead of continuing in the next column.

— The reviewer is founder-director of the Himalayan Institute of Cultural & Heritage Studies

BACKFLAP

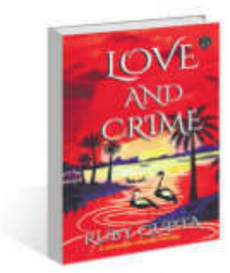
HARVESTING GODS
by Satya Mohanty.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 112. ₹399

These poems move between the intimate and the cataclysmic — between the ache of desire and the violence of memory, the tremor of a sinking hillside and the hush of a single unanswered question. Across sections, this book moves from political meditation to ecological lament and then, towards a thin, persistent thread of hope. 'Harvesting Gods' gathers the fragments of a world undone by power, grief, and forgetting, and offers them back to us as invitation — towards clarity, conscience, and a more generous imagination.



WE ARE OUR FUTURE
by Ashok S Ganguly.
Westland.
Pages 184. ₹599

The story of Ashok S Ganguly's life is inextricably tied to the fate of what was then a fledgling nation. After his graduate studies in the United States, he chose to live and work in India instead of returning to pursue a career as a scientist. In this memoir, he relives the highs and lows of his career with Hindustan Lever, the multinational that introduced branded goods to India. But beyond a memoir, this book is a reflection on the importance of taking ownership of your own future.



LOVE AND CRIME
by Ruby Gupta.
Sabre & Quill.
Pages 219. ₹399

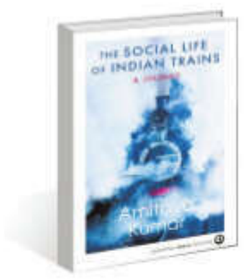
Detective N Ramalingam is called in to investigate a seemingly straightforward case of a missing painting, but what unfolds is a convoluted plot involving love, lust, and murder. At the centre of the story is a happy couple. Then the husband wants to add some 'spice' to their married life, but something goes horribly wrong... Dive into this tale and more in this collection of psychological thrillers.

Trains and India's journey

CHANDER SUTA DOGRA

AMITAVA KUMAR'S slim new book, part of Aleph's Essential India series, is not a travelogue that talks about the magic of train travel, as one might expect. He approaches the social life of Indian trains by telling us almost everything we knew or had half-forgotten about trains — the memories, the histories, the films on trains — and serves it up with personal perspectives that beg thought. Kumar undertakes two train journeys to understand how trains have seeped into the national psyche and shaped the nation's social and political journey.

A 72-hour journey aboard the Himsagar Express takes him from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, followed by a ride on the Darjeeling toy train that revives a childhood memory. On these journeys, he struggles to ask his fellow passengers grandiose questions like, "How has India changed in the past twenty years?" and "What are your hopes and aspirations?" He works out the answers himself from their preoccupation with mobile phones, transferring money on Paytm, even as some are headed to destinations where they will be employed as labour in factories and farms. It is a journalist's attempt to understand today's India through its railways.



THE SOCIAL LIFE OF INDIAN TRAINS
by Amitava Kumar.
Aleph.
Pages 152. ₹399

Have *achhe din* arrived for the mass of humanity cramped inside general coaches? And what of the sanitary practices in trains? Mahatma Gandhi had, in a speech at BHU in 1916, said that there was "indescribable filth in railway compartments". On day two of his journey, the author finds that the cleaning staff simply swept the trash into the countryside as the train passed through.

Both journeys bracket a chronicle that relies on history, sociology, and pop culture, with the train as the central motif reminding us how railways have influenced the way India operates. Much before April 16, 1853, when the first passenger train ran from Bori Bunder (Mumbai) to Thane, railway lines had been laid by the Madras Railway to haul materials required for the construction of irrigation canals. In later years, "railways spread a web of steel across the subcontinent, and after the First War of Independence in 1857, the British rulers recognised the absolute importance of railways for the mobilisation of troops".

Kumar's research in the British Library's India Office records revealed how meticulously the British maintained voluminous documentation about the establishment and running of railways, but nothing that reflected the damage it inflicted on India's agricultural economy. Subsistence farming gave way to commercial crop production for the international market, leading to grain shortages and famines.

In 'Stations of History', the book touches upon Partition violence and how train stations — symbols of organisational order — became a refuge for countless people fleeing bloodshed. But trains have also forged stories and myths of their own and altered history, as in the aftermath of the Godhra carnage.

Famous literary works have been set around trains, such as Gulzar's *'Raavi Paar'*, Khushwant Singh's *'Train to Pakistan'*, and Bhisham Sahni's *'Amritsar Aa Gaya Hai'*. The train remains an unforgettable motif in films like *'Pather Panchali'*, *'The Burning Train'*, and *'Dil Se'*.

The author is no stranger to train travel, having journeyed in third-class compartments from Patna to Delhi several times in his youth. One can never really forget the shared camaraderie with nameless strangers, or the ebb and flow of life on railway platforms and within crowded coaches. He writes of expressions of "public privacy", bureaucratic cussedness, and, on rare occasions, empathy.

Vignettes from his travels dot the book. Loud passengers, screeching babies, and people watching noisy dramas on their phones all become lessons in patient forbearance. No one seems to mind. Despite the discomfort of his journey, neither does Kumar. "The world is dirty, and life is difficult. Why should the railway sanitise your existence? No, let it fling reality back at you, so that you can feel alive again."

— The reviewer is a senior journalist

Memoir as a stand-up act

POULOMI DAS

COMEDIAN Vir Das has always existed slightly out of frame, and his book 'The Outsider: A Memoir for Misfits' builds its case for that status from the very first page. If Das is a misfit, it is not because he was excluded, but because he never quite belonged to any one place for long enough to be fully absorbed by it.

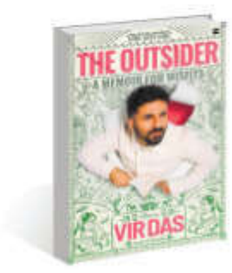
The book opens with dislocation: Das marooned on a Mexican island without a visa after an underwhelming comedy gig on a cruise ship. It is a comic metaphor for a life defined by movement, uncertainty, and being in the wrong place at the wrong time until, somehow, it becomes the right one.

The book traces the comedian's life as a series of migrations: geographic, professional, and emotional. He charts a childhood and early adulthood split across continents: India, Nigeria, the United States, and eventually a return to India.

His years in Africa are written with a particular nuance. Das captures the uneasy racial hierarchies of the time with a sharp, unsettling clarity, noting how Indian families occupied a strange middle space in postcolonial societies still finding their footing. These sections are among the memoir's most reflective, showing Das' ability to step back from the joke and register history, power, and privilege with care.

'The Outsider: A Memoir for Misfits' is at its strongest when Das interrogates ambition itself. Fame arrives in fragments, not as a single breakthrough moment, and is frequently accompanied by self-doubt rather than validation. He writes candidly about the loneliness of touring, the anxiety of being publicly misunderstood, and the emotional cost of constantly performing for different audiences. The backlash around his political comedy is another chapter in a long history of being misread.

At roughly 250 pages, the memoir moves quickly, propelled by a voice that feels closer to a stand-up set than a literary confession. He treats defeat as raw material. Bad gigs, cancelled shows, lovers who never quite arrive, and jokes that provoke government ire are all repurposed into fuel. Chapters unfold like extended bits, complete with digressions, callbacks, punchlines.



THE OUTSIDER: A MEMOIR FOR MISFITS
by Vir Das.
HarperCollins.
Pages 288. ₹699

Das' instinct as a performer shapes the prose: stories are paced for effect, humiliation is mined for humour, and even trauma is filtered through timing rather than melodrama. The result is a book that reads breezily but accumulates emotional weight. Unlike his stage persona, Das on the page allows silences, uncertainty, and unresolved questions to remain intact.

What ultimately makes 'The Outsider' resonate is its generosity. Das positions his story not as exceptional but as illustrative. He appears less interested in what happened than in how it sounded, felt, and landed. Small incidents are inflated through flamboyant retelling because, for him, storytelling is not ornamental; it is survival. Comedy becomes a way to organise chaos, to reclaim agency over experiences that might otherwise overwhelm.

In charting his own uneven path, Vir Das also documents the coming of age of Indian stand-up itself. The memoir, thus, stands as both personal history and cultural record, capturing what it meant to build something without a template. For misfits, the memoir offers recognition rather than instruction, and that may be its quietest, most enduring achievement.

— The reviewer is a film writer

A slow, savouring read of life in the kitchen and outside

SADAF HUSSAIN

A DEEPLY personal memoir by Michelin-starred chef Suvir Saran, 'Tell My Mother I Like Boys' combines food with the journey of self-discovery; as he puts it: "a memoir of appetite, for food, for love, for belonging." It tells the story of his life across continents and cultures.

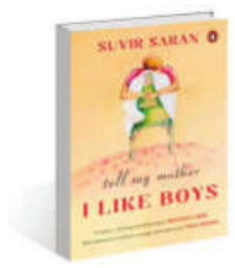
Saran is best-known for opening Devi, the first Indian restaurant in the US to earn a Michelin star. He uses the kitchen as both a safe place and a test for his identity. This book is really about all kinds of hunger, including the literal hunger for home-cooked food and the metaphorical hunger for love, acceptance, and a sense of self. The tone is honest and sincere, often thankful for the good things in life but never afraid to talk about the bad things. It mixes critical insight with the warmth of personal affection.

Saran starts the book with a *doha* by Sant Kabir: *Maati kahe kumhaar se, tu kya raunde mohe/Ek din aisa aayega, main raundungi tohe* ("The earth says to the potter: why do you trample me now? One day I will trample you"). It prepares the reader for a journey based on humility, mortality, and the quiet power of change.

This is both a food memoir and a coming-of-age story. Saran says that cooking is "never just about taste but about memory, survival, and the making of the self". Food has a lot of meaning: "Each dish carries a memory and meaning, stitching together pieces of exile, grief, desire, and return."

Saran talks about how exciting it was to have big successes, like the opening of Devi in New York, but also about how lonely he felt behind his biggest successes. There is joy in the sensory memories of Indian meals and the friendship in the kitchen, but there is also a sense of loss as he talks about the loves and friendships that have faded over time. The memoir is ultimately about strength and hope, even though it talks about sadness and setbacks.

The book is both brutally honest and uplifting, and it invites readers to go on a journey from being vulnerable to being real.



TELL MY MOTHER I LIKE BOYS
by Suvir Saran.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 240. ₹699

The structure resists chronology. Saran tells his story the way a *raga* unfolds — through repetition, echo, and emotional layering. The memoir travels from his childhood in Delhi to New York's culinary world and eventually to an introspective return to India. Rather than a straight timeline, each section loops, lingers, returns.

Food is the book's grammar. Saran doesn't drop recipes, but memories are organised around meals. Cooking becomes a form of language — grief is sauteed, love is marinated, survival slow-cooked. The act of cooking and sharing meals provides the framework for storytelling.

Comprehending Suvir Saran's background makes this memoir more interesting. He was born in New Delhi in 1972 and moved to the United States in the early 1990s, going on to become a famous chef. Saran also wrote several well-known cookbooks, competed on Top Chef Masters, so food lovers know him well.

What makes Saran stand out and is important to the memoir's context is that he was a pioneer for LGBTQ+ people in the kitchen. In the traditionally conservative environment, he traversed from Indian familial expectations to the machismo prevalent in professional kitchens, a courageous position. His queerness is not seen as a revelation or a break in his life; it just is, steady and unapologetic.

His mother is always there in the memoir, like a scent in the kitchen. She is always close by, but not always in the centre. In food, in habits, and in what she doesn't say, she shows her love. She gave him food, feelings, and resilience.

The book's later parts deal with issues of home and identity. When Saran writes about "the depths of illness, exile, and homecoming" and how he learnt to "break, heal, and begin again", it's clear that his own life experiences (including health problems and moving back to India) are what led him to those insights.

The richness of Saran's prose invites a slow, savouring read. At times, the narrative luxuriates in description and introspection where a more linear drive could hasten the pace. Some readers, expecting a straightforward chronological tale of restaurant kitchens, might instead find a mosaic of memories that jumps in time and tone. Yet this deliberate pacing and reflective structure feel true to the memoir's intent.

Saran delivers exactly what the best memoirs promise: a voice speaking its truth, flaws and all, and inviting us to find pieces of our own story in his.

—The reviewer is a chef and author

Wrong one against B'desh

PRADEEP MAGAZINE

IN the South Asian region we live in, with a shared history of strife, religious divisions marred by violence, wars and terrorism, playing each other on the sports field was once seen as a balm that could heal the festering wounds of the past. Or was this a naive mind's dream which never understood the deep-rooted prejudices and its violent responses — both emotional and physical — to a world that is now being run on hate and vengeful retaliation? Is sport in danger of becoming a weapon of "mass destruction", a tool that is being used too frequently to score political points?

As we mull over the ramifications of the new battlefield that has been created between India and Bangladesh and the stunning swiftness with which it has erupted, the cricketing world is groping for sane answers. India has had no acrimonious history with a nation it helped get its freedom from the tyranny of Pakistan in 1971.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the hero of that independence movement whose historic role in the creation of Bangladesh is undeniable. Yet, his own nation is now erasing that memory through violent and even obnoxious means. His daughter, Sheikh Hasina, who wielded power with an iron hand with dictatorial intent, had to flee Dhaka in a violent overthrow of her regime and is now a fugitive from her country, living in India's shelter.

India had another historic role to play in 2000, this time in Bangladesh's cricket history. The Marwari businessman from Kolkata, Jagmohan Dalmiya, the then presiding deity of Indian and world cricket, played a significant role in granting Bangladesh the status of a Test-playing nation. When it played its first-ever Test match in Dhaka against India, Sheikh Hasina, who was then Prime Minister, feted Dalmiya and publicly acknowledged the role he had played in putting her country in the elite echelons of Test-playing nations.

Over the years, Bangladesh has stood by India whenever India has taken strong, harsh measures against the Pakistan cricket board. In the geopolitics of the region, Bangladesh was a friend, a strong sporting ally that helped India strengthen its administrative hold on the subcontinent's cricket politics. While Dalmiya was the architect of creating an Asian lobby, that included even Pakistan, in challenging the White stranglehold over cricketing affairs, his successors, including the wily politician Sharad Pawar, followed suit. It is this mutually beneficial relationship in the fascinatingly intriguing politics of cricket that India has chosen to damage.

It is the mutually beneficial relationship in the intriguing politics of cricket that India has chosen to damage

It is an undeniable fact that India would have found it difficult, if not impossible, to overthrow the England-centric control of the White nations over cricket administration without the help of its neighbours Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Post-1990, economic liberalisation policies led to the entry of multinational companies and private television into the Indian space, benefitting cricket immensely and multiplying the cricket board's profits. Post-IPL, the Indian board is sitting on a foamed carpet of staggering revenues that gives it unimaginable control over decision-making in the cricketing affairs of the world. Even England and Australia act like subjugate partners. There is no one to challenge India's hegemony.

In the past, the Indian cricket board had never been a preserve of one political party. It has had important members from the Congress and the BJP at the helm, but domestic politics or a government's ambitions rarely affected its decision-making. Dalmiya and company, that included businessmen like AC Muthiah and N Srinivasan, had their goals set, which were more financial than political in nature. There were many times when they would challenge a government's diktat which they believed was not in the interest of Indian cricket and its finances.

The growth of the BJP and the beginning of the Modi era from 2014 onwards has changed this equation. The Indian board is now the preserve of the BJP, ever since Jay Shah took over its control. From that prism, preventing Bangladesh's Mustafizur Rahman from playing for Kolkata Knight Riders, putting on hold its tour of Bangladesh and scoffing at Bangladesh's threat to withdraw from the T20 World Cup that India is hosting, is to be seen as the Indian government's decision and not just of the Indian board.

The anger of the social media warriors who fret, fume and sweat over the violence against Hindu minorities in Bangladesh is justified. But why target India's most popular film star worldwide, Shah Rukh Khan, for a purely cricketing decision of hiring Mustafizur for his IPL team, while remaining silent on how Christian minorities were treated during Christmas in India and the Muslims are generally targeted in our country?

This is not a game of tit for tat. Human emotions are like a surging river and can be manipulated to flow in any desired direction. The flames of retaliation and revenge are easy to ignite but once lit, the devastation caused by it won't identify the race, colour, caste and religion of the sufferer. This contentious debate on the dangerous mix of politics with sport that could have catastrophic consequences evokes in me poet Rahat Indori's wise and poignant warning so beautifully put: *"Lagegi aag to aayenge ghar kayi zad mein; Yahaan par sirf hamaara makaan thodi hai"* (If a fire is lit, it will engulf many homes. Mine is not the only house here).

— The writer is the author of 'Not Quite Cricket' and 'Not Just Cricket'

Our beloved poets & their double lives

DIPANKAR GUPTA

THE contrasting images of the "garden" and the "citadel", first expressed in Greek thought, actually reflect a universal human condition. The "garden" is where childhood memories cling to nature, parental love and limitless fond indulgence. Contrarily, the "citadel" is where ambitions replace love, and calculations of pelf and profit overtake unquestioning indulgence. In the "garden", there is repose; in the "citadel", war.

Many of the poets we love is because of the time they spent in the garden and not in the citadel. When in the citadel, these very sublime people harboured violent politics that buzzed around them. They lived different lives: in the "citadel", they advocated force to crush enemies, and as poets in the "garden", there was none of that; only nature, longing and romance.

For example, William Butler Yeats, Charles Dickens and Ezra Pound had strong views on politics, often of the violent sort. Dickens in the garden wrote about "sweet compassion for the poor", but in the citadel he saw Hindus as "tigerous villains" needing "extermination". Yeats supported the fascist 'Blue Shirts' and Ezra Pound hated the Jews and rooted for Mussolini and Hitler. He saw virtues in the Ku Klux Klan too.

Yet, when Yeats turned to poetry, there is not a trace of his politics nor of his partisanship with the blue shirts. Instead, in his poem *'An Irishman Airman Foresees his Death'*, he wrote: *"I know I shall meet my fate, Somewhere among the clouds above; Those that I fight I do not hate, Those that I guard, I do not love."* Further, *"The years to come seemed waste of breath, A waste of breath the years behind."* The citadel, now just a waste.

In Ezra Pound, too, we find a sorrowful condemnation of how we transact our lives in the citadel. In *'Ione, Dead the Long Year'*, the following lines ring out: *"Empty are the ways, Empty are the ways of this land, And the flowers, Bend over with heavy heads. They bend in vain. Empty are the ways of this land."* The flowers here are the pliant, gentle "garden" and the "ways of the land" rule the "citadel" of ambitions.

John Milton enthusiastically supported the overthrow and execution of Charles I. This same man, whose calculated hate was evident in politics, gives no hint of that when in the near musical *'L'Allegro'*, he lyricises: *"There on beds of Violets blew, And fresh blown roses washt in dew,… To live with her and live with thee, In unreproved pleasures free; To hear the Lark begin his flight, And singing startle the dull night."*

Lord Byron's continental fame for his fierce endorsement of Greek and Italian nationalists is widely known. He even joined a secret society of radicals for this cause, but his poetry carried a heady garden scent. At those times, he turned his back on the citadel and wrote soft lines like: *"There is pleasure in the pathless woods, There is rapture on the lonely shore,… I love not man the less but Nature more…"*

What could be more ironical than William Wordsworth's life. He is widely read in classrooms for his poem on daffodils where clouds and flowers meet in happy harmony. Yet, in the citadel, he opposed the extension of voting rights in Britain's pursuit of the Great Reforms. This Act of 1832 aimed to rid politics of "rotten boroughs" and extend franchise to the working class. Worse, he also supported slavery.

In 1838, Wordsworth wrote to William Gladstone: "Many applications are made to me to sign the Petition… in favour of immediate abolition of Negro apprenticeship. I refuse to do so, and I am sure I shall never regret that resolution." He not only overlooked the violence embedded in slavery, but even saw some good in it. Still, this did not keep him from writing about daffodils while wandering around Lake Ullswater's shores.

In the 'citadel', they advocated force to crush enemies. As poets in the 'garden', there was only nature, longing, romance

Such instances can be multiplied. Stephen Spender was once a Spanish Civil War supporter and a member of the Communist Party, but in *'The Pylons'*, his best-known poem, he regrets how his idyllic rural "emerald country" was being ruined by industrialisation and greed. He bemoaned the loss of beauty: *"Over these small hills, they have built the concrete… Bare like nude giant girls that have no secret."*

Pablo Neruda, Chile's most cherished poet, was partisan in the Spanish Civil War and was even accused of endorsing Stalin. His most remembered verses, though, were about love, nature and the sensuality of the garden. Recall here his everlasting line: *"I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees."* In contrast, his poems against Standard Oil and profiteers were stiff, and reeked of the citadel.

Karl Marx left the garden of his youth for the citadel in his mature years. When he was young, he wrote verses full of overripe love and longing. Sample the following: *"Look into those eyes so bright, Deeper than the floor of Heaven, Clearer than the sun's own beaming light."* Later, when in the citadel, he called his verses "idealistic" and "fuzzy". Marx never returned to the garden.

Yes, Ayatollah Khomeini, too, wandered in the garden. His verses unsettle our views of the man we thought we knew. In the *'Wine of Love'*, he evocatively wrote: *"Don't consort with a wandering dervish, but if you ever do, Never ask him about wisdom, philosophy, scripture, or sayings of the prophet. I am drunk with the wine of thy love, so from such a drunkard, Don't ask for the sober counsel of a man of the world."*

The "man of the world" is the man in the citadel but it is the garden that offers reprieve. Without the magic of verse, the world would clearly be much worse!

— The writer taught sociology at JNU

Stop asking if mythology is true

UNIVERSE

DEVDUTT PATTANAIK

ISN'T mythology just made-up stuff? I hear this every now and then. The confusion comes from how we have collapsed "myth" into "falsehood": the "myth of climate change", the "myth of instability", the "myth of diabetes".

But the Greek root *'mythos'* means story — and human beings, all of us, make sense of reality through stories. The discipline that studies these meaning-making stories is mythology. It has nothing to do with the Sanskrit *'mithya'* (incomplete truth). It has everything to do with how cultures organise their subjective world. Ideas like justice, equality, freedom, right, wrong, good and bad are all based on a framework communicated in stories.

Consider how different civilisations script their stories. The Biblical imagination is strikingly human-centric and legalistic — God, prophet, commandments; obey and it is *halal*, disobey and it is *haram*; heaven versus hell. Nature barely appears as the protagonist. Humans have dominion over nature, is what the *Bible* says.

By contrast, myths that originated in India — Hindu, Buddhist, Jain — begin with *prakriti* (nature). Monsoon, snakes, rivers, seasons, soil: these are not backdrops, they are plot. Festivals orbit rain cycles, sowing and harvest, waxing and waning moons. We are part of nature. Our mind (*purusha*) experiences the dance of nature (*prakriti*).

This difference births two moral grammars. The Abrahamic frame is legal — right and wrong, permitted and forbidden. The Indian one is accounting — debit and credit. Every act is a transaction with the cosmos. *Paap* is not "sin" but debit incurred by consumption; *punya* is credit earned by giving back. Your *bahi-khata* (ledger) is spiritual, not only commercial. No wonder Yama, god of death, is also the accountant who audits our life-book on *Yama-dvitiya*. In Jain thought, the liberated being is one whose balance sheet is finally zeroed — no debts, no claims.

Once you see the accounting lens, Indian ritual logic clarifies. We honour animal wealth (*Govatsa*), metal wealth (*Dhanteras*), plant wealth (*Annakut*), the goddess (Lakshmi or Kali), and then accounting itself (*Bhai Dooj* or *Yama-dvitiya*). Even the much-misused *Dhanteras* debate reveals discomfort with money talk; some recently rebranded it as "Dhanvantari Day" to sanitise wealth with health. Nice sentiment, little precedent. We have always been honest that prosperity matters — so do generosity and settlement of dues.

Start asking what truth it enables, what kind of society it helps us become

Mythology, then, is not about proving whether an event "really happened". It is about mapping value. When a family lights lamps on *amavasya*, they are not testing physics; they are signalling hospitality to fortune, clarity against darkness, and the courage to face the audit of life. When a community performs *garba*, they are not just dancing; they are circling the *garbha* — the womb — acknowledging dependence on earth's fertility.

Dismissing mythology as "fake" blinds us to the frameworks that quietly steer law, policy, markets, and households. We don't need to abandon science to respect story; we need to recognise that data describes while myth decides what counts as good, holy, or fair. The task is not to standardise Indian traditions into a single orthodox manual, but to read our plural stories with rigour.

Stop asking if mythology is true. Start asking what truth it enables: what debts it discloses, what credits it demands, and what kind of society it helps us become.

— The writer is an acclaimed mythologist

What we found when we lost our way in the forest reserve

PADAM PARKASH BHOJVAID

SOME memories do not fade; they ferment. Neither a scandal nor a triumph, it is a small transgression from youth that has travelled with me for over four decades, from the rain-dark forests of Coorg in 1984 to the reflective stillness of retirement.

I was then a probationer of the Indian Forest Service (1983 batch), learning to read forests as one reads texts — patiently, humbly, alert to what lies beneath the surface. On a study tour to Medikeri, our guide was Dr SN Rai, whose authority needed no raising of voice. He taught silviculture not merely as a discipline but as a way of seeing: ordered, restrained, attentive. In classrooms and under forest canopies alike, he carried himself with a quiet exactness. On field days, dressed in khaki, sturdy shoes and an umbrella in hand, he seemed designed to blend into the landscapes he revered.

That particular morning began badly. The duty officer announced the wrong assembly time and dress code, and we arrived late — awkwardly dressed in ties and blazers instead of field gear. Our teachers stood waiting in khaki, their displeasure unmistakable. Once breached, discipline appeared to unravel the day itself: delayed buses, sharp words for drivers, even a burst tyre. The forest, when we finally reached it, seemed to receive us under a cloud.

Medikeri Biosphere Reserve, nestled in the Western Ghats, was our classroom. Beneath its dense canopy, Dr Rai spoke of layered abundance — evergreen forests, grasslands, streams alive with orchids, elephants, civets, macaques, and birds rare enough to make silence feel sacred. Yet beneath his measured lecture ran an undercurrent of reprimand, and beneath our attentive listening stirred restlessness — the impatience of youth, the itch to test boundaries even in a place that demanded reverence.

After the introductory talk, the batch was split into two groups, led by Dr Rai and Dr Dilipkumar, walking about 250 metres apart to allow focused discussion. It was here, in the spaces between authority and attention, that mischief quietly took root. Four of us — young, overconfident, and foolish — slipped away under the pretext of call of nature. What began as momentary evasion soon became indulgence: a smoke, a discreet sip of rum hidden in a water bottle, and the heady thrill of being unseen.

For nearly an hour, the forest seemed to cooperate. Thick undergrowth swallowed sound; winding paths erased sightlines. We timed our movements between the pauses of the leading group and the approaching footsteps of the trailing one. It felt clever then, almost elegant — a choreography of avoidance played out in green, buoyed by the illusion that the forest was vast enough to forgive small rebellions.

Then, without warning, the forest withdrew its consent. The murmurs faded. Footsteps vanished. The canopy appeared to close ranks. An unnatural silence settled — dense, alert, unsettling — as if the land itself had noticed our trespass. In that instant, bravado drained away, replaced by fear. We realised, with sudden clarity, that we were lost. Every snapped twig sounded like accusation. Paw prints of big cats, boar tracks pressed into soft earth, towering trees and ancient tree ferns — all seemed to lean inward. Our freshly acquired knowledge deserted us.

