



REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

ISRO shows how tech maturity accumulates

The semi-cryogenic breakthrough is a prelude to India's ambitions well beyond Gaganyaan

On June 24, at the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) Propulsion Complex in Mahendragiri, Tamil Nadu, an engine roared to life, for barely a few seconds. In those seconds lay years of patient, unglamorous engineering that will shape the next two decades of India's journey into space. ISRO successfully hot-tested its indigenous semi-cryogenic engine at 175 tonnes of thrust. It was the most powerful such firing yet, the eighth in a series that has been building steadily in thrust since March 2025. It was at 88% of the target demonstration of steady-state performance of the engine powerhead at 200 tonnes. Steady state performance refers to how the engine functions once it is at a constant throttle, speed, and load — this evaluates stability, fuel consumption and output under steady conditions.

ISRO has rightly hailed this as a major milestone. To the casual observer, a few seconds of fire and smoke over a test stand may seem unremarkable compared to the drama of a rocket launch. Yet, this apparently inconspicuous event brings India appreciably closer to a propulsion capability that only a handful of nations possess, and one that will underwrite everything from Gaganyaan's follow-on missions to India's own space station and, eventually, journeys beyond Earth orbit.

What exactly is a semi-cryogenic engine, and why does it matter? Most of ISRO's workhorse engines burn storable propellants such

as unsymmetrical dimethylhydrazine (UDMH)-based fuels used in the Vikas engine that powers the second stage of ISRO's PSLV and GSLV. The other, more recent alternatives have been fully cryogenic combinations such as liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen, which power the upper stage of the Launch Vehicle Mark-3 (LVM3). A semi-cryogenic engine lies in between: It burns refined kerosene, similar to aviation turbine fuel, together with the more eco-friendly liquid oxygen, which must be stored at extremely low temperatures. This combination is denser and easier to handle than liquid hydrogen, allows for more compact tankage, and, crucially, delivers a higher thrust for a given engine size. The engine under development, called SE-2000, uses what is called an oxidiser-rich staged combustion cycle, a highly efficient but technically demanding design that only Russia, the US, and China have mastered at this scale.

What made this test significant was not the full engine, but a critical subsystem called the Power Head Test Article, which includes everything except the thrust chamber: The turbopumps that feed propellant at enormous pressure, the pre-burner, the ignition system, and the associated control components. Getting this "power head" to start up smoothly, build thrust in a controlled sequence, and sustain stable operation is one of the hardest parts of engine development, since turbopump and combustion instabilities have historically doomed rocket engine programmes worldwide. This was the eighth hot-test in the series, following earlier firings at 47% and 60% of rated thrust. Reaching 88%, with stable and controlled performance

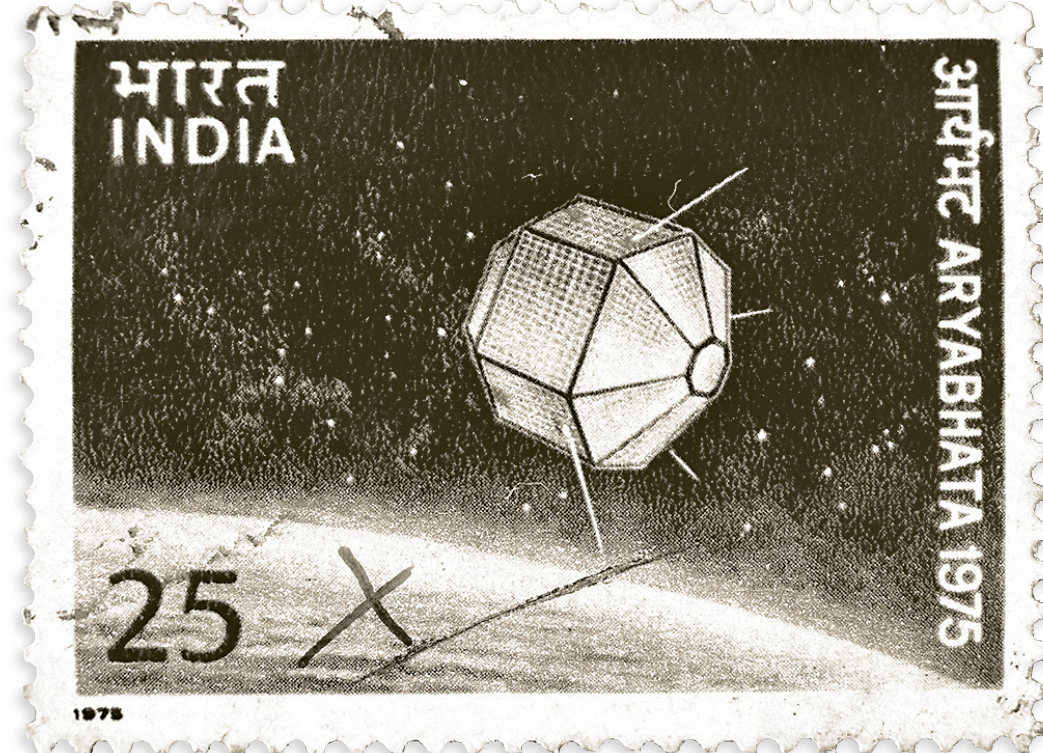
throughout, tells ISRO's propulsion engineers at the Liquid Propulsion Systems Centre that the design is sound and ready to be pushed towards its full 200-tonne capability.

This result should be read as a licence to proceed, not as the finishing line. ISRO has indicated that it now has the confidence to attempt a full-thrust demonstration of the complete engine, integrating the thrust chamber with the power head. The Semi-Cryogenic Propulsion Stage, called SCI20, that will eventually house this engine is intended to replace the LI10 liquid stage that currently powers the LVM3, India's heaviest operational launch vehicle. The upgraded configuration, working alongside an uprated CE20 cryogenic upper stage, is expected to meaningfully boost the LVM3's payload capacity to geostationary transfer orbit. ISRO is targeting the first flight of this upgraded LVM3 for as early as 2027, an ambitious but not unreasonable timeline given the pace of testing over the past year.

Why should this matter to a programme like Gaganyaan, whose immediate goal is simply to put three Indians into low Earth orbit and bring them home safely? The answer lies in what comes after. Human spaceflight cannot afford any shortfall in margins. A crew module, its life support systems, consumables, escape systems, and the additional structural mass needed to keep astronauts safe, all add up quickly, eating into the payload that a rocket can actually lift. The LVM3 that carries India's first gaganayatri this decade is already human-rated, and sufficiently powerful for that specific mission. But, flights after the initial Gaganyaan mission will demand considerably more lift capacity, sending heavier and



Somak Raychaudhury



A domestically designed semi-cryogenic engine shows that India's propulsion science has matured — engine by engine, test by test — to match the demands of an ambitious exploration programme for decades to come. SHUTTERSTOCK

better-equipped crew and service modules, and eventually supporting longer-duration missions that carry more fuel, more shielding, and more redundancy. Advanced propulsion is not a luxury for a mature human spaceflight programme; it is the foundation upon which everything else, including the crucial ingredient of safety, is built.

This is where the semi-cryogenic breakthrough is a prelude to India's ambitions well beyond Gaganyaan. ISRO's roadmap envisages the Bharatiya Antariksh Station, with its first module targeted for launch by 2028 and the full station operational by 2035, followed by a crewed lunar mission by 2040. It will have to be carried up in modular pieces and assembled in orbit. None of this is achievable with today's launch vehicles alone. ISRO's Next Generation Launch Vehicle, still on the drawing board, is designed around a cluster of five SCE-200 semi-cryogenic engines powering a single core stage carrying some

400 tonnes of propellant, a configuration that would place India in the league of nations capable of heavy-lift, and eventually super-heavy-lift, launches.

The semi-cryogenic engine tested last week at Mahendragiri is a fundamental building block for that entire future architecture. It is also the kind of propulsion technology that will eventually carry heavier communication satellites, interplanetary probes, and space station modules, quietly expanding what Indian industry and science can attempt in orbit and beyond.

There is a broader point about how technological maturity accumulates. Chandrayaan and Mangalyaan showed that India could navigate deep space with precision and frugality. Gaganyaan will show that India can safeguard human life in the harshest of environments. A domestically designed, staged-combustion, semi-cryogenic engine now shows that India's propulsion science has

matured, engine by engine, test by test, to match the demands of an ambitious exploration programme for decades to come. Each such capability, once acquired, does not stay confined to a single mission. It becomes part of the permanent toolkit available to Indian scientists and engineers.

A few seconds of fire on a test-stand in Tamil Nadu would hardly make for dramatic television. But such moments are how space-faring nations are actually built — with patience and in measured steps, long before an astronaut boards a spacecraft. As ISRO now turns towards a full-thrust firing of this engine, it is worth remembering that the road to the Bharatiya Antariksh Station, and eventually to the Moon and beyond, runs directly through test stands like this one.

Somak Raychaudhury is vice-chancellor and professor of physics, Ashoka University. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



The delight Wenger's has been for Delhi for 100 years

In my childhood, trips to Connaught Place frequently ended with visits to Wenger's. The once Swiss-owned confectionery was a favourite haunt for snacks in between shopping. The chicken patties and éclairs were my favourites as a teenager. Mummy would buy their plum cake for tea. She knew Daddy found it irresistible. Rarely could he resist a second slice!

It was only in my 20s that I discovered Wenger's flourie tarts. Covered with dry and crystallised fruit, I came to love the way my teeth would sink into the pastry. Over the last few decades this wickedly delightful creation is what I always buy from Wenger's. Indeed, whenever Pertie — do you remember him; he hasn't appeared in this column for a while? — drops by the office, he brings Flourie tarts in Wenger's famous and easily recognised boxes.

He knows it's an offering that can only please me. On such occasions, he tends to open the box with a flourish as if to

declare look what I've brought. Instantly, the aroma of freshly baked pastry wafts through the room.

The Wenger's restaurant on the first floor — I assume it still exists — serves delightfully strong coffee. It has small tables with low lamps. It feels cozy and quiet. That is probably because most people visit the confectionery on the ground floor, buy their breads, cakes and patties, and leave.

Wenger's delights are best savoured with the family or as you saunter through the colonnaded corridors of Connaught Place, heading to the next shop you want to visit or on your way home.

In the early 1970s, after taking the Senior Cambridge exam and whilst waiting for the results to be announced, my Doon School chum Rajbir Singh and I walked from the Gymkhana Club to Connaught Place so I could introduce him to Wenger's. "I'm sure we have better stuff in Bombay," he insisted as we wended our way. He was wrong and readily admitted

it as he munched his second chocolate éclair whilst licking fragments of the sweet cream off his fingers.

Why do I mention all of this? Because Wenger's has just turned a 100 years old. There are few shops that have done more to please and feed the denizens of Delhi over the last century.

If a culinary history of the capital were to be written, Wenger's along with Moti Mahal and Kake di Hatti would be assured places of pride. They represent more than just good food. They are part of the tradition and style of our city. In fact, they help define Delhi.

Wenger's was opened by Jeanne Seterchi Wenger and HC Wenger, and its first location was at Kashmere Gate. It moved to the corner of A-block, Connaught Place, in 1933. Since then, it is said, its devoted customers have included Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Shah Rukh Khan.

But it is the ordinary Delhiite, visiting to buy croissants, cheese straws or pastries, with children clamouring for cream cakes, that must be amongst the confectionery's favourite and most reliable clientele. Their custom is its guarantee of success.

Today, as I remember Connaught Place, the shops that come to mind are iconic and were often old haunts. New Book Depot, where I spent ages browsing through their collection. Sahib Singh, which used to be the chemist we always visited. Empire Stores, now history, whose fresh sliced ham was delightful. Pandit Brothers, where you could buy

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almost anything you needed. And Wenger's. They were the shops I was most familiar with. Many are no longer there. What a joy Wenger's still is!

Last week, in London, I spent many afternoons watching Wimbledon and devouring strawberries and cream. On sunny afternoons, it is a joy to have with a glass of Pimm's or, better still, chilled champagne. Now, if only Wenger's would introduce strawberries and cream on their winter menu. As Eliza Doolittle would say, wouldn't that be "lovely?"

Do you think the management might take a hint?

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



In evolving over millennia, instead of congealing into a brittle set of absolutes, Hinduism fully enabled both diversity of opinion and local variations. SHUTTERSTOCK

who defines all notions of conventional divinity, at another level? In truth, both are two sides of the same coin, each portraying the infinity of the Ultimate in myriad ways, and yet, each a window to that same supreme cosmic consciousness. At the apex is the Trinity — Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva — with their divine consorts. The Devi herself is conceived in multifaceted ways: Uma, Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Durga, Kali, and more.

The Bhakti poets explained this beautifully. In Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*, Ram sings powerfully in praise of Shiva, and Shiva proclaims a compelling tribute to Ram, because essentially both are manifestations of the same unity. Overarching the Shaiva-Vaishnava beliefs, the *Nirguna* Brahman is the only reality; the *saguna* is the grace of the playful energy of that reality. Tulsidas puts it succinctly: "Aguna saguna dui Brahma svarupa, akath agadha anadi anupa" (The attribute-full *saguna*, and the attribute-less *nirguna*, are

two aspects of the same Brahman; both are indescribable, unfathomable, eternal and unparalleled). He then compresses tomes of philosophical debate to explain why the *nirguna* becomes the *saguna*: "Aguna arupa alakh aia joi, bhagata prem basa saguna ho joi" (That *nirguna* Brahman which is attribute-less, imperceptible, indivisible and eternal becomes the *saguna Ishwara* to fulfil the love of the devotee).

The ultimate Brahman, therefore, becomes the multidimensional *Ishwara*, to become more accessible to devotees. There is both profundity and compassion in this benevolent transition. People like Doniger, used to religions with a predictable linearity, cannot comprehend this. For her — and so be it — Hinduism will remain an armadillo, part hedgehog, part tortoise.

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

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



The case for a law against marital rape

Marital rape remains a vexatious issue for India as it is not recognised as a criminal offence under the law. Under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), a man cannot be prosecuted for rape when he has non-consensual sexual intercourse with his wife if she is 18 years of age or older. There are other legal protections for women for abuse in marriage but not specifically marital rape. There are many petitions before the courts on the right to bodily autonomy, and despite law commission reports, amendments to the law and new legislations, no clear legal provision exists and everything is left to the interpretation of the courts.

The Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013, introduced a number of changes in the Indian Penal Code, 1860, Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, and the Indian Evidence Act, 1872. These changes are based on the recommendations of the Justice Verma Committee Report of 2013. However, one of the committee's key recommendations — that marital rape be criminalised — was not accepted by the Cabinet. The reasons given were that women will fabricate rape charges; a complaint of marital rape breaks the marital relationship; and the law provides other remedies that the wife can exercise. The exception made for marital rape is viewed by many legal experts as being based on the flawed presumption of irrevocable sexual consent within marriage.

In this context, the Infinite Saree, a campaign advocating for the removal of the marital rape exception from the law, is worth mentioning. The campaign was developed for Red Dot Foundation by Klick Health in collaboration with MediaMedic Communications, INVNT, TA2, and LightFarm.

A four-kilometre-long saree was embroidered with thousands of signatures supporting the removal of the marital rape exception and was displayed at Mumbai's Royal Opera

House. This is meant to begin public engagement and dialogue around legal protections for married women facing sexual violence. It highlights how creativity, culture and collective action can amplify conversations around gender justice. Imaginative campaigns like this draw attention to the issue. It is a largely unseen crime as most women are either unable or unwilling to come forward and make a case against their husbands. Family honour, patriarchy, and lack of any form of empowerment ensure silence.

The campaign highlights the lived reality of many married Indian women who experience sexual violence while often having limited legal protection. The legality of marital rape has been challenged by women's rights advocates, legal experts, and civil society organisations who argue that marriage should not negate an individual's right to consent.

A survivor who did not wish to be named said, "For years, I believed what was happening to me was something I simply had to endure because I was married. The emotional and physical trauma was real, but the silence around it was even more painful. Knowing that so many people are standing up and demanding change gives survivors like me hope." The courage of such survivors is at the centre of the movement and serves as a reminder that the conversation is ultimately about human dignity and fundamental rights.

Supreet K Singh, co-founder & CEO, Red Dot Foundation says, "Around the world, one of the greatest barriers to ending gender-based violence is the persistence of silence. The Infinite Saree is our response to that silence. Real change begins when society discards normalisation of violence as a social obligation and stops asking women to endure violence."

The views expressed are personal

Donigers of the world are wrong about Hinduism

I have heard uninformed foreigners — and some Indians — denigrate Hinduism for having lakhs of gods. These naysayers argue that Hinduism never had a unified core. No one god, no one religious text, no one supreme temple, no one pope and no one set of prescribed rituals make it just a collation of diversities that cannot qualify it to be a "coherent" religion in the way Abrahamic faiths are.

The high-priestess of American Indology, Wendy Doniger, actually asks superciliously, "Hinduism (dare I use the 'H' word, and may I stop holding up my hands for mercy with quotation marks?), is, like the armadillo, part hedgehog, part tortoise." The academic ease with which Doniger conflates diversity with disparity is amusing. What she refuses to understand is that the surface diversity that convinces her that there is not one but many Hinduisms, is precisely what Hinduism is about. In evolving over millennia, instead of congealing into a brittle set of absolutes, Hinduism fully enabled both diversity of opinion and local variations, without losing the centrality of its narrative.

Nothing illustrates this better than the remarkable dialectic between *Nirguna Brahman* (attribute-less cosmic consciousness) and *Saguna Ishwara* (attribute-full depiction of a personal god). This duality in the perception of divinity is the key to understanding both Hindu philosophy and religion. Assured of the primacy of the *nirguna* infi-

nite, which is formless, indivisible, omnipotent and immanent in everything, and of which the gods too are an emanation, Hindus have no inhibition in giving full play to the human imagination in creating, embellishing and humanising their *saguna* deities.

What foreigners, especially those of the Abrahamic faiths for whom divinity is prescriptive and singular, don't understand is that for the Hindu mind, revelling in the plurality of the divine is an act of devotional joy. It is plural in projection, and singular in belief. The firm anchorage of the one and supreme Brahman, legitimises — without diluting the original concept — the festive variations in the depiction of *Ishwara*. Indeed, Hinduism provides ample, even exuberant evidence of this.

The pantheon of our gods, the range of attributes we give to them, the myriad ways we worship them, the uninhibited manner in which we portray them, the songs we compose for them, the art we create for them, the rituals with which we venerate them, the delight with which we humanise them, the personal rapport we build with them, is not a sign of mindless primitive polytheism, but the joyous depiction of a vision that is monotheistic in concept and plural in representation — the ability to see the One in the many, and the many in the One.

Why else would we have *maryada purushottam* Ram, the very epitome of rectitude, at one level, and *leela purushottam* Krishna,



Pavan K Varma



{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Need For legal recognition

This is with reference to "Indian women farmers' long wait for visibility" by Namita Bhandare (July 05). In India's agrarian economy, women farmers remain deprived of legal recognition, land rights & institutional protection.

Maharashtra's legislation aims to confer long overdue dignity and economic inclusion.

Aditya Shekhar

Confidence is needed to use idioms

This is with reference to "Lost in Translation: How India Speaks English" by Karan Thapar (July 05). Indians speak English fluently, but use it literally. Encouraging greater exposure to idiomatic English enriches communication while keeping alive Indian English's unique identity.

Sanjay Chopra

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Our English is not idiomatic. While using English, we focus on word-to-word translations into our vernaculars, leading to a loss of intensity and depth of emotion. The English we use is referred to, colloquially, as Hinglish.

SH Quadri

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Two CMs and their *revdi* secrets



OFF THE RECORD
BY P VAIDYANATHAN IYER

TWO SECRETS shared with this writer by two Chief Ministers, one from the Bharatiya Janata Party and the other from the Congress, give a sense of the dilemmas they face, and the political tightrope they walk. While the identity of the CMs and the states they represent is not pertinent, the message these secret anecdotes deliver is important. It shows just how serious a problem the two CMs face — on the political and fiscal front.

A macro-economic risk that worries those closely following India's federal polity is the worsening financial health of states — slowing revenues, rising expenditure, and an increasing debt to fund the revenue-expenditure gap. Some states such as Telangana, Bihar and Himachal Pradesh struggle to pay salaries to their employees, while some others like Punjab and West Bengal do not have enough to spend on

roads and bridges, or infrastructure, that will help their economy grow.

Yet, come state Assembly elections, leaders of big political parties including the BJP and the Congress do not shy away from announcing new schemes with cash handouts, trying to please different sections of voters — women, the unemployed, and many more.

Secret 1 of a state Chief Minister has its origins in this battleground of competitive populism. This Chief Minister, from a BJP-ruled state, finds himself in a piquant situation during elections in other states. His state does not have any scheme which makes large monthly cash transfers of the kind most other states indulge in. So, when he is called to campaign for his party during elections in other states, he is in a fix — torn between the party's demand to amplify the benefits of a new cash dole-out scheme and his own state's record of prudence in spending. He has been resolute so far. "If you listen to my campaign speeches during elections in other states, I never talk up such cash benefit schemes. I focus on everything else," the CM says.

But why would the CM upset his party colleagues in other states by not talking up the benefits of cash transfers? He is candid. "My people are shrewd. The day I laud, praise and advertise such schemes

A senior bureaucrat, who has worked closely with the Prime Minister says his instinct is to call out his own Cabinet colleagues during meetings when they pitch populist schemes

—even if announced by my own party — in other states, my people will demand the same. I cannot afford to go down that path. So I avoid promoting such promises made in the manifesto," he says. His state is among those with a reasonably good financial health.

But the other Chief Minister's state is not in such good shape. In fact, no sooner did this CM take charge, he realised what he inherited. Being in a party in the Opposition INDIA bloc, he did not expect the BJP-ruled Central government to bail him out for the excesses of a political party in power before him. So exasperated was he with the finances of his state that in an informal meeting with the Prime Minister, one of the first things he told him in private was to do something about these cash handouts. The Prime Minister had kicked off a big political storm when he referred to such sops as "*revdi*" while inaugurating an expressway in Uttar Pradesh in July 2022.

This newly elected CM, most likely, got a patient hearing from the Prime Minister. "I told Prime Minister Modi that the only way to stop political parties from this race to the bottom is to bring a Constitutional amendment and fix a cap on such expenditures," the Chief Minister said.

This, from a CM who belongs to the Congress, a party that more than matches the BJP in announcing cash transfers,

comes across as a leap of faith. But then, the nearly decade-long rule of his predecessor had led to an almost tripling of the state's outstanding debt. More and more debt means higher interest payments. Together with salary and pension, such committed expenditure puts enormous strain on the state's ability to spend money elsewhere — be it for schools and hospitals or highways and development work.

But realpolitik hasn't spared even the Prime Minister, who has a reputation of being tightfisted. A senior bureaucrat, who has worked closely with the Prime Minister says his instinct is to call out his own Cabinet colleagues during meetings when they pitch populist schemes. A telling example was how he finally allowed for a completely free rice and wheat scheme under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana. "Once you make it free, there is no way you can even charge 10 paise per kg of rice or wheat," this aide said.

But can free rice or wheat be called a *revdi*? Defining a dole is always a slippery slope. One party's empowerment scheme can be a *revdi* for the rival party. This debate remains unresolved, but poses one of the biggest challenges today.

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

Delusions and distractions



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

EVERY TIME I return from a sojourn in some foreign city, I think how lucky our political leaders are that so few Indians can afford to go abroad. Less than 2% of our vast populace ever gets to see a foreign country, so they are unable to ask the questions that they must ask. Questions they cannot ask because they do not know that the more horrific, shameful and depraved aspects of Indian life do not exist in more civilised countries. In countries with less ambition to become the 'Vishvaguru', people do not live in filthy, degraded conditions that become filthier and more degraded when the monsoon comes. The media in those countries do not treat as normal that a thirteen-year-old girl was raped so brutally in Rajasthan by thirty-two men that she died from her internal injuries.

Last week I returned from a few days in London, where I went to catch up with my exiled son. And this child's story was the first I saw on social media after returning home. It shamed me and made me very angry. This young schoolgirl was coming home in an autorickshaw when the driver abducted and then sold her to a hotel owner. He colluded with other hotel owners to arrange for her to be gang raped for five days. She was moved from hotel to hotel, and somehow nobody found out. How? By the time she escaped from the clutches of these evil pervers, her body was too broken to be saved. But if the double-engine chief minister of Rajasthan has shown any empathy, he has done so invisibly.

Invisible also have been those self-appointed guardians of Hindu culture or as they like to put it 'bhartiya sabhyata'. An estimated hundred girls in India, half of them children, are raped every day. Those are the registered cases, the actual figure could be much higher, and never do we see the outrage from those defenders of Indian culture that there should be. They are eloquent about crimes against women in Islamic countries but rarely speak up when little Indian girls are abducted, brutalised and killed. Why?

Still recovering from the horror in Rajasthan, and while switching channels for more uplifting news, I came upon the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh speaking about the loot that has gone on in the Ram Temple in Ayodhya on his watch. He railed against those raising their voice against the looting of the temple, on the flimsy grounds that they had no right to speak since they had allowed Muslims to pray on the steps of the Hanumangarhi temple. "Can you imagine the Hanuman Chalisa being recited in a mosque...who are these people to speak when they could not do anything for Ayodhya? It is only when a double-engine government was elected in Uttar Pradesh that the grand temple to Ram could be built."

Chief ministers of 'double-engine' governments say almost nothing without reminding us of that double engine, but the truth is that double-engine governments have done little to improve abysmal living conditions in their states. This is because what they seem to concentrate on is creating double distractions from real issues like the total collapse of infrastructure when the rains come. The monsoon comes every year, even if belatedly because of El Niño and every year, we see flooded homes, broken roads and children dying because of the diseases that the rains bring.

In Mumbai this year, whole sections of the city drowned, and instead of explaining why, the government of Maharashtra spent its time worrying about how to close dance bars and how to bring a uniform civil code. Other double-engine chief ministers distract from their glaring failures of governance by trying to concentrate the attention of gullible voters on statues and temples.

It is no surprise, then, that last week the Global Liveability Index put Delhi and Mumbai at 120 and 121, out of 173 cities. We do not need an international index to tell us that our cities are unlivable. All we need to do is walk down a street or go shopping in a bazaar to stumble over rotting garbage, rats and filth.

Such conditions exist mostly because the average Indian has no idea that there are clean and beautiful cities in other lands. Or because of being lulled into a sense of false pride and nationalism by politicians who tell him that he should not bother about material comforts when he has leaders who build grand temples and statues taller than any other in the world. It is not just ordinary people who get distracted from real issues; we in the media do as well.

Last week, our major TV channels concentrated on showing us pictures of the Prime Minister speaking to the diaspora in different cities on his latest foreign tour and, in Indonesia, how he wandered around one of the grandest Hindu temples, Prambanan, with the Indonesian president in tow.

Speaking of Indonesia and the speech he made there, did you understand at all what he meant when he went on about the number eight? If any of you did, I would sincerely appreciate your thoughts on the significance of this number. During the Covid lockdown, was it not the number nine that he seemed to hold in mystic awe? As someone deeply interested in India becoming better, I hope he finds time one day for real problems.

The writer is a Senior Assistant Editor



INSIDE TRACK | BY COOMI KAPOOR

RETURN TO RAJ RELICS?

Being the original capital of the British Empire, Kolkata boasts some of India's oldest and grandest government residences. But unlike their counterparts in the rest of the country, West Bengal's ministers have not enjoyed the luxury of living in these palatial bungalows in Alipore and Baliganj for over half a century. What should normally be ministerial residences are occupied by senior bureaucrats. The city does not even have an earmarked chief ministerial house. When the Communists came to power in 1977, Marxist ministers pointedly did not live in these relics of the Raj. And Mamata Banerjee, who wanted to emphasise her humble origins, continued this practice. BJP CM Suvendu Adhikari has to decide whether to reclaim the accommodations of colonial glory for politicians or settle for humbler abodes. He himself is likely to move into an irrigation department bungalow in Alipore.

Adhikari has, however, indicated that he will transfer the secretariat back to the iconic Writers' Building, renamed Mahakaran, once the seat of West Bengal's state administration. In 2013, Banerjee abandoned the sprawling three-storey red-stone complex with exquisite Minton tile flooring, originally the central office of the East India Company and later the headquarters of the British government in India. The building is adorned with classical statues and ornate fixtures. Extensive repair work on the 250-year-old structure is required before the new government can move in.

HE IS ONE OF US

Champat Rai, the former general secretary of the Ram Janmabhoomi trust, received barely a slap on the wrist, though he was responsible for overseeing donations to the Ram temple. The Ram trust agreed to accept his resignation only after recording, first, appreciation for his sacrifice for the Ram Temple movement while blaming the State Bank of India for oversight. Those puzzled by a lack of accountability are unfamiliar with the opaque operating style of RSS, where there is no clear-cut corporate chain of command. In the Sangh tradition, a pracharak's age, loyalty and long years of service are much valued. Once an individual is well entrenched in the RSS, it is not easy to distance him from the organisation. A case in point is the VHP's Pravin Togadia, whose erratic, irresponsible behaviour had infuriated even Narendra Modi as Gujarat CM. Despite being an embarrassment to the BJP, Togadia continued as the vice president of VHP International for many years and was in charge virtually after VHP president Ashok Singhal fell ill, even though Modi was by then PM. Togadia was removed only in 2018 after he was pressured into holding an election, which he lost. He quit the RSS and started his own organisation.

Champat Rai, 79, a chemistry lecturer in a UP college, was jailed during the Emergency and later became an RSS pracharak. He was associated with the Ramjanmabhoomi movement in the 1990s, with Singhal as his mentor, and was respected for his legal knowledge of the case and for keeping meticulous records. Some feel that red flags should have been raised earlier. In 2021, the Opposition charged that the trust bought plots in Ayodhya for Rs18.5 crore, though days earlier, an intermediary had purchased the very same land for Rs2 crore. Visitors from Delhi who requested VIP *darshan* at the Ram temple were often put off by Rai's arrogant, cranky behaviour.

TRUMPING A GREY ZONE?

Vivek Aggarwal, IAS officer and ex director of the Financial Intelligence Unit, was appointed Vice President of the 40-member Financial Action Task Force (FATF) this month. India is preparing the ground for petitioning to put Pakistan back on the international FATF grey list alert for money laundering and for financing terrorism. Pakistan's trade, investment and banking were impacted after India succeeded in getting the country listed on a financial alert from February 2012 to February 2015, and again from June 2018 to October 2022, compelling it to go through the motions of prosecuting terrorists from the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed for fear of being fully black listed. This week, the NIA filed a detailed charge sheet against LeT chief Hafiz Saeed, establishing Pakistan's role in the Pahalgam terror attack. Data retrieved from the terrorists' phones is said to have established that LeT was providing the coordinates of the Baisaran meadow to the attackers. A rattled Pakistan, which is not a member of FATF, is fully relying on support from the USA, China and Saudi Arabia to block a potential Indian move.

SPLITS, MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS

A new political trend could emerge in Maharashtra. In both warring factions of the NCP, a section of the party wants to simply merge with the BJP. In the NCP (AP), Praful Patel and Sunil Tatkare are unhappy with Ajit Pawar's immature son Parth attempting to take full charge of the party. In the NCP (SP), Supriya Sule and her father lean towards joining the Congress, while other party MPs prefer the BJP option.

Akashvani: A voice from the sky, and a name that stuck



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY SUANSHU KHURANA

AS AKASHVANI, the official radio broadcasting wing of Prasar Bharati under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, celebrates its 90 years, it should not be forgotten that it was born under a different name: All India Radio.

Akashvani (meaning voice from the sky), the delightful term adapted from Rabindranath Tagore's eponymous poem, entered the official vocabulary only two decades later, in 1956, and then coexisted with All India Radio. Until 2023. When an internal order severed ties with the original name and made it mandatory for the institution to be called only by the new official name, Akashvani. In a satellite message, a section of the Prasar Bharati Act, 1990 (which came into force in 1997), was enforced, defining Akashvani as "the offices, stations and other establishments by whatever name called, which immediately before the appointed day formed part of or were under the Director General, All India Radio of the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting." It was described as implementing an existing statutory position rather than introducing a new policy. However, the execution strangely occurred more than two decades later.

Celebrating 90 years of Akashvani, then, is technically inaccurate.

The institution may have been called only Akashvani since 2023, but what has turned 90 is what generations of Indians have known as All India Radio.

The distinction between the two names is more than just linguistic. It, perhaps, has little to do with affection for the poetry of Tagore, the Nobel laureate who was extremely critical of the extreme nationalism that later became the core philosophy of the RSS, the ideological mentor of the BJP. The change in nomenclature likely reflects the Union government's Hindi-first approach, which has often mistaken some people's linguistic preferences for national identity. In a multilingual nation. There is also reliance on explaining the term All India Radio as colonial baggage, similar to the justification used for



promoting 'Bharat' instead of India.

The 2023 change puzzled many because, for the nation, both names coexisted. While Akashvani was widely used in Indian-language broadcasts, in English bulletins and shows, one always heard, "This is All India Radio". AIR has also been the institution's global identity.

Not happy with the change, Tamil Nadu MP T R Balu had also written to the Centre, calling the name change "unwarranted" and stating that Tamil Nadu always used the term 'Vaanoli' instead of Akashvani.

One individual instrumental in bringing the name AIR and its identity to the fore was Lionel Fielden, the BBC producer recruited in 1935 as undivided India's first Controller of Broadcasting, and who had the difficult task of coordinating broadcasting development in India. Unhappy with the long and clunky Indian State Broadcasting Service (ISBS), he wanted something simpler. For the change, he had to get past the then Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow. Fielden wrote in his book, *The Natural Bent* (1960), that he cornered Linlithgow after a State dinner, asking for his advice — an opening the man could not ignore. Complaining that the Indian State Broadcasting Service "was a clumsy title" and that "broadcasting" was difficult for many Indians to pronounce, "Fielden requested the Viceroy's help in suggesting a better alternative. "Indian State", I said, was a term which, as he well knew, hardly fitted into the 1935 Act. It should be something general. He rose beautifully to the bait. 'All India'? I expressed my astonishment and admiration... After some thought, he suggested 'Radio'? Splendid, I said — and what beautiful

initials. The Viceroy concluded that he had invented it, and there was no more trouble... Thus All India Radio (AIR) was born," wrote Fielden.