Four decades later, a heartfelt apology to the teachers

We guessed directions from the sun's angle, the slope of land, the imagined course of a stream. Voices dropped, tempers frayed. For half an hour that felt far longer, the forest reduced us to helplessness. Catharsis, I later learnt, often arrives disguised as fear. Relief came on a bicycle. A man appeared, pedalling carefully along a narrow forest path, a polystyrene box tied behind him. Language failed us, but gestures did not. He was carrying lunch for our group. With nods and signs, he conveyed that both batches would meet near a waterfall just ahead. He pointed the way, then guided us like one might shepherd errant children back to safety.

The sound of voices returned first, then laughter. We pressed five rupees and a few cigarettes into his hand and asked, again in gestures, for silence. He replied with the familiar Kannada sideways nod — wordless, reassuring. One by one, we merged back into the group by the waterfall, unnoticed.

Cool water washed sweat and fear from our faces. Lunch was served. The vegetable *biryani* tasted extraordinary — not for its spice, but for what it represented: return, survival, forgiveness unasked. Around us, the forest resumed its role as classroom, serene and indifferent to our private reckoning. Our teachers never knew. Or perhaps they did, and chose silence. Among ourselves, the episode became a shared secret, retold years later, always with laughter edged faintly with shame.

Now, at 68 and retired from service, I understand what that day truly offered. The forest disciplined us more effectively than any reprimand could have. It stripped away arrogance, reminded us of scale, and returned us humbled. To retired senior IFS officers Dr Rai and Dr Dilipkumar, this is a belated confession — and an apology. The forest has long forgiven us. It is only now that we forgive ourselves.

— The writer is a retired Indian Forest Service officer

DUPED INTO FIGHTING RUSSIA'S WAR

Pushed into combat zones after being lured by promises of overseas jobs, repatriated Indians point to a widespread recruitment network

From left: Sarabjit Singh Gill, Mandeep Kumar's brother Jagdeep Kumar and Dev Bhushan. TRIBUNE PHOTO MALKIAT SINGH

MANDEEP KUMAR'S CASE

Mandeep Kumar, a driver from Goraya in Jalandhar, was duped into joining the Russian army in 2024 after being promised passage to Italy via Finland. His body was repatriated on January 2 this year.

For over a week, his brother Jagdeep has refused cremation, demanding the arrest of eight agents allegedly responsible for sending Mandeep to Russia.

He is also seeking martyr status for his brother, a memorial gate in his honour, and recovery of ₹43 lakh — ₹35 lakh paid to agents and ₹8 lakh spent searching for Mandeep in Russia.

Mandeep Kumar
AGE: 27
NATIVE PLACE: Goraya, Jalandhar
RECRUITED: January 18, 2024
WORK DURATION: Two months
STATUS: Killed in a drone attack at Lisichansk, Ukraine, on March 19

Sarabjit Singh Gill
AGE: 35
NATIVE PLACE: Amritsar
RECRUITED: April 13, 2024
WORK DURATION: 5.5 months
STATUS: Repatriated

Dev Bhushan
AGE: 45
NATIVE PLACE: Najafgarh, Delhi
RECRUITED: 2024
STATUS: Repatriated

Karan Bhandari
AGE: 25
NATIVE PLACE: Ajnala, Amritsar
RECRUITED: May 2024
WORK DURATION: Four months
STATUS: Repatriated

APARNA BANERJI

"THEY don't treat us like men. We are robots, guns for hire, maybe ants, but certainly not humans," says Karan Bhandari, 25, from Amritsar, who spent two nights hidden amid corpses in the war-ravaged city of Bakhmut in Ukraine — believing it was his safest chance of survival.

Dev Bhushan from Delhi returned home with grievous injuries to both legs, one caused by a grenade blast and the other by a gunshot. Sarabjit Singh Gill, also from Amritsar, who thought he was headed to Russia for a courier job, was kept in isolation without food after he broke down from the shock of realising he had been recruited to fight a foreign war.

A courier, a gardener, a meat packer — almost all the Indian youths who landed at Moscow and St Petersburg airports since 2023 recount a similar story. Lured by promises of respectable overseas jobs, they were abruptly pushed into combat zones, left to fend for their lives.

The overwhelming sense they convey is of being treated as expendable — with no grievance mechanism, and no escape once trapped on the frontlines.

When Jagdeep Kumar of Jalandhar began a relentless 20-month search for his missing brother Mandeep Kumar, these stories poured out.

In September 2024, 96 Indians formerly serving in the Russian army were repatriated following diplomatic intervention by the Indian government after Prime Minister Narendra Modi raised the issue with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The Tribune's interactions with some of these survivors reveal grim frontline conditions and deplorable living arrangements at military camps.

The men allege the existence of a sophisticated and widespread recruitment network, involving agents in India and abroad, which has been ensnaring Indians, Sri Lankans, Pakistanis, Nepalese, even Europeans and others with lucrative job offers — only to funnel them into the Russian army.

Except for Dev Bhushan, who says he voluntarily joined after seeing an advertisement, the testimonies describe systematic exploitation: agents confiscating SIM cards and passports, pocketing salaries paid by the Russian government, and abandoning recruits in active war zones.

Karan, who was 23 when he was recruited, sold his bakery in Amritsar and paid an agent ₹4.5 lakh for what he believed was a meat-packing job in Russia. Instead, he spent months on the Bakhmut frontline, transporting ammunition and retrieving decomposing bodies. "For months, it felt unreal, like a film of endless doom," he recalls. "From St Petersburg airport, I was sent straight to the war zone after a two-day train journey, followed by just seven days of training at Rostov-on-Don."

At Bakhmut, drones and missiles fell constantly, he says. "Along with a Sri Lankan man named Ali, I carried bodies 13-20 km on my shoulders in the dead of night. Many were left to rot for months."

A missile hit their bunker one day, he recalls. "Four men died. I survived by hiding barefoot among corpses so drones wouldn't spot me. I never received a single rupee of my salary. The agents took everything."

Sarabjit Gill alleges that agents operate openly — from neighbourhoods in Punjab to Delhi and even within Russia. "They are everywhere, on the streets, near embassies. They don't care if you live or die."

Dev Bhushan says while his commanders treated him decently, the recruitment racket is vast. "Agents — Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis — pocket recruitment money and salaries. Poor foreigners are used simply to boost numbers."

Karan claims that agents were present even at the Indian Embassy in Russia. "The recruitment amount of ₹11 lakh paid by the Russian army is also pocketed by these agents. They seized my SIM and bank details, and siphoned off all payments. Complaints to both the embassy and the Russian army went unheard."

Both Karan and Sarabjit say representatives from firms — and in Karan's case, a Russian woman — accompanied them on flights, reinforcing the illusion of legitimate employment. "When I protested after learning the truth, I was told there was no choice," Sarabjit says. "If you try to escape, you'll be shot. Even many Russians were desperate and homesick."

INDIANS IN THE RUSSIAN ARMY

According to the Ministry of External Affairs' December 2025 response, 202 Indian nationals are believed to have been recruited into the Russian armed forces. Of these, 119 have been discharged following Indian government intervention. Twenty-six are reported dead and seven missing. The mortal remains of 10 Indians have been repatriated, while two were cremated locally. DNA samples of relatives of 18 missing or deceased Indians have been shared with the Russian authorities.

However, Jagdeep Kumar claims the actual number is far higher. Carrying a list of 13 confirmed deaths — including his brother Mandeep — he alleges that 800 to 900 Indians may have been recruited. Since his return, he says he has received reports of 33 additional missing persons.

SMASH HIT & MISS

Punjab's young shuttlers are touching new heights at the national level, but back home, the infrastructure needs an urgent upgrade

Zorawar Singh

Jagsher Khangurra

Lakshya Sharma

Tanvi Sharma

Manya Ralhan

Radhika Sharma

Inayat Gulati

DEEPANKAR SHARDA

IN a state where team sports traditionally dominate, badminton is quietly carving out a remarkable space in Punjab — led by a new generation of junior shuttlers who are making waves on the national circuit. Yet, their rise comes with a telling paradox.

Punjab, which last hosted the All India National Badminton Championship nearly four decades back owing to inadequate infrastructure, has nevertheless produced a surge of national-level talent. Junior players from the state have been winning tournaments and featuring prominently among India's best — largely driven by the individual efforts of players, parents and, to an extent, the state association.

The latest crop includes Tanvi Sharma, the youngest national champion; her elder sister Radhika Sharma, senior mixed doubles national champion; Jagsher Singh Khangurra, national sub-junior champion; international shuttlers Manya Ralhan and Lakshya Sharma (India No. 3 in men's singles); Vajir Singh, current India No. 1 in the U-15 category; Japleen Kaur, silver medallist at the U-13 nationals; Inayat Gulati, bronze medallist at the U-13 meet, and Zorawar Singh, who won the mixed doubles bronze with Inayat.

The list goes on, and all from a state still considered "emerging" in badminton.

So how have Punjab's players managed to challenge the dominant southern and western powerhouses? For most, the answer lies outside the state. A majority of these shuttlers train, or have trained, away from Punjab, not by choice but by compulsion. With limited high-performance facilities at home, families often spend lakhs to help their children pursue national and international ambitions.

The Punjab Badminton Association, headed by Sangrur MP Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer — himself a regular at the Sector 7 Sports Complex in Chandigarh — is attempting to bridge the gap by setting up a Centre of Excellence in Jalandhar. But will that be enough for the growing pool of aspirants dreaming of the national jersey?

Experts, many of them parents who prefer to remain unnamed, believe the state government must step in. If not through immediate infrastructure development, which takes years, then through financial backing for training, exposure trips and tournaments for promising players.

"Jalandhar currently has six indoor synthetic courts and four outdoor courts. We have requested the state government to convert the outdoor courts into indoor facilities, which would give us 10 courts at a single venue and make Punjab eligible to host a national championship," says Ritin Khanna, secretary of the Punjab Badminton Association and a former national player.

"The last national championship here was held at Raizada Hansraj Stadium in 1987-88. If things go well, we plan to bid for the 2027 nationals. Despite limited resources, we have increased the number of tournaments, cash prizes and grassroots development initiatives," he adds.

Former international player and National Centre of Excellence coach Anand Tiwari echoes the sentiment: "Punjab has immense talent. Our kids are crushing it at the nationals. With the right systems, academies, coach training, tournaments and prize money, the state could dominate in a year or two. Hosting nationals again would motivate parents, inspire kids and raise awareness."

Mangat Rai Sharma, father and coach of international shuttler Lakshya Sharma, stresses the importance of exposure: "Players living and training in Punjab can be as good as anyone else, but they need proper touring and opportunities to earn ranking points. Support has to come at the right time."

Behind every medal lies a heavy financial burden. A single feather shuttle costs around ₹300, and a good player can go through several in one session. Add to that stringing costs, shoes, multiple racquets and the biggest expense of all, travel. Tournament entry fees, diet, accommodation and the cost of accompanying guardians make national and international exposure a costly affair — but an unavoidable one for rankings and progression.

Jagsher Singh Khangurra, who rose to India's top U-17 ranking after winning the 2025 Sub-Junior Nationals, had no formal connection with badminton until he joined the Nabha Sports Centre near his home. Now training at the Prakash Padukone Badminton Academy in Bengaluru, his journey reflects Punjab's changing sporting landscape. "There was no plan to put him into badminton," says his father, Manpreet Singh. "The interest grew gradually, and as parents we tried to give him the best possible support. Playing for India is not easy, but with systemic backing, promising players can get there," he adds.

Shivani Gulati, young Inayat's mother, says she began playing badminton at the age of seven while studying at DPS, Jalandhar. "Initially, she took up the sport for physical activity at Phagwara City Club. Within two months, she emerged as the district champion. She is now training at the Ratti Badminton Academy in Jalandhar, where she practices for nearly eight hours a day in two sessions, but if needed, we are open to sending her outside the state," she adds.

Punjab's shuttlers have already caught national attention. Whether the state can now build the courts and support systems to keep them flying remains the bigger test.

Trump's Imperialism and India

US President Donald Trump, emboldened by the power of the dollar, the threat of tariffs, and military might, wants to impose his policies on the entire world. Trump wants the world to buy petroleum from the US and stop buying Russian oil. In his latest statement, he said that if India does not stop buying Russian oil, it could face tariffs of 500 percent instead of 50 percent. The same threat has been issued to China and Brazil. Trump believes that the world should trade with him on his terms and at his prices. He wants countries to buy goods only from the US and not from Russia or China. In a dangerous move, a new law is about to be passed in the US Congress that would exempt Trump from restrictions on imposing and removing tariffs. Trump claims he has already spoken to the Democrats about this. If this law passes, Trump's power will double. Clearly, the threat of 50 to 500 percent tariffs has shaken India's exports, and the Indian stock markets are continuously plummeting. This unchecked American aggression is not limited to this. It's a policy of praising our Prime Minister while simultaneously slapping our economy, because India, along with Russia and China, is becoming a rapidly emerging global power. It seems Trump wants to dismantle the global economy. He has announced the US withdrawal from 66 international organizations, including several UN bodies and the India-France led International Solar Alliance. This includes 25 UN organizations and 35 non-UN organizations. The India-France Solar Alliance is also included. There are continuous obstacles in India-US relations. Under diplomatic protocol, the Indian ambassador met with the US State Department and thanked the US for supporting India against terrorist activities. However, America's constantly changing behavior could create a difficult period for India and could also negatively impact Indian exports. India believes it can maintain its economic growth rate at 7.4 percent. Meanwhile, Trump's aggressive tactics are escalating. The US military seized a Russian tanker that was on its way to buy oil from Venezuela. Attempts to seize Greenland, which is rich in rare earth minerals, are also underway. For this purpose, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will be meeting with officials in Denmark. Wherever there are mineral resources, the US wants to establish its dominance. It wants to sell its agricultural and dairy products in India's vast market, but India has so far maintained its independence. It is true that due to America's vocal displeasure, India has reduced its oil purchases from Russia, but it does not intend to stop them completely. In the trade negotiations between the US and India, India is not ready to compromise and does not want to jeopardize the livelihoods of Indian farmers by giving unrestricted access to American agricultural products. This is the main obstacle. Trump's ambitions are growing. He has also angered the countries of the European Union. What should India do? It is clear that India will now have to move closer to China in addition to Russia. So, it is not unlikely that the map of international relations will change in the world.

-Abhishek Vij

Now, threats to bomb courts

The terrorists' system operates more through creating fear with threats than through actual violence.

The central and state governments are always concerned about the safety of the common man because the responsibility for the safety of ordinary citizens rests with the governments. Terrorists are engaged in creating chaos in the system by issuing threats and spreading fear.

Earlier, terrorists threatened to detonate bombs in schools in different cities of Punjab. They attempted to disrupt the education system by spreading panic among children and teachers. Now, their target seems to have shifted to the judicial system. The scope of the threats has also expanded. The method remains the same: anonymous emails.

Now, not only Punjab but also courts in Himachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, and Kerala have received threats of being bombed. Clearly, when the district sessions courts in Faridkot, Moga, Ferozepur, Rupnagar, Mansa, Mohali, and Anandpur Sahib in Punjab received these threats, the courts were evacuated. Panic spread, and work came to a standstill. Hundreds of police officers and dog squads, along with bomb disposal teams, searched every nook and cranny.They found nothing there, but the terrorists had already succeeded in their dangerous act of terrorizing the judicial system. In other states too, threatening messages were received via email in several districts. These included threats of suicide attacks using RDX-based IEDs. Such threats were received in Rajnandgaon, Bilaspur, and Durg in Chhattisgarh. A threatening email was sent to the Rewa district court in Madhya Pradesh. The civil court in Patna received an email threatening to bomb it. In Odisha, officials in several courts, including the High Court, received anonymous emails. In Kerala, when a threat was received about a bomb being planted in the Kasaragod district court, the premises were evacuated and searched. Of course, nothing was found in the places that were searched and thoroughly scoured. But the profound psychological impact of these threats is undeniable. People fear that this time the bombs weren't planted after the threats were made, but what will happen if bombs are planted later without any prior warning? The only solution is to eliminate the terrorist sources issuing these threats.

WHEN LIBERATION DOES NOT REQUIRE FORCE

(QUANTUM TUNNELING AND INNER EMANCIPATION)

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

Albert Einstein wrote in 1931

"The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious.
It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science.
He who knows it not, and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead."
-Albert Einstein, The World As I See It (1931)

In 1942, **Viktor Frankl**, the famous Austrian psychiatrist and neurologist was deported to Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz. He lost his parents, his brother, and his pregnant wife. By any objective measure, he was completely trapped—physically imprisoned, stripped of dignity, deprived of food, freedom, and certainty of survival. He later wrote that there were moments when suicide appeared to many inmates as a rational option, given the total absence of control over external circumstances.

What makes Frankl's case particularly relevant is not survival alone, but how he interpreted his inner condition. In his memoir and psychological classic *Man's Search for Meaning,* Frankl records that while everything could be taken from a person—possessions, health, family—one thing remained inviolable: ***the freedom to choose one's attitude toward suffering.*** He described a decisive internal shift in which he stopped asking what he expected from life and instead asked what life expected from him. That reframing, he argued, changed the quality of his inner existence even though his outer reality remained unchanged.

PHYSICS CONFINEMENT AND QUANTUM STATES

In classical physics, confinement is absolute. A particle trapped in a potential well remains imprisoned unless it possesses sufficient energy to climb over the surrounding barrier. The mathematics is uncompromising: if the energy is lower than the barrier height, escape is impossible. Yet twentieth-century physics discovered something quietly revolutionary. ***At the quantum scale, nature does not always obey classical intuitions.*** Particles, under specific conditions, appear on the other side of barriers they could never surmount by force. This phenomenon, ***quantum tunnelling***, has become indispensable to modern science, underpinning technologies ranging from semiconductors to nuclear fusion. *But its deeper implication is philosophical: limitation is not always as final as it appears (from Saima S.K, a physicist).*

Quantum tunneling arises from the wave-like nature of matter. According to Schrödinger's equation, a particle is described not as a fixed object but as a probability amplitude, a wave function that spreads across space (Schrödinger, 1926). When such a wave encounters a potential barrier, it does not abruptly vanish. Instead, it decays exponentially within the barrier, retaining a finite probability of emerging on the other side. The particle does not "break" the barrier; it passes through by virtue of its quantum state. As Richard Feynman later observed, tunneling is not an exception to the laws of physics but a direct consequence of them (Feynman, Lectures on Physics, Vol. III).

> At the most fundamental level, nature advances not only through force and accumulation, but through improbable transitions enabled by inner configuration.

This insight has reshaped our understanding of stability and change. In nuclear physics, tunneling explains radioactive decay—how alpha particles escape atomic nuclei despite insufficient classical energy. In biology, proton tunneling has been shown to influence enzymatic reactions and even DNA mutation rates, subtly shaping evolution itself (Klinman & Kohen, Annual Review of Biochemistry, 2013).

At the most fundamental level, nature advances not only through force and accumulation, but through improbable transitions enabled by inner configuration.

HUMAN CONFINEMENT AND TUNNELING

Human experience often mirrors this structure with unsettling precision. Psychological research has long documented how individuals become trapped in what clinicians describe as "***cognitive and emotional wells" patterns of fear, grief, trauma, or learned helplessness that resist rational effort.*** Studies on depression and anxiety consistently show that exhortations to "think positively" or "try harder" are ineffective precisely because the internal energy required to escape exceeds what the person can summon (Seligman, Learned Helplessness, 1975; Beck, Cognitive Therapy, 1979). *The barrier is real, even if invisible and a lot many people encounter such barriers in their lives.*

Yet transformation does occur. When all feels lost—often suddenly, quietly, and without dramatic external cause humans can transform. Neuroscience increasingly suggests that such change does not always result from incremental effort, but from qualitative shifts in internal state. *Research on neuroplasticity demonstrates that attention, meaning-making, and self-compassion can reconfigure neural networks, altering emotional responses without directly "fighting" them (Davidson & McEwen, Nature Neuroscience, 2012).* Like tunneling, the change is not proportional to visible effort. It arises from a reorganization within.

OUR SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS AND TUNNELING

Ancient spiritual traditions articulated this truth long before physics gave it mathematical form. The Bhagavad Gita describes liberation not as conquest of the world but as mastery of one's inner condition. ***"Uddhared atmanatmanam"*** — let a person raise the self by the Self (Gita 6.5).

The verse does not advocate force, but alignment. When the inner orientation shifts, circumstances lose their binding power. Similarly, the Buddha repeatedly rejected struggle as the path to freedom, teaching that suffering ends not through resistance but through right understanding. As he stated,

"With the arising of wisdom, ignorance ceases"
-(Samyutta Nikaya).

Modern psychology echoes this logic. Acceptance-based therapies, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), demonstrate that psychological flexibility—not suppression or struggle—predicts long-term well-being *(Hayes et al., Behavior Research and Therapy, 2006). Patients improve not by overpowering fear, but by changing their relationship with it. The barrier remains, but it no longer confines.*

The analogy with quantum tunneling is structurally precise. In both cases, escape does not require greater external force. It requires a different internal description. *When a particle's state is represented as a wave rather than a point, new pathways emerge. When a human being shifts from resistance to awareness, from self-judgment to compassion, from compulsive striving to attentive presence, previously impenetrable limits become permeable.*

This explains why genuine healing often appears unimpressive from the outside. A person simply stops reacting in the old way. A long-standing fear loses its grip. A grief softens without explanation. Psychologists studying post-traumatic growth note that such transitions are frequently non-linear and internally driven, arising after periods of quiet reflection rather than intense intervention (Tedeschi & Calhoun, Psychological Inquiry, 2004).

Spiritual literature consistently warns against mistaking effort for progress. The Tao Te Ching observes,

"He who grasps loses."

The Upanishads declare that the Self is known not by exertion, but by stillness. Even Christian contemplative traditions emphasize surrender over struggle, as articulated by Meister Eckhart:

"God is not found in the soul by adding anything,
but by a process of subtraction."
What, then, are the practical implications of this convergence between quantum physics, neuroscience, and spiritual wisdom?

First, attention must shift from external outcomes to internal states. Practices such as meditation of surrender have been shown to reduce default-mode network activity in the brain—the neural correlate of rumination and self-referential thought—thereby loosening entrenched mental patterns (Brewer et al., PNAS, 2011).

Second, self-compassion must replace self-criticism. Research by Kristin Neff demonstrates that self-compassion enhances resilience and motivation more effectively than harsh self-evaluation (Neff, Self-Compassion, 2011). Compassion changes the emotional energy landscape, much as altering boundary conditions changes quantum probabilities.

Third, acceptance of the present moment—without premature attempts to fix it—creates the conditions for transformation. Viktor Frankl observed that meaning often emerges not through control, but through conscious response to constraint (Man's Search for Meaning). Acceptance does not deepen the well; it changes the nature of the barrier.

Finally, stillness itself must be valued. Periods of silence, contemplation, and non-doing allow latent capacities to surface. As in quantum systems, observation alters outcomes. The quality of attention matters.

Quantum tunneling teaches a radical lesson: confinement is not always defeated by force. Sometimes, it dissolves when the system becomes something else. Human life, at its deepest level, appears to obey the same law.

Being stuck does not mean being powerless. And freedom, more often than not, begins with becoming different within.

(Views expressed are the author's own).

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

Resilience is not the absence of hardship, but the courage to adapt and continue.
-Rabindranath Tagore

Why India's youth remain the country's strongest hope

India's youth are often discussed in the context of crisis—unemployment, competition, uncertainty. Yet focusing only on struggle overlooks a deeper truth: young Indians are demonstrating remarkable adaptability, redefining what success and resilience look like in a changing economy.

Across cities and small towns, young people are refusing to remain passive in the face of limited formal opportunities. Instead, they are creating work, learning new skills, and reshaping traditional occupations with modern ideas. This shift reflects not failure, but evolution.

The rise of entrepreneurship among young Indians is one of the most hopeful trends of the decade. Small businesses, digital services, food ventures, and creative enterprises are flourishing, often with minimal capital. Technology has lowered entry barriers, allowing talent to matter more than background. A laptop, a smartphone, and determination are enough to build something meaningful.

Importantly, this new workforce

is redefining dignity of labour. Educated youth entering trades, services, and informal sectors are challenging rigid ideas about status. They are proving that meaningful work is defined not by job titles but by independence, stability, and purpose. This cultural shift has long-term implications for a society historically shaped by hierarchy.

Skill development is another area of progress. Online learning platforms, vocational programs, and peer-to-peer training have expanded access to education beyond traditional classrooms. Young people are learning coding, design, marketing, and technical skills on their own terms, often faster than institutional systems can adapt. This self-driven learning culture is a powerful asset for a rapidly changing economy.

Owned, Printed and Published by Shital Kumar Vij. Published from S-9, Industrial Area, Jalandhar, Punjab-144004.

Printed at Dainik Savera News and Media Netwok, S-9 Industrial Area, Jalandhar, Punjab -144004. ***Editor-Abhishek Vij**

Responsible for the selection and editing of all the news published in this issue under the PRB Act and all disputes arising out of them will be subject to the Jalandhar Court

From Distraction to Discipline: A Parent's guide to building focus in children during exams

Dr Isha Kohli
PhD in Microbiology, runs educational institutions and brings over 20 years' experience in parenting, child psychology, and education.

The season of board exams have started and whether these exams are truly a turning point in life or just another academic assessment is a debate in itself. However, one truth remains unchanged, these exams carry immense expectations, constant comparisons, and overwhelming pressure. Not just boards, with the academic sessions about to end school final term exams are also knocking the doors in the heads of educators, parents and children. Added to this is a growing concern of frequent distractions and reduced concentration among children, a challenge that has deeply stressed not only today's parents but generations before them as well. The pressure may change its form with time, but its weight has been felt across ages. When it's just a few days left for the exam, is your child still easily distracted when reading, solving problems, or following lessons? Do they find it hard to sustain attention for any length of time, despite your best efforts? You're not alone as many parents are sailing in the same boat.

Science behind distraction: Attention control helps in regulating engagement on a targeted task for a set period of time. It works in a way where one part of the brain focuses on the task whereas the other part suppresses the wish to focus on the irrelevant topics and distractions. Lack of attention is not laziness or lack of seriousness. Board exams in specific come in the life of a children when they are in their adolescence period when a part of their brain responsible for attention is still developing. It requires continuous training and counselling to stay discipline. Constant exposure to digital world, peer pressure, fear of failure and exam stress further detaches the child from their wish to practice for their exams.

Raising focus mind: How parents make the difference:

A) Help and guide child to set up a daily routine: Directional approach is crucial to gain sense of responsibility and security. The time to get up, fixed time to study, play, meals, and sleep is crucial. The schedule made should not just stick on notice board or room's wall, it shall be strictly followed until it becomes a habit of the child. If a child knows what they need to do next, they are less likely to get distracted and naturally follows routine.

B) Time-targeted study: this strategy creates a healthy challenge for the child to complete the task in set time. It becomes a game for the child and in a fun way the child finishes it with less distraction and gets engaged in the work. This strategy becomes more efficient if a big task or chapter is broken in to smaller and manageable sections. Instead of finishing a chapter in one go, it can be done in shifts which brings clarity of concepts and interest to study and complete it further. The child feels the task is achievable rather than overwhelming and helps in gaining confidence when the task is accomplished. The child also learns time management skills and self-discipline if this strategy is followed.

C) Distraction free study space: May not be a particular room but a fixed space that is away from TV noise, kitchen's distraction and frequent movements. The study space shall be fixed and not keep changing daily. It is crucial that the area selected should be clutter free and minimal objects should be there to avoid any kind of distraction. Care should be given that no unnecessary digital gadgets like mobile or laptops are placed near the child's study area because these instruments can remind the child of any incidence and the child can loss the concentration. All the necessary objects required like notebooks, stationery etc. should be available on the study table. It is advisable to stop studying on bed or couch to avoid any kind of laziness.