This was a landmark moment that gave a fledgling broadcasting network a distinct character, making it a cultural anchor of sorts, one that people in undivided British India identified with. The name went on to become synonymous with public broadcasting in the Subcontinent. After this, Delhi, Lahore and Dhaka, among others, had their All India Radio stations. Independence would come almost a decade later, in the wake of a bloody Partition and the station names in Pakistan and East Bengal (later East Pakistan) were altered. All India Radio, which would always open with Walter Kauffman's signature tune on the violin played by Mehli Mehta (conductor Zubin Mehta's father), carried official announcements, voices of leaders and film songs that became a soundtrack to our lives. It thrilled us with vivid cricket commentary, and regaled us with classical music recitals — strands that brought together millions who could not read a newspaper, and in the process, shaped the country's cultural imagination.

Around the time Fielden came to India, a private radio station — Radio Mysore — began in 1935 at a college professor's residence. It started using the name Akashvani in 1942 when writer Narayana Kasturi began managing it; Kasturi's mother is said to have come up with the name. One isn't sure if she had read the Tagore poem too. Akashvani, informally in use in regional broadcasts, was officially adopted two decades later.

"What's in a name?" asked Shakespeare. "That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet". One can agree that a name change may not change the core truth of an organisation. And one, possibly, cannot dispute the elegance of the word Akashvani. But at the same time one cannot dismiss 'All India Radio' as a vestige of the Empire. The institution outgrew that long ago, becoming the voice of an independent nation by unifying disconnected regions and princely states post-Independence. But those in charge at Prasar Bharati also need to be precise when discussing their own history and organising celebrations, marathons and competitions as is being done this year.

All India Radio is as Indian as Akashvani. For decades, it held multiple stories and identities. Honouring one should not come at the cost of completely omitting the other.

The writer is a Senior Assistant Editor

The beautiful and the damned



ON THE LOOSE
BY LEHER KALA

prepared that the fallout could be potentially disastrous. Indeed, it's imperative to make space for the fact that fickle, thy name is youth. Saying one thing, doing the opposite (while even, perhaps, believing you're doing what you originally claimed) is not necessarily wilful manipulation — rather, at the ripe old age of 22, it's a classic case of keeping all options open, otherwise known as two-timing. As Shakespeare rued about deceivers, one foot in the sea and one on shore, romantic inconstancy is as old as mankind itself. It is one of life's jokes. Either the people we like don't like us back, and when they do, our perverse minds choose another. One can't blame a 20-something for mistakenly believing we can have it all, but only somebody entirely devoid of empathy will commit murder to achieve their end. Normal people stringing two lovers along will cop out midway.

It's also a fact that in the digital era, it's a lot easier to superficially nurture several romantic relationships, all at once. Be-

tween WhatsApp, dating apps, hook-up apps and Instagram, the paradox of choice pops up in exactly the same way it does in a coffee shop. There are tens of options to pick from, like between a latte and a cappuccino, with skimmed or dairy-free milk. On the surface, the profusion of options seems like it's fantastic; there's something for everyone. But it's precisely this surfeit of choices that has turned us all into maximizers, constantly calculating hypothetical trade-offs, while chasing the best possible outcome. While learning to choose is hard, the opposite, not having the choice to begin with, is harder. It does appear that Siya was denied her generation's outlook of enjoying the experience of unlimited possibilities, even if those freedoms carry their own angst. Disregarding the psychological complexities of our adult children to suit convention is robbing them of their journey to becoming who they were meant to be.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

Satellite data from 2013 to 2024 revealed that 71% of 287 large dams across the U.S. significantly altered water temperature downstream. In most cases, the water became warmer and – notably – maintained that temperature for at least 20 km downstream. The most extreme shifts occurred at dams with reservoirs. Altered river temperature can disrupt fish spawning and harm aquatic ecosystems, especially in spring and summer. The study highlights the widespread effects dams have on river health.

The team found no patterns linking genetic clusters to host species, geography or timing. Suggesting this may reflect the global trade in psittacine birds, the researchers said their findings highlight risks to conservation based on breeding captive birds.

A C U C U E

FAQ

Why is VAR controversial?

How does it work? What went wrong in the Egypt-Argentina match? What decision has FIFA taken in this regard?

S. Shrivathsan

The story so far:

On July 7, 2026, the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) came under the spotlight after causing disappointment for Egypt and delight for Argentina in the World Cup round-of-16 clash in Atlanta. Egypt felt hard done by after a beautifully crafted second-half goal was chalked off following VAR intervention for a foul in the build-up.

The African team, which let slip a two-goal advantage and eventually went down 2-3, was incensed that the on-field official was not called upon to forensically examine potential Argentine fouls that were made seconds before the winner was scored.

What is VAR and how does it work?

The VAR refers to the system itself and the chief referee who inspects every phase of play, usually from a central hub. Proposed in the early 2010s and approved by lawmakers at the International Football Association Board in 2016, the VAR was welcomed into the football family to provide technological support to on-field referees and minimise mistakes. The main objective is to avoid “clear and obvious errors” during key match incidents.

The current set-up includes numerous high-quality cameras stationed at different points in a venue and a pitch-side monitor, which is generally placed close to the dugouts. The head official at the VAR booth recommends that the on-field referee re-examine events that the latter could have handled better. The man or woman in the middle, however, can choose to

The lack of consistency in interpreting similar situations and deciding when to intervene has left many baffled; what is a penalty or red card in one referee's eyes may not be the same in another's view

ignore the advice or stick with the original decision even after an on-field review.

When can the VAR intervene? In tournaments and leagues across the globe, the system is

primarily used to analyse the following: goal/no goal, penalty/no penalty, direct red card or the reversal of it, and mistaken identity. Being used at the World Cup for the third successive edition (it was introduced in 2018), the VAR has been having additional responsibilities this time. It intervenes when a corner kick is wrongly awarded and helps in removing an incorrectly brandished second yellow card, which would otherwise result in a player being sent off.

How effective has the system been in the ongoing World Cup?

The VAR has made some contentious interventions so far, none more than the one for the disallowed goal in the Egypt-Argentina fixture. The Egyptian footballer Mostafa Zico was in dreamland after finding the back of the net following a breathtaking attacking move from the ‘Pharaohs’, but ecstasy turned into agony in a matter of minutes. Jerome Brisard, the VAR based at the tournament hub in Dallas, recommended that the on-field referee, Francois Letexier, review a possible foul by Egyptian player Marwan Attia on Argentine player Lisandro Martinez at the other end of the pitch. After an on-field review, Letexier deemed that Attia unfairly won the ball in the build-up to the goal and therefore ruled it out.

What made the Egyptians furious?

The Egyptian contingent argued that the foul was not committed in the phase of play preceding the goal and that the Attia-Lisandro duel took place well away from where the sequence ended. But FIFA chief refereeing officer Pierluigi Collina issued a clarification saying: “If a foul is identified in the build-up and is deemed to have had an impact on the goal, the VAR will recommend an on-field review. There is no defined limit regarding either the distance from goal or the amount of time between the incident and the goal.”

The Mohamed Salah-led side also confronted the official when it felt that an “illegal” contact on the foot and a shirt pull, both in Argentina's 18-yard box, were overlooked seconds before the winning goal. Letexier, however, waved off the protests and was not advised to recheck the incidents. Egypt head coach Hossam Hassan remarked that his team was “unfairly” treated by the man in-charge, while the national federation later filed a complaint with FIFA.

After being under the microscope, the sport's global governing body made a huge change to its VAR operations, appointing two in-house VAR officials for every match in the business end of the tournament (quarterfinals to final).

What are the complaints?

The lack of consistency in interpreting similar situations and deciding when to intervene has left many baffled; what is a penalty or red card in one referee's eyes may not be the same in another's view. There are claims that VAR is making football a “soft” sport by nitpicking fouls that are hardly spotted by on-field officials - Germany defender Jonathan Tah's disallowed goal in the round-of-32 encounter against Paraguay is a case in point. Fans, and sometimes even players and staff, are left in the dark about what the VAR is communicating to the man or woman on the ground.

Why did the U.S. indict Lawrence Bishnoi?

Which are the three Punjab-linked transnational organised crime syndicates against which the U.S. Department of Justice announced an indictment? Who is Bishnoi and what has he and his gang been accused of? What did charge sheet filed by the NIA say about him in 2022?

Vijaita Singh

The story so far:

On July 8, the U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) announced an indictment against three Punjab-linked transnational organised crime syndicates operating across India, Canada, the U.S., and Europe. Among the most significant allegations is that Lawrence Bishnoi, 33, a Punjab-born gangster, and his associate, Satinderjeet Singh alias Goldy Brar, ordered the assassination of pro-Khalistan activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in 2023 in Surrey, British Columbia, Canada. While Bishnoi is lodged in a high-security prison in Ahmedabad in Gujarat, Brar is a wanted fugitive in the U.S. Nijjar is designated as a terrorist by India.

The investigation has also led to multiple arrests, major drug seizures, and indictments alleging extortion, racketeering, murders-for-hire, and drug trafficking. The DoJ said that 37 people have been charged so far. It said that 24 defendants, connected to the three India-based transnational organised crime groups, who have been charged with a litany of criminal acts, have been arrested in the U.S., Canada, and Spain. Law enforcement officials are looking for 10 fugitives – seven in the U.S., two in India, and one in Europe.

Which are the three groups indicted by the DoJ?

The central organisation in the U.S. case is the Lawrence Bishnoi Organised Crime Group (OCG). Prosecutors describe it as a transnational criminal enterprise headquartered in India but operating extensively in Canada, the U.S., the U.K., Europe, and Australia. According to the indictment, the group was founded and led by Bishnoi and continued to function even while he was incarcerated. Brar allegedly managed North American operations, while Rohit Godara



File photo of police escorting Lawrence Bishnoi at a court in Delhi. REUTERS

The DoJ accused the Bishnoi network of targeted killings, shootings, kidnappings, assaults, and public threats to create a climate of fear among businessmen, celebrities, and members of the Indian diaspora

oversaw activities in Europe.

The second organisation is led by gangster Jagtar Singh alias Jaggu Bhagwanpuria, 38, who is imprisoned at Silchar jail in Assam. U.S. authorities describe his group as a separate transnational crime syndicate with a significant presence in India, Canada, the U.S, and other countries. According to prosecutors, the network has more than 1,000 members and associates worldwide. It emerged as a rival to the Bishnoi organisation but allegedly developed its own international criminal infrastructure. Bhagwanpuria is a former aide of Bishnoi.

The third major network is associated with Ravinder Singh Dhandra, 57, a Canada-based operative accused of running a large cross-border narcotics operation. This group's primary focus is the large-scale movement of drugs between countries, particularly the U.S. and Canada.

What are the charges against the Bishnoi group?

The charges against the Bishnoi gang were filed by the U.S. in a California court in February 2026, records show. The DoJ said that Bishnoi projected an image of himself as a “patriot,” “nationalist,” and a deeply religious individual through social media posts and interviews with news organisations and used this public image to recruit members and associates to his crime syndicate in India, the U.S., and elsewhere.

The DoJ accused the Bishnoi network of targeted killings, shootings, kidnappings, assaults, and public threats to create a climate of fear among businessmen, celebrities, and members of the Indian diaspora. It accused the gang of killing Punjabi singer Sidhu Moosewala, threatening singer Gippy Grewal, and plotting an attack on actor Salman Khan between 2023 and 2026. These alleged acts all coincided with Bishnoi's incarceration at the high-security prison in Ahmedabad.

According to investigators, the objective was to facilitate extortion and enhance the gang's reputation. The indictment also alleges that the group was involved in transporting cocaine and methamphetamine across North America and stealing narcotics shipments from rival trafficking organisations.

The indictment said that recruitment coordinators for the Bishnoi gang “enticed impoverished minors in India to join the enterprise by promising, among other things, money, notoriety, and protection.” It said that upon being recruited into the Bishnoi gang in India, new members received minimal compensation for criminal acts committed on behalf of the enterprise. The Bishnoi gang sent loyal members to countries including the U.S. and Canada on student and work visas obtained using fraudulent information, to assist the

enterprise's criminal operations in those countries, the DoJ said.

What has the NIA said about Bishnoi?

According to his lawyer Rajni Khatri, Bishnoi has been lodged in Sabarmati jail since 2023 in solitary confinement and is under 24/7 CCTV surveillance. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has invoked Section 303 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, which prohibits his movement outside the jail. He participates in court hearings via video conference, and if police from outside the State need to interrogate him, they travel to the prison.

According to a charge sheet filed by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in 2022 against Bishnoi and others, 84 cases have been registered against him in Delhi, Chandigarh, Rajasthan, and Punjab with the first case dating back to 2010. Ms. Khatri said that Bishnoi had been discharged or acquitted in 40 other cases. The NIA's charge sheet mirrors the allegations made by U.S. authorities that Bishnoi has been running his criminal network from prison. “He is so adept in operating from inside the jail that he has not applied for bail in any case... [for] many years,” the NIA said. Ms. Khatri said he did not apply for bail in recent years as there are several cases registered against him and no one will come forward to secure a bail bond for him.

The NIA compared Bishnoi's rise to that of the fugitive underworld don Dawood Ibrahim and accused him of funding the activities of “pro-Khalistan extremists.”

How did the Federal Bureau of Investigation unravel the Bishnoi gang?

According to the indictment, Sukhraj Singh Kang, a senior India-based lieutenant in the Lawrence Bishnoi Organised Crime Group, who directed and coordinated acts of violence carried out by members and associates in the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere, provided key evidence.

Where does the Nijjar killing fit into this?

The U.S. indictment alleges that Bishnoi and Brar ordered the assassination of Nijjar in June 2023. Prosecutors claim that Bishnoi supplied information about the target and that associates carried out the killing outside a gurdwara in Surrey. The allegation places the Bishnoi network at the centre of one of the most sensitive diplomatic disputes between India and Canada in recent years. The murder strained diplomatic relations between the two countries, with the government of the then Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, alleging the involvement of “agents of the Indian government” and designating Indian diplomats as “persons of interest” in the investigation.

Bill Essayli, First Assistant U.S. attorney, told a press conference that the “Indian authorities have been very cooperative and India is happy with today's operations.”

Meanwhile, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is conducting a parallel investigation into South Asian organised crime, the DoJ said.

Why did the government get ZEE5 to remove ‘Satluj’?

What is the film about and why was it removed two days after release from ZEE5? Who was Jaswant Singh Khalsa, the subject of the film? Can the government order an OTT platform to block a film? How are OTT platforms regulated? What legal remedies are available to the filmmakers?

Rizmi Lia M.

The story so far:

On July 5, just two days after its premiere, the film *Satluj* (originally titled Punjab '95) was removed by ZEE5 from its OTT platform. The filmmakers have said the government ordered the removal. Reports suggest that a Centre-appointed committee is examining the film under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act. No official blocking order has been made public.

What is Satluj about and why was it removed from ZEE5?

Directed by Honey Trehan and starring Diljit Dosanjh, *Satluj* is about the life of human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khalsa, set against the backdrop of Punjab in the 1980s and 1990s. Khalsa had been documenting the alleged extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and illegal cremations during Punjab's militancy years and had estimated that around 25,000 people had been secretly cremated across the State. In 1995, he was abducted from outside his home in Amritsar and was never seen again. The Central Bureau of Investigation concluded that he was taken by police officers to a police station



Villagers watch a special screening of the film ‘Satluj’ at a Sikh temple at Tatley village, in Punjab's Gurdaspur district. AP

There is a shift from pre-certification under the Cinematograph Act to post-publication executive control through Section 69A and the IT Rules

in Tarn Taran and killed in custody.

The film premiered on ZEE5 on July 3 after years of delays over a certification dispute with the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). However, two days later, the platform removed it from its India catalogue while continuing to stream it internationally through ZEE5 Global, citing “current developments”.

The film's OTT release came after years of controversy. Originally scheduled for a theatrical release in India, it faced hurdles with the CBFC. The Board reportedly recommended 127 cuts before granting the film certification. The delays forced the makers to repeatedly postpone the release, and the film never made it to theatres.

Can the government legally order an OTT platform to remove a film?

Unlike films released in the theatre, content released directly on streaming platforms does not require prior certification from the CBFC under the Cinematograph Act, 1952. Instead, OTT platforms are regulated under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. However, Section 69A of the Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000 empowers the Centre to block online content on limited grounds, including acts threatening the sovereignty and integrity of India, security of the State, defence of India, friendly relations with foreign States, and public order, or to prevent the commission of a cognisable offence. Any such blocking, however, must follow the procedure and safeguards prescribed under law.

What legal safeguards apply before online content can be blocked?

According to Apar Gupta, advocate and founder of the Internet Freedom Foundation, if the reported action against *Satluj* has been initiated under Section 69A read with the IT Rules, 2021, the government is required to follow certain “procedures and safeguards”. These include a reasoned written order explaining how the content falls within one of the statutory grounds

under Section 69A(1), an opportunity for the publisher to be heard, and a review by the designated committee. He points out that the Supreme Court, in *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015), had upheld Section 69A because these procedural safeguards, including recorded reasons and an opportunity for hearing, formed part of the statutory framework. He notes that the constitutional validity of certain provisions of the IT Rules, 2021 remains under challenge before the Delhi High Court.

Can blocking orders remain confidential?