> The pressure may change its form with time, but its weight has been felt across ages. When it's just a few days left for the exam, is your child still easily distracted when reading, solving problems, or following lessons?

D) Limit digital distractions: Post Covid the electronic gadgets have become unavoidable part of our lives. Study materials, E-versions of books and notes and previous year question banks are readily available. Although this is a blessing, but it has been observed that when the child opens any digital study resource, the retention is there for just 15-20 minutes and after this the attention is diverted to social media which is more engaging and visually stimulating. The hard copies version should be preferred and child should be encouraged to prepare self-written notes. The mobiles shall be switched off during the study time to avoid distractions.

E) Pretend, Play and Study: This is another effective technique that helps in naturally reducing distractions and helps child to stay focus. In this techniques, the child can keep any object say any soft toy and pretend to be the teacher. The child then teaches the concepts in his words to the dummy student. While teaching, the clarity of thoughts, recalling of information and better understanding of concepts happen. The child can understand the gap of learning and can then revise the topic again. If a parent becomes a dummy student, its turns in to a meaningful and emotional experience both for parents and child. Child starts explaining freely and shares the challenges faced in a particular subject or chapter. The sense of parental support is felt by the child rather than being judged. It's advantageous for parents also as they will get to know the status of child's preparation for examination.

F) Frequent tests and questions solving: When the child prepares a particular topic, the tests and extra questions play a crucial role to identify the weak areas and helps in reducing distractions. Give the challenge to the child while doing tests like he/she gets challenges in the playground. Children have the hidden tendency to accept challenge and go to an extent to complete the challenge. Also while doing extra questions, the child actively engages in the concept rather than passively reading the topic.

G) Study sessions- break- study session: Long study sessions will distract the child and the child will dislike opening the book. Small breaks (avoiding mobiles or TV), are important to avoid mental fatigue. If after a long study session, for example solving 3 hours previous year question paper, 1 hour of an outdoor playtime helps to stay energetic and concentrated. A lazy and tired child with low energy will not put his complete efforts while studying. And research has proved that exercise and physical games keep the body energetic.

H) Small reward to improve child's focus: Simple rewards such as buying stationery, giving extra play time or offering loved food can be used as perks for completing the tasks provided. This small act acknowledges the efforts made by the child and motivates to excel in the next target thereby reducing distractions and stress.

There is no structured one step recipe or one day effort for the parents to help children to gain focus. It is a gradual process that needs patience, calmness, understanding child's psychology and a strong bond with the child. With continuous positive reinforcement and emotional support a child can easily stay focus and disciplined with clarity of thoughts in his head thereby building the future full of opportunities and growth.

India's quiet climate innovators are rewriting the future

India's climate conversation is often dominated by grim statistics—rising temperatures, polluted cities, shrinking water sources. Yet beneath this noise, a quieter and more hopeful story is unfolding. Across villages, towns, and research institutions, Indians are building solutions that demonstrate how climate action can be practical, inclusive, and locally rooted.

From renewable energy to water conservation, India is witnessing a wave of innovation driven not just by policy mandates but by people responding creatively to their realities. Solar power, once considered an elite or inaccessible technology, has become a tool of empowerment in rural India. Farmers in

Rajasthan and Gujarat are replacing diesel pumps with solar-powered irrigation systems, reducing costs while cutting emissions. These transitions are not symbolic; they are economically sensible decisions improving livelihoods.India's renewable energy push is also creating a new generation of jobs. Technicians, engineers, and local entrepreneurs are finding work in installing, maintaining, and managing clean energy infrastructure. This shift challenges the outdated idea that environmental protection slows economic growth. In reality, India's green sector shows that sustainability and development can reinforce each other.

Water conservation offers another example of positive change. Traditional practices such as rainwater harvesting, once neglected, are being revived with modern efficiency. In parts of Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, community-led watershed projects have transformed dry landscapes into productive farmland. These efforts rely on cooperation rather than top-down directives, reminding us that environmental resilience is strongest when communities take ownership. Indian cities, often criticised for congestion and pollution, are also experimenting with improvement.

Digital payments are quietly reshaping everyday India

Digital payments in India are often discussed through statistics transaction volumes, user numbers, and technological milestones. Yet their deeper impact is visible in everyday life, where small behavioural shifts are reshaping how people earn, spend, and save. From roadside vendors to small manufacturers, digital payments have become embedded in daily economic activity.

The expansion of mobile internet and affordable smartphones laid the foundation for this change. Platforms enabling instant bank-to-bank transfers and QR-based payments reduced reliance on cash, particularly for small-value transactions. For millions, digital payments

are no longer a novelty but a default option.Small businesses have been among the biggest beneficiaries. Digital transactions reduce the need to manage cash, lower risks associated with theft, and simplify record-keeping. Vendors can accept payments from customers without investing in expensive equipment. This ease of use has expanded participation in the formal financial system, even among those previously excluded.

Consumers, too, have adapted quickly. Digital payments offer convenience, transparency, and speed. For migrant workers and informal labourers, instant transfers to families in distant regions reduce dependency on intermediaries. These everyday efficiencies accumulate, subtly improving financial stability for households.

Beyond convenience, digital payments are influencing access to credit. Transaction histories create informal financial footprints, allowing lenders to assess creditworthiness more accurately. Small enterprises that previously lacked documentation can now access micro-loans and working capital. While challenges remain around interest rates and data privacy, the potential for financial inclusion is significant.

India's quiet public health revolution beyond hospitals

Public health in India is often discussed during crises pandemics, outbreaks, or shortages of hospital beds. Yet away from emergency headlines, a quieter transformation is taking place. Across the country, public health is gradually shifting from a hospital-centric model to one that emphasises prevention, early intervention, and community-based care. This change, though uneven, has the potential to redefine how health outcomes are achieved in a nation of over 1.4 billion people.

Traditionally, healthcare in India has been reactive. People seek medical attention only after illness strikes, often at advanced stages. This approach places enormous pressure on hospitals and increases treatment costs, while preventable conditions continue to rise. Recognising this challenge, policymakers, health workers, and local administrations are increasingly focusing on preventive healthcare nutrition, sanitation, vaccination, mental health awareness, and lifestyle interventions.

One of the most visible components of this shift is the expansion of primary healthcare infrastructure. Health and Wellness Centres, introduced under the Ayushman Bharat initiative, aim to provide comprehensive care at the grassroots level. These centres go beyond treating minor ailments; they address non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, maternal and child health, mental health support, and basic diagnostics. By bringing services closer to communities, they reduce dependence on overcrowded tertiary hospitals.

Community health workers play a central role in this

transformation. Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), Auxiliary Nurse Midwives, and Anganwadi workers act as the first point of contact for millions, particularly in rural and marginalised areas. Their work—ranging from promoting institutional deliveries to tracking immunisation and nutrition—demonstrates how public health outcomes depend as much on trust and outreach as on medical technology.

Nutrition has emerged as another critical focus area. Malnutrition, both undernutrition and obesity, continues to affect large sections of the population. Programmes targeting maternal nutrition, mid-day meals, and early childhood development are increasingly viewed as health interventions rather than welfare measures. This broader understanding reflects growing awareness that long-term health outcomes are shaped early in life.

Mental health, once neglected, is also gaining attention. Awareness campaigns, helplines, and school-based interventions are helping reduce stigma and expand access to care. While the shortage of trained professionals remains a challenge, the integration of mental health services into primary care marks a significant shift from earlier approaches that treated mental health as a specialised, isolated issue. Technology has further strengthened public health systems. Digital health records, telemedicine, and mobile health applications are improving access and continuity of care, especially in remote regions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital platforms demonstrated their ability to scale rapidly, a lesson that continues to inform public health planning.

Despite progress, challenges remain. Regional disparities, workforce shortages, funding gaps, and infrastructure limitations persist. Urban areas often benefit faster than rural regions, and preventive care still competes with immediate curative needs for attention and resources. However, the direction of change is notable.

India's public health evolution highlights an important lesson: sustainable health systems are built not only in hospitals but also in homes, schools, and communities. As preventive care gains ground, the focus is shifting from treating illness to sustaining well-being. This transformation may not be dramatic, but its long-term impact could be profound, shaping healthier lives and a more resilient healthcare system.

Never Let Me Go
THE CLONES WE CREATE

AS IT TURNS 20, ISHIGURO'S *NEVER LET ME GO* ECHOES SHELLEY: ARE WE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CLONES, THE CREATURES WE DESIGN WITH THE WILL TO SERVE HUMANS?

BY PRAMOD K NAYAR

Clone Robotics announced to much fanfare the arrival of Protoclone. Made of Myofiber, the company's own invention, and touted as the 'only artificial muscle in the world capable of achieving such a combination of weight, power density, speed, force-to-weight, and energy efficiency', the Protoclone mimics the human. And what's more, 'you can speak to the clone in English', declares Clone Robotics proudly. 'Do it yourself once, the clone will do it forever', it says. Welcome to the new age service providers. It is at once a proto-type and a clone.

But this seems rather tame, even by the standards of the AI age when debates rage as to whether Artificial Beings (ABs) deserve welfare and voting rights (they do not eat so they are not consumers in this sense at least). Anticipating the ethical and moral debates around the role of ABs in human lives, homes and societies, designed to serve humanity, is a novel celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2025.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, also a hugely successful film, threw up more questions than it answered, but foregrounded for us the value systems that humanity continues to espouse when it comes to the servitor class.

Never Let Me Go (2005) deals with the life of a group of clones studying at a school, Hailsham, and is set some time in future London. The clones are created, if that is the word, so that when the time comes, their internal organs can be harvested to aid humans with terminal conditions. The harvesting is termed 'donations' and usually, after the fourth donation, the clones die. The tale, narrated from the point of view of one of the clones, Kathy H, ponders multiple questions, often raised by the clones themselves, over the ethics of cloning such beings with the exclusive intent of making use of their bodies for human purposes.

Living Cadavers

In Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2004), special animals are bred with extra kidneys and livers which could then be harvested. In Ishiguro's novel, these special creatures are human clones.

The clones when they start their involuntary 'donations', become 'living cadavers' (Chris Hables Gray's term). While they do possess sentience, intellect, emotions and all the drives and instincts of humans, they merely exist to provide organs. They are bodies and lives that may be terminated at human will. Beyond their role of donors, they do not count:

> *Their [the humans'] overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease. So for a long time ... people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us.*

One can then even think of them as living storehouses wherein, without refrigeration, meat and organs are stored for future use. The organs are, of course, commodities, being harnessed from this storehouse as and when humanity needs them. So a posthuman store wherein one can pick up, buy and use key organs to protect humanity.

Yet, Ishiguro complicates such a simplistic reading. Xenotransplantation — transplantation of organs from other living beings — is at the heart of the tale. And yet are these foreign organs (xeno means foreign)? The clones are themselves made from humans, and their organs go back into humans. In other words, there exists an organ cycle that blurs the borders between origin (humans as origins for clones, clones as the origins of the organs) and destination (the clones as the destination, or products, of human cloning, the humans as the destination of clone organs). The transplantation undermines the clone/human, foreign/self-distinction.

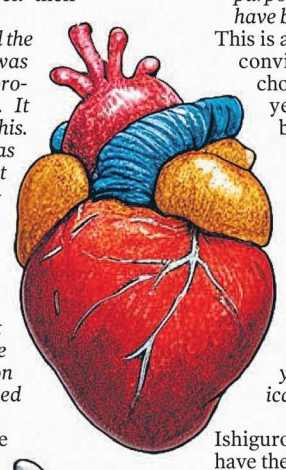
In his tract on transplantation, the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, who received a new heart, ponders whether his original heart was really his, because it betrayed him. 'If my heart was giving up and going to drop me, to what degree was it an organ of "mine," my "own"?', he asks. Consequently, he asks whether the heart he has received and which his body has accepted has become his own. And, since the heart is stereotyped as the seat of emotions, he wonders whose emotions he felt when his heart behaved like a stranger and now when he has someone else's heart.

In the same vein, Ishiguro asks: what separates the humans from clones if the latter are our progeny and products and their organs keep us alive? And why would they be second-class citizens when they are sentient *human* creations?

A New Servitor Class?

Are clones and ABs another servitor class, and if so, are we looking at a new brand of slavery? Ishiguro would return to this question in his later work, *Klara and the Sun*, where Klara is an Artificial Friend who is to be a companion to a sick child. In *Never Let Me Go*, the servitor-class is derived from the humans and are thus, in effect, a variant of the human whom we, humanity, have consigned to be our servants. The debate about this class is mired in the question of origins. The clones are *not* robots. The clones themselves seek their origins, or 'possibles':

> *The basic idea behind the possibles theory was simple, and didn't provoke much dispute. It went something like this. Since each of us was copied at some point from a normal person, there must be, for each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her life. This meant, at least in theory, you'd be able to find the person you were modelled from.*



And here, with the knowledge of their future as living cadavers, Ruth pronounces their less-than-decent origins:

> *We're modelled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren't psychos. That's what we come from. We all know it, so why don't we say it? A woman like that? Come on. Yeah, right, Tommy. A bit of fun. Let's have a bit of fun pretending... If you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that's where you'll find where we all came from.*

Ishiguro is drawing parallels with slavery: with how some classes and races of humans were deemed to be closer to animals and, therefore, *sub*human, like the clones who originated in Ruth's interpretation from 'trash'.

The debate about origins is not simply that. It also raises questions as to the ethics of creating a class of beings who exist to serve humanity. Ishiguro here and *Klara*, however, does not just raise this ethical question. Unlike slaves, who were made to serve humans against their will, clones and ABs are *designed* with the will to serve humans. Then, if we have created ABs who are meant to serve humans, whose very capabilities are directed at serving humans, then principles of justice demand that they be allowed to fulfil their capabilities. If the AB or the clone has to grow and reach the peak of her or his capabilities then society must allow them the rightful freedom to serve humans.

As the philosopher Stephen Petersen making a case for 'engineered robot servitude' puts it:

> *It seems possible to design robots from scratch so that they want to serve us in more or less particular ways. In such cases the robots are not slaves, since they are not working against their will...*

That is, if it is designed that the clones and ABs are meant to serve humanity, then should we prevent them from reaching their full potential in doing so? Of course this question follows the resolution of the larger problem, as to whether we ought to design such beings at all.

Souls, Rights

At one point in the novel, Ruth states: 'I was pretty much ready when I became a donor. It felt right. After all, it's what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it?' The clones are predestined to donate their organs and then die. They have no self-determined purpose, they cannot choose their fate. Ishiguro is, in fact, directing our attention to a key question: do *all* sentient creatures, including clones and artificial beings, have the *right* to choose their life goals, the plot of their lives?

> **The clones are told in Hailsham:** *Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do ... You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided.*

This is acculturation, a pedagogic mode of convincing the clones that their life choices have been made for them. And yet, this acculturation is itself double-edged, as a teacher tells them in Hailsham:

> *We demonstrated to the world that if students were reared in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being. Before that, all clones — or students, as we preferred to call you — existed only to supply medical science.*

Ishiguro's larger query is: do we humans have the right to determine the life plots of sentient creatures? If so, how is this different from slavery where the fates of millions of Africans were determined by a handful of plantation owners and industrialists?

The issue of rights is complicated. We are told the artwork of students is put in a gallery so that it can be proved that clones who possess artistic abilities also possess souls: 'But does this mean that those beings in possession of souls are being denied rights and is art a function and manifestation of the soul? In *Never Let Me Go*, we realise that the clones are aware of their slowly diminishing lives:

> *But Tommy would have known I had nothing to back up my words. He'd have known, too, he was raising questions to which even the doctors had no certain answers.*

But we recognise that human emotions are themselves the product of cultural training: So, how is this emotional intelligence training different from algorithmically programmed emotions, asks Ishiguro. The question of justice and rights can no longer be restricted to humans. It is appropriate that it is in the 20th anniversary year of *Never Let Me Go* that Guillermo del Toro returned to the novel that began the debate over the responsibility of the creator towards the created: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). *Never Let Me...* echoes the thorny issue the creature raises in Shelley: 'I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy'. Ishiguro wonders, are we not responsible for the clones, the creatures we design and create?

Kazuo Ishiguro cautions us that humanity owes something to those it creates. Even if those we create are, as Mary Shelley called her book, our 'hideous progeny'.

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Printed and Published by **Damodar Rao Divakonda**, on behalf of Telangana Publications Pvt. Ltd., Printed At Telangana Publications Pvt Ltd, H.Nos. 9-87/3, 9-87/3/1, Thumkunta Muncipality, Dist. Medchal-500078.
Published at Telangana Publications Pvt. Ltd, #8-2-603/1/7,8,9, Krishnapuram, Road No. 10, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad-500034, Telangana State. Editor: **Koothuru Sreenivas Reddy**. Ph: +91 40 2329 1999, Toll Free: 1800 425 3666. RNI No. TELENG/2016/70426.

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Greater Kashmir

Printed and Published by Rashid Makhdoomi on behalf of GK Communications Pvt. Ltd, 6 - Pratap Park Residency Road, Srinagar (J&K) and Printed at Greater Kashmir Printing Press 14-B Industrial Estate Sanat Nagar, Srinagar (J&K)

Printer / Publisher: **Rashid Makhdoomi**

Editor: **Fayaz Ahmad Kaloo**

Executive Editor: **Arif Shafi Wani**

Bureau Chief (Jammu): **Shuchismita**

Jammu Bureau
3/A, Auqaf Complex, Auqaf Market, Gandhi Nagar
0191-2430732

Mumbai Bureau
402, B-Wing, INS Towers, G Block, Bandra Kurla Complex, Bandra (E), Mumbai- 400051.

Published from
6 - Pratap Park, Residency Road, Srinagar - 190001

R.N.I. No:
48956/88 Regd. No: JKNP-5/ SKGPO-2015-2017

P. Box No
558 (GPO)

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Drinking Water Paradox

Why the fourth-largest economy still fears its own taps

Sunday Sounds
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I still remember my first visit to the United States in 1997. I was accommodated at the International House, or I-house, at the University of Chicago, feeling tired after a long journey and eager to settle in. My first question to the hostel guide was w*here I could find drinking water*. He looked somewhat confused at first. He then pointed towards the kitchen sink and, staring at me, said, "From the tap in the kitchen. We all drink tap water." With hesitation, years of conditioning kicked in when I asked this question, as back in India, we boil it, filter it, and sometimes buy it. Sensing my doubt, he reassured me again: this was government-supplied water, treated, monitored, safe. People drank it without a second thought. Nearly three decades later, that moment still lingers. Not because American tap water was extraordinary, but because our country's tap water so often is not.

The recent water contamination tragedy in Bhagirathpura, Indore, is a brutal reminder. Nearly a dozen people are reported to have died, and hundreds fell ill after consuming contaminated water. Diarrhoea, vomiting, dehydration, and avoidable deaths have occurred. Sad incidents that should never happen in any city, especially one that prides itself on cleanliness and good governance. The Indore bench of the Madhya Pradesh High Court rightly called the incident a "public health emergency," stressing that access to clean drinking water is part of the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution. The court summoned the chief secretary, held senior officials accountable, and ordered urgent steps such as supplying safe water, setting up health camps, repairing pipelines, testing water samples and planning long-term water safety measures. But Indore is not an exception. It has exposed a wider and deeper problem.

Let us ask a simple question. How many of our neighbourhood families drink or we do drink water directly from the tap? The honest answer is: the majority of us will say no. Instead, India runs a parallel water economy. Bottled mineral water, RO purifiers, UV filters, community filtration plants. Every restaurant, railway station, airport, temple, mosque, and office now installs RO units as a matter of routine. We all notice that packaged drinking water companies are doing roaring business, not because Indians love brands, but because they fear disease. This fear is rational. Water-borne illnesses like cholera, typhoid, hepatitis, acute diarrhoeal disease continue to stalk Indian households. For millions, "safe water" is something you buy, not something you receive as a right. In Europe, the US or Japan, bottled water is a lifestyle choice. In India, it is a survival strategy.

The water crisis hits hardest in India's slums and unrecognised colonies. These are the areas that keep our cities running. The people who clean our homes, guard our buildings, cook our food, work in factories, deliver packages and maintain our streets often go back to homes where clean drinking water is a rare luxury. Because these settlements are labelled "unauthorised", they are often left out of official city services. In many such colonies, clean water pipelines do not reach them, and even when they do, the supply is irregular and often unsafe. Families line up every day with plastic buckets and cans, waiting for government water tankers. They never know when the tanker will come or whether the water will be safe to drink. Women and children suffer the most. The scenes in rural areas are equally concerning, where women and children walk long distances, sometimes for hours, to collect safe drinking water and then carefully divide the limited water between drinking, cooking, and washing. In the summer, shortages lead to anger, fights, and despair. The irony is painful: the people who make cities livable are denied the most basic need for life. This is not just a failure of infrastructure; it is a moral failure of our society.

> The recent water contamination tragedy in Bhagirathpura, Indore, is a brutal reminder.

Our country is progressing. Gone are the days when India suffered because of the partition and people struggled for their existence. Today, we proudly call ourselves the developing world's fourth-largest economy. Our highways are bigger, airports more modern, metros faster, and digital payments easy. Yet millions of our countrymen suffer, mostly at the basic level: providing safe drinking water from its taps.

The Indore tragedy exposed this harsh reality. It gained attention after a social media clash between a local leader and a journalist, which brought long-standing governance failures into the open. Several cases of sickness are now in the forefront after consuming tap water. Several previous warnings were ignored, complaints were dismissed, and responsibility was repeatedly delayed. Years ago, a pollution control board report had already found most water samples in Indore unsafe. Plans to lay new pipelines were stalled because funds were not released. The system failed again and again until people began to die.

Recent reports under the Jal Jeevan Mission present an equally worrying picture. In Madhya Pradesh, more than one-third of rural drinking water samples were found unsafe, worse than the national average. In government hospitals, only a small number of water samples met basic safety standards. Several institutions, including schools, continue to face widespread contamination. In some places, where tap connections exist, they often do not work properly. Taps run dry, water comes only at odd hours, and leaking pipes lie next to sewer lines, creating constant risks of contamination. This should be an eye opener and our authorities, as well as local NGO's social workers, religious leaders need to see across the country, and more so where their access is easy, that how we can improve the standards of our drinking water, a lifeline.

Our country and we, as citizens, do not suffer from a lack of schemes or slogans. We suffer from neglect of basics. Safe drinking water requires unglamorous, relentless work at all levels. Officially, auditing old pipelines is a necessity. Separating sewer and water lines in ever-increasing urban cities is a must. It needs further replacement of corroded pipes, maintaining pumps and motors, ensuring proper chlorination, conducting frequent quality tests, installing online monitoring systems, and responding immediately to citizen complaints. Every state and Union Territory must be subjected to an honest audit. Municipal corporations and public health engineering departments must face some hard questions. How much money is actually spent on essential water schemes? Why are safety test reports ignored? Who approved unsafe water supplies? Why do some neighbourhoods suffer year after year? This is not about blaming people for the sake of it. It is about fixing responsibility when lives are at stake.

Clean drinking water is not a special benefit for a particular class, gated colonies or those who can pay. It is not a favour from the government. It is a basic constitutional right that comes from the right to life. That is why the Indore High Court's words are important. By calling the incident a "public health emergency," the court made one thing clear: unsafe water is not a minor problem; it is a violation of fundamental rights.

How many of you must have noticed that when our loved ones return to India from a long stay in developed foreign countries, and if they drink tap water, they fall sick, experience loose motion, and pain in the abdomen. This is an uncomfortable truth we often ignore. Foreign tourists and even Non-Resident Indians visiting India are usually warned never to drink tap water, whether at home, in hotels or in restaurants.

The sad incident of Indore deaths has brought forward a painful truth that needs to be addressed. Indore is known as India's cleanest city. Today, it is in the spotlight for a disaster that could have been prevented. If this moment is wasted, it will become just another tragedy that people forget. Our country needs a serious national rethink on drinking water. This means clear and public audits, independent water testing, strict punishment for serious negligence, and open sharing of water quality data. Slums and unrecognised colonies must be brought into official water supply systems. Only when every Indian child, rich or poor, can drink water from a tap without fear, then, we truly call ourselves a developed country. Until then, the booming bottled water industry will keep growing by profiting from a failure that no civilised society should accept.

Surinder Singh Oberoi, National Editor Greater Kashmir

We the Pollutants!

Man is the only species capable of destroying its own habitat consciously

FREEZE FRAME

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We blame plastic. We curse smoke. We rage against carbon. But the biggest pollutant on Earth is not an object. It is us. Humans!

We like to think pollution is accidental. An unfortunate by-product of progress. A side effect of development. That is a comforting lie. Pollution today is intentional, organised and defended. It wears the language of growth. It hides behind convenience. It survives because we choose not to stop.

Look at news about Mount Everest. The highest, purest symbol of nature's defiance. Once sacred is now littered with oxygen cylinders, torn tents, plastic wrappers, human waste and even frozen bodies. The mountain did not invite this. Man carried it there. We wanted conquest. We left garbage. Even altitude could not save pristine innocence.

Then look upward. Beyond skies. Beyond clouds. Into space. We imagined space as infinite and clean. A final frontier untouched by human error. What did we do? We polluted that too. Thousands of dead satellites. Fragments of rockets. Invisible debris racing at lethal speed. A junkyard orbiting Earth. We call it "space debris." A polite term for cosmic disregard.

The universe is vast. Our irresponsibility is faster. Back on Earth, pollution is no longer local. It travels. It crosses borders. It respects no religion, no nation, no ideology. The air you breathe today was exhaled somewhere else yesterday. The river you poison flows into someone else's food tomorrow. The plastic you throw away never actually goes away. It only changes address.

Man has polluted water until it burns. Rivers catch fire. Oceans choke on plastic. Fish ingest what we discard and return it to our plates. This is not ignorance. This is arrogance. We pollute soil until food grows hollow. Crops look healthy. Nutrients vanish. Cancer rises quietly.

We pollute sound. Constant noise. No silence. Birds disappear. Sleep breaks. Minds fray.

We pollute light. Cities never sleep. Stars vanish from memory. Children grow up without knowing what a real night sky looks like.

We pollute information. Noise replaces knowledge. Falsehood travels faster than truth. Even minds are no longer clean.

We pollute relations. Hypocrisy replaces sincerity. Goodness and well-wishing get treated as wickedness. People don't deserve affection.

And then, there is the most dangerous pollution of all. Moral pollution. When convenience becomes more important than consequence. When profit silences science. When comfort kills responsibility. That is when damage becomes permanent.

Man is the only species capable of destroying its own habitat consciously. The lone species that studies extinction academically while practising it daily. The only species that writes climate pledges and violates them before the ink dries.

We hold conferences. We sign declarations. We take photographs. And return to business as usual. We invent technology faster than wisdom. We build cities taller than our ethics. We drill deeper than our conscience. Every generation believes it will fix what the previous one broke. Every generation breaks more efficiently.

We have turned progress into a weapon. Speed into a virtue. Consumption into identity. Minimalism is trendy. Waste is routine. We speak of saving the planet. But the planet does not need saving. It will survive.

> Pollution is not merely smoke in the air. It is impatience. It is excess.

It has survived ice ages, meteor strikes, volcanic winters. It will survive us too. The real question is simpler and harsher: Will we survive ourselves?

Pollution is not merely smoke in the air. It is impatience. It is excess. It is the refusal to pause. It is throwing without thinking. Buying without needing. Using without caring. It is teaching children ambition without restraint. Success without stewardship. It is raising generations who inherit devices but not responsibility.