One of the central questions is whether the government is required to disclose the reasons for a take down. Rule 16 of the Blocking Rules contains a confidentiality provision. The government has increasingly relied on it to withhold blocking orders even from the affected parties. This undermines the rationale on which the Supreme Court upheld Section 69A in the *Shreya Singhal* case since a blocking order that remains secret cannot be meaningfully challenged before the court of law. Without access to the blocking order, filmmakers cannot effectively challenge the decision, and the courts are left with little material to assess whether the restriction satisfies the constitutional test of proportionality laid down in decisions such as *K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* (2017) and *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India* (2020).

Does the case signal a broader shift in the regulation of OTT platforms?

There is a shift from pre-certification under the Cinematograph Act to post-publication executive control through Section 69A and the IT Rules. As OTT platforms fall outside the CBFC certification, the executive blocking powers risk functioning as a parallel censorship mechanism.

What legal remedies are available to the filmmakers?

If a blocking order has been issued, the filmmakers can challenge it before a High Court through a writ petition under Article 226 of the Constitution, arguing that the direction is ultra vires Section 69A and violative of Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(g), which provide the right to freedom of speech and expression and the right to practise any profession or carry on any occupation, trade or business, respectively.

PROFILES

Towards a more European alliance

NATO

Faced with external security challenges and internal divisions, especially under a sceptical Donald Trump administration, European members are preparing to play a larger role in keeping the alliance united and functional

G. Sampath

For more than seven decades, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has been the cornerstone of Western security architecture. Founded in 1949 as a bulwark against Soviet expansion into capitalist Europe, the 32-member military alliance outlived its original purpose by morphing into a vehicle for American power projection not just in Europe but across the globe.

In the post-Cold War era, challenges to NATO have come from within and without. The most obvious external threat has been Russia, which sought to check its continued eastward expansion by invading Ukraine. Today, the Russia-Ukraine war, in its fifth year, remains NATO's foremost priority in the context of its foundational mandate of European security. The threat from within, however, has been more insidious. It can be summed up in three words: the Trump Presidency.

Both in his first and current term, President Donald Trump has questioned NATO's utility for the U.S., and even threatened to exit the alliance. He believes that while NATO's capabilities, funds, leadership and infrastructure were overwhelmingly American, the U.S. gets out of the alliance far less than it puts into it, in contrast to its European allies, who got to reap its benefits while paying a fraction of the costs.

Mr. Trump's simmering resentment appeared to reach a boiling point in April, when his NATO allies ignored his call to join the U.S. in its war of choice against Iran. Notably, Spain and the U.K. (initially) refused access to their military bases for U.S. warplanes, while France refused over-flight rights. Mr. Trump lashed out, calling NATO a "paper tiger" without the U.S. He saw it as NATO's betrayal of the U.S., stating: "We've been there automatically, including Ukraine. Ukraine wasn't our problem. It was a test, and we were there for them, and we would always have been there for them. They weren't there for us."



Joint family: Leaders including NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, U.S. President Donald Trump, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan pose for a photo during the NATO summit in Ankara, Turkiye on July 8. AP

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio went further: "If NATO is just about us defending Europe if they're attacked but then denying us basing rights when we need them, that's not a very good arrangement."

U.S. drawdown

This was followed, in June, by a *New York Times* story based on a leaked communication, which laid out plans for a significant drawdown of U.S. commitments in NATO's Europe operations. According to the report, the Trump administration planned to "pull a third of the fighter jets it provides NATO for Europe", along with "reallocating a missile-launching submarine and an aircraft carrier, along with several warships". These developments set alarm bells ringing in Europe's strategic corridors, as they seemed to erode the lynchpin of their collective security – the pledge of mutual defence under Article 5. Could they still rely on the U.S. to rescue them in the face of an attack?

The U.S. has also scaled down its assistance to the Ukraine war effort, making European allies the principal financier. At the same time, Mr. Trump

has been pushing NATO's European members to spend 5% of their GDP on defence (3.5% on core military requirements plus 1.5% on critical infrastructure). But only five of NATO's 32 members are on track to meet this target in 2026.

Other sources of intra-NATO tensions include Mr. Trump's obsession with annexing Greenland, a sovereign territory of fellow NATO member Denmark. Mr. Trump also feels frustrated that European security considerations are coming in the way of his developing a more congenial relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Tensions on this front came to the fore in early 2025 when he tried to broker an end to the Ukraine war by directly speaking to Mr. Putin.

For their part, NATO's European members have tried to play a balancing act. There is now a clear-eyed recognition that the U.S. can no longer be expected to continue as the sole pillar of NATO. The constitutive principle of NATO is the unconditional security guarantee. But Mr. Trump's repeated attempts to make it conditional – linking it to members "paying up", or to their

'loyalty' – has cast a pall of uncertainty on that guarantee, prompting European nations to consider autonomy and self-reliance. But those are expensive propositions that need time, and vast investments, to fructify. In the interim, the European allies cannot do without continued U.S. engagement in NATO operations which, to their mind, calls for a strategy of placating Mr. Trump selectively and flattering him indiscriminately.

Interim strategy

This strategy, which was on full display at the NATO summit that unfolded in Ankara, Turkiye, on July 7-8, appears to have worked rather well. European leaders, led by NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, a canny Dutch politician, showcased their plans to ramp up spending on military hardware and investments in expanding their defence industrial base. While sticking to their decision not to get their hands dirty in the Strait of Hormuz, they ensured that the summit declaration reiterated Mr. Trump's stated goals in the Iran war: Iran must never acquire nuclear

weapons, and freedom of navigation must be restored in the Strait of Hormuz. For good measure, they also pledged \$50 billion in new defence procurements – a bonanza for America's military-industrial complex – and €70 billion worth of military assistance to Ukraine. In return, they got Mr. Trump to undersign an "ironclad commitment" to Article 5.

But the tensions, though papered over in Ankara, haven't gone away. The European allies' reluctance to join U.S. military operations against Iran points to a fundamental divergence in how the two see NATO. While Europeans view NATO as a "defensive" force that is region-specific (trans-Atlantic), Mr. Trump sees it more broadly as an extension of U.S. military capabilities that should be deployable globally.

To be fair, NATO has never been a one-way street as Mr. Trump seems to believe. For nearly eight decades, the U.S. has enjoyed unfettered access to air bases, military networks, infrastructure and logistical support across Europe, without which its various campaigns in West Asia and elsewhere over this period would have been impossible. It has also enjoyed the support of its European allies on most foreign policy issues, including when they have been controversial, and the military leadership of most nations in the continent. But with the U.S. increasingly prioritising the Pacific theatre, a greater European role in NATO was inevitable.

For the medium-term, in the words of the Ankara declaration, "a stronger Europe within a stronger NATO", is the stated objective, wherein European allies and Canada would be "assuming greater responsibility for the Alliance's defence". But over the long-run, Europe would want to develop its military capabilities to a level where, firstly, it provides credible deterrence against Russia even in a scenario of strategic ambiguity on the matter of American intervention in the face of a credible threat, and second, secures the autonomy necessary to safeguard its own political interests when they come up against American coercion.

THE GIST

Both in his first and current term, President Donald Trump has questioned NATO's utility for the U.S., and even threatened to exit the alliance

Trump's simmering resentment appeared to reach a boiling point in April this year, when his NATO allies ignored his call to join the U.S. in its war of choice against Iran

Other sources of intra-NATO tensions include Mr. Trump's obsession with annexing Greenland, a sovereign territory of fellow NATO member Denmark

A persistent force

Nigel Farage

From leading the Brexit campaign to starting Reform UK, the far-right leader has remained a deeply controversial figure in British politics

Sriram Lakshman

Nigel Farage, who heads the right-wing Reform UK party, announced on July 7 that he was resigning as the MP for the English constituency of Clacton-on-Sea, only to quickly add that he would re-run in the ensuing byelection. Mr. Farage, a polarising figure with staying power, has survived a plane crash, a car crash and several milkshakes thrown at him by protestors. He is now seeking to politically survive the latest scandal brewing around him.

Mr. Farage is currently being investigated by a parliamentary process for not registering a £5 million personal gift from a Thailand-based crypto millionaire, Christopher Harborne. There are other recent controversies as well, including a recent report in the *Sunday Times* about gifts Mr. Farage received from a long-time associate and convicted fraudster, George Cottrell. He has denied wrongdoing in both instances, arguing the gifts were personal.

Mr. Farage is no stranger to controversy. He was the informal lead of the deeply divisive 'Leave' campaign, which sought to take the U.K. out of the EU (Brexit). In 2010, he acquired notoriety for a speech in the European Parliament, in which he called Belgium a "non-country" and its former Prime Minister Her-



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

man Van Rompuy a "damp rag" to his face.

Mr. Farage was born in a well-to-do family in Kent in 1964. His father was a stockbroker who struggled with alcoholism and left the family home when his son was five. After completing his schooling at Dulwich College in London, Mr. Farage chose to become a commodity trader in London rather than attend university.

Having joined the Conservative Party as a teenager, he quit it in the early 1990s after the John Major government signed the EU's foundational Maas-tricht Treaty. Mr. Farage, by now a Eurosceptic, became a founding member of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in 1993. In 1999, he became a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) in Strasbourg and quit being a trader.

After Brexit, Mr. Farage acquired a new objective: replacing the Conservative party as the main Opposition to Labour. In 2021, during the pandemic, having dissolved the Brexit Party, Mr. Farage created

Reform UK. It currently supports tight immigration control, including rescinding permanent residence, and has taken up right-wing culture wars, such as "supporting free speech" and countering affirmative action. It also seeks to scrap net-zero policies.

Prior to his election to the U.K. Parliament in July 2024, Mr. Farage had worked as a television broadcaster and programme guest, including in America, where he has appeared on various *Fox News* programmes. Since at least 2016, Mr. Farage has cultivated ties with U.S. President Donald Trump. He has sought to develop Reform as the British version of Mr. Trump's MAGA political platform.

'Opposition voice'

In the run-up to the July 2024 general election, which Labour was expected to win, Mr. Farage insisted that Reform UK would become "the leading voice of the Opposition". The Conservatives, it turned out, became the official Opposition, but Reform

broke its previous records. While it had just five MPs in the 650-member House of Commons, it won the third largest vote share (14.3%).

Even with just a handful of MPs in Parliament, Reform has been wielding an outsized influence on government and the Opposition. A number of key sitting Tory MPs defected to Reform just this year. Labour's significant tightening of migration policies has been a reaction to Reform's positions and voter preferences.

Reform made significant gains in local council elections in England and Assembly elections in Wales and Scotland in May, at the expense of Labour and the Conservatives.

While Reform has more consistently led other parties in opinion polls since around the middle of 2025, Mr. Farage's own popularity has suffered. His net favourability ratings were worse than Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch's but higher than outgoing Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer's, as per polling from April.

Andy Burnham, who is set to replace Mr. Starmer as the PM, had a 20-point lead over Mr. Farage in a June YouGov poll about who would make a better PM. Reform also stands to potentially lose votes to hard-right party Restore Britain. Mr. Farage, while far from safe electorally, is unlikely to go gently into the political night.

Oneness of the multitude

Hinduism in Indonesia

The Prambanan Temple signifies the assertion of Hinduism as a monotheistic religion to meet the legal standard in the Southeast Asian country

Varghese K. George

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the historic Prambanan Temple near Yogyakarta, Indonesia last week. Standing alongside Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, he offered prayers at the 9th-century UNESCO World Heritage Site, the largest Hindu temple complex in the country, which houses the trimurti of Vedic Hinduism – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

The temple signifies the assertion of Hinduism as a monotheistic religion to meet the legal standard in the country for official recognition, which it secured in 1962, after a period of turmoil and uncertainty following Indonesia's independence in 1945. The trimurti is presented as the manifestation of one supreme god. The temple combines the antiquity of the faith and traditions with the modern, innovative repurposing of the inherent polytheism of Hinduism as monotheistic.

In Indonesia's legal system, two concepts are in tension – mandatory monotheism and the guarantee of religious freedom. The country's national identity itself is deeply tied to adherence to religion. The country has a national identity card with a mandatory column on religion. Marriage registration, birth certificates, school religious education tracking, civil service promotion,



AFP

and even burial rights are tied to a person's declared religion.

Indonesia also guarantees religious freedom. To reconcile this, the state recognised six religions – Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism – as *agama*, formalised in 1965.

The founding principle of the modern Indonesian state has five components (Pancasila), and the first is monotheism, or faith in one supreme god. When this was mandated as state policy, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism were considered legitimate by default. Hinduism could not meet the three criteria set in 1952 for a community to be recognised as a religion – it had to be strictly monotheistic, possess a recognised holy scripture, and be founded by a prophet.

The application for Hindu recognition was formally turned down by the Indonesian Ministry of Religion in 1952. Reformers organised under the banner of the Parisada Hindu

Islam and Christianity arrived with pre-existing global institutional scaffolding – scriptures, clergy hierarchies, and centuries-old doctrines. Hinduism in Indonesia had to build its scaffolding specifically to satisfy state monotheism rules and qualify as one of the recognised *agama*s. But internally it is closer to a federation of distinct traditions unified under a shared nomenclature.

Once Hinduism secured official recognition, it became something other indigenous groups could deliberately import wholesale as a legal shelter. The linkage between Hinduism and Indonesia's indigenous groups is a shared abstract supreme being concept plus a shared certifying institution (PHDI), laid over communities whose actual ritual life – deities, ancestor practice, and funerary rites – remain substantially indigenous and pre-Hindu in origin.

Three common features from older traditions, shared across religions including Catholicism, Protestantism and Hinduism, continue to endure in Indonesia – ancestral worship, animal sacrifice and nature worship. Islam and Christianity too are diverse and pluralistic in Indonesia, though their pluralism, shaped over four to five centuries, is now widely seen as an organic part of the country's cultural depth.

Opinion

SUNDAY, JULY 12, 2026

IN HIS BIRTH CENTENARY YEAR, RITWIK GHATAK’S WORKS ILLUMINATE NOT JUST THE PSYCHOLOGICAL RUPTURE OF 1947, BUT ALSO THE EXILE, DISPLACEMENT & LOSS THROUGH WHICH BENGAL CONTINUES TO IMAGINE ITSELF

Cinema in an age of refugees



■ ASHWANI KUMAR

cinema to be no more than chimera or fantasy will be surprised to discover in Ghatak’s films a world where Kafkaesque estrangement is fused with Fanon’s tragic vision of decolonisation.

Few filmmakers in world cinema have evoked as much passion, and admiration and yet remained so intriguingly neglected as Ritwik Ghatak. During his lifetime, he occupied a curious position on the margins of Indian cinema, revered by his fellow artists and intellectuals but denied visibility and recognition. Yet his apparent marginality concealed an extraordinary influence. Contemporary Indian film makers frequently acknowledge that his work reshaped the possibilities of Indian cinema by combining melodrama, political consciousness, and formal experimentation. Sudhir Mishra, maker of iconic films such as *Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi*, recently remarked that “every time you make a film, somewhere Ghatak is present,” suggesting that his cinematic grammar has become part of the sub-conscious of Indian filmmaking. When Ghatak died in 1976, his cinema lingered on the margins of world film culture. Once dismissed in the West as ‘scandalously obscure’, his films are now widely recognised as masterpieces of world cinema.

Popular imagination often casts him as the tragic Devdas of Indian cinema, a brilliant but self-destructive artist undone by alcoholism, emotional intensity, and professional disappointment. The comparison



If Ray represented the ‘suitable boy’ of Indian art cinema, Ghatak was its ‘problem child’

invokes the canonical hero of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s novel *Devdas* and at first glance, the analogy appears tempting. A committed Marxist, maverick Jungian thinker, a poet of rare intensity and short story writer, he spent much of his career working under difficult circumstances and battling personal turmoil. While the films of Satyajit Ray travelled across international film festival circuits and secured global acclaim, Ritwik Ghatak remained on the margins. Yet it was Ghatak who articulated

an unforgettable mytho-political cinematic vision of the anguish of a civilisation torn apart by partition, an anguish that neither many of his contemporaries nor the dominant discourse of post-colonial nationalism fully acknowledged.

Film critic Jacob Levich famously contrasts Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak through the metaphor of temperament and personality. In his words, if Ray represented the ‘suitable boy’ of Indian art cinema, Ghatak was its ‘problem child’.

This formulation captures an important distinction in their artistic sensibilities, but it also risks encouraging a flawed biographical reading in which Ghatak’s turbulent life overshadows the historical catastrophe of partition that shaped both the man and his cinema.

Thus, to remember Ghatak merely as the tragic Devdas or the ‘problem child’ of Indian cinema is to make a biography for history. While the Bengali *bhadralok* found comfort in Ray’s refined cinematic aesthetic, Ghatak remained relegated to slums of cinema. As cultural theorist Ashis Nandy’s reflections on the psychological aftermath of Partition suggest, Ghatak’s ‘lifetime of homelessness’ or self-destructive impulses can be understood not simply as personal failings but as the psychic consequences of suffering the disintegration of a shared cultural world.

Oscillating between lyrical nostalgia and revolutionary anger, his emotional and creative volatility can itself be read as a historical symptom, a ‘belated psychosomatic’ response to the violence, displacement and cultural rupture unleashed by the Partition of 1947.

Ritwik Ghatak made only a small number of films but his most celebrated are the Partition Trilogy—*Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961), and *Subarnarekha* (1962). Among them, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is widely regarded as his masterpiece. Ghatak’s cinematic vision is deeply intertwined with his poetry, which also

bears the wounds of Partition and the refugee crisis. The imagery of rivers and lost villages, central to *Subarnarekha* and *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*, transforms the river into a metaphor for history itself, carrying away homes, memories, and identities. The same sensibility appears in his poetry.

In *Subarnarekha*, the declaration, “who here is not a refugee” extends the experience of Bengal’s partition into a universal meditation on displacement. Drawing on folk theatre, Baul music, *khayal*, and visual echoes of Buddhist and classical traditions, Ghatak creates an epic poetics of the refugee. In an era marked by mass migration, and the farcical brutality of war, when the word refugee has become both a political accusation and a cry of desperation, Ghatak’s films appear eerily prophetic.

Watching his films, one realises that we live in an age of refugees, an age in which even history seems homeless, wandering through the debris of its own making. As a poet, I find echoes of my own fractured memories in Ghatak’s words:

*I walk through streets of strangers
Searching for the sound of my mother*

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India’s World Cup FOMO

RINGSIDE VIEW

TUSHAR BHADURI

EVERY FOUR YEARS, when the FIFA World Cup comes around, the footballing backwater that is India wakes up to the Beautiful Game with common people turning armchair experts and critics, and sleep cycles getting affected throughout the country. Most of these people would pay scant attention to the sport between two editions but won’t hesitate to pronounce opinions on Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Kylian Mbappe, Erling Haaland et al as well as explain the strengths of the Spanish defence and FIFA geopolitics.

Along with this, a familiar quadrennial lament would be heard from a wide cross-section of the population: Why India, with a population close to 1.5 billion, can’t come close to making it to the World Cup? Most of these people won’t be able to name more than a couple of footballers from the Indian national team, but consider it a national embarrassment that India is nowhere to be found in the Greatest Show on Earth, when tiny nations like Cape Verde and Curacao make their presence felt and give some of the biggest teams a run for their money.

It’s nothing more than FOMO (fear of missing out), with the exception that the fear comes true, unfaillingly, at every edition. There’s a feeling that India, as the self-proclaimed Vishwaguru, needs to be at the FIFA World Cup and somehow, the event can’t be called the World Cup if it doesn’t feature the most populous country on earth.

That’s when the tournament was expanded to 48 teams to make it more inclusive, but with the real intention of allowing the two biggest markets — India and China — to be part of it. But while China did qualify for the 2002 edition in Japan and South Korea, it failed to advance beyond the group stage, losing all its three matches and failing to score a single goal.

Some Indians may mention the 1950 World Cup in Brazil, where India had a chance of playing before pulling out. Contrary to the popular myth, it was not an insistence on playing barefoot as opposed to with boots that was the reason for the withdrawal, but more mundane financial reasons — the cost and logistics of sending the team to virtually the other end of the world — poor preparation, and considering the football competition at the Olympics as more prestigious.

As for the nostalgia for a time gone by when India was supposedly good enough to ‘qualify’ for the World Cup, here’s a reality check. They had got the opportunity after all the other three teams in the Asian qualifying group — Indonesia, the Philippines and Burma — had withdrawn, for reasons similar to those given by India.

Bleak future

Coming to the present, India has little chance of qualifying for the FIFA World Cup in the foreseeable future — even if the number of teams is increased further — as it’s not a priority of any of the stakeholders beyond offering lip service. India hasn’t even qualified for next year’s AFC Asian Cup.

The governing body of the sport in the country, the All India Football Federation, thinks it’s more



All India Football Federation Deputy Secretary General M Satyanarayan addresses a press conference on the roadmap for the 2026-27 Indian Super League season in New Delhi

worthwhile to pursue a change in its name to Football Federation of Bharat than to improve the level of the game in the country or its FIFA ranking, which is languishing at 138.

A country that can’t even conduct a domestic league — not due to war or other factors beyond its control — shouldn’t even think of qualifying for the World Cup. The reasons why the last season of the Indian Super League (ISL) was curtailed and seemed likely to be cancelled altogether at one stage are well documented and were largely commercial in nature. The sticking points were marketing rights and broadcast deals, and other issues related to money.

Even countries with meagre resources have a functional domestic league. It doesn’t need to be glitzy or flashy. Having a functional domestic structure that has a fixed calendar and abides by generally accepted regulations shouldn’t be too much to ask. Every league needn’t be a copy of cricket’s IPL.

On the footballing side of things, the issue that gets talked about the most is the paucity of quality Indian strikers, as if it’s the one aspect holding the national team back. The AIFF initially stipulated that one must be on the field throughout a league game, before backing out realising that the regulation was not enforceable.

Another proposal offered as a sure-shot solution is looking for quality players of Indian heritage around the world. Indeed, a lot of players who have featured in the ongoing World Cup weren’t born or raised in the countries for which they are playing. But why would a talented player, having Indian blood, find it worthwhile to surrender his passport and take up Indian nationality? He will first have to be convinced that he doesn’t have a chance of representing a quality side that may have a chance to compete in the biggest tournaments in the world. This approach

first needs a change in regulations at the highest levels of the government. Clarity of purpose is the first requirement here.

Lack of quality

The best Indian players contracted for amounts that may not be commensurate with their quality, who were supposedly worst hit by the uncertainty surrounding the ISL, can’t absolve themselves of this mess either. Apart from shedding tears and drafting appeals to resolve the impasse, they just sat on their hands even when the franchises they were contracted to reduced salaries and sometimes even threatened to shut down. The players could have tried to go and play overseas. Most of their Indian teams may not have had a problem with relieving them as they weren’t playing anyway, and it would have helped their finances.

But hardly any player sought that route, as they would have had to compare themselves with footballers elsewhere. Their level would have been exposed, and they would have had to settle for amounts much lower than what they are getting in India.

And now to the Indian football fan. It’s only been a few months since Messi came for a four-city tour of India, and people spent considerable amounts just to get a glimpse of the legend. The vandalism that took place in Kolkata when some disgruntled fans vented their ire was unprecedented. That sort of ‘passion’ is not visible when the national team underperforms or the domestic league isn’t held. The problem here is common to what ails almost every sport in the country. People care less about the sport than the stars.

In such a scenario, the hand-wringing over India’s absence from football’s showpiece is only temporary. The World Cup has one week left. This phase will soon pass too.

AIFF thinks it's more worthwhile to pursue a change in its name to Football Federation of Bharat than to improve the level of the game in the country

INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



Return to Raj relics?

Being the original capital of the British Empire, Kolkata boasts some of India’s oldest and grandest government residences. But unlike their counterparts in the rest of the country, West Bengal’s ministers have not enjoyed the luxury of living in these palatial bungalows in Alipore and Baliganj for over half a century. What should normally be ministerial residences are occupied by senior bureaucrats. The city does not even have an earmarked chief ministerial house. When the Communists came to power in 1977, Marxist ministers pointedly did not live in these relics of the Raj. And Mamata Banerjee, who wanted to emphasise her humble origins, continued this practice. BJP CM Suwendu Adhikari has to decide whether to reclaim the accommodations of colonial glory for politicians or settle for humbler abodes. He himself is likely to move into an irrigation department bungalow in Alipore.

Adhikari has, however, indicated that he will transfer the secretariat back to the iconic Writers’ Building, renamed Mahakaran, once the seat of West Bengal’s state administration. In 2013, Banerjee abandoned the sprawling three-storey redstone complex with exquisite Minton tile flooring, originally the central office of the East India Company and later the headquarters of the British government in India. The building is adorned with classical statues and ornate fixtures. Extensive repair work on the 250-year-old structure is required before the new government can move in.

He is one of us

Champat Rai, the former general secretary of the Ram Janmabhoomi trust, received barely a slap on the wrist, though he was responsible for overseeing donations to the Ram temple. The Ram trust agreed to accept his resignation only after recording, first, appreciation for his sacrifice for the Ram Temple movement while blaming the State Bank of India for oversight. Those puzzled by a lack of accountability are unfamiliar with the opaque operating style of RSS, where there is no clear-cut corporate chain of command. In the Sangh tradition, a *pracharak*’s age, loyalty and long years of service are much valued. Once an individual is well entrenched in the RSS, it is not easy to distance him from the organisation. A case in point is the VHP’s Pravin Togadia, whose erratic, irresponsible behaviour had infuriated even Narendra Modi as Gujarat CM. Despite being an embarrassment to the BJP, Togadia continued as the vice president of VHP International for many years and was in charge virtually after VHP presi-

dent Ashok Singhal fell ill, even though Modi was by then PM. Togadia was removed only in 2018 after he was pressured into holding an election, which he lost. He quit the RSS and started his own organisation.

Champat Rai, 79, a chemistry lecturer in a UP college, was jailed during the Emergency and later became an RSS *pracharak*. He was associated with the Ramjanmabhoomi movement in the 1990s, with Singhal as his mentor, and was respected for his legal knowledge of the case and for keeping meticulous records. Some feel that red flags should have been raised earlier. In 2021, the Opposition charged that the trust bought plots in Ayodhya for ₹18.5 crore, though days earlier, an intermediary had purchased the very same land for ₹2 crore. Visitors from Delhi who requested VIP *darshan* at the Ram temple were often put off by Rai’s arrogant, cranky behaviour.

Trumping a grey zone?

Vivek Aggarwal, IAS officer and ex director of the Financial Intelligence Unit, was appointed Vice President of the 40-member Financial Action Task Force (FATF) this month. India is preparing the ground for petitioning to put Pakistan back on the international FATF grey list alert for money laundering and for financing terrorism. Pakistan’s trade, investment and banking were impacted after India succeeded in getting the country listed on a financial alert from February 2012 to February 2015, and again from June 2018 to October 2022, compelling it to go through the motions of prosecuting terrorists from the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed for fear of being fully black listed. This week, the NIA filed a detailed charge sheet against LeT chief Hafiz Saeed, establishing Pakistan’s role in the Pahalgam terror attack. Data retrieved from the terrorists’ phones is said to have established that LeT was providing the coordinates of the Baisaran meadow to the attackers. A rattled Pakistan, which is not a member of FATF, is fully relying on support from the USA, China and Saudi Arabia to block a potential Indian move.

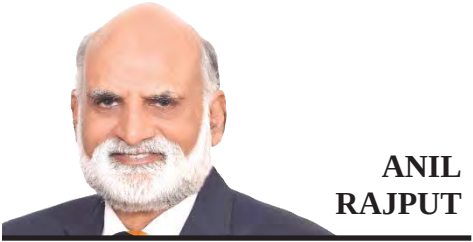
Splits, mergers and acquisitions

A new political trend could emerge in Maharashtra. In both warring factions of the NCP, a section of the party wants to simply merge with the BJP. In the NCP (AP), Praful Patel and Sunil Tatkare are unhappy with Ajit Pawar’s immature son Parth attempting to take full charge of the party. In the NCP (SP), Supriya Sule and her father lean towards joining the Congress, while other party MPs prefer the BJP option.

“TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY.
IT’S THE ONLY PLACE YOU HAVE TO LIVE”
— JIM ROHN

JAGANNATH RATH YATRA

The cuisine of mahaprasad, memory and devotion



ANIL
RAJPUT

There are festivals that are seen, festivals that are heard, festivals that are tasted and festivals that are experienced. Jagannath Rath Yatra belongs to all four. The sight of the great chariots rolling through the Bada Danda of Puri, the sound of cymbals, conch shells and chants of Jai Jagannath, and the fragrance of sacred food rising from homes, mutts and temple kitchens together create one of India's most powerful civilisational experiences. Every year, on Ashadha Shukla Dwitiya, Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra leave the sanctum of the Shri Jagannath Temple and travel to the Gundicha Temple in their magnificent chariots. For millions of devotees, this is not merely a procession. It is the rare moment when the divine steps out to meet the people. In that meeting, food becomes one of the most intimate languages of faith. The cuisine of Rath Yatra is not about indulgence or display. It is about offering, receiving, sharing and remembering.

The cultural history of Rath Yatra is deeply tied to the idea of accessibility. Lord Jagannath, whose name means Lord of the Universe, who does not remain distant from his devotees. During the yatra, he comes out of the temple with his brother and sister so that everyone, regardless of age, status or background, may receive darshan. The chariots themselves become moving temples. Lord Balabhadra's Taladhwaaja, Devi Subhadra's Darpadalana and Lord Jagannath's Nandighosha are pulled not by kings alone, but by countless hands joined in devotion. The festival moves from Shri Mandir to Gundicha Temple, where the deities stay before returning during Bahuda Yatra. This journey is filled with rituals, pauses and emotions, each carrying its own culinary memory. At the heart of it all is the Jagannath food tradition, one of the most sacred and distinctive temple cuisines of India.

To understand the cuisine of Rath Yatra, one must first understand Mahaprasad. In Puri, food is not simply cooked for consumption. It is prepared as bhog, offered to Lord Jagannath, and sanctified as Mahaprasad after its ritual association with Maa Bimala. Only then does it become food that is received by devotees as grace. The cuisine is sattvic, without onion and garlic, and built around rice, lentils, vegetables, jaggery, coconut, ghee, milk, curd and local seasonal produce. In Ananda Bazaar, Mahaprasad is shared among people without the ordinary barriers of caste, class or social standing. In a country where food often reflects hierarchy, Jagannath Mahaprasad stands as a sacred reminder that before the divine, all are equal. The process of preparing Mahaprasad is as sacred as the food itself, and it also reflects a remarkable traditional understanding of heat, steam and scale. In the Jagannath tradition, cooking is not treated as an ordinary kitchen activity, but as seva performed under strict ritual discipline. The food is prepared in the Rosaghara, the temple kitchen, by hereditary cooks known as suaras and mahasuaras. The ingredients are sattvic, vegetarian and free from onion and garlic, and nothing is tasted during preparation because the food is meant first for the Lord. Water is drawn from the temple wells traditionally known as Ganga and Jamuna, and the cooking is done in earthen pots called kudua over firewood.

What makes the preparation especially distinctive is the stacked-vessel method. Several

earthen pots are placed one above another on the same wood-fired hearth, with rice, dal, vegetables or other offerings cooking in separate vessels at the same time. Traditionally, it is said that the pot at the top cooks first, followed by the vessels below. Rather than seeing this only as a mystery, it may also be understood as the wisdom of an old cooking science. The fire below creates intense heat, while steam and hot air rise through the stacked arrangement. The clay pots absorb, retain and slowly distribute heat, allowing the food to cook gently without direct metal contact. The porous earthenware, the trapped steam, the shape of the hearth and the arrangement of the pots together create a system that can cook large quantities while preserving texture, aroma and warmth. Once the food is cooked, it is offered as bhog to Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra. In the Puri tradition, the offering becomes Mahaprasad only after its ritual association with Maa Bimala. It is then carried to Ananda Bazaar, where devotees receive it not merely as food, but as grace.

The most recognisable way in which devotees receive this sacred food is Abhada, the cooked Mahaprasad meal associated with the temple tradition. Abhada is not one single dish, but a complete experience of rice, dal, vegetables, greens, khatta and sweets received together. It is served with humility, often on leaf plates, and eaten with reverence. Its beauty lies in its simplicity. Unlike rich restaurant food, Abhada does not depend on heavy spice or elaborate garnish. Its depth comes from the sanctity of the offering, the purity of ingredients and the collective memory of generations who have eaten it as divine food. Around Rath Yatra, devotees who visit Puri often consider receiving Mahaprasad an essential part of the pilgrimage. For those outside Odisha, preparing Odia-style dishes at home becomes a way of joining the festival through taste.

Among the rice preparations, Kanika holds a special place. It is a fragrant sweet rice cooked with ghee, sugar or jaggery, and mild spices such as bay leaf, cardamom or cinnamon, depending on household practice. Unlike ordinary sweet rice, Kanika belongs to the ceremonial world of Odisha's temple food. It carries a gentle sweetness, a golden richness and a festive dignity that make it appropriate for offering. Ghia Anna, rice mixed with ghee, is another preparation that may appear simple but is deeply meaningful in the Mahaprasad tradition. The warmth of cooked rice and the aroma of ghee create a food that is soft, nourishing and sacred. Dahi Pakhala, rice cooled with curd and water, reflects Odisha's climate and culture. In the humid monsoon atmosphere of Rath Yatra, such cooling foods are both practical and symbolic. They remind us that temple cuisine is not detached from



ecology. It understands heat, rain, hunger, digestion and the needs of the body.

The savoury heart of the Rath Yatra table is found in Odisha's vegetable and lentil preparations. Dalma is perhaps the most beloved of these. Made with lentils and vegetables such as raw banana, pumpkin, papaya, brinjal, yam or drumstick, it is lightly spiced and often finished with roasted cumin and ghee. Dalma is nourishing without being heavy, festive without being excessive. Its importance lies in balance. Grain, dal and vegetables come together in one pot, reflecting the Odia instinct for food that sustains both body and spirit. Muga Dalma, made with moong dal, has a softer and more delicate character. The roasted aroma of moong dal, combined with seasonal vegetables, gives it a comforting depth that makes it suitable for offerings and family meals during the festival.

Another important preparation is Besara, a mustard-based vegetable dish that reveals the distinctive flavour of Odisha. Mustard paste gives it sharpness, warmth and earthiness. Vegetables such as pumpkin, raw banana, potato, colocasia or ridge gourd may be cooked in this paste, creating a dish that is unmistakably Odia. It is not generic temple food. It carries the taste of the region. Mahura adds another dimension to the meal. Usually made with mixed vegetables and gentle spices, it has a rustic, full-bodied quality. It may include vegetables like pumpkin, brinjal, raw banana and yam, cooked until they absorb the seasoning and become soft, fragrant and satisfying. Saga Besara or simple Saga Bhaja brings greens into the ritual meal. Leafy vegetables cooked with mustard or lightly sautéed reflect the everyday wisdom

of Odia households, where greens are treated not as decoration but as essential nourishment.