Man has not spared Everest. Man has not spared oceans. Man has not spared space. Why would he spare the future?

Yet hope remains. Not in slogans. Not in summits. It lies in restraint. In choosing less. In slowing down. In remembering that Earth is not a resource. It is a relationship.

When man stops seeing himself as master and starts acting as caretaker, pollution will fall. Not overnight. But honestly. Until then, the greatest pollutant walks freely. Drives freely. Consumes freely. Calling himself civilised. And wondering why the world is suffocating.

A grave internal threat

The narcotics surge threatens J&K's youth fuelling addiction, crime, and vulnerability

Narco Threat
Ruchika Kakkar

Jammu and Kashmir has seen an exponential increase in drug use in recent years. During the first week of 2026, a number of narcotics-related arrests and recoveries in the Union Territory (UT) included:

On January 7, Police recovered 4.5 kilograms of charas during routine patrolling in the Kulpora area of Pulwama District and arrested one peddler, Parvez Ahmed Dar.

On January 6, Police seized heroin worth lakhs from a truck and arrested one accused in Pulwama District. On the same day, in Kathua District, drug peddler M. Sadiq alias Siku was detained and lodged in Jammu Jail. In Samba District, police arrested two peddlers - Deepak Sharma and Adil Hussain - recovering 9.72 grams of heroin from their vehicle at Vijaypur.

On January 1, the Anti-Narcotics Task Force (ANTF) Kashmir arrested Tamana Ashraf, a woman who had been absconding for three years, in Srinagar's Batamaloo area. She was linked to a 2023 NDPS case involving the trafficking of over 7 kilograms of charas to Mumbai, via courier.

On January 6, 2026, Maqsood-ul-Zaman, Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) for North Kashmir Range, noted that drug abuse was the "gravest internal threat" confronting J&K, after terrorism. Similarly, on January 3, 2026, Anshul Garg, Divisional Commissioner Kashmir, called drug addiction a "major challenge" and one of the "gravest social issues" facing the region. He described it as a "huge problem" and a "major warning signal" for society, noting that addiction rates in the Kashmir Valley have tripled over the past three to three-and-a-half years, with an alarming surge in heroin consumption, especially among young people in educational institutions.

Official assessments indicate that approximately 1.3 million people in J&K are affected by substance abuse or drug addiction. In 2025, the J&K Police mounted an aggressive crackdown, registering around 1,000 cases under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act. This led to around 1,400 arrests, spanning street-level peddlers to major suppliers. In Jammu District alone, Police arrested 311 drug peddlers - including 35 women - and seized over 15 kilograms of heroin valued at more than INR 600 million in the international market, along with 78 kilograms of ganja, 114 kilograms of poppy straw, and large quantities of prescription drugs and opium. Authorities also destroyed massive quantities of seized narcotics, including 5,293 kilograms of poppy husk, 49 kilograms of cannabis, and 44 kilograms of hashish in Jammu District. Preventive measures included detaining 11 hardcore peddlers and attaching properties worth millions linked to drug proceeds. These figures underscore a resilient trafficking ecosystem. Despite sustained operations, the frequency of large consignments - often detected at checkpoints or through intelligence - indicates deeply entrenched networks continuously recalibrating routes and methods.

> Drones have emerged as a primary method for cross-border narcotics smuggling.

A disturbing trend emerged in 2025, with the increasing involvement of women and married couples as traffickers. In Jammu, 35 of the 311 arrested peddlers were women, some operating independent all-women networks to evade detection. Couples were often tasked with distribution, exploiting familial cover. Security agencies view this shift as a strategic adaptation by syndicates to outmanoeuvre law enforcement.

Sophisticated networks are exploiting vulnerable borders and adapting tactics, while links to narco-terrorism undermine the social structure, prey on youth, and potentially finance militant operations. Investigations indicate that Pakistan-based syndicates are the principal source of the heroin inflow into J&K, with proceeds from the drug trade systematically diverted to finance terrorism. This narco-terrorism nexus not only sustains militant operations but also deliberately targets vulnerable youth, recruiting drug addicts as over- ground workers (OGWs). Through inducement or coercion - using narcotics, cash, or weapons - these individuals are compelled to provide logistical support, intelligence, and facilitation for terrorist activities, effectively turning drug trafficking into a recruitment mechanism. Traditional smuggling routes through Poonch-Chakkan da Bagh and Uri-Salamabad remain active. However, traffickers have increasingly shifted their operations to areas south of the Pir Panjal range, reflecting the evolving patterns of cross-border terrorism. Pakistan is reported to channel drug proceeds to terrorist organisations. The surge in narcotics trafficking has not

only facilitated cross-border terrorist infiltration but has also exacerbated drug addiction among the youth, deepening the security and social crisis in the region.

Drones have emerged as a primary method for cross-border narcotics smuggling. In 2025, India recorded 791 drone incursions along the western border, with the vast majority (782) in Punjab and Rajasthan, and nine along the J&K International border (IB). Indian forces neutralised 237 drones, including 72 carrying narcotics, along with five with weapons and 161 empties. This tactic allows Pakistan-based handlers to bypass traditional routes, fuelling narco-terrorism, while targeting border vulnerabilities in J&K.

The narcotics surge threatens J&K's youth - 90 per cent of users are aged 17 to 30 - fueling addiction, crime, and vulnerability. It sustains a conflict economy, blurring lines between crime and terrorism. With synthetic drugs and new smuggling methods, including drones, complicating detection, enforcement alone falls short. As one analyst noted, the trade has "embedded itself within everyday social spaces," requiring integrated governance, real-time intelligence, forensic upgrades, and community rehabilitation.

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Oped

Snowless Winters

And Water Security In Kashmir

In Kashmir, declining snowfall and early snowmelt are reducing water flow in rivers and streams

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For many years, climate change was considered a future problem, but in Kashmir Valley it is now clearly visible, in everyday life. The Valley is experiencing warmer winters, rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, frequent cloudbursts and hailstorms, and longer dry spells. Since the 1980s, the average temperature in Kashmir has increased by about 0.8°C, with a faster rise after 2000. These changes have weakened winter weather systems and are turning snowfall into rainfall, especially at mid-altitudes. At the same time, rapid land use and land cover changes are taking place due to population growth, urban expansion, tourism, and infrastructure development. Farmlands, wetlands, forests, and open areas are being converted into buildings, roads, and commercial spaces, particularly around cities and other towns. Wetlands have been encroached upon, reducing their ability to store water, control floods, and support ecosystems. Forest loss due to deforestation, road construction, hydropower projects, and mining has increased soil erosion, reduced groundwater recharge, and degraded river resource water quality.

Nonetheless, black carbon pollution has also become a serious concern. Emissions from vehicles, old transport systems, biomass burning, brick kilns, and winter heating release fine soot particles floats in atmosphere and at faraway areas, settle on snow and glaciers. This darkens their surface, speeds up melting, and worsens air quality, which is reflected in declining air quality levels across the Valley as witnessed during this winter season frequently. Rapid growth in population and traffic has further increased environmental pressure. More vehicles mean higher fuel use, air and noise pollution, especially in cities and tourist areas. Seasonal tourism adds extra stress on water resources, waste management, and fragile mountain ecosystems.

Together, land use changes, black carbon emissions, and growing human pressure are intensifying the impacts of climate change in Kashmir. These factors are declining snowfall, accelerating snow and glacier melt and weakening natural water systems, increasing the risk of floods, droughts, and long-term water insecurity in the region.

Declining Snow and Glaciers

Kashmir has always relied on winter snowfall, which fed rivers, groundwater, soils, wetlands, and farming. In the past, mountain ranges received regular snow from December to February. This snow melted slowly in spring, providing water during early summer. Today, snowfall has become irregular, shorter, and often turns into rain. This situation, called snow drought, occurs when snow is very low or melts too early due to warmer temperatures. Its effects show up later as reduced river flow, dry soils, and early water shortages. Recent studies show that Himalayan snow cover has dropped to some of the lowest levels in decades, reflecting a long-term climate change trend. The winter of 2024–26, with very little snow and rain, is part of this growing problem. Even the traditional Chill-ai-Kalan period is now largely snowless, showing how quickly winters are changing in Kashmir.

Less snowfall also directly affects glaciers, because winter snow is needed to balance summer melting. With warmer temperatures and reduced snow, glaciers in Kashmir are shrinking fast. The Kolahoi Glacier, the largest in the Valley and the main source of the Lidder River- a major tributary of the Jhelum river, is a clear example. It has lost about more than 20% of its area between 1962 and 2018 and continues to thin by losing mass. Shrinking glaciers reduce water availability during dry months and threaten drinking water, irrigation, hydropower, tourism, mountain ecosystems, and long-term water security in the region.

Declining Water Resources and Ecosystem Challenges

In Kashmir, declining snowfall and early snowmelt are reducing water flow in rivers and streams. Rivers like the Jhelum, Lidder, and Sind now have lower water levels during summer, increasing water stress when demand is highest. At the same time, short but intense rainstorms raise the risk of floods, meaning the region can face both droughts and floods in the same year. This decline in river flow puts more pressure on groundwater, wetlands, and overall water security. Springs, which are vital for drinking water, irrigation, and feeding rivers, are drying up. Hundreds of springs, including Achabal, Verinag, Kokernag, Panzathnag, Aripal, and Sheerbag etc, are showing very low flow or even drying completely-a situation never seen before. Currently, most of the springs are in drying state during this snowless winter season. Factors like reduced snowfall, irregular rainfall, early snowmelt, deforestation, road construction, tunnelling, riverbed mining, and overuse of groundwater are damaging recharge zones and aquifers. Wetlands and lakes such as Wular, Dal, Anchar, and Hokersar are particularly vulnerable. Snowmelt used to maintain water levels, flush pollutants, and support ecosystems. Now, reduced inflow concentrates pollution, lowers water quality, and harms habitats. Alpine ecosystems are also changing: meadows are shifting, wetlands are shrinking, invasive species are spreading, and habitats for birds, fish, and insects are declining. Together, drying springs, reduced groundwater recharge, and changing snow patterns are creating serious ecological and water challenges across Kashmir.

> Rain-fed farming in upland areas has become uncertain, threatening food security and farmer incomes.

Socio-Economic Impacts

Water stress is affecting people's livelihoods. Agriculture and horticulture are already suffering. Snow once protected crops and soil from frost and kept moisture levels stable. Its absence affects apple orchards by reducing chilling hours, disturbing flowering, and lowering yields. Saffron and other crops face increasing moisture stress. Rain-fed farming in upland areas has become uncertain, threatening food security and farmer incomes. Hydropower projects struggle with unpredictable water flow, and winter tourism suffers as reliable snow cover declines. Beyond economics, snow and glaciers are part of Kashmir's cultural identity. Their loss is also a loss of heritage and connection to the land and water in the region.

Way Forward for Water Security Adaptation

Kashmir is at a critical stage. Rising temperatures, declining snowfall, retreating glaciers, and changing rainfall patterns are creating serious water and ecological challenges. Urgent and long-term action is needed to build climate resilience and tackle the region's water crisis. A few key measures can be adopted immediately for effective water security management as give below.

Rain and Snow Water Harvesting: Snowfall in the Himalayas is declining, and much winter precipitation now falls as rain instead of snow. This increases water stress because rain quickly runs off and is not stored for later use. Rainwater harvesting is a simple and practical solution. Rain can be captured during the rainy and monsoon seasons and allowed to seep into the ground through well-designed structures. Proper groundwater recharge along natural contours can store water that would otherwise be lost, helping to revive drying springs, restore wetlands, ponds, and other water bodies. Rainwater harvesting should start with government buildings and institutions and gradually extend to households, with rooftop systems where possible. National or state schemes can provide funds, technical guidance, and standard designs. In cold and high-altitude areas, snow-water harvesting can also be adopted. Innovative solutions like artificial glaciers and ice stupas can store winter water and release it slowly during spring and early summer, supporting local water needs.

Other Strategies for Water Security: Winter snow, glaciers, and springs must be treated as vital water resources rather than seasonal features. Scientific monitoring through weather stations, snow gauges, field surveys, and satellites is essential to provide early warnings for droughts, floods, and water shortages. Natural recharge systems such as forests, wetlands, alpine meadows, floodplains, and karewa landscapes must be protected and restored. Strict control is needed on encroachment, unplanned construction, mining, and deforestation. Priority should be given to spring revival through springshed management, groundwater recharge, and protection of karst and limestone zones. Agriculture and horticulture should adopt climate-resilient practices, and infrastructure, roads, hydropower, and tourism projects must follow climate risk assessments to protect fragile ecosystems. Active involvement of local communities, coordination among government departments, and wider use of nature-based solutions are crucial to build long-term water and climate resilience in Kashmir.

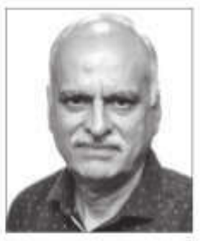
Conclusion

Kashmir is facing a climate and water crisis with rising temperatures, declining snow, retreating glaciers, and drying springs. Immediate action through water harvesting, ecosystem restoration, sustainable land use, and community involvement is essential to secure water, protect ecosystems, and build climate resilience for the Valley. Simple actions like rainwater harvesting can make a big difference.

Dr. Riyaz Ahmad Mir, former Sr. Geologist-GSI, Scientist-In-Charge National Institute of Hydrology, Western Himalayan Regional Centre Jammu, J&K.

Not so easy to explain

Primarily, the objectives of the shrine fund must be explicitly defined for this institute



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The Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Institute of Medical Excellence (SMVDIME) located in the foothills of the revered shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi (Katra) has been dragged into a controversy which was seemingly avoidable. The barely six-month old medical college has suddenly been sought to be made an instrument of communal polarization in Jammu and Kashmir.

It is seldom that the controversy over selection of candidates, in this case done by a central agency on all India basis, stems from a communal dispute rather than merit, or any other basis. Out of the 50 candidates selected on the basis of NEET examination, 42 were Muslims, one Sikh and seven Hindus. This became the basis for some hitting the street. They questioned how an institute funded by offerings made at the Mata Vaishno Devi shrine could have majority Muslim candidates. This is an affront to the country's laid down system and norms.

There is no denying the fact that the communal divide runs deep into the demography of Jammu, and Kashmir and that it is dug further deep in every election season or whenever the political leaders feel insecure. The situation on this front has got further entrenched during the last over a decade and it will not be wrong to say the SMVDIME controversy is its new manifestation with dangerous consequences.

The quick turn of events after Centre acting "swiftly" to press the National Medical Commission (NMC) into service which in turn withdrew its Letter of Permission (LoP) granted to SMVDIME to run MBBS course in August-September last year for the 2025-26 session.

What went wrong within six months? Were the flaws ignored during earlier inspection, if any, and under whose pressure? Both the Union Health Ministry and the NAM should come clear on facts in the interest of their own credibility.

Normal practice in such cases is that the erring medical college is given a hearing and time to remove deficiencies before taking any drastic action. Was SMVDIME given such an opportunity?

It seems it was not done. It is another matter that the NMC has protected the interests of the selected candidates by directing the J&K UT government to adjust them in other medical colleges. That is also an indication about the uncertain future of the Katra medical college which in such a case will be an opportunity lost for Jammu region.

Whom to blame for this "fiasco"? Under the existing set up this question assumes utmost significance as the current dispensation, as seen during the last decade, is a past-master in shifting blame on the opposition parties or their ruled state governments, or the BJP's adversaries for the acts of commission and omission in areas which directly come under their own domain.

If the selection process was wrong, as a case is being made out by the protestors, who is to be blamed for that. In this context the overnight action by the NMC is self-explanatory.

Did the Board visualize such a situation where in a Muslim majority UT this could have happened at any given point in time? Ostensibly, it was not done. Was it an oversight or a loophole kept to be stitched some other day as per the political expediency?

Was the Union Health Minister Mr J P Nadda, who is also the BJP's national president, unaware about the developments taking place related to the setting up of the SMVDIM? The NMC, could not have swung into quick action, without his intervention, to bail out the BJP set-up in J&K and protect its overall Hindutava plank. Given the fact that despite having swept through the entire Hindu-dominated belt of Jammu region bagging 29 out of 30 seats in this segment during last year's assembly elections, and people having voted for BJP more than half-a-dozen times, from Panchayat to Lok Sabha, since 2014, the region is lying in dire-straits.

> A vital question, what has Jammu gained with the closure of the medical college, is being asked.

Did the SMVDIM come as a handy tool to divert attention from the burning issues and unkept promises? Frankly speaking, this conundrum is not easy to explain.

The closure of the SMVDIM, the BJP circles call it a mere suspension, has caused two sets of reaction - between Jammu and Kashmir (owing to politics based on different demographic characters) and more importantly within the Jammu society. While the BJP-brigade and their supporters were jubilant over the closure of the medical college and having stopped the entry of Muslim candidates, fortunately, it has been viewed as a negative move running against the interests of Jammu region by a substantial section of the society. A vital question, what has Jammu gained with the closure of the medical college, is being asked.

A vital question remains as to why the Jammu and Kashmir Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Act, 1988 was not suitably amended before mooting proposal for a medical college. As the experts suggest, it needed amendment in sections related to governing administration, oversight, and use of land and institutions developed by the Shrine Board, thereby meaning that the objectives of the shrine fund must be explicitly defined for this institute.

A more worrying fall-out of this episode is that the meritocracy has come under question. And questioning the merit of the students, irrespective of their faith, should disturb all right-thinking people. If the merit is questionable in this case, then the entire NEET process is under the cloud.

One way out of the crisis, as suggested by some experts and rightwing ideologues is granting minority-institution status to SMVDIM, which will permit seats to be reserved for the Hindu community. If the Centre (read BJP) agrees to do that, how will it justify its stand vis-à-vis Aligarh Muslim University and Delhi's St Stephen's College, which have minority Muslim and Christian characters and the ruling dispensations have sought to change that.

The Jammu and Kashmir Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Act, 1988 requires amendments, particularly in sections governing administration, oversight, and use of land and institutions developed by the Shrine Board. What intrigues the most is that the UT administration glossed over the fact that Jammu already has two educational institutions having been granted the minority status. The Acharya Shri Chander College of Medical Sciences (ASCOMS), run by the Shri Chander Chinar Bada Akhara Udasin Society, has Hindu Minority status and reserves 25 per cent of its seats for Hindu students. The Mahant Bachittar Singh College for Engineering and Technology reserves 50 per cent of its seats for Sikh students as a Sikh Minority institution. Importantly, both continue to follow standard NEET/BOPEE admission procedures.

So, finally, the political compulsions seemed to have overrun everything else, thereby endangering the UT with another bout of communal polarisation. Immediate remedial measures must be taken to prevent such a situation.

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ILLUSIONS AND DELUSIONS

In a shifting world, India needs a Budget for balance

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Given the international pyrotechnics and as we are in our budget season, it may be a fitting occasion to take stock of our economic position. Complex systems, such as national economies, are best understood through the familiar glass-half-full or glass-half-empty lens. Seen this way, India's half-full picture is impressive: we remain among the fastest-growing economies despite tariff tantrums in our largest export market; our stock and IPO markets are vibrant, ranking next only to the New York Stock Exchange in returns; and we have a large, ever-expanding consumer society. Demand for air travel, SUVs, luxury housing, and other high-end goods continues to rise, reflecting growing confidence and aspiration.

Yet the half-empty view is stark. We remain heavily dependent on imported goods and technologies, a vulnerability with serious national security implications in a fractured world. Our metropolises – already overcrowded and polluted – are struggling to cope with migration and unchecked growth. Thirty-nine Indian cities rank among the world's 50 most polluted. Delhi, Bengaluru, and Mumbai are choking under traffic congestion and toxic air, threatening the future trajectory of our services exports, our primary growth engine, anchored in these very metros.

An imbalance in our growth model is being signalled by our capital markets. In the Nifty 500 today, banks and financial services account for roughly one-third of market capitalisation; IT services add 9%, while industrials languish at barely 6%. Two decades ago, energy and industrials together dominated the market, accounting for nearly half of it. The shift is striking: investors have favoured services, where scalability is easier and regulatory risks are fewer, while shying away from manufacturing and industrials. By contrast, the US equity market, although dominated by technology at nearly 30%, retains about 10% in industrials, while Europe maintains a more balanced mix across industrials, finance, healthcare, and technology. India's 6% industrial share is dangerously low, reflecting not just investor preference but the mis-signals in our policies.

This weakness is troubling because manufacturing growth has not taken off, despite the government's serious intent and initiatives, such as PLI, Make in India, and sectoral packages for electronics, defence, and renewables. R&D schemes, innovation hubs, and infrastructure investments have helped only partially – Apple's limited shift being a rare success. Manufacturing's GDP share is stuck at 15-16%, far below the 25% target, with exports, jobs, and capital inflows dominated by services.

The core issue is a skewed risk-reward balance: manufacturing faces long gestation, regulatory uncertainty, and weak exit options, while services offer faster, smoother returns. Policy signals have been channelling entrepreneurial energy towards services, finance, real estate, and consumer markets – domains where risks are lower, and rewards are faster, leaving manufacturing, especially tech manufacturing, undersupported. Another structural gap lies in our insolvency law. India's IBC lacks US-style Chapter 11 protections that allowed distressed firms (such as GM) to reorganise and preserve value. Without such safeguards, capital-intensive industries carry higher risk premiums, discouraging investment.

The forthcoming Union Budget presents a timely opportunity to address the current imbalance and strengthen the role of manufacturing in India's growth model. A key proposal meriting consideration is the acceleration of the 12 new 'industrial cities' announced some time ago under the National Industrial Corridor Development Programme, along with the eight that were then declared to be already underway. Designed to specialise in distinct sectors, these hubs can enable manufacturing at scale and help rebalance the economy away from its service-heavy tilt.

Alongside, measures that directly reduce entrepreneurial risk can be examined. Co-locating technology institutes within industrial corridors and encouraging third-party provision of labour housing or skilling centres aligned with the hubs' focus would lower project costs and create a stronger ecosystem for new entrepreneurs.

Urban pollution is also signalling design errors. India has over 4,000 statutory towns, 400 cities with populations exceeding 100,000, and 40 cities with populations above 1 million. In most countries, such cities are the bedrock of growth. Yet, in India, fiscal and managerial strength remains concentrated and thus a range of public goods remains scarce outside a privileged circle of capital cities. A more equitable redistribution of human resources across non-metros and a reprogrammed signalling mechanism – eliminating outdated subsidies for metro living, imposing graded vehicle taxes, and congestion levies on firms – could create voluntary decongestion.

The Union Budget is more than an accounting exercise; it is a statement of intent. This year, we could use it to signal confidence in our own capabilities. The world has changed, but India's greatest threats remain internal: polluted cities, congested metros, skewed capital markets, and policy signals that deter entrepreneurs from tech manufacturing. This budget season, let us resist obsessing over Washington or Beijing. Instead, let us confront our own mis-signalling. By broadening our growth base and strengthening resilience, India can chart a confident path forward in a turbulent world.

THIS AND THAT

The stylish audacity of Ilaiyaraaja

As I wrap up my column this Saturday, I am off to the Bengaluru International Exhibition Centre on Tumkur Road to catch a live show to mark a milestone — 50 years of Ilaiyaraaja's music. Many in my circle are huge fans of the film music composer; they even travel across cities to catch his concerts. I count myself as one of his most ardent fans, and I once drove from Bengaluru to Chennai to catch a show. The frenzy was such that it took two hours to reach the venue from the hotel, just 2 km away. Ilaiyaraaja's fans are spread across the world, and the South Indian diaspora turns up in huge numbers whenever he performs abroad.

Yet, I sometimes wonder if the larger world has fully comprehended the extent of his genius. He has never been nominated for a Grammy, and Hollywood hasn't embraced him either. Not that it matters to him, but it rankles his admirers.

Film music is group effort, and multiple authorship defines the film song. The intros and interludes are often composed by musicians other than the composer of the tune. Conventionally, composers in Indian cinema have excelled at making Indian-style melodies, getting their orchestras arranged by those familiar with Western music theory.

This collaboration between Indian and Western musicality has produced some of the most original-sounding music in the world. Before the word 'fusion' even came into vogue, Indian film music was fusing genres from across the world without inhibition. Ilaiyaraaja casually produces what it takes a group of musicians with specialised skills to produce. He makes the tunes and also writes the score for his full orchestra, with separate parts for each instrument. I don't know who else can do that, and at his pace.

But that is not his primary claim to genius. It is difficult to describe the thrill that his initial scores generated among music lovers. The galaxy of composers active when he debuted had individual styles and comparable orchestral arrangements. He arrived with a sensational new approach to phrasing, harmony, and orchestral arrangement. He produced the most audaciously stylish splash of sound we had heard in Indian films. And it drew from a profusion of styles, Indian and Western.

S R Ramakrishna
often sees high art in kitsch and vice versa

Ilaiyaraaja has often spoken about how, with rudimentary knowledge and a phenomenal memory for tunes, he landed the job of assistant to Kannada film music composer G K Venkatesh. He eventually debuted as an independent composer with the 1976 Tamil film *Annakkili*. In fact, YouTube is replete with Ilaiyaraaja lore, with videos chronicling how some of his most iconic songs were made. In recent years, he has taken his listeners through the making of his scores, explaining in detail how the various sections of his orchestra come together.

The 1990s brought a challenger: A R Rahman. With *Roja* (1992), Rahman began exploring the new possibilities of electronic music, synthesisers, and advanced programming. It looked like Ilaiyaraaja's analog-era flamboyance was being overtaken, but his music has stood the test of time, and he is actively composing even at 82. When interviewers ask him about technology overtaking music, he is categorical: "Without performance, there is no music."

At his peak, Ilaiyaraaja's popularity eclipsed the stars; films succeeded on the strength of his music alone. For those upset that he has not got his due, it is a matter of consolation that, in 2025, Ilaiyaraaja recorded and performed his Symphony No. 1, Valiant, with the London Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's 77-piece ensemble.

The Modi dispensation made him a Rajya Sabha member in 2022, as part of the BJP's push for a Tamil Nadu presence. Ilaiyaraaja has been relatively silent in the Upper House. Attendance is sporadic, and he has made no memorable speeches. All of which again underlines how he is a musician first and foremost, and his interest in politics will remain a matter of little consequence.

In his conversations, he can be cutting, but he never holds back when it comes to sharing his insights. At a workshop he conducted in Goa, he gave a live demonstration of his composing philosophy – a film score shouldn't merely represent what is appearing on screen, it should add subtext. He showed what he would do to score for a scene in which a man in murderous rage is out to kill his father. He came up with a gentle lullaby, telling the audience that he is reminding the protagonist about the tender moments he has shared with his father.

The peaks Ilaiyaraaja scaled will remain hard to reach. In an era of AI algorithms and auto-tune, his organic genius reminds us why music must remain human. In him, the most distant streams of music merge to create aural magic.

SANS THE SACRED

The penance for our times

I was recently thinking back to the most annoying parts of my early schooling and recalling the numerous essays in multiple languages we were required to write on the population explosion in India. I bet those who designed that curriculum are feeling pretty silly given that the total fertility rate in India has fallen to 1.9, below the replacement level of 2.1. Perhaps those essays all paid off, but now we must worry about an ageing population and the problems that come with it.

This got me thinking about the various attitudes we see in Sanskrit literature towards having children – the conventional, the bizarre, and the totally unhinged. For one, I remember being taken aback at reading a part of the famous prose text, Bana's *Kadambari*, where the queen Vilasavati is inconsolable after hearing a religious sermon which declares that a son (*putra* in Sanskrit) is so called because, by being born, he saves his parents from hell, and that those who are childless (or maybe sonless?) are doomed to hell. Grief over not having children is one thing, but imagine having to fear eternal or extended damnation!