No



Odia festive meal feels complete without a sharp, sweet or sour note, and this is where Khatta becomes important. A khatta may be made with ingredients such as elephant apple, raw mango, tomato in household versions, or other souring agents, balanced with jaggery and mild spices. Its role is to awaken the palate and bring contrast to the meal. Ambila, a soupy sour vegetable preparation, offers another expression of this Odia love for tang and balance. It is usually light, digestive and deeply suited to the monsoon mood. Santula, made with boiled or lightly cooked mixed vegetables, is gentler and more restrained. It reflects the sattvic side of the cuisine, where the natural taste of vegetables is allowed to remain visible. Even a preparation like Badi Chura, made by crushing fried or roasted lentil dumplings with mustard oil, green chilli and sometimes coconut, carries the rural strength of Odisha's kitchens. It is sharp, textured and intensely local. Kakharu Phula Bhaja, pumpkin flowers dipped in a light batter and fried, brings seasonality and delicacy to the table, showing how even flowers become part of festive memory.

If the savoury dishes give the Rath Yatra meal its body, the sweets give it tenderness. The most significant sweet connected to the festival cycle is Poda Pitha. During Bahuda Yatra, when the deities return from Gundicha Temple to Shri Mandir, Lord Jagannath is traditionally associated with a halt near Mausai Maa Temple, where Poda Pitha is offered. This makes it one of the most emotionally specific foods of the Rath Yatra tradition. Poda Pitha is made from rice batter, often enriched with jaggery, coconut, lentils, cardamom and sometimes black pepper, then slow-cooked or baked until the outside becomes dark and caramelised while the inside remains soft and fragrant. The word poda means burnt, but here the burn is not a flaw. It is the source of flavour. The smoky crust, the sweetness of jaggery and the grainy softness of the interior make it one of Odisha's most distinctive ritual foods.

Khaja is another essential sweet in the Jagannath tradition. Made from layered dough that is fried and coated in sugar syrup, it is crisp, flaky and long-lasting. It is often associated with temple prasad and pilgrimage, partly because it travels well and retains its texture. Gaja, a deep-fried sweet made from dough and soaked or coated in sugar syrup, is denser and more robust. It offers a different kind of satisfaction, crisp at the edges and sweet within. Arisa Pitha, made with rice flour and jaggery, is fried until it develops a rich

brown surface and chewy interior. It is one of Odisha's classic festive pithas, linking Rath Yatra cuisine to the wider pitha-making culture of the state. Kakara Pitha, often made with semolina or wheat and stuffed with coconut and jaggery, brings softness, sweetness and aroma. Manda Pitha, a steamed dumpling filled with coconut and jaggery, offers a gentler contrast to the fried sweets. Its steamed form makes it light, devotional and homely. Milk and chhena-based sweets also occupy a cherished place in Odia food memory. Rasabali, with flattened chhena patties soaked in thickened sweetened milk, is rich, soft and ceremonial. Chhena Poda, Odisha's celebrated baked cheese dessert, is made by baking fresh chhena with sugar or jaggery until it forms a caramelised crust. Kheeri, the Odia form of kheer, becomes distinct in the Jagannath context because of its ritual association. Jagannath Ballava, Kora Khai and Nadia Kora add to the temple and festive imagination, representing sweets that are easy to offer, share, carry and remember.

Beverages during the Rath Yatra season also carry both ritual and regional meaning. The most sacred among them is Adhara Pana, a special sweet drink associated with the concluding phase of the Rath Yatra rituals. It is offered in large pots on the chariots and traditionally includes ingredients such as milk, chhena, sugar and spices. Its ritual meaning is very specific, so it should not be confused with an everyday summer drink. Alongside this, households and pilgrims may enjoy cooling Odia beverages suited to the heat and humidity. Bela Pana, made from wood apple pulp, water, jaggery and sometimes curd or coconut, is cooling and digestive. Dahi Pana uses curd as its base and offers relief during long days of worship and travel. Chhena Pana, enriched with fresh chhena, gives a sweet, nourishing quality. Torani, the lightly fermented water from pakhal, reflects the Odia genius for cooling the body through rice-based traditions. Even simple jaggery water with lemon, roasted cumin or coconut can become part of the pilgrim experience, not as temple bhog, but as the practical kindness of festival hospitality.

As modern life becomes faster, many young people may know Rath Yatra through photographs, television coverage or social media posts, but not through the taste of its food. That is why families and communities must keep these traditions alive not only by speaking about them, but by cooking them. Children must know why Poda Pitha is offered during Bahuda Yatra, why Mahaprasad is received with reverence, why food from Ananda Bazaar is considered sacred, and why Odia households prepare pithas, cooling drinks and sattvic meals during this season. To preserve the cuisine of Jagannath Rath Yatra is to preserve a way of seeing food as grace, cooking as service, sharing as equality and tradition as a living inheritance. The chariots of Puri move once a year, but the values they carry must move from one generation to the next every day. If we want future generations to feel the spirit of Jai Jagannath, we must give them more than stories. We must give them the taste of Mahaprasad, the warmth of Poda Pitha, the humility of Abhada and the understanding that a civilisation survives not only through temples and texts, but through the sacred offerings, rituals and memories it continues to prepare, receive and share.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)

Padharo Mhare Feast: Rajasthan's Royal Kitchen

GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Rajasthan's desert kitchens have set up camp in central Delhi. Food Exchange, the all-day dining restaurant at Novotel New Delhi City Centre, has handed its dinner buffet over to the state for *Padharo Mhare Feast* — a festival celebrating the slow-cooked, boldly spiced repertoire of Rajasthan's royal and rural cuisines.

The name borrows from Rajasthan's familiar greeting, *Padharo Mhare Des*, loosely translating to “come on in.” It reflects the spirit of hospitality that defines both the state and the festival. Behind the menu are two chefs with close ties to the region rather than a borrowed theme. Chef Chetan Singh, Master Chef at Novotel Jaipur Convention Centre, has collaborated with Chef Umesh Singh, Executive Chef at the Delhi property, to create a menu rooted in regional ingredients and traditional techniques rather than a generic North Indian spread. As the chefs explain, the aim is to bring the warmth, culture and celebratory

spirit of Rajasthan to the table along with its distinctive flavours. That intention is evident from the soup counter, where Makke ka Raab and Bajre ka Raab — millet-based broths usually enjoyed in Rajasthani homes — sit alongside Dal Badam ka Shorba. The appetisers include Pyaz ki Kachori, Mirchi Bade, Sangri ki Tikki, prepared with the dried desert bean that has long been a staple of the region, and Paneer Methania Tikka flavoured with the famous Mathania chilli.

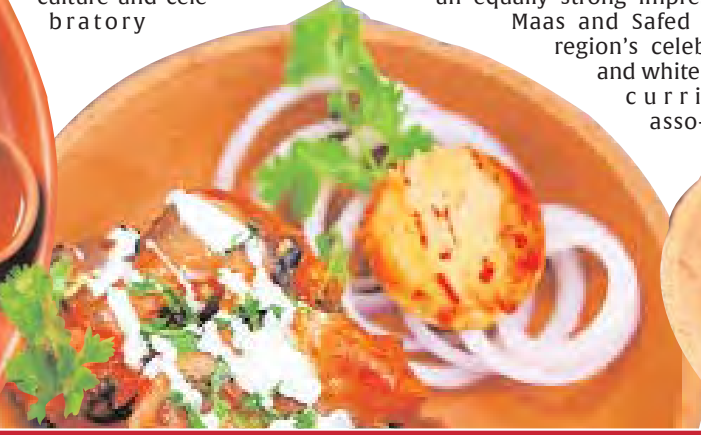
The main course showcases ingredients and recipes that rarely travel beyond Rajasthan. Panchkutta ki Sabzi, a blend of dried desert vegetables and legumes, shares space with Jodhpuri Gatta Curry and a tangy Rajasthani Kadhi. Reflecting the state's arid landscape, Bajra and Jowar rotis replace naan and pair well with the dedicated Dal Baati counter, where crisp, ghee-soaked baatis are served with Dal Mewadi, Dal Banjara and Churma, completing Rajasthan's iconic dal-baati-churma combination.

The non-vegetarian selection makes an equally strong impression. Laal Maas and Safed Maas, the region's celebrated red and white mutton curries

asso-

ciated with Mewar's royal kitchens, headline the spread alongside Khad ka Murgh, Dunder Murgh and Machli Jaisamandi, inspired by Rajasthan's lesser-known lake cuisine. Starters such as Murgh Shekhawati Kebab, Achari Fish Tikka and Lahsuni Murgh continue the emphasis on robust regional flavours. Desserts bring the meal to a fitting close with some of Rajasthan's best-known sweets. Malai Ghevar, closely associated with Teej celebrations, is joined by Mawa Kachori, Moong Dal Halwa, Rajasthani Lapsi and Besan ki Chakki, offering a glimpse of the state's rich dessert tradition.

The festival succeeds by staying close to its roots. Rather than presenting a familiar buffet with a Rajasthani label, it highlights recipes, ingredients and cooking traditions, bringing an authentic taste of Rajasthan to the Capital.



PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR

THE MAIN COURSE SHOWCASES INGREDIENTS AND RECIPES THAT RARELY TRAVEL BEYOND RAJASTHAN. PANCHKUTTA KI SABZI, A BLEND OF DRIED DESERT VEGETABLES AND LEGUMES, SHARES SPACE WITH JODHPURI GATTA CURRY AND A TANGY RAJASTHANI KADHI

Leave prejudice to live

To truly know anything, even our own selves, we must experience each moment with an open mind

AMMA (SRI MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI)

Children, we regard some people as good, and brand some as good for nothing. After some time, we will say that those very people we had earlier praised as good are bad, and those whom we had dismissed as good for nothing are friends we can trust.

Thus, our opinions and outlook keep changing. How does this happen? The main reason is that we lack true knowledge. We accumulate sufficient information about the body and the external world. But we know nothing about our own mind; we know nothing about ourselves. Prejudging everything has become a habit with us. If we approach everything with preconceived notions, we will not have real knowledge about anything. We should be able to see everything as it is. We should learn how to look upon everything with an open mind. Only then can we see what is true.

This world - objects, people and all - is constantly changing. The person we saw yesterday is not the same today. Whenever someone goes to a tailor to get clothes stitched, the tailor will retake the measurements. He doesn't think, "I already measured him last time." The tailor knows that the person's size and tastes can change.

We should have this kind of outlook when we interact with others. A person's character and attitude towards us can change any moment. Today's enemy can be tomorrow's friend. Today's friend can also be tomorrow's enemy. We should be able to look upon people with an open mind instead of sizing them up based on our past impressions. There are those who think that acting on preconceived ideas will help them avoid obstacles. Actually, what is needed is alertness, not biases. Prejudging is an unfavourable attitude, and alertness a favourable one. When we prejudge, we miss out on much new knowledge. However, when we act with alertness, we gain further insights.



Amma remembers a story. While at home, a man lost his wallet which contained a lot of money. The man, his wife, and their children started searching the whole house. They couldn't find it anywhere. The man's youngest son, a seven-year-old, said, "The boy next door had come here a little earlier." The man, who until then had only affection for that boy, suddenly started to suspect him.

"Haven't you seen the way he looks? There's no doubt about it. He's the one who stole the wallet," declared the man, who began to discern deceitfulness in the boy's manner of sitting, walking, and talking. He then began to express his anger and coldness towards everyone in that boy's family. The man who lost his wallet also lost his peace of mind.

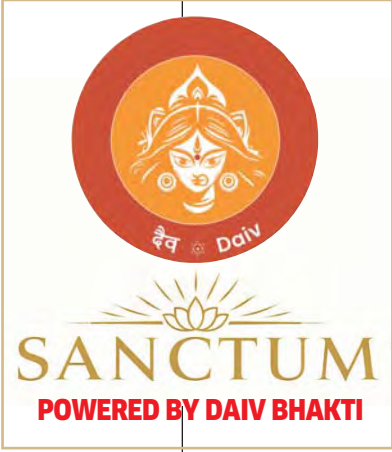
One day, while sweeping and cleaning the house, the man found his wallet in a gap in the sofa. Filled with remorse, he once again considered the boy a good, faultless, and innocent child. His respect for the family was restored and he apologised for his baseless suspicion and harsh words.

When we regard something with fixed ideas, a judgement will first form in the mind and we will see everything through an outlook that may often be misleading. We should first learn about something through alertness and discrimination in the present moment. Only

after that should we come to a conclusion. Prejudging is nothing but projecting our likes and dislikes on others. It will not help us see the truth; it will hamper our outlook. It is like looking at the world through glasses of many different tints. We will say, "blue world," "black world," or "red world." We won't perceive the multi-coloured composition of what truly exists before our eyes.

We should be able to understand and evaluate all situations and experiences - even our own selves - without prejudice. Through the awareness and maturity that spiritual principles impart, we can lead lives based on dharma that bring love, compassion, and peace to all.

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



Why happy employees need less management

SADHGURU

We as humanity have not focused on human resource in its real sense. We have invested a lot in maintaining a human being where he is right now, but we have not truly invested in developing a human being in such a way, that we open up the human possibility to its fullest potential.

A few years ago, when I was in Davos at the World Economic Forum, a certain professor from Harvard University came up to me and said "Oh, you are that amazing tree planter." I said "No, I am not a tree planter." He said, "No, no, you planted millions of trees."

"Yes, we did that, but I am not a tree planter." Then he asked, "What do you do then?" I said, "I make people flower." A true HR department means you must know how to make people flower. To make a human being flower, what are the necessary conditions? Your body, mind, emotion and your energy need to be

cultivated to their full scope and dimension. You will understand this from your career, your profession and your business - unless you do the right things, right things will not happen to you. This is how life works. If this is true outside, this is also true inside. But before we do the right things with other people, first of all we need to do the right things with ourselves. If you were doing the right things with yourself, you would be in utmost pleasantness. After all, whether somebody is seeking success, money or power, whether somebody is going to the bar, going to the temple or wants to go to heaven - essentially everybody is seeking pleasantness inside and outside.

Right now, your experience is unfortunately determined in reaction to external situations. Whatever kind of situations you are living in, not a single person on this planet happens 100% the way you want them. If this is so, at least this one human being - you - must happen your way. But right now, your joy, your peace, your wellbeing is so fragile. Anybody can shoot it down.



When your wellbeing is so fragile, being anxious is normal. When anxiety is normal, madness is just one step away.

Especially if the outside situation becomes unpleasant for some reason, if people around you are unpleasant, it is all the more important that you keep your insides pleasant. If we want to truly develop human potential, the most fundamental thing is we must create a situation where pleasantness is a conscious choice, it is not something that happens to you because somebody is wonderful to you. If the best has to come out from a human being, the first thing is, you must know how to keep yourself joyful so that you can keep everybody around you joyful. If everybody who is working for you is really happy, they don't need much management. A joyful man is a wonderful human resource always. If I meet you when you are very happy, I am sure all of you are wonderful human beings. If I happen to meet you when you are angry, frustrated, and unhappy, you could be a nasty human being. I am not saying you are, but possible. So, this is the basic thing which we have not attended to.

Your body, your mind, your emotion and your energies can be constantly enhanced and made to function in a better way than they are right now. The very source of creation is throbbing within you every moment, but you are not aware of it. This body got created from within, not from outside. What you call as your body is an accumulation of food. You provide the raw material, but the making of the body is happening from within. Instead of living here as an accumulation of food, and an accumulation of impressions

which you call "mind," if you had access to that source of creation within you, you would live a very exalted life. That is when we can say you are truly developing human resource, not just by training them to do this and that.

This must happen to every human being, and it is not far away. Your joy, your misery, your agony or your ecstasy always happen within you. This is the essential human predicament - your senses are all outward bound, but the seat of your experience is within you. If only you were aware of how the seat of your experience happens, would you make your experience of life pleasant or unpleasant? Definitely pleasant.

If you were in utmost pleasantness, you would function at your best. We have built all kinds of infrastructure on the planet but we have not built much infrastructure for the inner wellbeing of a human being. How a human being is within himself is most important if we want to bring out the best in that person. Otherwise, we will remain a crippled humanity. I want you to see HR in a much larger perspective than just running your company, hiring and firing people. If we really want to develop human resource, we as individuals, as families, as communities, as nations, as humanity as a whole, have to invest something into developing a human being into a much bigger possibility than the way he is right now.

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

Live today: There may be no tomorrow

Life does not promise another sunrise; it only entrusts us with this sacred moment. Before time quietly closes the door, let your heart forgive, your hands serve, and your soul seek God. The greatest tragedy is not dying tomorrow, it is failing to truly live today



DR SADHU GYANANANDDAS

In the Mahabharata, the Pandavas were wandering through the forest during their exile. One afternoon, exhausted by heat and thirst, they desperately searched for water. Nakul first spotted a beautiful lake shimmering amidst the trees. Crystal-clear water danced under the sunlight like liquid silver. Overjoyed, he rushed toward it.

But before he could drink, a mysterious voice echoed through the forest: "This lake belongs to me. Before drinking, you must answer my questions. Ignore my warning, and death will follow." Blinded by thirst, Nakul ignored the warning and drank the water. Instantly, he collapsed lifeless beside the lake.

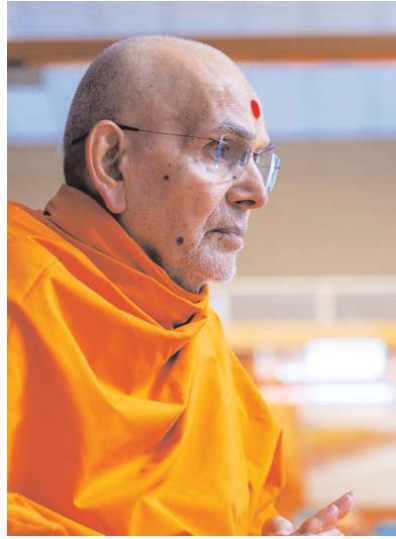
One by one, Sahadev, Arjun, and Bhima arrived, heard the same warning, ignored it, and met the same fate. Finally, Yudhishtir came and was stunned to see his four brothers lying lifeless beside the lake. Unlike the others, he remained calm and respectfully agreed to answer the questions of the mysterious Yaksha.

After many deep questions, the Yaksha finally asked, "What is the most astonishing thing in this world?" Yudhishtir replied, "Every day, countless people die, yet those who remain think they are immortal. What can be more astonishing than this?"

This answer exposes the greatest illusion of human life. Every day we witness death around us, yet we continue living carelessly, absorbed only in pleasure, wealth, ambition, and temporary enjoyments, as though death will never come to us.

After narrating this incident, Yogiji Maharaj once said, "Life is ephemeral, and therefore every moment should be lived with awareness, purpose, and understanding.

Of course, human life rests upon the most fragile foundation imaginable, uncertainty. No man knows what the next moment holds. A healthy person may suddenly collapse, a prosperous man may lose everything overnight, and a smiling face may disappear before sunrise. Yet we live as though



tomorrow is guaranteed. As a result, we postpone goodness, delay spirituality, ignore relationships, and waste precious time in endless distractions, assuming life will continue forever.

That is why the timeless reminder of the Bhagavad Gita strikes the human heart with such force: "For one who is born, death is certain."

This is not a statement of pessimism; it is a call to awakening. Even Steve Jobs, who was the wealthiest and most influential man in the world, couldn't buy one more day for his life. True, all success, innovation, and fortune stood helpless before death. However, death is not the tragedy; forgetting death is the tragedy. The awareness that life is temporary gives seriousness to our actions and value to our moments. A student studies sincerely when he knows the exam date is fixed. Similarly, a wise person lives meaningfully because he knows time is limited.

If there may be no tomorrow, then why waste today in hatred? Why postpone prayer, kindness, self-improvement, or expressing love? The uncertainty of life should not create fear; it should create urgency for right living.

Live today with purpose. Speak gently. Forgive quickly. Serve selflessly. Spend time wisely. Build character

more than wealth. Because life is not measured by how long we live, but by how deeply and nobly we live.

During His pilgrimage as Nilkanth Varni, Bhagwan Swaminarayan awakened people from the illusion of worldly permanence and guided them toward the eternal. One such remarkable incident took place in Nepal. At that time, the King of Nepal Rana Bahadur Shah, was suffering from a severe and incurable illness. Physicians, astrologers, and tantric practitioners had all failed to provide relief. Hearing of the Balaprabhu whose divine radiance had captivated scholars and yogis alike, the king requested Nilkanth Varni to visit the palace.

When Nilkanth entered the royal court, the old king bowed with great reverence and prayed:

"O Prabhu! If you possess divine powers, please cure my disease. I will reward you with immense wealth, honor, and whatever you desire."

Nilkanth Varni compassionately looked at the king but did not immediately heal him. Instead, He first imparted spiritual wisdom.

"Your disease has arisen according to your own karmas. No physician, mantra, or medicine can erase what has been ordained by the law of karma. Even at this stage, you are thinking of your wealth and power, which is very pitiful." He further said, "O King, this world is ephemeral. Kingdoms, wealth, youth, and power are like dew upon a lotus leaf, beautiful for a moment, gone with the first rays of the sun. Therefore, do not place your faith in what time will surely take away. Seek the eternal refuge of God instead, for only spiritual realization accompanies the soul beyond death."

Nilkanth Varni not only cured the king but also transformed his life. He reminded humanity that life is uncertain and every breath is precious. Tomorrow is only a possibility; today is the gift placed in our hands. Live it wisely.

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

When the good you do makes you miserable

You don't get mango by sowing the seeds of neem. As you sow, so do you reap

GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

While it is easy to repent bad deeds, good deeds can make you miserable too. Good deeds don't automatically uplift you. Your intention, attachment, expectation, ego, and the state of mind behind the action determine whether the deed brings you joy or misery.

Even when you do charity, sometimes you may feel that your good deeds went unnoticed. 'I did such wonderful things, but nobody recognises them. There is no appreciation for them.' This is a usual complaint. This need for recognition, for one's good deeds, can cause misery. In the Narada Bhakti Sutras, Narada advises taking a break not just from activity but also from expecting the fruit of that activity. It brings deep rest from doubts, conflicts, and misery. One who isn't concerned about the outcome and is focused on the action goes beyond dualities, beyond conflicts. The wise one is beyond all actions. Yet they continue to engage themselves in action for the benefit of the world.

You have some expectations when you perform good actions. This expectation becomes a source of misery. Even when a good deed happens through you, you must remind yourself that it is the divine who has put you in a scenario where you got the opportunity to do a good deed. That is why it is said, 'The giver must be thankful.' When someone gives something, and it is accepted, the giver must be thankful. The thought is, 'I have been given the role of a giver; that is itself a great blessing.'

Another type of complaint that often comes from people who do good work is, 'I did such good deeds yet see what has happened to me.' That is why the saying is, neki kar, kuwein me dal (Do good deeds and throw them in the well.) You shouldn't even remember that you have done it. Otherwise, you might end up miserable, thinking, 'I have done this and that for so many years, but people who have benefited don't recognise me anymore in my rainy days.' Just remember, you must have done some good in the past, so you got to serve, and you have done it.

Doubts about your positive actions also cause misery. These doubts come up when you see people who do harmful things get rewarded by society. But I tell you, it only appears like that because you see events through a very narrow lens. You only need to expand your awareness.



These so-called bad people must have done something good in their past lives, and they reap good results now. You have done so many things in so many lifetimes, and they all have repercussions. Similarly, those who do good, if something bad happens to them, know that, knowingly or unknowingly, they must have committed some wrong in the past. You don't get mango by sowing the seeds of neem. As you sow, so do you reap.

People don't experience misery because of their goodness. You have to use your intelligence and awareness before any action. If someone says, 'I am very good and noble,' and then they put their hand in the fire, they are bound to get burnt. You should also have a presence of mind and use your intelligence before you act.

To free yourself from the results of past actions, you should regularly do our sadhana or spiritual practices (practices like meditation, breathing, Sudarshan Kriya, chanting, singing.) When you see the results of your actions from a bigger perspective, great inner strength dawns within you, and you can smile through any situation.

Everyone goes through tough times. And those who do good also go through their own share of challenges. Plenty of obstacles can come your way when you set out to do some good work in society. A committed mind may at times experience rough weather, but it will reap the fruits of its toil. Tough times beckon you to put your skills into action. Trying times bring the best out of you. Rewarding times gives you the best of the world. Miseries in life bring you some depth. Life is a combination of both. We need to make use of every situation, whether

good or bad, to your advantage. That is intelligence. Wisdom from past experiences; engaging in spiritual practices; invoking the valour within, and keeping one's faith help us sail through the rough patches of life.

Your goodness can also fuel your ego and become a source of misery. When you think you are very good, then you somehow feel others are not as good. When you find others aren't good, you definitely become no good yourself. When you find that you are right, everyone else becomes wrong in your eyes. It is a very delicate balance.

On the other hand, the feeling that you are not as good as others or that you lack something is also part of your ego and is equally destructive. 'Everyone else is right. Only I am always wrong. Nobody loves me. Nobody understands me.' These types of thoughts are not helpful. Instead, create space for all types of opinions and feelings: 'I am right, and so is everyone else. Everyone is right in their own way.'

Despite all this, you cannot stop doing good in society. In fact, you cannot exist without performing some action. Your body organs are serving you even when you are asleep.

Your first and foremost commitment is to do seva in the world. When you make the service your sole purpose in life, it eliminates fear, brings focus in your mind, purposefulness in action, and long-term joy. When you do seva, it brings naturalness and human values back in society; it helps in building a society that is free from fear and depression.

If you have the desire to serve and help others, you don't have to worry; your needs will be taken care of. Your life is not a big responsibility for the Divine. It can take care of you very well. Don't be concerned and worried about money or other resources so much. They'll all come. Be filled with love, be filled with gratitude, get rid of the fear in you by being in love.

When you do something which benefits others, it should be cherished, it should humble you and inspire you to do more, instead of making you proud or arrogant. Because you are not really the doer. Simply offer your negative as well as positive deeds and qualities to the divinity. Keep a smile on your face, serve, and immerse yourself in knowledge. Then, no misery will be able to touch you.

AN EXPLAINER ON INDIA, IN BULLET POINTS

A curious notion has been gaining currency in the media. That people are no longer interested in entertainment and sports. Maybe the statistics reveal new sectors of popular interest. That wouldn't be surprising after three decades of politics being framed as audio-visual entertainment, even if it's often of the gothic sort. Leave aside our *Bigg Boss*-like news TV. It seems only firangs watch that now, strictly for entertainment. (If you haven't seen that reel of two white men guffawing over Indian war coverage, go google!) There's plenty of everything gushing around in the online circulatory systems: comedy, tragedy, slasher gore, podcast pedants, QAnon types, globe-trotting lefties, all attracting more foot-falls than cinema halls.

One does get the distinct sense that average political engagement levels are much higher among the Twenty20s—the generation in that tender age bracket in this decade—than at any other time before. The explosion of content has sent curiosity skyrocketing. The Uber driver from Agra wants to know about Bhindranwale. Sophomores are asking ChatGPT about Suhrawardy. Kurds may rank higher on search engine stats than curd. The media is obliging. According to this theory, what everyone is consuming the most is this new artefact called explainer: on every possible topic.

Especially “geopolitics”. It used to be a rarefied topic. Even the word was reserved for 5-megaton oped pieces. Not anymore. Not with asymmetric wars becoming as ambient as air pollution, and Donald J Trump emerging as the new mathematical puzzle that even AI can't solve. The questions mob us from all sides. From the stock market to your sleep, everything is in the red in this Age of Anxiety. You can't blame young people for wanting to know why things are so messed up. That has turned us into a textbook nation! Not an ideal one, just one where even adults are now consuming knowledge in easy-to-digest Q&A capsules. In any case, we are society of exam-takers, leak or no leak. So we in the media too turn into a Kota coaching centre.

But who says entertainment has lost its hold on our psyche? The latest successful startup in Indian politics has come via cinema. The entire youthful sap of our ancient Tamil lands was diverted to underwriting the phenomenal rise of Vijay. Talk to anyone beyond their 50s, and you hear stories of them being emotionally blackmailed into voting TVK by their children or grandchildren! The background chatter has it that Vijay came into politics because the scion of the previous dispensation was making it difficult for him to function in the film industry. In short, a filmi fight spilled into the political field. That proves South Indian politics has not quit its long romance with cinema. Even the new Kerala CM scored a few brownie points with the youth by putting out that he was a regular at film festivals!

As for West Bengal, if you think the big fight is ‘The CM vs Mamata Banerjee’, you are wholly wrong. Half the social media space is devoted to ‘The Trolls vs Rachana Banerjee’. The former Bengali actress a.k.a. Jhumjhum—a self-styled Didi No 1 of local TV, and now a Rajya Sabha member—had recently hopped from the real TMC to the rebel TMC. At that point, she stirred the pot saying it takes a bit of class “to stay in Urbana”, referring to her champagne-class Kolkata colony, and made a throw-away remark about a “footpath girl”. You can imagine how that went.

In Punjab, it's a more sombre story. A stark film failed in a years-long battle with the censors. Unlike the blind film censor in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, they actually watched it and pronounced quietus by a thousand cuts. Anyway, it had Diljit Dosanjh, who has a knack of putting the ruling order in a pickle. Suddenly, under the name *Satluj*, it was put out on OTT. Only to vanish again. Initially, there was no official ban but it soon came. Now it's on just about every WhatsApp group, being furiously shared, to be watched no later than this weekend. Even gurdwaras are holding screenings.

A generation or two is discovering the fraught history of India through a film. Or through explainers—for, geopolitics isn't absent. The young were being encouraged to the path of violence by another country. A State crackdown, even if excessive, was made necessary, they say—the Constitution and civil rights sometimes have to be kept aside for a little while. In short, the law has to abolish itself so as to uphold the law.

Thus, a nation and its founding paradoxes are meeting in an encounter. KPS Gill's family, one of whom is otherwise a paragon of liberal thought, is defending the mass burials of Punjab. But the human stories were bound to emerge from the grave like ghosts, in the form of poetry, protest, song or film. The parallels with Bengal are striking. Both states suffered the mayhem of Partition, saw strife with Naxalism and militancy, lost a whole generation to the state's bullets, and finally rejoined the mainstream—thanks to those bullets, they say. Both states subsequently also saw an economic decline. Even if Punjab looks prosperous on the outside, it is fragile within.

What was the original question? Yes, if politics has become entertainment, the reverse is also true and the proof is probably playing on a small screen near you.

QUOTE CORNER

In the 1990s, if a player was a good dribbler, people would say he had *samba no pé* (samba foot)... As US-style evangelical prosperity gospel churches sprang up in Rio's favelas, samba gave way to Brazilian funk that exalted consumerism and removed *double entendres*... The 2026 squad only has one non-evangelical in the starting lineup.

Brian Mier, co-editor of *Brasil Wire*, explaining how Brazilian football's decline is mirrored in a deeper socio-cultural transformation across the nation over decades

As of 2026, the plaintiff's evidence is ongoing. We may say that even a snail may question the speed at which this trial is proceeding.

Justices Sanjay Karol and N Kotiswar Singh, on a commercial suit pending before a consumer court and then the Delhi High Court since 2015

I would probably just watch the replays of Egypt getting robbed again and again.

Zohran Mamdani, New York mayor, when asked what he would do with the 6 mins saved per commute as a result of his new bus scheme, on questionable World Cup refereeing decisions

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DIPLOMACY: BILLION PEOPLE, ONE BRAND



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

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It was 6°C outside Marvel Stadium in Melbourne on Thursday night, but inside, nearly 30,000 people were generating their own heat. Giant mandalas glowed behind the stage, and the red carpet stretched improbably long. When Narendra Modi walked out beside Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, the arena did not so much applaud as detonate.

Albanese, who has hosted Bruce Springsteen at the same venue, joked that even ‘The Boss’ hadn't seen a reception quite like this one. Chants of “Modi, Modi, Modi” collided with an Australian sporting refrain “Oi! Oi! Oi!” This was the Melbourne leg of Modi's latest three-nation tour of Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand—one unmistakable style, road-tested across more than a hundred foreign visits to around 100 nations since 2014. It's a record unmatched by any Indian Prime Minister before him.

What sets apart Modiplomacy is not merely its volume, but its geography and grammar. Where American, Russian, Chinese and many European leaders have historically circled a familiar loop of Washington, Moscow, Beijing, London, Paris and Tokyo, Modi has, by design, repeatedly stepped off it. He became the first Indian PM to visit Israel, Palestine, Mongolia, Rwanda, and, weeks before this trip, Slovakia since its independence.

He has traveled to Fiji, Seychelles, Mauritius, Papua New Guinea, Trinidad and Tobago—nations that rarely feature on major-power itineraries, yet host sizeable populations of Indian origin. Everywhere, a connecting line keeps surfacing. It's about retrieval of a diaspora no previous PM had systematically courted—in Houston's ‘Howdy Modi’ rally and now in a sold-out Docklands arena in Melbourne, where he told the crowd their weekends of bhajan-clubbing and backyard cricket proved a life built abroad and an identity rooted in India need not contradict each other.

Layered onto that geography is a more personal grammar than statecraft's usual communiqués and restrained handshakes. The Modiuglomacy—extended to leaders from Barack Obama to Emmanuel Macron—is now so recognisable that foreign media outlets anticipate it as a symbolic gesture. Gestures like unveiling a two-decade-old photograph of himself with former Australian captain Steve Waugh at the Melbourne Cricket Ground this week, a memento from when Modi was still Gujarat's Chief Minister, define Modi's style.

Numbers, too, have entered the repertoire, deployed as literal equations rather than abstract talk of “connection”. In Jakarta, Modi told the Indian community that Republic Day, January 26, could be read as 2+6=8, echoing President Prabowo Subianto's own milestones, a flourish that didn't quite land since Republic Day is an annual event, not the “last year” event his arithmetic implied. Opposition parties mocked it as gimmickry. In Melbourne, he reached for a different sum, describing the India-Australia relationship as 1+1=11, insisting the partnership was not merely additive but exponential. He called this trip his “hat-trick” in Australia, urging the diaspora to “hit fours and sixes” for their adopted country, reaching for a metaphor his audience lives inside.