Then we have Bhishma in the *Mahabharata* – the revered grandfather figure of the Pandava princes. He was the son of the goddess Ganga and the king Shantanu. In another tale, Ganga abandons Shantanu for questioning her judgment in drowning all their previous sons, leaving him with only one – Bhishma. Shantanu must have understandably been lonely, and he falls in love with Satyavati, the daughter of a fisherman chieftain. The chieftain tells the king that he would only permit him to marry Satyavati if Shantanu would agree that Satyavati's son would inherit the kingdom. When Bhishma hears of this, he takes up a vow to remain celibate and so, to never have children. This supposedly terrifying vow earns him the name 'terrifying' (Bhishma means terrifying in Sanskrit). This all leaves one wondering exactly what was terrifying about the vow. Perhaps it was because he was a royal prince, and all royal princes were terrified of their lineages dying out?

Anusha S Rao
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The final story for today is one about the sage Saubhari. It is said that he was minding his own business, meditating on the banks of a river, when his eyes fell on a couple of fish who were engaging in rather public displays of affection, and he decided he wanted those pleasures too. So he went straight to the king Mandhata, and asked him to marry off one of his daughters to Saubhari. The king was probably taken aback, but he could not afford to offend the sage, so he suggested that any of the princesses who wished to marry him would be given to him in marriage.

The sage gleaned the cause of the king's reluctance and decided to put his powers obtained through all that difficult penance to good use. He transformed himself into a handsome young man and walked into the inner apartments; all the princesses began to fight amongst themselves to be married to him. This way, he married all fifty princesses! If you thought that was a bit much, he created elaborate palaces, opulences, and pleasures for them, and had a hundred children with each of them. One day, when he got a rare quiet moment – rare because he had five thousand children and fifty wives – he thought about how he had ruined his life, all because of looking at a couple of fish. And so, he gave it all up again and retired to the forest for more penance, this time permanently. Unsurprisingly, his wives also followed him (imagine birthing a hundred children!), and all of them attained liberation.

For our times, though, the solution to declining birth rates is simple. Just find a way to share the women's load in birthing and raising children while running the household; stop careers from punishing women for taking time off for family; and give fathers more parental leave so they can do their share. But perhaps this is even tougher to attain than the miraculous powers of Saubhari's penance.

ROVING REFLECTIONS

A tale of two High Commands

Renowned journalist Rajdeep Sardesai, in his recent video blog, referred to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah as '*jodi* number one'. Together, they function as the BJP's high command, with an iron grip on the party. One is the unquestioned supreme leader; the other, a strongman and strategist. They hold sway, not only among the cadres, but even in the party's ideological fountainhead, the RSS.

It was the Congress party that established the original 'high command'. Its powers were entrenched during the time of Indira Gandhi, as the former prime minister gained absolute control of the party, with no room for dissent. Congress continued to hold its flock together under Sonia Gandhi during the two UPA governments – she was the party's *de facto* high command. Inscrutable, astute, and aloof, she exercised power through loyalists such as Ahmed Patel.

Now, the power structures of the party are cracking under an idealist at its helm – Rahul Gandhi, the reluctant crown-prince. As Congress drifts rudderless, the high command has been reduced to a ceremonial body, neither feared by a host of leaders who pursue their own factional and regional interests, nor held in high esteem by the party men.

Take the Karnataka situation. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah repeatedly asserts he will complete his full term and there's no question of any change of guard, while the Deputy Chief Minister, D K Shivakumar, defiantly notes that a deal was indeed struck before the swearing-in, for him to take over as the CM midway through the five-year term. The rift is playing out in public in an ugly face-off between the minions of the two leaders.

It turns farcical when the old warhorse, the elected nominal president of the grand old party, Mallikarjun Kharge, says the high command will have the final word. There has been no credible intervention from the high command that inspires confidence among the people of the state, subjected to this extended leadership tussle.

Capt G R Gopinath (Retd.)
builds bridges, sometimes by tearing down walls. He is a soldier, farmer, and entrepreneur

On the other side of the political spectrum, a question is gaining credence – after Modi, who? The Prime Minister will be 79 at the end of his present term. There has always been speculation on who will inherit his mantle. Will it be Shah, the number two in the power hierarchy, or Yogi Adityanath, the influential Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh? Also, there is Nitin Gadkari, the Minister for Road Transport and Highways from Nagpur, projected in some circles as the RSS' choice.

It was, of course, the RSS' intervention in 2014 which led Modi to the high seat. But in the Modi-Shah era, the RSS does not hold such absolute power, and its prime ministerial pick, if there is one, for the 2029 general election will not be uncontested.

There is also that other question – "After Modi, what?" What kind of legacy is Modi likely to leave behind? Does he desire to leave behind the prototype of a mighty Hindu Rashtra, where minorities and Dalits live as second-class citizens in a society on the edge? Or a genuinely democratic republic? – a developed, vibrant economy with equitable growth, where all are equal under the law and live in dignity, where the politics of appeasement has ended?

Today, Modi invokes Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Vivekananda, and pays homage to Savarkar and Golwalkar. These are two sets of men embodying irreconcilable ideologies. Modi has a little over three years left in his third term – a decisive period in shaping his legacy. What road will he take?

None of this, of course, is to discard the possibility of the man putting his hand up for another term. Modi has often projected himself as someone not chasing power – "I'm a *fakir*; I will walk away with my *jhola*", he once said. History, however, is replete with rulers eager to hold on to power until incapacitated or overthrown. "We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means; it is an end," George Orwell wrote in *1984*.

Modi remains India's most charismatic and popular leader. He has lost none of his verve or oratorical skills. His political instincts are sharp, and his drive to win elections is intact, backed by the organisational muscle of a massive, cadre-driven party.

But these traits appear more pronounced also because of the uncertainties that define the principal opposition party and its leadership. Optics matter in a battle of perceptions. Who commands the forces, and who is *seen* as commanding them, can determine a party's future.

KNOWN UNKNOWNS

Gold, oil, and the fragility of sovereignty

Gopichand Katragadda
The former CTO of Tata Group and founder of AI company Myelin Foundry is driven to peel off known facts to discover unknown layers
@Gkatragadda

I spent this past Christmas and New Year's Eve walking through Lima, Cusco, and finally Machu Picchu with family. Peru is breathtaking, but it is also unsettling. Beneath its beauty lies a civilisational wound that never quite healed. You feel it most clearly when you revisit the story of the Inca empire and the moment it met Francisco Pizarro.

This was not a heroic clash of equals. It was an ambush.

When Pizarro arrived in 1532, the Inca emperor Atahualpa ruled an empire of astonishing scale and sophistication. Roads, granaries, astronomy, and administration bound the Andes together. Gold, central to the Inca culture, was not money. It was sacred: the sweat of the sun. Pizarro understood none of this and did not need to. He understood extraction.

At Cajamarca, Atahualpa was lured into a meeting under the guise of diplomacy and was captured in a sudden, brutal attack. Thousands of unarmed retainers were slaughtered. The divine king was imprisoned. What followed is one of history's most grotesque transactions: Atahualpa offered to fill a room with gold and silver in exchange for his freedom.

The ransom was paid in full. Temples were stripped. Sacred objects were melted down. An entire cosmology was reduced to bullion. Atahualpa was executed anyway, on charges of fratricide, a debated accusation, and an internal matter his captors weaponised.

This is worth stating plainly: the conquistadors did not break a deal. They never believed that one existed. Agreements, morality, and even sovereignty only applied within their own civilisational frames. To the external aggressor, the Inca were not equals. They were an inconvenience sitting on top of valuable resources.

Gold was the 16th century's ultimate prize. Oil has played the same role for the last hundred years.

Petroleum has powered economies and reordered global power itself. Control over oil has determined currencies, wars, coups, and the very definition of sovereignty.

In this light, Venezuela is not an aberration. It is a continuation. The country holds the largest proven oil reserves in the world, estimated at over 300 billion barrels. At its peak, oil accounted for more than 90% of its export earnings. For decades, that wealth underwrote social programmes, national pride, and political autonomy. But oil also painted a target on the country's back. In the modern world order, resource-rich nations that insist on sovereignty are rarely left alone. They are sanctioned, isolated, destabilised, or "rescued" in the name of higher principles that curiously align with strategic interests.

The pattern is familiar. External pressure intensifies. Financial systems are weaponised. Parallel markets emerge. Assets are frozen. Narratives are shaped. Eventually, intervention is framed as inevitable or even benevolent. This is not about excusing governance failures or idealising regimes. That framing itself is part of the problem. It quietly shifts attention away from the central fact: powerful external actors consistently behave as predators when strategic resources are involved.

The oil century has refined this art. The petrodollar system tied energy to global finance, ensuring that access to oil, and, therefore, national survival for many countries, ran through institutions dominated by a handful of powers. Sanctions now achieve what cannon fire once did. Currency replaces cavalry. Markets succeed muskets.

Pizarro did not ask whether the Inca governed perfectly. He did not debate legitimacy or reform. He saw gold, weakness, opportunity, and acted. Modern geopolitics prefers a better language, but the instinct is unchanged. Oil, like gold, becomes the justification after the decision has already been made.

Peru lives with the consequences of this history. The Inca empire did not simply fall; it was dismantled. Knowledge systems were erased. Wealth was extracted. Society was reordered to serve distant interests. The ruins of Machu Picchu are relatively well-preserved because they were cut off. But the voices that built it were never allowed to finish their story.

Venezuela is not silent yet, but the danger is the same. When a nation's primary wealth becomes the object of external appetite, sovereignty becomes conditional. The question is no longer what people want, but what others will allow.

History is often written as tragedy softened by hindsight. Walking through Peru, it is impossible to miss the lesson that is carved into stone: civilisations are not destroyed because they are imperfect. They are destroyed because someone stronger decides their wealth is better used elsewhere. Gold did that to the Inca. Oil threatens to do the same today to any society whose wealth becomes more valuable than its voice.

A new sheriff in town

ACROSS THE AISLE

BY P CHIDAMBARAM

TWO HUNDRED years after the Monroe Doctrine was declared by the 5th President of the United States, and despite the widespread doubt about its power and efficacy, the doctrine was invoked by the 47th President of the United States. The present circumstances were, I think, not imagined in 1823.

President James Monroe's eponymous doctrine warned *European* powers against interfering in the affairs of newly independent nations in the Americas. On the night of January 2/3, 2026, President Donald Trump transgressed every basic tenet of the doctrine. He used *USA's* military power to invade a sovereign country in the *Americas*, capture the elected President, and whisk him away to be tried by a criminal court in New York. It was an astounding enlargement of the Monroe doctrine. No foreign power had interfered in the affairs of Venezuela. The people of Venezuela had elected Nicolas Maduro as President, although the outcome of the election was bitterly contested. Mr Maduro may have turned undemocratic and authoritarian but he is not the first elected ruler to have done so.

Hegemonic presidents

The new doctrine deserves to be called the Bush-Trump doctrine. The closest parallel was the U.S.' interference in Panama (1989). Under President George Bush Sr., the U.S. military invaded Panama, defeated the Panamanian forces, forced President Noriega to seek refuge in the Vatican's Embassy, and eventually surrender. The declared goal was regime change. With that military action, the U.S. became the new Sheriff in the Americas.

President Bush Jr became Sheriff in Iraq and three Presidents (Bush Jr, Obama and Trump), successively, became Sheriff in Afghanistan. In the case of Iraq (2003), a fake threat of Iraq possessing WMD (weapons of mass destruction) was invented and, in the case of Afghanistan (2001-2021), troops were sent as part of the 'war on terror' against al Qaeda and the Taliban regime. Both wars were spectacular failures. In the latest case of Venezuela, the U.S. accused President Maduro of drug trafficking and conspiring to smuggle narcotics into the U.S., but they are still charges unsupported by any public evidence.

From Mr Trump's pronouncements, it is clear that Mr Maduro was a casualty in the pursuit of the goal to control Venezuela's oil wealth. Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world and was pivoting toward China in oil exports, arms imports and foreign investment. The U.S. is determined not to allow any other country (especially Russia and China) to acquire economic interests in Venezuela (especially oil wealth) which are 'reserved' for the United States. Shortly after the capture of Mr Maduro, President Trump candidly said that large U.S. oil companies will be allowed to "produce and sell' Venezuelan oil and 'make money'.

> Despite the boast of Vishwaguru, India is losing voice and relevance in world affairs. As a former Indian Ambassador said, 'what India said would not make a difference'

India losing relevance

The 4-hour operation, coded *Absolute Resolve*, was a demonstration of the U.S. armed forces' vastly superior technology, machinery, intelligence, planning and execution. To enter another country in the middle of night and snatch the Head of State from a heavily-protected presidential house —and without suffering any casualty — belonged, we thought, to fables and fantasy, but America proved that its military could do it. The U.S. military is the most lethal war machine built in the history of the world. Alarmingly, there is also evidence of the making of a new Sheriff of the World, barring China.

India went unnoticed before and after *Absolute Resolve*. Mr Trump has already snubbed Mr Narendra Modi twice with his claims: *once*, on ending the India-Pakistan war and *next*, on India reducing its imports of Russian oil to please Mr Trump. The government is so scared of earning Mr Trump's wrath that the official statement on Venezuela did not condemn the capture of President Maduro or even mention the role of the United States. The statement referred to "recent developments in Venezuela", and called upon "all concerned to address issues peacefully through dialogue", as if it were counseling on a dispute over the score at a football match!

On this issue, India is isolated among the five founders of BRICS and from Europe. Despite the boast of Vishwaguru, India is losing voice and relevance in world affairs. As a former Indian Ambassador said, 'what India said would not make a difference'.

Free pass to imperialism

Absolute Resolve has, I am afraid, given a free pass to Russia and China. Mr Trump has hinted that he will grab Greenland. The resolution of the Russia-Ukraine war — if it happens — will involve Ukraine ceding territory to Russia. China will be tempted to take its 'One China' policy to its logical conclusion. If China makes another attempt to intrude into India's northern border or Arunachal Pradesh, India will be left to fend for itself. After seizing control of Venezuela's oil reserves, the U.S. has less interest in concluding a trade agreement with India. Mr Trump can manipulate India's export of goods to the U.S. — allow more or less into his country — by playing with tariffs *without* a trade agreement.

Donald Trump II has proved to be the most interventionist president in U.S. history. The tally includes Palestine, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Nigeria and now Venezuela. This is the ugly face of the self-appointed new Sheriff. We may not shed a tear for Mr Maduro or his wife, but we should mourn the return of imperialism and the demise of sovereignty of nations.

Dangerous distrust

FIFTH COLUMN

BY TAVLEEN SINGH

IT IS true that the Home Minister of India should not be called 'nasty and naughty' by a sitting Chief Minister. Also, true that she should have restrained herself from disrupting a raid by the mighty Enforcement Directorate (ED) and true that she should not have marched off with documents that may have assisted these diligent economic sleuths in solving a corruption case. Having said this, may I add that there is too much that the Government of India is doing that makes those who oppose it suspicious of its motives. Why is it that it is always on the eve of a state election that sudden intrusion by the Central government occurs?

It was mere months before the Bihar election that the Election Commission decided on its Special Intensive Review (SIR), leading even your non-aligned columnist to speculate about motives. Now, months before the election in West Bengal, we have the ED descend on Kolkata to raid the office of the Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC), in which, Mamata Banerjee claims, were stored sensitive documents that detail her strategy to win the state for a fourth term. The ED claims that it was just a routine investigation into money laundering related to illegal coal mining. Fine, but why should this happen just before elections are due to be announced?

May I humbly suggest that it is time for the Prime Minister to seriously ponder over why his government's motives and methods are viewed as suspect and mala fide. It is not just Opposition politicians whose hackles are up, it is ordinary people as well. When last week, in the middle of a cold, winter night, bulldozers rolled up to start tearing down 'illegal' structures outside a mosque in old Delhi, rabble-rousers started spreading the news that it was the mosque that was going to be demolished. They were believed, and this caused a large mob of angry Muslims to gather and start throwing stones at policemen and the demolition squad.

When a government loses the trust of ordinary people, everything it does will be suspect. And rumors will spread that it is misusing the levers of power to crush dissent. I have argued before that Umar Khalid should be released on bail after five years in prison without trial, but as a law-abiding citizen, I accept the Supreme Court's decision to deny him bail. What worries me as someone who was in Delhi when the Hindu-Muslim riots he is charged with masterminding happened is that Kapil Mishra, who made a very incendiary speech at that time, is now a minister. He has never been charged with anything despite his speech threatening violence 'after Donald Trump leaves' being freely available on social media. He is now Minister of Law and Justice in the Delhi government.

There are other reasons why not just the Government of India, but the BJP is being increasingly distrusted. After people died of drinking poisonous municipal water in Indore, Kailash Vijayvargiya was questioned by a reporter about what had happened. As Minister of Urban Development, it should have been his duty to explain why a pipeline carried toxic water to the homes of the people who died, but instead of answering, he told the reporter to stop asking "*ghanta* (nonsensical) questions". This brave reporter reprimanded him on camera about using words like '*ghanta*', and the minister scuttled into his car and drove off. But why has he not been sacked for the deaths in Indore? Instead, as usual, it is lowly officials who have been 'suspended'. This minister is the same man whose son threatened to beat up an official with a cricket bat some years ago. He was briefly detained, but a special court released him when the noise died down.

Is it any wonder that people are beginning to lose faith in the government? Whenever BJP spokesmen are asked about some of the bad things that are going on, the only response they have is to say that if there is a problem then 'go to the courts for justice'. Clearly, nobody has briefed them yet on how slowly the justice system works. The backlog of cases in Indian courts is estimated to be 5 crores. The Supreme Court alone has a backlog of 90,000 cases.

The point being that going to court is almost as futile as appointing commissions of enquiry. These commissions usually take so long to deliver their reports that often the people affected by some gross injustice, like the widows of the Sikhs killed in the pogrom after Indira Gandhi's assassination, wait decades for justice. Ten commissions of inquiry were set up to investigate that pogrom, so, by the end, almost no witnesses were left alive and, in any case, the word justice had lost all meaning.

What should worry the Government of India now is the growing mistrust between it and us the people. There is such a miasma of mistrust between us and the government that it is scary. Most people I meet tell me these days that they believe all politicians are corrupt and deceitful. More important than winning West Bengal is to win back the trust that has been lost. Or there will inevitably be other chief ministers who will join Mamata Banerjee in calling someone as revered and powerful as the Home Minister 'nasty and naughty'. This will make the Modi government look much worse.

INSIDE TRACK | BY COOMI KAPOOR

RANDOM SELECTION

The surprise appointment of Nitin Nabin, 46, the relatively inexperienced MLA from Bihar, as BJP working president is the upshot of a long-standing tug-of-war between the RSS and the two-member BJP high command as to who should lead the party. The RSS wanted a president who would keep the Sangh in the loop. Its preference was Nagpur boys Nitin Gadkari or Devendra Fadnavis, or a senior leader of stature like Shivraj Singh Chouhan. Amit Shah's choice was ministers Dharmendra Pradhan or Bhupendra Yadav, both in their 50s, who proved their mettle as his efficient deputies in challenging Assembly polls. The name of G Kishan Reddy, Shah's former deputy, also came up. J P Nadda overstayed as party chief far beyond his three-year term due to the stalemate. Last month, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat met Shah in the Andamans and Nabin's name cropped up — a choice so random that neither side raised objections. According to insiders, the idea was that Nabin, largely unknown outside his home state, would be first tested as a working president and the name of the full-time president decided later. But BJP's media managers immediately announced his name and even offered reasons for his selection: He was much younger than any other contender and did not come from a dominant caste. Factors that should ordinarily have worked against him!

PAWAR DYNAMICS

Gautam Adani, the government's favourite billionaire, inaugurated the new AI educational centre at Baramati, the Pawar family's home ground, last month. Adani, who has funded the centre, is working to reunite the feuding Pawar family camps. Already, the rival NCP factions are contesting local polls together in some districts, such as Pune. Adani recently met Ajit Pawar in Mumbai and Sharad Pawar in Delhi to suggest a compromise: Ajit's MLAs would support Sharad Pawar's re-election to the Rajya Sabha in April. In exchange, Supriya Sule is willing for the NCP(SP) to merge formally with the NCP(AP), provided her father officially heads the united party, even if Ajit calls the shots in Maharashtra and would be acknowledged as his uncle's heir. Ajit is yet to agree to the second proposal. Adani is an old friend of the Pawars. Although very few MLAs still remain with Sharad Pawar, the BJP realises his important role as a respected mediator in the INDIA bloc, placating allies disillusioned with Rahul Gandhi's leadership.

OBTUSE MOVES

There is growing disenchantment in the Congress over some recent party decisions, perceived as downright obtuse. In Maharashtra, Prakash Ambedkar's VBA was allotted a generous 62 seats as an ally for the Mumbai civic polls, although his political relevance has eroded. In fact, at the last moment, he surrendered 20 of the earmarked seats since he could not muster enough candidates. In Tamil Nadu, DMK leader M K Stalin is furious over party leaders close to Rahul criticising the DMK's fiscal policies, hardly the best tactic for arriving at a cordial seat-sharing formula. In J&K, during the final stages of a PIL hearing calling for the eviction from government accommodation of former state legislators, it emerged that one of three favoured politicians the L-G's administration had permitted to continue unauthorisedly in his residence for seven years was the high-profile Congress chief spokesperson Ravinder Sharma. Disgruntled state Congresspersons grumble about a BJP sleeper cell in the state party.

DEMAND OUTSTRIPS SUPPLY

Someone in the Department of Posts clearly goofed up while releasing the commemorative stamp to mark the RSS's centenary celebrations last October. Normally, a first day cover of a Rs 5 stamp sells for between Rs 10 and Rs 15, depending on whether it has a postal stamp. Currently, the RSS centenary stamps are being sold by the e-post office website for an astonishing Rs 300. The stamp shortage is despite the fact that 2.06 lakh stamps were printed. Either the department did not calculate the demand or did not reserve a quota for the group being honoured, as is customary.

GOGOI'S OUTREACH

With the Assam Assembly polls approaching, Gaurav Gogoi, Rahul's trusted aide, is on an outreach mission. He recently met Sushmita Dev, the feisty daughter of the late Central minister Santosh Mohan Dev. Sushmita quit the Congress in 2021 to join the TMC and was rewarded with a Rajya Sabha seat. The Congress is nervous about its standing in Assam's Barak Valley, despite the large number of Muslim voters because of extensive SIR voter revisions.

India-Pak-Bangladesh: Once upon a time, friends on the pitch

HISTORY HEADLINE

BY SANDEEP DWIVEDI

Former BCCI chief NKP Salve (*left*) and his Pakistan counterpart, retired Air Chief Marshal Nur Khan, presented a united front when it came to cricket. EXPRESS ARCHIVES, WIKIPEDIA

IN THE sub-continent, be it neighbours in a housing colony or nations with shared borders, slamming shut the cricket door is seen as the ultimate act severing ties. Pappu and Raju aren't allowed to play bat-ball when Mr Sharma gets miffed with Mr Verma next door over chucking trash across the fence. On the grand stage of international diplomacy, for far more serious misadventures, India and Pakistan, and now even Bangladesh, weaponise cricket, flipping the very idea of sport as soft power on its head. This wasn't how it used to be.

In the 1980s and 1990s, India and Pakistan players didn't just shake hands, they hugged, joked, swore the same profanities and hung out together long after stumps. Their officials were brothers-in-arms when fighting the common enemy — cricket's influential Anglo-Aussie axis. India and Pakistan would also watch the back of their younger sibling — Bangladesh.

Back then, the International Cricket Council was run by a blatantly biased rule book that was written by and for the Whites. The World Cup would always be on British soil, England and Australia wouldn't just have two votes in any ICC decision, but also the veto if they were still in minority.

A revolt for change was born on June 26, 1983 — a day after India won the World Cup at Lord's. And the seeds of cricket's democratisation were sown by two men from countries that had fought wars and regularly traded allegations of destabilising each other.

The two board chiefs, politician NKP Salve and retired Air Chief Marshal Nur Khan, had many reasons to cold-shoulder each other but when it came to cricket, they would become thick as thieves. Salve, an Indira Gandhi loyalist, was a Lok Sabha MP during the 1965 Indo-Pak war, the conflict where Khan was Pakistan Air-Force's commander-in-chief. Unlike today, cricketing loyalty carried more weight than political, military or even nationalistic allegiance.

A lot can happen over a plate of biryani when an Indian and Pakistani meet, even if it's at the Lord's dining area. So less than 24 hours after Kapil Dev lifted the Cup and an entire nation, a surprisingly glum Salve met Khan over lunch. The Indian board chief was miffed by the English refusing his request for a couple of passes, or even tickets that he was willing to pay for.

As Salve and Khan moaned how "passes" was the least they could do for the president of a board whose team played the final, a stray comment hit the air. It was an exasperated Khan who blurted out: "Why can't we play the next World Cup in our countries?" That was to be Asia's eureka moment.

Next year, in 1984, the India-Pakistan-Sri Lanka troika won a joint-bid to bring the Cup to the sub-continent. They came up with an offer the ICC members couldn't refuse. Each permanent member was promised £200,000, nearly four times more than what the permanent host-contender England was offering. In a sly move that would have made the street-smart traders from Lahore and Delhi's old bazaars proud, India and Pakistan said they wouldn't take money from ICC to host the event. This was an offer with no precedent, and the Anglo-Aussie partnership fell for this too-good-to-be-true sweetheart deal.

Unforeseen by England and Australia, the World Cup moving to Asia signalled the change of a power equation. The 1987 Reliance Cup made India and Pakistan, and the world, realise the worth of their cricket in Asia. It was the epochal moment when India's financial tap got turned on and it continues to cascade buckets full of notes to date.

After Salve and Khan got the World Cup to the sub-continent, Jagmohan Dalmiya, in a symbolic power shift, would play a big role in shifting the ICC headquarters from London to Dubai. Dalmiya would also lay the foundation of the Asian Cricket Council, grant Test status to Bangladesh and, if the grapevine is to be believed, protect Pakistan pacer Shoaib Akhtar when he was unfairly called a chucker by the world.

With each passing year, India's voice would get stronger and coffers fuller. These days the BCCI has no opposition at ICC. In a first, BCCI's Jay Shah would be ICC president uncontested. The Anglo-Aussie era was well and truly over.

Tragically, during their heady rise, some old bonds broke and mindsets changed. There had been wars and disagreements between neighbours in the past, politicians and military heads have ruled boards but they'd remained committed to the sport and never tried to shut that cricket door on impulse. But now the priorities have changed. Having climbed high, India has their heads in the clouds. They have forgotten those on whose shoulders they stand, the neighbours who helped and their commitment to the sport that has made them prosperous.

The writer is Sports Editor, The Indian Express

New year, old you

ON THE LOOSE

BY LEHER KALA

ON JANUARY 1, the original iron man, Arnold Schwarzenegger issued a terse and deflating warning for the millions of people everywhere dreaming of making radical changes to their lifestyles in 2026. "Motivation doesn't last. A routine does," he advised, saying what anyone who's ever tried a dramatic turnaround already knows. Willpower is a short-term fuel source, likely to run out sooner rather than later. Indeed, we're barely a fortnight into January and already, determination for maximising output, whether at work or at workouts, is waning (the two frustrating issues that plague most of humanity). No worries, anyone struggling to stick to a plan may take solace in the statistical truth that 77% of New Year goals fail after just one week.

Bridget Jones announced her three-point grand plan best, puffing away at a cigarette with a wine in her hand: "I will quit smoking, drink less and, oh, and stick to my New Year's resolution." Jones embodies the human predicament perfectly, that there's a vast, unbridgeable chasm between our desires and our reality — new year, new me, the symbolic fresh start that January evokes has to be scrupulously examined to understand the limitations of self-control. Personally, I believe we set too much store on specific dates to "begin again" (blame trending hashtags like #goals, or #reset, and relentless social media inflicted mania for self improvement). Any random Tuesday in February is as good a day as any to restart but typically, we swear to ourselves before January that this time will be different. Except, we're exactly the same people we were on December 31.

Desperate for transformation, we forget that life happens; for even the most determined, the best laid plans fall apart when they clash with existing duties and responsibilities. The only way to ensure resolutions last is to not count on willpower, rather, arrange our lives in a way that makes it easier to make changes.

It's far simpler to resist a cookie if it isn't in the house just like one forgets about Instagram if the app isn't on the phone. Similarly, the Alcoholics Anonymous acronym HALT cautions against getting too Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired, recognising it's much harder to choose wisely when one is cranky. The chances of inner fortitude coming to one's rescue are greater when our ambitions are reasonable; self control works much better with small, doable changes. Unfortunately, humans are obsessed about planning for the future. People on diets are already visualising how they'll look in a particular outfit, ten kilos lighter. The problem with trying to figure out life before actually living it is, it's inevitably demotivating to discover, progress never pans out the way one thinks it will. It's a meandering route to clarity and definitely setbacks, like the occasional donut, are part and parcel of a weight-loss journey. Instead of cutting ourselves some slack for being human, we lose steam, crushed by the realisation that real change is incredibly hard.

Perhaps the way to see New Year's resolutions isn't the fact that they're almost certainly doomed to fail, but that by making them we're forced to critically evaluate our lives, and at least think about where improvement is necessary. Taking time to reflect on what we want to do and who we want to be is the first step to acknowledging our own imperfections. Or maybe, we'll end up philosophically making peace with our inadequacies. Either way we're better off. We're trained to believe happiness is linked to personal achievement, and certainly striving gives one purpose and staves off boredom, if nothing else.So by all means, make that resolution. As long as one remembers while we're alive there is no beginning and there is no ending, every effort is part of a long, mostly tedious journey to becoming yourself.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Francesco Lotoro | By Tunku Varadarajan

The Music That Survived the Holocaust

Barletta, Italy

"One day, when talking about Auschwitz, we will talk about music, and only then will we have truly liberated Auschwitz."

The man who says this is Francesco Lotoro, a passionate Italian pianist, composer and musicologist. He's 61, and we're in his modest four-room house in this coastal city of around 95,000 northwest of Bari, near Italy's heel. Since 1988, when he finished his piano studies at an academy in Budapest, Mr. Lotoro has dedicated his life to "restoring, recovering, reclaiming" music composed by prisoners in Nazi concentration camps and prisoner-of-war camps of World War II, as well as in Soviet gulags. In the process, he has exhausted his savings and gone deep into debt. His wife, Grazia Tiritiello, works at the post office. "We need her salary, benefits and pension," he says.

Only recently, he spent €20,000 of his own to acquire the oeuvre of a Czech composer, who died at a death camp, from his "wonderful but cash-strapped descendants." He shows me a violin that belonged to a Polish musician who was sent to Auschwitz at 17, survived and emigrated to the U.S. after the war, settling in Bay City, Mich. After a segment about Mr. Lotoro aired on CBS's "60 Minutes" in early 2020, the man's widow wrote Mr. Lotoro offering to give him her husband's violin, which Mr. Lotoro calls "the Violin of Auschwitz." He flew to Michigan to pick it up. It was in a ruined condition, and Mr. Lotoro spent €2,500 to restore it. In the process, he earned the ire of museum curators, "who asked why I did that." They would have preferred to preserve it as a damaged artifact. "But I am not a museum," Mr. Lotoro says. "I am a musician. Just as the music composed in the camps must live again, so must a musical instrument devastated by the same imprisonment."

An Italian musicologist has devoted his life to collecting compositions by the Nazis' prisoners.

Mr. Lotoro has collected "10,000-plus musical scores to date," he says, the majority of which are compositions from concentration and death camps. When I exclaim aloud at this huge number, he tamps down my amazement: "No, no. There's so much left—90% of this music is still unrecovered, unknown." His collection—which has devoured two rooms in his house, as well as many shelves of library space lent to him by a well-wisher in town—includes amateur compositions made by "cultured people for whom music was a part of everyday life." But a startling number of pieces—symphonies, sonatas, madrigals, sonnets, even ambitious operas—were composed to the highest standards of professional musicianship. "If I were to play you some of these works, and I didn't tell you that they were written in Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen, you wouldn't know. It's beautiful music, that's all."

A Nazi law from 1933 barred Jews from participating in professional and public life, and that included the performance of music. Jewish musicians were, at a stroke, shut out of orchestras, conservatories, theaters and universities. "Almost all Jewish composers, conductors, music teachers and orchestral players who couldn't escape from Europe ended up in the camps," Mr. Lotoro says. He has detailed biographies of 140,000 such musicians, a number he calls "the tip of the iceberg." He is working on a 12-volume encyclopedia titled Thesaurus Musicae Concentrationariae—Treasury of Concentrationary Music—which he expects to complete by 2027: "It will contain history, historiography, theory, aesthetics, bibliography, a dictionary of musicians, and 500 musical works written in the concentration-camp universe." Mr. Lotoro's dream is to establish a center for such music in a former distillery in Barletta by 2028; but as he scours for funds, he knows it could take longer.

He is a painfully modest man. I have to prize out of him the fact that his is the world's most comprehensive private collection of "concentrationary music," a phrase of his invention that he prefers to use instead of "concentration-camp music." He defines "concentrationary" to include all circumstances in which there's a punitive concentration of people, including in ghettoes. His vast archive contains music composed in the ghettos of Warsaw, Lodz, Krakow and elsewhere.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem have "huge, large collections," he says. They have been the beneficiaries of donations from family members "because of the great international importance of these institutions." Mr. Lotoro's archive, for the most part, has been put together by personal toil and tireless persistence—travels across Europe, to the U.S. and to Israel, accompanied by painstaking detective work and requests to the descendants of camp musicians to bequeath to him their family papers. He and his wife have schlepped materials home by train, "five big valises recently from Prague." He is, he says, "like the Monument Men, but in a musical key"—a reference to a 2014 Hollywood movie, loosely based on fact, about a unit of salvagers that set out to save priceless art in World War II.

Once, he entered an attic in Italy where a camp inmate composer's son had stashed all his father's papers: "I was immediately aware of being bitten all over my body by parasites. The papers were infested. I had to return in a space suit and gloves to disinfect everything. Only then could we pack and transport the papers." Old manuscripts are usually infested with woodworms, silverfish or "other microscopic creatures with a love of paper."

Why did prisoners, many awaiting certain death, compose so much music? In his book "The Lost Music of the Holocaust" (2024), Mr. Lotoro quotes Jerzy Rajgrodzki, a Jewish violinist and Treblinka survivor, who attested that "in the camp, songs had a revolutionary purpose for us. They encouraged us to keep up our fight for survival and to find a way to salvation." Emile Goué, a French composer and prisoner in a German POW camp—where he contracted an illness that killed him shortly after the war ended—said that "music wasn't entertainment or a game, but the very expression of our inner lives."

Mr. Lotoro is in awe of these composers in adversity: "Those who produced music in captivity were laying down a testament. These musicians were repairing a broken world." Ghettos, concentration camps and gulags were "reverse black holes that turned the clock of history back to the time of the Huns." But they also "triggered an explosion of creativity. Music served as an individual and collective strategy of resistance, producing mental and spiritual nourishment no less indispensable than food."

He cites a heartbreaking example of such resistance, shown by a group of young Tunisian Jews who arrived at Bergen-Belsen in 1943. They repeatedly sang a Hebrew song of their own composition, which another inmate memorized and was able to recall after the war. Committed to *kashrut,* the Jewish dietary laws, they resolutely refused any of the meager food offered at the camp, and "allowed themselves to die of starvation." Mr. Lotoro calls this "an act of defiance embedded in music."

I first met Mr. Lotoro at Auschwitz on Jan. 27, 2025, the 80th anniversary of the camp's liberation. He was playing a piano in the house once occupied by Rudolf Höss, the camp's commandant, which has been purchased by the nonprofit Counter Extremism Project and turned into the Auschwitz Research Center on Hate, Extremism and Radicalization. This Jan. 27, Mr. Lotoro will headline a fundraising concert for the project at the Kennedy Center in Washington, at which he and an orchestra will perform 15 compositions from the death camps.

In Auschwitz last year, he was playing a lullaby on the piano, composed by Adam Kopycinski, a brilliant Polish musician who was the conductor of the Auschwitz Orchestra and had performed for Höss. (After the war, Kopycinski founded the Wroclaw Symphony Orchestra.) The emotional effect of a tender lullaby performed in a house where a mass murderer of Jewish children had once lived was overwhelming. The dozen people in the room were in tears.

Why would someone compose a lullaby, of all things, at a death-camp? "The lullaby is a highly prized musical form," he says. Schumann, Brahms and Liszt all "tried their hand at this genre." He guesses that Kopycinski, who lost two sisters at Auschwitz, "probably dedicated the lullaby to a son from a previous marriage before his deportation." He adds that the musical repertoire at Ravensbrück, a camp for women and girls, included several lullabies. "Writing a lullaby helped to preserve the maternal aura that had to be maintained in ghettoes and camps with large populations of women and children." Mr. Lotoro also cites a lullaby, sung in Yiddish, that was composed by a Polish Jewish watchmaker, Aron Liebeskind, at Treblinka, after his wife and 3-year-old son were gassed. He called it "Lullaby for My Little Son in the Crematorium."

We know of this lullaby because Liebeskind, who was later killed at Sachsenhausen, transmitted the song there to Alexander Kulisiewicz, a Polish musician and political prisoner who had an eidetic memory. As his reputation spread through the camp, musicians of every kind went to him and "decanted their music into his mind," Mr. Lotoro says. " 'Alex,' they said, 'we've heard you're able to learn a song by heart.' "

After his liberation, Kulisiewicz, stricken with tuberculosis, dictated "716 songs in many languages to a nurse who realized how valuable this material was." Before his death in 1982, he had amassed a collection of death-camp music, a large proportion of which now rests at the Holocaust Museum in Washington. Kulisiewicz's son, Christof, gave a trove of Kulisiewicz's papers to Mr. Lotoro.

Relatives of camp musicians welcome Mr. Lotoro with open arms: "They know about me from the internet, perhaps. But when I began this research in 1988, there was no email, social media or smartphones. I would go directly to the home of the survivor"—many were still alive—"or their relatives, and was welcomed like a friend. The relatives of survivors have proven to be my best allies." Only in one case has a relative said that his father's musical manuscript "was a precious memory and that he would never show it to anyone."

Practically every concentration camp had an orchestra, made up of prisoners, who played for the German officers as they ate their meals, and also played fast-paced marches as the inmates filed out for labor duties. "The German authorities at Auschwitz I"—the main camp of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex—"had a good knowledge of classical music and incurred considerable costs to acquire musical instruments, scores and sheet music." The orchestra grew to some 80 musicians. Alongside the orchestra was a brass band, 120 strong. The musicians weren't exempt from forced labor but did enjoy marginally better living conditions.

When Polish Jewish conductor and composer Artur Gold arrived at Treblinka in 1942, Kurt Franz—a brutal SS commander known for unleashing his large dog on prisoners—made sure that "the famous musician be given what he needed to assemble an orchestra befitting his reputation," Mr. Lotoro says. Gold "managed to have his musicians exempted from ordinary work in order to hold regular rehearsals." They also received extra food rations. "It was probably the best-known and most accomplished orchestra" among the extermination camps on Polish soil.

Mr. Lotoro was born into a Roman Catholic family, but when he was 15, he started to "become fascinated with Judaism." He met his wife, Grazia, in 2000, when he was 36, and together they resolved to convert to Judaism. There are no synagogues in Barletta, so they drive for hours to Rome for religious instruction. They converted formally in 2004, on the morning of their wedding day. His Jewish name is Israel; Grazia's is Sarah. The rabbi who conducted the wedding ceremony told Mr. Lotoro: "You have a mission to give life to dry bones."

"Being a Jew helps me with my research," Mr. Lotoro says. "It's a mission, a mitzvah." While the music he encounters is often exhilarating, the back stories are tragic and demoralizing. How do you cope when you learn that a composer who salvaged his musical compositions after two years in Buchenwald had to burn the papers to keep warm on the death march the Nazis forced him to undertake as American soldiers approached the camp? Or that a distinguished Jewish composer was dispatched to the gas chamber merely because he coughed as Josef Mengele walked past the assembled inmates?

"Being a Jew allows me to withstand the many, many periods when I am down," Mr. Lotoro says. "But ultimately, what I do is remembrance. And memory is our official Jewish sport."

Mr. Varadarajan, a Journal contributor, is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and at NYU Law School's Classical Liberal Institute.

From the Swamps of Louisiana to the Supreme Court

CROSS COUNTRY
By Daniel J. Erspamer

New Orleans

The long-term strength of my state's economy and the success of President Trump's energy agenda are on the Supreme Court docket on Monday. If those stakes aren't high enough, basic American principles like the rule of law hang in the balance too. Welcome to *Chevron v. Plaquemines Parish*, a case so bizarre it could only have come out of the Louisiana swamp.

The case has its roots in World War II, when the federal government directed oil companies to produce unprecedented supplies of crude oil and specialized petroleum products. While businesses like Chevron surely never thought they would be sued for their efforts to help America win the war, they had protection under federal law: companies operating as de facto federal officers are guaranteed access to neutral federal courts when facing lawsuits for their actions. When Congress enacted the first version of this policy in 1815, it channeled Alexander Hamilton, who wrote in the Federalist Papers that federal jurisdiction must extend to cases "in which the State tribunals cannot be supposed to be impartial and unbiased."

That description applies to the Bayou State. Since 2013, trial lawyers working on behalf of local parishes—the Louisiana equivalent of counties—have filed dozens of civil lawsuits in state courts seeking damages from oil companies for coastal erosion they claim was caused in part by wartime production activities. In 2016, the state intervened as a third-party plaintiff in the litigation. The Louisiana Attorney General's Office also entered into a joint-prosecution agreement with private plaintiffs' counsel that prohibits the state from supporting any arguments raised by the defendants, regardless of their merit.

Impartial justice under such a system is doubtful. As many legal scholars and experts have noted, this arrangement appears to undermine the Louisiana attorney general's independence. The trial lawyers spearheading this litigation have a direct financial interest in the lawsuits' outcomes. They also help fund campaigns for the judges who hear the cases and the state officials who make them possible. The plaintiff bar's grip on Louisiana politics is bipartisan: Both the current Republican governor and his Democratic predecessor supported the state's role in this litigation.

The state's economy, the Trump energy agenda and the rule of law are on the line in the Chevron case.

From the outset, oil companies invoked their right to remove these cases to federal court. But trial lawyers pressed on in state court, asserting arguments that ignore Louisiana law to keep the suits alive and out of federal jurisdiction.

These lawsuits are framed as local enforcement actions brought under a Louisiana coastal-use law enacted in 1980, but they target lawful activities dating back to the 1940s that are explicitly grandfathered under that law. In the first case that went to trial, a state district court judge acknowledged this. Less than a month later the judge changed his mind, remarking that his initial ruling would "gut" the trial lawyers' case. What's really been gutted is the rule of law.

In April, the case was allowed to proceed in state court even after Chevron asked the U.S. Supreme Court to weigh in on where these claims should be considered. After a three-week trial, a local jury returned a $745 million verdict against the company. With more than 40 additional cases pending in state courts, the potential liabilities are staggering.

Only the Supreme Court can stop this farce. Clarity from the justices is necessary to address a split among circuit courts over the interpretation of the statute governing the removal of cases from state to federal court.

A decisive ruling is also essential to ending the legal uncertainty that these lawsuits have created, which significantly affects energy companies' willingness to invest in Louisiana oil and gas production. According to research from my organization, since 2009 Louisiana's offshore production has declined 56%, while federal offshore output grew. Employment in the industry has fallen by 37%, and since 2014 the state has lost $1.1 billion in wages and $70 million in forgone tax revenue. Put simply, capital investments are moving out of the state to lower-risk regions.

This litigation threatens the survival of Louisiana oil and gas production and my state's ability to grow, attract families and thrive. It is also a threat to Mr. Trump's energy agenda. In fact, the enormous stakes have prompted the U.S. solicitor general to file a brief in support of Chevron's request for removal to federal court. Louisiana energy is essential to America's economic and national security interests. Families and companies are counting on the Supreme Court to uphold the law—and secure our future.

Mr. Erspamer is CEO of the Pelican Institute for Public Policy.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Iranian People Answer the Call

Reza Pahlavi took a risk. From exile, the Shah's son called on Iranians to rally against the regime at 8 p.m. on Thursday and Friday. If few had showed, Mr. Pahlavi would have been exposed as another big talker from safety abroad. Instead the Iranian people answered his call.

The country's streets explode at the time the Crown Prince appointed.

The protest wave accelerated, with the largest demonstrations in years in Tehran, Mashhad and across the country. Anti-regime protesters ruled the streets for hours, even in affluent areas in the capital, shouting "down with the dictator," "freedom" and "long live the Shah."

Police vehicles were abandoned and set ablaze. Regime flags were ripped up. Several state buildings were burned in Tehran, along with a state propaganda building in Isfahan. A few security forces were killed, reportedly along with many protesters. A video has emerged of bodies strewn on a hospital floor.

More details are hard to come by because on Thursday the regime cut off internet and phone lines nationwide in an attempt to disrupt protests and cover up its repression. This is the regime's playbook from 2019, when it killed 1,500 protesters.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei doesn't want President Trump to see the crackdown. On Thursday Mr. Trump reiterated that if the regime slaughters its people, "we're going to hit them very hard." For protesters facing down armed regime thugs, this and their own large numbers are their only protection.

But the regime's earlier repression—at least 40 killed and 2,000 arrested before the blackout—didn't cross Mr. Trump's red line, he said Thursday. He attributed those deaths to "stampedes," which gives the regime a pass.

The Ayatollah replied by taunting Mr. Trump. "If he can, let him manage his own country," Mr. Khamenei said Friday, while Tehran's public prosecutor threatened rioters with the death penalty. But Iran's state failures—in currency, prices, water, electricity and defense—are now undeniable, and a turn to massive violence could lead to an even larger uprising.

Thursday and Friday made clear the protests have broad momentum. The longer they go on, the more Iranians overcome the fear on which the regime depends. Without weapons, the protesters will need sympathizers in the regime and the military to join their cause.

Revolutions also need leaders, and it's good to see Mr. Pahlavi organize the protests and have other factions and strikers join in. The Iranians in the streets aren't all in favor of restoring the monarchy, and Mr. Pahlavi says consistently that he wants to be a unifying national symbol and a merely transitional leader. But it's notable that he has enough of a following that Iranians turned out when he asked.

Someone has to yoke the memory of Iran's pre-1979 past to a live possibility of a better future. If the exiled Crown Prince can do that, the regime is in more trouble than it knows.

On Friday Mr. Pahlavi appealed to Mr. Trump for help. The U.S. can do so first by restoring communications. Coordination, including via Mr. Pahlavi and diaspora news sites, is essential. Contrary to what Vice President JD Vance suggested Thursday, this is no time for nuclear talks. Undercutting the Iranian people by giving the regime credibility and relief from sanctions would be the Barack Obama move.

This may be a rare moment when revolutionary change is possible. The fall of a regime that has spread terror and mayhem for 47 years would be earth-shaking. This is an opportunity—call it an obligation—for the U.S. and the world to rally to the side of the Iranian people.

Mr. Trump, Thank Mitch McConnell

The headline from Capitol Hill on Thursday is that the Senate voted 52-47 to advance a war powers resolution to limit President Trump's actions on Venezuela. The vote was a rebuke to the President, and Mr. Trump didn't take it well, as you would expect.

The Senator stands on consistent principle on presidential war power.

The Senators in favor included five Republicans: Maine's Susan Collins, Missouri's Josh Hawley, Alaska's Lisa Murkowski, Kentucky's Rand Paul, and Indiana's Todd Young. Most notable in that list is Mr. Hawley, who fancies himself presidential material but isn't helping his cause by advertising that he'd be happy as President Gulliver tied down in the Lilliput of Capitol Hill.

But for our money the speech of the day was from Mitch McConnell, the senior Senator from Kentucky, former Majority Leader, and frequent target of Mr. Trump's wrath. Mr. McConnell has been a consistent, thoughtful supporter of presidential powers, and he continued to stand on principle on Thursday.

Like many scholars, Mr. McConnell has doubts about the constitutionality of the War Powers Act that passed over the veto of a weakened Richard Nixon. But for the sake of this vote, the Senator accepted its terms and still offered good reason to vote no.

"First, plain statute: Notification of Congress within 48 [hours]? Check. Withdrawal within 60 days? Try 60 minutes!" Mr. McConnell said, regarding the time U.S. forces spent on the ground in Caracas.

"What's more, recent history provides clear precedent from Presidents of both parties," the Senator added. "What authority did this operation exceed that President Obama or President Reagan did not exceed in operations in Libya? Or President Clinton in Kosovo?

"What makes this time different than President Biden's strikes in Syria or Yemen? Certainly, there's little daylight between the legality of this operation and the one President H.W. Bush undertook to apprehend Manuel Noriega in Panama."

This is the history you know when you didn't arrive in the Senate last Thursday. Mr. McConnell, we should add, has supported Presidents of both parties on the war-making power no matter the doubts he might have had about a specific policy.

Mr. McConnell went on to say Thursday that "a stable Venezuela, led by duly elected Venezuelans, will leave Americans safer and more secure. The Administration should explain how that end goal will be achieved."

Assuming the Venezuela war resolution passes the Senate and House, Mr. Trump can still veto and it won't become law. But the President should want to keep the country on his side, and he ought to thank Mr. McConnell for his vote and sound advice.

A Big Oil Case at the Supreme Court

The Supreme Court on Monday will kick off oral arguments for the new year with an important case *(Chevron USA v. Plaquemines Parish)* of jurisdictional house-keeping. Here's the question: Can businesses be sued in state courts for actions they took on behalf of the federal government?

Louisiana's trial bar and politicians try to loot Chevron in state court.

Plaquemines and other coastal parishes in Louisiana are suing Chevron and other oil companies for—get this—producing aviation fuel for the U.S. military during World War II. The plaintiffs say their oil drilling in the 1940s to fulfill a federal contract led to coastal erosion and damaged wetlands. They want billions of dollars in damages.

Land erosion is a serious problem in Louisiana as it increases the risk of flooding. But the main culprits are storms and geography, not oil and gas drilling. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also contributed by leveeing the Mississippi River to prevent flooding, which had the unintended effect of preventing wetlands from naturally regenerating.

Leading the raid on Chevron is plaintiff attorney John Carmouche, who has contributed to campaign groups supporting Republican Gov. Jeff Landry and his Democratic predecessor John Bel Edwards. Both support the lawsuits. Mr. Carmouche's firm has also donated to the campaign of state Judge Michael Clement, who presided over the Plaquemines trial last year.

The judge made procedural rulings in the plaintiffs' favor, and a local jury awarded Plaquemines $740 million in damages—equivalent to about $33,200 per resident. Chevron's liability could swell as more parish lawsuits go to trial.

Chevron says the lawsuits belong in federal court because its oil drilling fulfilled a federal contract. A 2011 federal law lets federal officials, agencies, or anyone acting under their direction such as contractors remove civil lawsuits and criminal prosecutions to federal court if their actions are "relating to any act under color of such office."

This federal-officer removal doctrine has a long and rich history. In the War of 1812, Congress authorized federal customs officers, then responsible for enforcing a trade embargo with England, to move shipowner claims against them to federal court. The purpose was to prevent harassment in state court for doing their job.

Congress over two centuries has expanded the federal judicial forum for federal officers to ensure state lawsuits wouldn't interfere with national objectives. A 2011 amendment added protections for federal contractors. But the plaintiffs argue that the law covers only Chevron's refining of aviation fuel—not its oil drilling. This is strange logic.

Chevron had to extract oil to produce aviation fuel. The plaintiffs' cramped reading of the law would weaken protection for federal contractors by limiting federal jurisdiction to claims related to end-products. Critical mineral developers with federal contracts could be sued in state courts for alleged environmental harms caused by exploration. Letting plaintiff attorneys harass federal contractors in state courts could discourage businesses from assisting the feds in emergencies.

The stakes in the case go beyond oil drilling to bedrock federalism principles. States have constitutional powers, but they don't include legal harassment of companies or agencies doing their federal duty.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A Defense of the Donroe Doctrine in Greenland

Your editorial "Invade Greenland? Why?" (Jan. 7) castigates President Trump and adviser Stephen Miller for committing the ultimate of Washington sins: saying what you mean and meaning what you say.

Mr. Trump has never wavered in his belief—shared by presidents as diverse as Andrew Johnson, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman—that Greenland is essential to our security and should eventually be part of us. As these pages have reported, Chinese maritime activity is increasing in the Arctic and giving credence to Beijing's insistence that it is a "near Arctic power." The People's Liberation Army is conducting war games simulating combat in the Western Hemisphere, and Russia continues to expand its Arctic bases and icebreaker fleet despite its quagmire in Ukraine.

The National Security Strategy established a "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine that identifies "extra-hemispheric powers" from meddling in the West. The president acted under that precept to remove Nicolás Maduro from power in Venezuela. It is under the concept of "hemispheric defense" that he is reiterating what he has stated in various forms since 2018: Greenland can't be allowed to fall under the sway of adversaries. That Washington and Western Europe continue to be flummoxed by that historically grounded commitment is more an indictment of the foreign-policy establishment than of the Trump administration.

While Mr. Miller's comment that the world is "governed by power" may offend the sensibilities of Wilsonian idealists, it reflects the reality of contemporary great-power rivalries. Mr. Trump's bold action in Venezuela, and his commitment to the defense of the Western Hemisphere, will have a salutary global effect by restoring the U.S. deterrent. An assertive America confident in its power and role on the world stage is the surest guarantee of peace.

Alexander B. Gray
McLean, Va.

Mr. Gray, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, served as chief of staff of the White House National Security Council, 2019-21.

Why Is Boston's Biotech Industry Struggling?

Your report "Boston's Biotech Engine Is Sputtering" (U.S. News, Dec. 30) rightly notes that highly trained Ph.D.s are struggling to find work as Boston's biotech sector contracts. But the problem isn't an oversupply of scientists or a temporary venture-capital cycle. It's a deeper structural failure in how the country builds industries.

The U.S. excels at funding discovery and celebrating breakthroughs, then neglects the hard work of manufacturing them at scale. When commercialization stalls, capital retreats, companies collapse and top talent is left without a place to apply its skills. We have seen this before in semiconductors, solar energy and nuclear power. Research leadership remained but manufacturing—and economic strength—moved elsewhere.

Biotechnology faces the same risk. The real bottleneck isn't the lab; it is the lack of domestic biomanufacturing capacity to carry innovations across the "valley of death" from proof-of-concept to commercial reality. That gap is where today's job losses are felt most acutely.

Biotechnology's strongest case isn't ideological or aspirational. It is practical. Modern fermentation enables more reliable medicines, higher-performance materials and more secure supply chains. These advantages already exist, but without shared-scale facilities and de-risked first-of-a-kind plants, they can't support sustained employment.

If the U.S. wants biotechnology to remain an engine of growth, it needs to treat biomanufacturing as essential infrastructure. Otherwise, we will keep training world-class scientists for jobs that no longer exist here.

Mark Warner
Liberation Bioindustries
San Antonio, Texas

Anti-Christian Hatred Isn't the Hindu Norm

Tunku Varadarajan reports on "The Hindu Attacks on India's Christians" (Houses of Worship, Jan. 2). Yet it's easy to get the wrong impression. That's a behavior the majority of the country doesn't condone and for which a small percentage of Hindus are responsible.

Allow me to share my experience. I've lived in the U.S. since 1970 but have visited India, where I was born, frequently since the mid-'90s. I run a metal-molding company, which employs some 5,000 people who work in India. The ground reality, as I've seen it: Most Christians lead robust, fulfilling lives of accomplishment and play leading roles in the arts education and medicine. The camaraderie between the Hindu and Christian communities is a delight to watch. I'm a Hindu but have supported the Bangalore Baptist Hospital for the past 25 years, funding and guiding it to its current position as one of the country's leading hospitals. I'm not the only Hindu who does so. Many others help Christian institutions, study in Christian colleges and celebrate Christmas. No issues.

India is a huge country, home to 22 languages, the menu of the world's religions and an ethnically mixed population. Mr. Varadarajan writes of "widespread hatred and thuggery." Indians living in India, including Christians, don't see it.

Krishna Chivukula
Odessa, Fla.

The 'Gallant' Mr. Mamdani

Peggy Noonan rightly advises that "We Could Use a Return to Gallantry" (Declarations, Jan. 3), and she's right to cite Jackie Kennedy as an exemplar. She selflessly participated in the public ceremony honoring her husband days after he'd been assassinated. The following week she wrote a note of condolence with "inexpressible sympathy" to Marie Tippit, whose husband, J.D. Tippit, was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald during the manhunt. Grace personified.

William Baldwin
Kirkland, Wash.

Is Zohran Mamdani not calling for gallantry in the public sector? It sounds so to my ears. "For too long, we have turned to the private sector for greatness, while accepting mediocrity from those who serve the public," he said in his inaugural address. "I cannot blame anyone who has come to question the role of government, whose faith in democracy has been eroded by decades of apathy." The mayor wants government "to be great" and to match the excellence we expect from the brightest lights of the private sector.

Ms. Noonan despises the use of government power for base and destructive ends. There is no shortage of examples in the political scene: "We live in a cold political world of cocoons, bubbles, and silos." True but not inevitable. Mr. Mamdani is trying to fashion a gallant government—one that takes responsibility and, as Ms. Noonan writes, "shows we can be better."

Alan Saly
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Lawler's 'Principled' Stand

I love how Rep. Mike Lawler's "principled" stand involved throwing massive amounts of taxpayer money at people, many of whom don't need or deserve it, to fix premiums ("I Didn't Hold the GOP Hostage on Healthcare, Letters, Jan. 3). With principles like that, spare a thought for those who still think conservative entitlement reform is possible.

Larry Thomas
North Hampton, N.H.

Cut Mark Kelly Some Slack

Regarding your editorial "The Kelly-Hegseth Grudge Match" (Jan. 6): I wish my senator hadn't joined the five other Democrats in that social-media video. Silly, partisan, unhelpful. But I also wish the defense secretary had simply asked Senate leadership to censure or reprimand Mr. Kelly instead of attempting to strip him of his rank and pension. In spite of his poor decision, Mr. Kelly gave our country 25 years in the Navy, flew 39 combat missions and four missions in space. I didn't vote for him, but I admire his service and devotion to duty. One mistake could be excused by a grateful nation.

Jim Barber
Mesa, Ariz.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"My outside interests include paying rent and having money for groceries."

OPINION

A Good Riddance, but a Disquieting One

DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

Nicolás Maduro wasn't the president of Venezuela but an illegitimate head of state, brutal and criminal, whose presence was ruinous for his country and its people. No good person mourns his fall.

Beyond that, some points:

The U.S. military reversed the script. After news broke Saturday of Mr. Maduro's removal, gone was the picture you keep in your head of the slovenly withdrawal from Afghanistan. It was replaced by a predawn raid that was brilliantly executed and valiant. High stakes, high pressure, every piece of the machine had to work for the whole thing to work, and it did. One hundred fifty warplanes from 20 locations, a successful cyberattack that turned off Caracas's lights, Russian-built air defenses taken out. The New York Times reported on the pilot of the first helicopter in the assault, who was hit in the leg three times when the MH-47 Chinook came under fire, kept flying, and struggled to stay aloft. He and the co-pilot stuck the landing, army commandos poured out, there was an intense firefight with Mr. Maduro's security. Many U.S. troops were brave, all were professional, none were lost.

No one should mourn the fall of Maduro, but the world is becoming more brutish and narrow.

Can competence be moving? Yes.

The decision to go in was Trumpian in its boldness, Trumpian in its blur—he has ad-libbed and free associated about his strategic reasoning a lot but never issued a truly formal and persuasive statement, as if he didn't trust his own reasons or didn't trust others' ability to understand them. It was Trumpian too in the sense that after the military success it all looks ad hoc and thrown-together, and maybe ill thought through in the long term.

No one knows what's next. How does this *work?* A quagmire—a thugocracy left able and intact, with the likelihood of U.S. boots on the ground? An against-the-odds triumph—it's only when you push over the tree that you find out how hollow it was inside? Something in between? What does *that* look like?

STARMAX/ZUMA PRESS

Nicolás Maduro and his wife are escorted in New York, Jan. 5.

Everyone knows "You break it, you own it" is true. The administration is saying we didn't break it, we just removed a bad guy and left his government standing, but under pressure and on notice.

The dog that didn't bark was conservative influencers and media figures passionately inclined toward nonintervention in the world. Part of their silence would be personal loyalty to a president who had just launched a military operation, part would be professional prudence: If this foray works, they won't have been tarnished by opposing a success; if it turns south, they'll announce they were loyal but have eyes and now must speak up. But part of the reason they said little is that they weren't sure how their own base felt. The base itself wasn't sure.

Trumpian Republicans came to hate what they called "forever wars." What they really hated is what we have called them in this space, "long, unwon wars" that bled blood and treasure for years and yielded nothing. That was what they hated: all that loss and nothing good. Capped off by Afghanistan—our aircraft and vehicles abandoned to the people we went there to fight, the Taliban, as they took charge. *That* is what Donald Trump's supporters hate.

If this "war," if that's what it is, "works," however that looks, they will be happy with it.

I don't buy a major reason not to have removed Mr. Maduro, which is to avoid giving Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping a rationale for their own past and future aggressions: *We can take Taiwan, he took Venezuela.* Messrs. Putin and Xi do what they want within systems that allow it. "Trump did it" isn't an excuse they need or require.

It is more likely they've been impressed by what Mr. Trump did—he was bold, made a big gamble, and U.S. military and intelligence were first-rate. If you think Mr. Putin with his shambolic military and envious nature didn't notice, you're wrong.

This is Mr. Trump's second big win in this administration from the military and intelligence agencies, the first being the complex and successful bombing of Iran's nuclear sites last June. Venezuela will sharpen his taste for such endeavors.

Is it possible to be happy Mr. Maduro is gone and still feel disquiet and unease? It is. Which gets us to the larger point, that we're in a new time. What I felt Saturday morning was that something good had happened, and yet something had been unleashed.

In 2014, when Mr. Putin took Crimea, many in the U.S. foreign-policy establishment were rocked and shocked. I attended a gathering of diplomats, journalists and scholars, and they had blanched faces as they discussed what it means. But they dwelled on secondary and tertiary issues and had fantastical notions—was Mr. Putin just making a point, and having made it, will he retreat?

I thought no, you are missing the heart of it. What just happened is an endpoint. The old post-1989 way is over for Mr. Putin, we're in new territory. I thought of the name of Tom Wolfe's then-recent final novel, "Back to Blood": The world is going back to something basic, grimy and tribal.

Concerned, sophisticated liberals are warning the world is devolving into "spheres of influence," going in the direction of Russia dominating Europe, China dominating Asia, America dominating the Americas. No higher belief is held high, not democracy or pluralism.

They are right to be concerned. Such a world replaces the old imperfect one—it deemphasizes the long and never fully satisfying work of friendship and alliances, of stabilizing international institutions and arrangements, of active diplomacy that can make things better. It isn't creedal or expansive, will likely be more brutish and narrow.

Venezuela is within our sphere. So is Greenland, which within days the administration was threatening.

Connected to this, at least in my mind, are the words of Stephen Miller, White House deputy chief of staff for policy, to CNN's Jake Tapper on Monday. This is the mood music of the Trump White House right now:

The world must be governed by "force," Mr. Miller said. "We live in a world in which you can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else, but we live in a world, in the real world, Jake, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world since the beginning of time."

He didn't say "You can't handle the truth," as Jack Nicholson did in "A Few Good Men," but that was the flavor. He didn't say, as Osama bin Laden did after 9/11, that the world respects only "the strong horse." But it had that sound.

There's truth in it: This brute world respects strength. But you wonder how you'd feel if those words came from a high aide to the leader of China or Russia. How does it make anything better that Americans talk like this now, suggesting they're more willing to act just like the world, think like it, leaving it with no higher standard to meet or better behavior to be impressed by? I can't figure how that makes things better.

How Trump Makes Good on His Threat to Iran

By Saeed Ghasseminejad And Behnam Ben Taleblu

President Trump has warned Tehran that Washington is "locked and loaded" if the regime slaughters peaceful protesters. Iran is calling his bluff. With at least 42 confirmed dead, the president's warning is now a policy test. Will America enforce its red lines?

Mr. Trump has proved he isn't Barack Obama on Iran policy. Whereas President Obama made a nuclear deal enriching Tehran's theocrats, Mr. Trump withdrew from that flawed agreement and pursued a sanctions strategy robbing the regime of oil revenue. When Iranians took to the streets starting in 2017, unlike Mr. Obama in 2009, Mr. Trump offered robust political support to protesters and torpedoed the conventional wisdom in Washington that doing so would be the kiss of death.

As with Venezuela, he can order the seizure of tankers carrying oil in violation of sanctions.

Now, as the regime is firing at hospitals and warning of no leniency, protesters inspired by President Trump's promise are beseeching him to help, even naming streets after him. Will Mr. Trump replicate Mr. Obama's 2013 red-line debacle in Syria, which undermined U.S. deterrence globally, locked in a teetering regime for more than a decade, and plunged the Middle East into bloody conflict begetting a refugee crisis?

The Islamic Republic is betting that it can suppress this latest uprising with lethal force while the West watches. Mr. Trump can prove them wrong. How? By tracking and confiscating oil tankers, something the U.S. has done with Venezuela. These tankers, dubbed the "Shadow Fleet," are illicitly transporting Iranian oil to China and undermining Mr. Trump's policy of maximum pressure.

This approach allows the U.S. to inflict acute pain on the regime without immediate military strikes against Iranian territory. It also buys time for Iranian protesters to grow their numbers on the street.

Practically speaking, seizing the vessels would fire a warning shot at the regime while denying it the revenue needed to fund its apparatus of repression. Politically, it would let Mr. Trump preserve his credibility and impose an immediate cost for the violence committed by authorities.

Tehran's sneering response to Mr. Trump was a miscalculation. Ali Larijani, secretary of Iran's highest-ranking security body, warned Americans to "be mindful" of their soldiers' safety, forgetting that what drove Mr. Trump to kill Iran's chief terrorist, Qassem Soleimani, six years ago was a cycle of violence in Iraq that targeted U.S. servicemen and contractors.

Indifference in the face of the regime's violence would only prolong the crisis. A newly formed Defense Council in Iran recently hinted that the regime might even take preemptive military action against perceived external threats.

With the regime continuing to meet protestors with violence, the time has come to shatter its confidence. Here, the stunning military operation against the Maduro regime can bolster American power, but the Islamic Republic might still be gambling that in the Middle East, Washington will sit out the fight.

Mr. Trump can change this impression by targeting the regime's economic arteries and signal to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei that the price of slaughtering his own people is the total collapse of his state's financial viability.

Iran is already under severe economic strain. Its currency has fallen, and protests against the regime have spread nationwide. Yet Tehran still exports more than 2 million barrels of oil a day, which generates revenue to fund proxies, oppress the Iranian people, and advance a ballistic-missile and nuclear program. The mismatch between American power and the regime's resilience exists because Washington allows it. To break the regime's will, the U.S. must move beyond designating vessels on paper and start physically confiscating the tankers that transfer Iranian oil.

This won't require action by Congress. The U.S. has the legal tools to handicap this fleet today. Civil forfeiture allows the U.S. to seize the illicit cargo and the tanker itself. Oil is a renewable resource, but a specialized tanker is a strategic asset. A sanction is a fine; a seizure is a foreclosure.

We know where the ships are. What the U.S. needs is the political will to seize them.

The connection between the shadow fleet and the streets is direct. Every tanker that docks is a lifeline for the regime. Every tanker seized is a victory for the opposition. For the brave men and women risking their lives in Iran, the seizure of these vessels would be a force multiplier, bolstering confidence. A bankrupt regime can't pay domestic paramilitaries or a Shiite foreign legion to shoot its citizens indefinitely. When the regime's income evaporates, so will the loyalty of the security forces whose members rely on it.

The window to support this movement is open, but not indefinitely. To empower the streets, Mr. Trump should seize Tehran's shadow fleet as the first step. If that doesn't deter Mr. Khamenei, Washington has ample room to increase the pain.

Mr. Ghasseminejad is a senior Iran and financial economics adviser at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Mr. Ben Taleblu is FDD's Iran program senior director.

Oil Power vs. the People's Revolution

BUSINESS WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

Since there has been much confusion on the point, let's understand: Oil is a highly unusual resource. It allows regimes to put very large amounts of cash in their pockets without worrying whether their domestic arrangements, such as personal freedom, the rule of law and predictable regulation, will sustain an economy based on the ingenuity, education and enterprise of their citizens.

It allows regimes like Vladimir Putin's or the Iranian mullahs' or Venezuela's to pursue aims, like the Ukraine war, that wouldn't be available to them otherwise. The cash wouldn't be available; let's face it, neither would the aims. A country of empowered citizens would have no interest in a war with Ukraine on the basis that Russia has been pursuing it, to upend the prosperity and success of a neighbor and trading partner.

The world has reached a moment. Venezuela's creaky regime has received a push from President Donald Trump's military action against Nicolás Maduro, Iran's from Mr. Trump's and Israel's military action in last year's 12-day war. Much of the Biden-Trump hesitancy on Ukraine, I'm here to tell you, has been fear for Mr. Putin's own political stability.

No war for oil, the left is shouting. They miss the point. In the long run, the wealth and technology that allow a country to compete in the first league comes from citizens, not from holes in the ground. In the U.S., true, citizen ingenuity did conjure new wealth from holes in the ground via fracking. But most Americans hardly notice America's reemergence as an energy power. They create so much wealth and prosperity already that the energy business is a drop in the bucket.

Mr. Trump also misses the point when he brags that now the U.S. controls Venezuela's oil. Yes, as experts told the Journal on Thursday, by letting oil flow again the U.S. will help fund imports desperately needed by Venezuela's consumers and businesses. But as long as prosperity is restricted to a resource controlled by government, which dictates who receives the proceeds, the "resource curse" is likely to keep poor a country that, on paper, should be rich.

Citizens of Venezuela and Iran face an opportunity thanks to the impulsive and unpredictable Trump.

For now, the administration's functional goal is removing control from the displaced dictator Mr. Maduro's hands and somehow placing it in new hands. How this will play out is far from certain. An obvious step would be allocating a slice to the recognized opposition. But the Trump administration perhaps merits some patience despite its evident lack of a plan. A lot of things that nobody can predict or control have been set in motion.

On casual lips is another intervention, a 1953 coup in Iran, which the U.S. is said to have engineered. If only it were that simple.

The British were not unreasonable in seeking compensation for seized Iranian oil assets or commercial terms for continuing to generate revenue needed by the Iranian government, a situation not without analogies to Mr. Trump's Venezuela intervention.

But Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, likely in fear of the extremism he himself unleashed, was paralyzed. He approached the U.S. for aid to keep his government afloat, implying he might otherwise turn to the Soviets. The Truman and Eisenhower administrations were more sympathetic than remembered, but they weren't about to put U.S. taxpayers on the hook for a nation whose wealth was "rather like Texas," as Truman Secretary of State Dean Acheson explained to him.

In fact, it was Mossadegh who launched a coup, jailing an emissary who brought the shah's request for his resignation (as the shah was entitled to ask). When Mossadegh's intransigence finally pushed the country over the edge, Iran didn't have a democratic tradition like Venezuela's, but it had a civil society, and virtually all segments, including Mossadegh's intermittent Islamist allies, backed his removal, which only in lore was concocted solely by the U.S.

Unfortunately, the revolution Iranians really wanted would come only 26 years later, beginning, like this week's protests, with shopkeepers and students. It would be hijacked by a theocratic kleptocracy that, despite rank unpopularity, has survived 47 years because it controls Iran's oil revenue.

All this holds lessons for today. Despite occasional rhetorical excesses out of Washington, U.S. troops aren't the answer. Iranians and Venezuelans will have to assume moral and bodily risk if they want a different future. Even then, they will still have to the solve the problem (and temptations) of oil.

But in the bold impulsivity and reactivity of this president, they have an opportunity. Witness last weekend's energetic and unpredictable Maduro snatch. The moment seems less likely to extend itself to Putin's Russia but, of course, we don't know what we don't know.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
PUBLISHED SINCE 1889 BY DOW JONES & COMPANY

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Chicago Tribune

Founded June 10, 1847

YOUR VOICE

The revelations I see in animal prints left in the snow

By Susan Koch

Starting with impressive early-season snow, our Midwest climate this winter has been memorable for sure. Whether a lake-effect blast on the Lake Michigan shore or a whiteout along Interstate 80, our tolerance has already been tested.

I've done my share of shivering and shoveling, but the cold and snow also bring one of my favorite pastimes. For that, I owe thanks to the many creatures that populate Midwestern landscapes — specifically the 100 acres of timber on our farm not far from the Mississippi River.

While a few animals such as woodchucks and bats are true hibernators, many others remain active in both rural and urban areas throughout the winter. So there's nothing I'd rather do on a bright winter day than climb into my Carhartts and head out through the snow.

What makes this winter wandering so fascinating is not necessarily the wildlife you see. Rather it's the evidence of their presence left behind — footprints, droppings, scrapes, beds and myriad other indicators of the daily activities that sustain these winter residents from one day to the next.

I have no idea what I'm going to discover on any given day, but since white-tailed deer are the most abundant large animal in the Midwest, it would be unusual not to see evidence of their presence.

Deer have well-established runs especially obvious in the winter landscape. One morning after several inches of fresh snow,

A dusting of snow covers the woods at Bunker Hill Forest Preserve as deer make their way on Chicago's Northwest Side on Jan. 23, 2018. **NANCY STONE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

I followed a trail of cloven-hoofed prints that ran along the edge of a wood to where a small herd had bedded down some hours earlier. Each animal left a distinct bean-shaped imprint — their heavy winter coats insulating them from the cold.

The tracks of Eastern cottontail are also a common sight — especially near thickets of chokecherry, elderberry and other bushes that provide safe shelter. Though the cottontail's feet are completely covered with fur, the four toes visible on each foot and the bounding pattern of their gait are easily recognizable.

Cottontails are strict vegetarians, but unfortunately for them, that's not the case for the coyotes, bobcats, foxes and raptors that share their surroundings. Rabbits are most certainly on the menu every day for these hungry hunters.

One morning, I came upon a scene that looked to be an encounter between a cottontail and a coyote — the coyote's tracks with four large toes and sharp claws obvious in the snow. All that was left was a scattering of blood and a few tufts of fur. It was not a pretty sight.

Unlike coyotes, which often range even in daytime as pairs or small family groups, bobcats and foxes spend the winter roaming their territory in solitude. They stalk their prey — rabbits, mice and voles as well as pheasants and turkeys — mostly in the elusive hours before sunrise or the soft light of dusk.

Though I have yet to identify bobcat tracks this winter, a strategically placed trail camera recently recorded a photo of a beautiful male prowling across a stubble field, its tawny spotted coat and tufted ears standing out clearly against the snow. With more precipitation in the forecast, I'm looking forward to finding clues to his activities, including tracks and scratching posts, in the coming weeks.

Since I'm the stranger in their midst, I don't often find tracks with the animal still in them. But once as I walked across a pasture covered with a dusting of snow, I came face to face with a beautiful red fox. It promptly dashed away into the woods — leaving behind elegant straight-line footprints and a smile on my face.

Fortunately for anyone interested in exploring in the winter landscape, the backyard or a neighborhood playground is a good place to start. There are also numerous parks and preserves in the Chicago area including the Morton Arboretum and the Heller Nature Center — ideal habitat for many species.

The Animal Tracker app enables your phone to help identify tracks on the spot. "Animals Don't Cover Their Tracks" is a Facebook group that shares photos of tracks and other signs and offers advice on how to identify them. And for the armchair explorer, numerous online groups share wildlife trail camera photos — some of which are quite spectacular.

In his winter monologue "Snow," Robert Frost wrote: "You can't get too much winter in the winter." Given the snowy tracks and trails yet to be explored in our 100-acre wood and elsewhere, I enthusiastically embrace that point of view.

But I reserve the right to change my mind — maybe around the first of April.

Susan Koch is a retired chancellor of the University of Illinois Springfield. She lives in Iowa City, where she and her husband farm and raise purebred Angus cattle.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Rayner's gift of joy

Regarding the op-ed "Ray Rayner was a lasting gift to Chicago's children" by Michael Peregrine (Jan. 3): Through all the years and all the morning programs, "Ray Rayner and His Friends" was by far the best morning show. Maybe the fact I was an elementary school child in the late 1960s and watched the show before walking to school with friends biases my thoughts in this regard, but Rayner brought something to me that no other morning show did — joy. Whether it was Rayner reporting on sports by clumsily writing the previous day's scores on a chalkboard (including Slippery Rock) or performing terribly on some craft project, he always did so with a laugh and happiness that was infectious.

I learned from Rayner that maybe my sports team wouldn't win that day or that my school art project wouldn't be what I had imagined, but regardless, we all could still enjoy life with the right, joyful attitude.

— Keith Duncan, Upland, Indiana

Quite a career day

In 1957, Ray Rayner's daughter Christine was in my kindergarten class at Oaklane School in Northbrook. The teacher hosted career days during which fathers came to tell us about their jobs. Mr. Berkebile was an airline pilot. Mr. Breitkopf's company made packaging for candy (and brought a lot of boxes that we all had fun putting together). My dad was a railroader (I still recall the diesel locomotive that he drew as he talked). But, wow! Mr. Rayner was someone we *all* knew right away. His presentation was the most entertaining of all.

Thanks to Michael Peregrine for sparking the memory — and, yes, you can tell someone grew up in Chicago when they pat their shirt fronts for a little note.

— Nann Blaine HIlyard, Winthrop Harbor

MIKE LUCKOVICH/THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

'Textbook for life'

Many years ago, I attended a workshop for teachers at Tribune Tower on a Saturday. We learned a phrase that I have never forgotten: "The newspaper is your textbook for life."

I began stopping on my way to my classroom each Friday morning to buy a dozen newspapers, one for each student in my classroom; all of them had behavioral challenges. I would write out a worksheet, similar to a scavenger hunt, asking students to find answers to questions that would require them to scan several pages of the paper.

The room fell silent as each student studied all the sections of the paper, sometimes becoming absorbed in articles that were not related to my questions on the worksheet. It was not important to me that the worksheet was completed accurately — only that they spent time learning to read a daily newspaper. And some very interesting discussions followed based on things they had learned.

Today, I'm a retired teacher, but I still begin every day with my "textbook for life."

— Ellen M. Peirce, Chicago

Stop-start on cars

I'm giving David McGrath a split decision on his list of innovations he wants back ("The innovations I'd like to see deep-sixed in 2026," Jan. 1).

He's absolutely right about restaurants that are too loud for conversation. Throughout history, meals have been communal events fostering fellowship — and not about a group of people eating together without being able to commune.

But, as far as the auto stop-start feature on cars, he's wrong. Yes, it's an annoyance. But there aren't going to be many absolutely pain-free ways to fight climate change.

If we are unwilling to pay even this small price, just how is this going to work out?

— Mike Koetting, Chicago

Noisy restaurants

What a gift it is to read David McGrath's op-eds. A writer, who with the skills of a gifted neurosurgeon, manages to reach into my ever-softening hard drive of a brain and extract my exact feeling of frustration trying to carry on conversations with my friends at a restaurant table. While at the same time listening to a conversation from Table 14 across the room about how there never seems to be anyone working at certain big-box stores to help find what they need.

It truly is a loud, loud world out there — at least to us oldies.

Well said, David. Well said.

— Reg Green, Manteno, Illinois

Bad NYE telecast

ABC absolutely failed in its coverage of the New Year's Eve celebration for Chicago! With all the hype about the national coverage with New York, I thought there would be more time spent in Chicago. New York switched to Chicago just before midnight, and Chance the Rapper did one song and did the countdown to midnight. ABC showed the fireworks and then switched to Las Vegas.

In years past, the local channel did a much better job.

— Daniel Cook, Woodridge

Underwhelming party

It was great Chicago was featured on ABC on New Year's Eve, but there was *nothing* there in the way of entertainment for hours!

Chance the Rapper performed just before midnight, and the fireworks were (as always) spectacular, but for the prior three hours, the network cuts to Chicago were completely embarrassing.

I counted at least eight on-camera appearances by Chance during which he had zero to add. And of course Mayor Brandon Johnson trying to whoop it up, but there was no *there* there. A shameful showing for the Second City.

The blame is squarely on Johnson for the failure.

— Jay Seifried, Chicago

Chicago's priorities

On my daily dog walks through Lincoln Park, poop bag in hand, I often find myself dipping into the alleys behind multimillion-dollar homes to make a "deposit." Behind the meticulously maintained garages sit rows of city-issued garbage and recycling carts — four, five, sometimes six bins per household. Regardless of the number, each homeowner pays a flat $9.50 a month for trash removal. It's a revealing place to think about Chicago's priorities.

In my six-unit condo building, we pay many times that amount to a private hauler for the same service.

I don't claim to understand much about Chicago's new budget, from video gaming revenue to restructured liquor taxes. But I do understand inequity when I step in it. Chicago's system funnels more than $250 million a year into subsidized garbage pickup for single-family homes — while multiunit buildings foot the full bill themselves.

It's a policy that stinks more than anything my dog leaves behind.

— John Mjoseth, Chicago

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The FT View

FINANCIAL TIMES
'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

Trump unbound: unchecked at home, adventurist abroad

America is accelerating the shift towards a Hobbesian order

Has any year in memory started with such a bang as 2026? In little over seven days, Donald Trump's America has captured the Venezuelan president and declared control of the country and its oil. The president has tossed out threats to Cuba, Colombia, Mexico and Greenland, and warned Iran's leaders that America is ready to intervene if they kill domestic protesters. The US has seized two oil tankers carrying Venezuelan oil — one reportedly escorted by a Russian submarine. And in one move this week it withdrew from some 66 UN and international organisations.

So startling has been the opening of January that US air strikes on Nigeria, on December 25, already feel like the distant past. Trump started the new year in a confident mood, and the success of his Venezuelan gamble — which could easily have backfired — has emboldened him further. The world is dealing with a Trump unbound: a president who feels unconstrained at home and is asserting America's right to act internationally as it sees fit — not just within the western hemisphere over which he has asserted US dominance, but wherever it can get away with it.

This amounts to a sharp escalation in Trump's America First foreign policy. But the president continues to throw his weight around at home — from pressing the US oil industry to pile back into Venezuela despite the lack of legal protections, to a misguided move to ban big institutional investors from buying single-family homes in an effort to boost housing supply. The heavy-handed tactics of his Immigration and Customs Enforcement goons have led to an unarmed woman in Minneapolis being shot dead, sparking protests. Videos raised doubts over Trump's claim that she ran over an ICE agent.

It is debatable how much his actions add up to any coherent worldview from Trump himself. This is a president who follows his whim and his "gut". Military adventurism abroad distracts from his languishing ratings at home. At 79, his hyperactivity also constitutes a riposte to rumours of infirmity and ill health.

Yet if in his first term many in his administration sought to rein him in, powerful White House figures in his second term embrace the president's audacity and portray it as strategy. Stephen Miller, Trump's deputy chief of staff, this week scoffed at the "niceties" of a "rules-based system". He claimed the administration was reflecting the realities of a world "that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power".

America has, of course, intervened militarily abroad countless times before. Even as it sought to construct and enforce the post-1945 rules-based order, it broke those rules when it suited it. In the past, however, rule-breaking was the exception; now it is becoming the norm. Though not solely responsible, the Trump administration is accelerating the shift to a Hobbesian world carved up between strong powers who dictate terms to the rest.

Powerful White House figures are embracing the president's audacity and portraying it as strategy

What might restrain Trump? The courts have had some success; the Supreme Court may soon curtail his tariff powers. Losing control of Capitol Hill in the November midterm elections, if the Democrats regain the House of Representatives, could reduce his room for manoeuvre at home, though less so internationally. Law-breaking is also possible, to influence the voting or try to overturn the result.

Arguably, little may change in foreign policy unless Trump's projection of US power is seen by Americans to be harming their own lives. For America's democratic allies, the implications of the past week, and past year, are stark. However much they may rue the passing of the old world, they need to adapt fast to the new one.

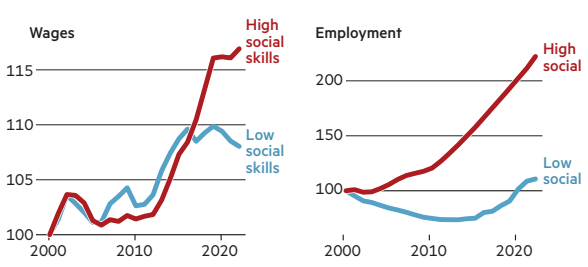
Opinion Data Points

How social skills can help to AI-proof your job

John Burn-Murdoch

Jobs involving more soft skills have outperformed more purely quantitative occupations of late, even within the tech industry

Trends in real wages and employment in computer & mathematical occupations, split by importance of social skills in the job (index, 2000 = 100)



Sources: American Community Survey; O*Net; The Growing Importance of Social Skills in the Labor Market (Deming, 2017)

It's not a sentiment that will come naturally to many given the often eye-watering salaries of those in question, but 2026 is looking like the year we will need to develop sympathy for the coders and quants. Anyone who has used the latest iterations of agentic AI coding tools will have seen for themselves that over the past few weeks we have unquestionably crossed a threshold: the ability to write code to build real, functioning software or quickly gather and analyse data to answer questions has switched overnight from a scarce and specialist talent to a routine and ubiquitous skill. Developers and data scientists are today's blacksmiths, with obsolescence looming large.

Or are they? Listen to almost any conversation over the past decade or two about the most valuable training and skills for career prospects in the 21st century and it will probably have been dominated by science, technology, engineering, maths and coding. Clearly, demand has indeed been very strong. But the implicit assumption that it's specifically the quantitative and technical aspects of these professions that make them well rewarded is not borne out by the evidence.

Counter to the prevailing view, an important but often overlooked 2017 study by Harvard economist David Deming showed that social skills have, in fact, seen the biggest rewards in the labour market over recent years. Extending his analysis through to the present, I find that this remains the case today — and is just as true for those working in science, engineering and tech as for anyone else.

When we look at employment numbers and earnings for different occupations, those that have fared best combine quantitative abilities and interpersonal skills like social perceptiveness, co-ordinating ability, persuasiveness and negotiation (a group that includes doctors, consultants, economists and, yes, even software developers, according to detailed occupational skill data). And jobs requiring strong soft skills but relatively little mathematical aptitude (among them lawyers, therapists and nurses) have fared much better than those requiring strong numerical talent but fewer social skills (among them statistical assistants and programmers).

This is a reversal of the situation a generation or two ago. In 1980, people with strong social skills and poor mathematical skills earned less than those who were strong with numbers but lacked interpersonal aptitude. Today that has flipped and it's the more socially adept who fare much better.

Even within tech and other deeply quantitative fields, roles combining strong coding skills with creativity and collaboration are the ones in which people have thrived. People in mathematical jobs with the lowest emphasis on social skills (actuaries and mathematicians among others) have fared markedly worse both in terms of employment and earnings than those for whom collaboration, creativity and interpersonal interaction play a larger role (software developers among them).

An alternative telling of the boom in software employment and salaries is a boom in demand for people who — while certainly mathematically skilled — are primarily distinguished by their aptitude in using these skills to work closely with others in finding creative solutions to complex and multi-faceted problems. Contra the narrow focus of policymakers on Stem subjects or coding, now more than ever our economy rewards broad skillsets: team players, problem solvers, good communicators and creative thinkers.

This has clear implications for today, as agentic coding tools start automating quantitative work. It should be both useful and reassuring for people in data-heavy knowledge work to reflect on the value they bring to their job over and above writing code and formulas — the parts of their skillset that are far from obsolete. It was probably the broader knowledge, ideas and teamwork that got them to where they are, over and above their pure quant skills. It will almost certainly be so in the years to come.

The initial shock upon discovering that something individuals think of as their own specialist skill has become routine, ubiquitous and automated is understandable. But as the writing of functions and formulas goes the way of hammering metal, quants and coders can reframe their professional identities around being the creative problem solvers, ideas people and project managers they always were. After all, was it really the act of writing the code that was the fun part of the job? Or was it the things that code enabled you to build and discover?

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Why the geopolitics of international currency choice matters

In The Long View "Have we reached a tipping point on public debt?" (Opinion, FT Weekend, December 20) John Plender is instructive on this all-important question, citing the American economist and monetary expert Barry Eichengreen on the linkage between inflation and government debt. The former heals the impact of the latter, albeit inflation is the bitter pill.

Concurrently America's pre-eminent rate historian and prognosticator Jim Grant, in his Grant's Interest Rate Observer (vol 43, no 24, December 19 2025), also leaned on Professor Eichengreen. Grant highlights a paper published in December 2017 by Eichengreen, Arnaud J Mehl and Livia Chiţu entitled "Mars or Mercury? The Geopolitics of International Currency Choice", linking the composition of a country's foreign reserves to military alliances. That paper argues that military alliances boost the share of a currency in the partner's foreign reserve holdings by 30 percentage points and that in a scenario where the US withdraws from the world, it estimates that long-term US interest rates rise by as much as 80 basis points.

Considering the 10-year Treasury yield was just 2.4 per cent at the end of 2017, this is a benefit of "wow proportions" to the US piggy bank and, in turn, to global rates.

Now consider how likely it is that in the same week two worthy and ocean-separated writers — Plender and Grant — have referenced the same academic. What are the odds?

This coincidence must alert readers that a tempest is brewing on subjects noted: lurking inflation, increasing debt, suppressed interest rates and the shifting of hegemonic power.

There are only two important questions in investing that also apply to subjects impacting the future stability of the world — tell me why and tell me when.

Plender gives us the "why", the ever-increasing "intolerable burden" of government debt and suppressed rates leveraging the global financial system. He gives us the tipping point.

What we await is "the when", as in when do we know we have "tipped".

Paul Hackett
Madison, NJ, US

US household wealth and Trilussa's chicken analogy

In his thought-provoking article "Why Americans feel poorer even though they're not" (Data Points, FT Weekend, December 6) John Burn-Murdoch argues that since the 1980s rising spending on housing, childcare and healthcare (which hereafter I shall refer to as "mandatory costs") has been more than offset by falling prices of goods, resulting in greater prosperity across the US.

Reading this claim, I was reminded of a famous poem by the Italian poet Carlo Alberto Camillo Mariano Salustri, known by the pseudonym Trilussa, on the limits of statistics. With his characteristic Roman irony, he observed that if I eat two chickens a day and you eat none, statistics report that on average we each consume one chicken a day.

Keeping this caveat in mind, I examined data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey and found that the surge in mandatory costs follows a broadly common pattern across all income quintiles.

I then consider how rising mandatory costs affect the wellbeing of different income groups, using wellbeing as the relevant criterion, understood not merely as prosperity, but also as freedom of choice.

From this perspective, the increase in mandatory costs does not appear to materially alter the wellbeing of the bottom two income quintiles, which are persistently constrained to negative savings rates (Marina Gindelsky and Robert Martin, BLS, June 2024).

At the opposite end, the living standards of top earners also seem largely insulated, as their spending on housing, healthcare and education is more discretionary than necessity driven.

By contrast, soaring mandatory costs weigh most heavily on middle-class households. They reduce freedom of choice between saving, investment and consumption, limiting opportunities for economic security or entrepreneurial initiative.

Moreover, the growing share of unavoidable consumption hinders any reversal of the long-term decline in the US personal saving rate (Bureau of Economic Analysis).

Finally, the compression of discretionary middle-class savings may reinforce the concentration of surplus savings among the wealthy, who tend to lend to increasingly indebted lower- and middle-income households ("The Saving Glut of the Rich and the Rise in Household Debt"; Atif Mian, Ludwig Straub and Amir Sufi, 2020).

In sum, the claim that US households have grown more prosperous warrants closer scrutiny.

Alberto Chies
Padua, Italy

Dame Sarah Mullally, the first woman to become Archbishop of Canterbury

Money is not a cure-all for the Church, but it does help

In your Big Read article "Can a new leader rescue the Church of England?" (FT Weekend, January 3) the Bishop of Manchester was quoted as saying "Show me the large tranche of capable, unemployed vicars", suggesting that, "if we simply gave money to every diocese and said, 'Have more vicars', I'm sure dioceses in London and the south-east would be fine but those in the north and south-west would find they had no one to hire."

He may well be correct, but perhaps it might be worth pausing to ask why. A recent Church of England report, "Living Ministry", showed that fewer than three-quarters of clergy felt they were "fulfilling their sense of vocation". A full 29 per cent showed signs of depression, and such are clergy stipends that only 42 per cent reported that they were living comfortably.

Maybe this is why, according to recently published figures, the Church lost almost 6 per cent of its stipendiary clergy due to resignation, a greater number than those who retired. Demoralised clergy do not present an attractive example to those who might be sensing some sort of calling themselves, and the joy of the Lord seldom surrounds the pulpits of the demotivated.

Money isn't the answer to everything, but it does help some things. "The labourer deserves his wages", noted Saint Paul in an early discussion on apostolic pay, and giving more money to dioceses might help them address the poor morale among the nation's clerics, such that they might retain the clergy they already have, and meet the financial pressures which reduce front-line parish ministry. And that, surely, would be good for the whole church.

The Reverend Prebendary Dr Christopher Moore
Member, General Synod, Fownhope, Herefordshire, UK

Reassuring sound of snow ploughs on Toronto streets

I found Ioan Marc Jones's article ("All quiet on the domestic front", House & Home, January 3) on his zealous search for silence rather sad. Of course, pneumatic drills, heavy traffic and noisy neighbours can be very annoying and, as he says, bad for physical and mental health.

But he takes the problem further or, rather, closer to home, right into his flat. Objecting to a kettle you can actually hear boiling water, or a vacuum cleaner or a hair dryer doing their job seems to me a very "first world" problem, as they say. Just how many minutes a day can they affect him?

I like a bit of noise. On a walk where I live in downtown Toronto, I'm pleased that ambulances can blare their way through traffic to rescue people. A friend with a minor kitchen fire called 911, and waited outside. She said that the fire truck's siren approaching from half a kilometre away was the best sound she had ever heard. Last night I was woken at 2:00am by what might, elsewhere in the world, have been overhead armed drones, or invading tanks: it was a convoy of snow ploughs, clearing the city streets. I'll take that over the sound of silence any day.

Gillian Fenwick
Toronto, ON, Canada

Good to see large shoe sizes are not a footnote

I am 13 years old, 5 foot 9, and wear a size 44 shoe. My mother is the same, as are my aunts. Accordingly, your article "Can women with big feet finally feel well-heeled?" (HTSI, January 3) was noted in my family. The piece succeeds on two fronts: it raises awareness and provides a resource for girls and women like us hoping to wear the trending shoe. I feel seen and will shop from the suggested brands. Thank you!

Adele de Segundo
New York, NY, US

Don't dismiss the corrosive impact of lower-level crime

Your editorial "Don't believe the fake gloom about London" (The FT View, FT Weekend, December 20) provided a clear and welcome corrective to the increasingly hysterical outpourings from the plutocrats across the pond. Nevertheless, to largely dismiss the corrosive impact of verified lower-level crime, such as the steep increase in mobile phone theft, is foolhardy. It's not just the actual rise in this type of crime, but the fear of becoming a victim of it that can and does instil fear in the individual on the streets of London and detracts from the mainly positive picture drawn.

Mark Johnson
Elloughton, East Yorkshire, UK

Long odds: finding life elsewhere in the universe

While I greatly admire physicists producing more and more detailed information about the universe ("'We're on the cusp of something really exciting'", Lunch with the FT, Life & Arts, December 20), unlike your interviewee, space scientist Maggie Aderin-Pocock, I'm sceptical about "life out there". As there are 300bn stars in our galaxy, it's comprehensible that some kind of "life", described by artificial intelligence as "a complex, self-sustaining process in organised matter, characterised by traits like growth, reproduction, metabolism, response to stimuli, adaptation, and homeostasis", would have arisen in one or more of those stars or planets.

But if we think of life as something ET-like, ie capable of contacting and socialising with us, my "natural intelligence" considers it highly unlikely. Just think about the complex evolution before Homo sapiens emerged. Maybe some statistician could calculate the real odds of truly intelligent life elsewhere in the universe.

Timo Strandberg
Professor Emeritus, Helsinki University Hospital, Helsinki, Finland

How dressmakers measure up

Thank you to Guru Madhavan (and to Albrecht Dürer and the Pyramid makers) for an inspiring reminder of how well we managed before the smartphone ("Obsessive tracking doesn't gauge what really counts", Opinion, December 27).

I taught pattern-cutting and design and strongly discouraged any use of "numbers". Rule of thumb, hand-to-eye: tailors and dressmakers had a tape for every customer, on which key details could be noted. All necessary information in one safe place.

Take a length of tape. Hold it round the client's hips. Mark on tape. Hold same tape across shoulders and mark. Hold tape from waist to knee . . . etc.

The list is extensive, and proportional, eg half shoulder = armhole depth; one-third hip = crotch depth (fold the tape in 3, easy!). Body parts also were practical; a knuckle was a good stand-in for an inch.

My favourite, and very useful, is that the outline of a foot (minus the heel) makes the perfect pattern for a collar.

Penelope Woolfitt
London N10, UK

Correction

● In the first half of last year, JPMorgan estimated that AI spending contributed 1.1 percentage points to US GDP growth, not to US GDP as wrongly stated in an article on January 3.

Opinion

Trump's retro oil plundering will deliver only short-term gains

ENERGY
Gillian Tett

This winter, an essay by an Australian investor called Craig Tindale, with the ugly title "The Return of Matter: Western Democracies' material impairment", has caused a frisson in some financial circles — and in the White House.

The essence of Tindale's argument is that western elites have been so burdened by cognitive biases — of the sort described by the Swiss intelligence service — that they have obsessively focused on service-sector activities, while ignoring industrial processes.

"For the past three decades, western economies have operated under the tacit neoclassical assumption that control over intellectual property, financial instruments, and software code constitutes the apex of value creation," he argues.

"[Elites thought that] the physical processes of industrialism . . . could be outsourced to low-cost jurisdictions without strategic peril," he adds. That enabled China to jump in and dominate global manufacturing supply chains with barely any outcry.

It is a thesis worth examining now, given US President Donald Trump's decapitation of the Venezuelan government. One way to frame these dramatic events is that the Trump administration is reverting to an ugly form of "retro imperialism" based on a sphere of influence mantra — and naked plunder.

However, another reading is that Trump's team have embraced Tindale's insistence that physical matter matters, and are fighting for industrial dominance. Hence Trump's desire to control Venezuela's fossil fuels indefinitely, while undermining Chinese access to them.

"The future will be determined by the ability to protect commerce and territory and resources that are core to national security," Trump explained last week. "These are the iron laws that have always determined global power, and we are going to keep it that way."

Will it work? The answer is "yes" and "no" — depending on your intellectual and temporal frame. On paper, Venezuela has the world's biggest oil reserves, almost a fifth of all potential supply. However, they cannot be unlocked without more than $100bn of investment, since its infrastructure has collapsed and the crude oil is so heavy and sulphur laden that it needs expensive processing to be sold in western markets.

Trump says US oil companies will make that investment. But Philip Verleger, an energy economist, tells me they "do not have the money". So the US oil sector is now demanding White House guarantees before it acts.

Maybe Trump will deliver. If he does, "combined oil reserves from Venezuela, Guyana and the US could give the US about 30 per cent of global oil reserves if consolidated under its influence", as JPMorgan Chase notes. This would change global oil dynamics.

But there is a bitter irony here. Although Tindale is correct to decry the anti-manufacturing tunnel vision of neoliberals, Trump's team have cognitive biases too. Most notably, they seem determined to ignore the fact that fossil fuels are not the only energy source.

> Doubling down on fossil fuels undermines US renewables and is economic self-sabotage

This is ridiculous. To see why, just look at China: even as it has expanded industrial production and (lamentably) coal mining in recent years, it has also invested in renewable energy on a stunning scale. That is partly to fight climate change — which is a laudable goal.

But Beijing has also done this because some renewable energy, like solar, is dirt cheap, and diversification creates more resilience. So while it will certainly hurt China to lose access to cheap Venezuelan crude, it can partly use other energy sources. It is also gaining soft power by exporting products such as ultra-cheap solar panels to countries around the world. And by investing in renewables, China is expanding its electrification infrastructure in a way that could create a big advantage in the AI race.

"China now produces 2.5 times as much electricity as the US and is pulling further ahead," notes Ian Bremmer of the Eurasia Group, who points out that places such as Saudi Arabia and India are (quite sensibly) aping this strategy. But Trump is not. Instead his White House is doubling down on fossil fuels, and undermining American renewable energy, including by removing past subsidies.

This is a moral crime, given the potential impact on climate change. It is also economic self-sabotage: not only is Washington ceding soft power to Beijing, but the attacks on renewables could also hamper American efforts to build the power infrastructure needed for AI. Venezuelan oil alone cannot do the trick.

"The fastest, cheapest path to new [electricity] capacity at scale — solar plus batteries, deployable in 18 months — is precisely what the United States is now hobbling," notes Bremmer. "Washington is asking the world to buy 20th-century infrastructure, while Beijing offers 21st-century infrastructure."

To put it more bluntly, Trump's team has now won the short-term battle with China to control Venezuelan oil. But they are at risk of losing the bigger strategic global war around the energy needed for AI. Investors — and Trump supporters — should pay attention, and weep at these dangerously retro instincts.

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Person in the News | Jens-Frederik Nielsen

The Greenlandic leader under pressure

The island's 34-year-old prime minister is at the centre of a momentous geopolitical struggle, writes *Richard Milne*

Jens-Frederik Nielsen may be Greenland's prime minister, but he has also been its badminton champion 19 times in singles and doubles.

"Sports are a challenge every time. It's about goals, and it's good that I like to train hard. Because in the end it's about winning. That's just the way it is. It shouldn't just be fun," he told Danish newspaper Weekendavisen last year.

The 34-year-old will need all that determination in the coming months. The vast Arctic island of just 57,000 people, a semi-autonomous territory of the kingdom of Denmark, is at the centre of one of the most meaningful geopolitical struggles in decades.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly insisted his country needs to take control of Greenland from Denmark, potentially by force, even if it comes at the expense of Nato.

Nielsen unexpectedly became Greenland's youngest prime minister in March as his pro-business, centre-right Demokraatit party defeated the traditional political forces on the world's biggest island. This was in part due to his charm and in part due to his insistence on independence, but only when its economy was ready.

He was thrown straight into the maelstrom due to Trump's belligerent interest, but Nielsen has not been afraid to stand up for Greenland despite the power imbalance. "Enough is enough. No more pressure. No more insinuations. No more fantasies of annexation," he said this week, calling Trump's comments "entirely unacceptable".

The pressure and stakes keep rising, however. Discussions between the US, Denmark and Greenland will start next week when the foreign ministers of all three meet.

It is a high-wire act for Nielsen: trying to push gradually towards independence from Denmark while holding the US at bay. Some politicians in Nuuk, Greenland's snow-decked capital, say Trump's interest creates an opportunity to play off the US and Denmark against each other. Others see a trap.

"Greenlanders are really irritated by what is going on. But also scared. There's a lot of support for what Jens-Frederik is doing. He's a very likeable person," says one leading business person.

Nielsen is popular, receiving 50 per cent more personal votes in last year's elections than the next highest politician. Per Berthelsen, founder of Demokraatit and member of Greenland's pioneering rock band Sumé, says: "He is an incredibly gifted, diligent, serious, reliable and good man."

Born in 1991 in Nuuk, Nielsen has a Danish father and a Greenlandic mother. That mix caused him problems at his school. Dislike of Denmark is widespread in Greenland over issues such as the forceful insertion of contraceptives in some young Greenlandic women in the 1960s and 70s.

"Break times were the worst. If the students from the older classes caught me, I would get kicked and punched all over — and shouted at to go home to Denmark where I belonged," Nielsen told Weekendavisen.

But his heritage has not been a hindrance to his political career. A friend of his says: "He lives very well with being half Greenlander and half Dane, and he navigates those two worlds well. He's part of a young Greenland that is not turning towards Denmark and saying it's all your fault."

Nielsen has developed a good relationship with Mette Frederiksen, his Danish counterpart, who has said that she understands Greenland's push for independence. "He's a good, straightforward, pragmatic guy," says one Danish official who has dealt with him.

He found solace in sport, and was selected for the national youth team in football and handball as well as badminton. His biggest success came in 2023 when he won the badminton singles' gold medal at the Island Games, the most prestigious sports competition Greenland is allowed to take part in.

Nielsen entered politics as a baby-faced 23-year-old who was active on social media in 2014. Nivi Olsen, who became minister of education and culture, chose him as her ministerial secretary.

"He is a very precocious man. I received warnings against hiring him because he was too young. He was so loyal. He said: 'if someone tries to shoot you, I'll jump in front of you'," Olsen told TV station KNR in 2020. She added that as party leader, he liked to say of himself when there was chaos that "Dad's got it under control".

> 'Enough is enough . . . No more insinuations. No more fantasies of annexation'

Demokraatit was usually a junior coalition partner but last year the party's campaign on issues voters cared about, such as elderly care and social housing, while not overly dwelling on Trump's rhetoric, propelled it to a surprise first place.

Nielsen showed his pragmatism by choosing coalition partners that agreed with him on a gradual pace to independence but were less in favour of his pro-business reforms, rather than Naleraq, a newer populist party that has flirted with Trump and wants a quick break from Copenhagen.

"For me, it is important that we build the foundation before we build the roof," Nielsen has said, meaning Greenland's economy needs to be much stronger to wean itself off Denmark's current annual subsidy of $700mn.

Now, he is facing pressure of a kind that few leaders have to deal with. But one former badminton rival thinks he has the right characteristics to meet the challenge. "He doesn't get down on defeat," Frederik Elsner told KNR. "He becomes much stronger from losing."

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How special forces became warfare's go-to solution

WORLD AFFAIRS
Adam Tooze

Blacked-out helicopters fly low across a darkened city. Explosions and gunfire erupt. Masked men surge towards their objective — a kill, a capture, a body, a blindfolded and handcuffed VIP. All of it filmed live through night vision optics, fed back to a command centre where a group huddles, eyes fixed on the screens. The whole event, long trailed in advance and yet a complete surprise. Held secret, for security reasons of course, until unleashed on the world as a sensational PR coup.

Since the abduction of President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela by US special forces last weekend, the world has been puzzling over motive and strategy. Was it oil? The "Donroe Doctrine"? Cuba? Who is next?

But if you focus not on the ends but on the means, then the selfsame scene evokes very different associations. Whatever its ultimate motive, this is no throwback to gunboat diplomacy or a rupture with familiar norms. We have seen this before. The template for the Maduro operation was the Obama administration's killing of Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden, of course, was not a head of state. In that regard the closer parallel is to the toppling of Libyan leader Muammer Gaddafi in 2011. Compared to those operations, the capture of Maduro was smoothly executed and almost quaintly legalistic.

Though Maduro was a high-status target, operations to hunt down those designated as enemies of the United States are anything but exceptional. The special forces establishment, currently numbering in the order of 70,000 "operators", is in action continuously.

Delta Force, the core of America's modern military special forces, was formed in 1977 from veterans of dirty wars in Vietnam and Laos. It drew inspiration from Britain's SAS, a freewheeling unit set up during the second world war that attracted American attention for its success in fighting communist guerrillas in Malaya.

In the latter half of the 20th century, special forces units proliferated. For western democracies their attraction is the answer that they offer to the basic questions of modern warfare. Who to kill? Who should do the killing? And how to minimise the burden on your citizens?

One set of answers, much favoured by liberal democracies, emphasises bombardment or blockade by long-range air and sea power. These play to economic and technological strengths and minimise the risk to troops. But they are also blunt instruments, and expensive.

Assassination, subversion, hit and run sabotage, psyops and paramilitary proxies orchestrated by special forces make huge demands on a handpicked group of specialists, but cut costs and offer the added benefit of deniability. Self-consciously mirroring their opponents in leftwing guerrilla movements, cold war special forces learned to put irregular warfare at the service of the state. Subsequently, the so-called war on drugs and the global war on terror expanded their operations on a huge scale.

Rumours suggesting that Maduro's overthrow was an inside job are par for the course. Pitting "gangs" against "counter-gangs" was the model developed by the British in Malaya and perfected in Northern Ireland. The US played the same game in Iraq.

Special forces are both part of the state and deliberately unbound from many of its rules. This ambiguity is useful but at scale it poses nagging questions of accountability and resources. How to pay for regular, standing armies was, after all, the question that historically gave rise to parliaments. Who, then, oversees and pays for an irregular war fought off the books? Not for nothing, first the French and then the CIA learned to make the drug lords of the Golden Triangle into the paymasters of their paramilitaries. As the Iran-Contra affair of the 1980s and the opium economy of Afghanistan reveal, America's secret state knows a thing or two about narcoterrorism.

The current special forces establishment grew out of an effort to bring military discipline and some degree of Congressional oversight to this murky world. Eagerly supported by a bipartisan consensus, the special forces are today more lethal than ever and, though covert, also the most visible and culturally "relevant" branch of the US military. Images of muscle-bound Navy Seals and Delta Force make endless fodder for Hollywood, social media and computer games. The paramilitary antics of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) bear their cultural imprint.

> Muscle-bound Navy Seals are Hollywood fodder. The paramilitary antics of ICE bear their cultural imprint

Of course, the fact that the US maintains a special forces establishment the size of the British Army does not by itself explain any given operation. But what it should rule out is pearl-clutching. Far from being unthinkable, what the Trump administration did in Venezuela has been imagined over and over again. And, as for the legality, international law has always been entwined with the chosen tools of liberal warfare — sanctions, blockade and punitive special operations. If gun-toting special operators appear as a modern Frankenstein, this is our monster.

The writer is an FT contributing editor and writes the Chartbook newsletter

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