Strip away the choreography and the visits still carry a dense agenda: 16

agreements in Jakarta spanning defence and space cooperation between Isro and Indonesia's BRIN, a decade-stalled uranium deal and expanded defence roadmap in Melbourne, and talks in Auckland building on this year's India-New Zealand trade agreement. Modi now holds more than three-dozen international civilian honours—Indonesia's Bintang Adipurna the latest—making him India's most internationally decorated PM.

Opposition leaders argue the travels came at cost of roughly ₹762 crore over a decade. But the bigger picture is arithmetic before charisma. India, a nation of 1.4 billion people, is the fastest-growing major economy on the planet. When Modi lands in Melbourne, Jakarta or Berlin, he facilitates access to Indian consumers and a multimillion-strong diaspora.

That leverage buys latitude: a PM whose country other governments need something from can set the terms of his own reception—for one, a stadium instead of a banquet hall. Host governments build itineraries around the informality rather than merely tolerating it. Albanese's office organised the 30,000-seat stadium event. The mayor of Nice ordered India's tricolour flown over the city hall, a courtesy rarely extended to visiting dignitaries. None of this sits in any protocol handbook; it exists because hosts have concluded that meeting Modi on his own terms is worth more than insisting he meet them on theirs.

This louder and disruptive diplomacy has to be empirically examined. Jawaharlal Nehru's authority was moral and intellectual, heard in world capitals in English polished enough to out-argue his hosts. Indira Gandhi needed no charm, carrying the cold authority of a leader who split Pakistan in two and made Cold War superpowers wait on her deci-

sions. Atal Bihari Vajpayee wrote poetry, rode a bus to Lahore and let restraint itself become his signature, the poet visible beneath the politician even at Pokhran.

Modi has none of these instruments, and yet has arguably reshaped the tone of Indian diplomacy by inventing a different currency: relentless, repeated, personalised familiarity, amplified through modern media as none of his predecessors could. Where Nehru persuaded through argument and Vajpayee through gesture, Modi persuades through repetition and intimacy—the same embrace, the same rally, the same one-liners deployed in Houston, Wembley and Melbourne until audiences recognise the pattern the way they'd recognise a returning performer.

None of this should be mistaken for diplomacy on Modi's terms alone, since the accommodation cuts both ways. Albanese benefits from embracing a leader popular with a diaspora bloc that votes in marginal seats; Prabowo gains domestic standing by association with a rising power. It is part of why critics ask whether this style outlives Modi, or is so bound to his persona that Indian diplomacy will need a new narrative once he is gone, as it did after Nehru, Indira and Vajpayee. What Modi has done, in essence, is convert India's economic ascent into a weaponised diplomatic style tailored by cultural nationalism rather than merely a diplomatic asset.

His predecessors leaned on intellect, power or literary grace because those were the currencies India could spend when its economy was a fraction of its size today. Modi, as a leader of a gigantic economy, chose instead to spend that weight on informality, betting that a billion-person market can be leveraged on its own terms. Hug first, followed by a protocol that concludes in a treaty.

His admirers or historians may call that a masterstroke of soft power; or a triumph of marketing over statecraft. But the tone and terms set by Modi dictate how global leaders are expected to engage with the PM of a New India.

THE REPUBLIC OF RECURRING SURPRISES



THE THIRD EYE

SHANKKAR AIYAR

Author of *The Gated Republic*, *Aadhaar: A Biometric History of India's 12 Digit Revolution*, and *Accidental India* (shankkar.aiyyar@gmail.com)

INDIA runs on many calendars. The fiscal calendar defines the spend of the exchequer, the academic year for students, the kharif and rabi calendars for farmers, the festival calendar for the soul. There is a fifth calendar that is unprinted and unfailing, observed with the devotion of the faithful. It is the calendar of outrage.

It opens with January and February focused on air pollution. This January, 123 of 148 cities recorded higher-than-recommended PM2.5 levels, and 53 cities figured in the most polluted lists. March arrives with water worries. Taps run dry and tanker mafias rule the roost in Bengaluru, Chennai, Mumbai, Pune. By May, it is inverter raj as power outages haunt homes and offices. June brings the rains; July brings the floods. The clouds clear for potholes and craters to show up in August and September. October is open for suggestions, followed by November and December, when the nation returns to smog, stubble burning, winter inversion. Between the recurring surprises, there is the parade of preventable disasters—hotels and

hospitals on fire, collapsing flyovers, derailed trains, stampedes at shrines and attacks on hospitals.

The disasters arrive without appointment, but rarely without precedent. The rituals that follow events are as predictable. The visuals surface on social media followed by headlines. Whether the government follows depends on the math of casualties and momentum of opposition—and is usually followed by announcements. This year when the 50 hottest cities of the planet were in India, the minister stayed in the shade and mum.

Explanations for events sound more like alibis—“this much rain was not expected”. It is also the only time climate change is acknowledged. Nature is ahead of the curve, governance is behind it—and the distance between the two is measured in committee reports that are old enough to vote and are still waiting to be read. The unprecedented has become India's most precedent justification.

The response to events is predictable. So is the follow up. After the catastrophe in Mumbai in 2005, the Madhav Chitale committee delivered a 359-page report. Twenty years later, its core prescriptions—no development zones along rivers, relocation of encroachments, mangrove protection—remain largely unimplemented. In 2018, a Supreme Court-appointed committee reported on the lack of effective steps and that even the 50-metre buffer had not been created. This week, Mumbai and Pune were inundated by flood waters for over 48 hours at places, bringing the cities to a standstill.

Mumbai presents the template for unattended issues. Following a major flood in 1985, a committee identified

the need for a new stormwater drainage system. In 1993, the BMC came up with the Brihan Mumbai Storm Water Disposal System, but didn't implement it for lack of funds. BRIMSTOW-AD surfaced again after the 2005 floods, but is incomplete in 2026. On Thursday, the Maharashtra government announced yet another plan that will cost over ₹13,000 crore and which will make Mumbai “a sponge city”.

The archives damn governments. This week, Surat received the heaviest rainfall in its history. Its vulnerabilities though are not new, though. The recommendations for solution date back several decades to after the 1968 floods. The expert panel which examined the 2006 floods indicted the construction sprawl on Tapi's flood plains. Two decades later, the floodwaters followed the construction sprawl. The response: announcement of a ₹500-crore project.

Bengaluru and Chennai have refined the absurdity of circumstance. Both face water distress and often ration water by tankers in April. They also end up evacuating people by boat in November. Chennai 2015 followed a drought; Bengaluru's 2022 floods arrived months after its borewells ran dry. Same lakebeds—concretised for shortage, submerged in surplus. In Delhi, the government declared the waterlogging “under control” the same afternoon the opposition declared that the capital a sea. In 2024, a landslide in Kerala's Wayanad district buried over 400 people. This week, another landslide struck Kalladi in the same district. The hillside was mapped, vulnerability documented, warnings issued.

On paper, India is a global superpower of committees. The Rashtriya Barh

Aayog (National Commission on Floods) was constituted in 1976. It submitted 207 recommendations that were sent to states in 1981. But the recommendations stayed on paper. In 2001, the Rangachari Committee reviewed and shortlisted 40 recommendations for immediate implementation. Guidelines followed disasters. The National Disaster Management Authority's guidelines came in 2010. The BJP's promise of 100 new cities in 2014 were followed by Smart Cities and the AM-RUT programme. Yet, on ground, there is little to assure people.

India does not lack for diagnosis. But it suffers from a 20-year lag between the diagnosis and implementation. Consider this nugget. In 1975, the Union government drafted a model law for flood plain zoning and shared it with the states. Suffice to say it did not get far. But in 2022, the idea was back in circulation. And in 2026, it is stranded between the Centre and the states. Unlike in the past, weather updates are fairly robust these days. The warnings land. The orange alerts are issued. What does not exist is the machinery to act on foresight—because the entire apparatus of Indian administration is trained to react, not prevent.

Tolstoy observed that happy families are all alike, while each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Indian cities are unhappy for the same reasons, only on different schedules. Different rivers, identical post-mortems. Encroached flood plains. Concretised lakebeds. Desilting claims disproven at the first cloudburst. The calendar of outrage will keep its appointments. The question is whether governments will keep their appointment with governance.

Probe speed

Ref: *Speed up Dharani cases, prosecute guilty seniors* (Jul 11). Two years is far too long for a scam of this scale to remain under investigation. Delay only helps those responsible for corruption regain confidence. The Telangana government must set firm timelines for the SIT's work and ensure suspended officials cannot quietly return to similar postings. Justice delayed here actively enables the next scandal.

Swathi Senthilkumar, email

Tech valuations

Ref: *Techno bubble blooms again in amnesiac rush* (Jul 11). The parallels drawn with the 2000 dot-com crash are hard to dismiss. When investors chase valuations built on unproven technologies and tribal affiliations rather than known variables, corrections eventually follow. Regulators should require clearer disclosure of realistic timelines of AI ventures before retail investors pile in. Optimism is fine; blind optimism repeats history.

Prajesh Paramasivan, Neelambur

Professional orientation

Ref: *Missing link in professional edu* (Jul 11). Professional courses producing technically sound graduates who struggle with basic ethical judgment is a real gap, not an abstract concern. Universities should treat ethics as a graded, practical subject rather than a token orientation session. Case-based reasoning tied to real workplace dilemmas would prepare students far better than isolated lectures ever could.

S P Suganya Devi, Coimbatore

Ottapalam's pride

Ref: *'See you from up there'* (Jul 11). It is extremely heartening to hear about Col Anil Menon, the Nasa astronaut who would be the first person of Malayali origin to go to space, where he would stay for eight months conducting research about the human circulatory and nervous systems. It is a matter of pride that he belongs to the ancient city Ottapalam, and to a Nair Chettur family that has given India eminent citizens. We convey our best for his mission.

Sreeprakash Ottapalam, email

Take-it-easy policy

Ref: *Fire breaks out as CNG leaks from damaged pipelines* (Jul 11). Before any digging, the pipeline map for that area would have been consulted. How then could a gas pipeline get damaged like this? This is sheer negligence with a highly hazardous and polluting result. Such incidents reflect a dangerous take-it-easy attitude. Unless we get serious, we are inviting bigger tragedies.

Komala B, email

Philatelists' plight

Ref: *Trail of tales* (Jun 27). The Philately Passport is a good initiative that began last year. Many citizens are interested in purchasing it, especially those of us who love stamp collections. But a recent exercise at the Karnataka Postal Circle had very limited numbers and thousands of philatelists who wanted to buy these collections weren't able to do so because of short supply. May we request the postal department to print more Philately Passports and make them available more widely?

Gopal Namdeo, Bengaluru



Remembering Teejan Bai, whose art brought the *Mahabharata* to ordinary folk

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The Sunday Tribune

SPECTRUM



In 'Languages of Freedom', Neera Chandhoke analyses various notions in the Indian context

BOOKS PAGE 4

CHANDIGARH | 12 JULY 2026

Over a century after World War I ended, 34 Punjab Registers found in the Lahore Museum have been instrumental in finally honouring the sacrifice of previously unrecorded Indian servicemen

The forgotten 9,909

SHYAM BHATIA

MORE than a century after the guns of World War I fell silent, nearly 10,000 Indian soldiers whose deaths slipped from the official historical record are finally to receive the recognition they were denied.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) has announced that 9,909 previously unrecorded Indian servicemen will now be commemorated after a decade-long research project centred on a remarkable archive in Pakistan: 34 handwritten Punjab Registers containing the names of some 3,20,000 men recruited into the Indian army during the war.

It is one of the largest single additions ever made to the Commission's casualty records, and represents far more than an administrative correction. It restores identities, acknowledges forgotten sacrifice and shines a light on one of the last major gaps in the history of India's contribution to the Great War.

More than 13 lakh Indians served during World War I, making the Indian army one of the largest volunteer forces in history, with soldiers fighting from Flanders and Gallipoli to East Africa and Mesopotamia.

Behind the announcement lies an extraordinary story of historical detective work that began not in London or Delhi, but in the Lahore Museum.

"I found them in 2014 during research for our *Empire, Faith & War* project," recalls Amandeep Madra, co-founder of the UK Punjab Heritage Association, whose discovery set the entire process in motion.

"Military historians knew the registers existed in principle, but no one had gone to look. It seemed unlikely: an art museum holding 34 handwritten volumes of military records. But they were there: a systematic record of every Punjabi man who served in the Indian army during the First World War. I knew straightaway it was significant."

The significance became deeply personal. One of the first registers photographed was from Ambala district, the home of Madra's own family.

"My father's *Chacha* (paternal uncle), Bishen Singh, had served," he says. "My dad remembered being taken to collect his pension as a boy and that he'd been blinded by sandstorms during the war. That was all we knew. Then I found him in the register. He was the only man from our village to serve. If it could do that for my family, I knew it could do it for thousands of others."

What followed was more than 10 years of painstaking work.

The 26,000 pages had first to be photographed, digitised, indexed and transcribed. The project later became a collaboration between the UK Punjab Heritage Association, the University of Greenwich and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Prof Gavin Rand of the University of Greenwich recognised the scholarly importance of the archive and secured funding for its transcription. The CWGC then undertook the laborious task of comparing the information with its own casualty database.

That comparison proved anything but straightforward.

Names had often been spelled differently by different clerks. Villages appeared under several spellings. Regimental records varied. Punjabi naming customs created further complications.

As Madra explains, researchers had to learn to think like Edwardian record keepers. 'Roor Singh' and 'Rood Singh' could be the same man. 'Dulla' might turn out to be Abdullah Khan, "but only if every other detail — father's name, village and regiment — matched".

During the Covid lockdown, volunteers began checking a sample of soldiers listed in the registers as having died during the war against CWGC records. They immediately discovered dozens whose names simply did not exist in the Commission's database.

As the work expanded, the omissions kept growing. Ultimately, researchers examined almost 16,000 recorded deaths against some 74,000 existing Indian army casualty records. Supported by computer-assisted analysis and multiple layers of verification, they identified 9,909 men who had never previously been commemorated.

Why had they disappeared from history? According to Dr George Hay, Official Historian at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the reasons were both administrative and political.

"The British Indian Government made a conscious decision not to extend full war graves status to Indian army soldiers who died at home and away from operational zones," he explains.

Many of those men had survived the battlefields only to die later from wounds or disease after returning to India. Unlike British soldiers who died in comparable circumstances, their names were never passed on to the Commission's predecessors for permanent commemoration.

Administrative failures compounded the problem, meaning that some operational casualties also disappeared from the historical record.

The findings reinforce the conclusions reached by the CWGC's Special Com-



CWGC-funded PhD student George Williams (left) examines the Punjab Registers with Prof Gavin Rand from the University of Greenwich. (Below) The handwritten entries.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: CWGC



Each register entry records a soldier's religion, caste, father's name, village and district, creating an extraordinarily detailed portrait of rural Punjab between 1914 and 1918

mittee on Historical Inequalities in Commemoration, established in 2021, that entrenched racial prejudice and discriminatory colonial attitudes had contributed to unequal commemoration.

For Madra, who served on that committee alongside Professor Rand, the present announcement demonstrates that history can sometimes be corrected rather than merely debated. "This is one of the rare cases in Britain's colonial history where we can actually correct a wrong rather than just argue about it," he says.

The Punjab Registers reveal far more than military service. Taken together, the registers amount to an unparalleled census of rural Punjab on the eve of modern history, recording not simply soldiers but families, villages, religions, castes and communities that would later be divided by Partition.

Each entry records a soldier's religion, caste, father's name, village and district, creating an extraordinarily detailed portrait of rural Punjab between 1914 and 1918.

The newly identified casualties themselves reflect the diversity of that society: approximately 41 per cent were Muslim, 26 per cent Hindu, 25 per cent Sikh and less than 1 per cent Christian.

"It gives us Punjab from the village up," Madra says. "You begin to see how communities were organised and how people identified themselves. It tells the social history of Punjab as much as its military history."

That Punjab no longer exists. The villages recorded in the registers now lie across India and Pakistan, reminding us that the soldiers belonged to an undivided province long before Partition divided families, communities and memories.

"It isn't an Indian story or a Pakistani story," Madra says. "It's a shared Punjabi story." The research itself crossed modern borders. British and Punjabi scholars worked alongside archivists in Pakistan, while transcribers in both India and Pakistan painstakingly converted thousands of handwritten pages into searchable data.

For many families, the project has already transformed fragments of family legend into documented history.

Among those newly recognised is

Jagat Singh of the 34th Reserve Mountain Battery, who died in Mesopotamia in January 1918. His great-granddaughter, Manjinder Nagra, became the first Sikh woman to play rugby for England.

Another descendant, Leicester dentist Dr Inder Singh Palahey, spent years searching for information about his great-grandfather, Kesar Singh.

"From just hearsay to now discovering the facts about my great-grandfather's ultimate military sacrifice has been incredibly poignant," he says. "The fact that he will now be remembered in perpetuity simply means everything to us."

Madra has experienced that same emotion himself. Finding his own relative, Bishen Singh, in the registers remains his most powerful memory of the project.

"It's probably the only surviving record where both his name and his father's name still exist," he says.

The work, however, is far from complete. The 9,909 names represent only those who died and were omitted from commemoration. The registers themselves contain details of around 3,20,000 soldiers and promise to become one of the richest resources ever assembled on the Indian army during World War I.

Researchers hope eventually to create a public, searchable database allowing descendants across the world to trace relatives, add family histories and photographs, and piece together stories that have lain buried for generations. The CWGC also believes similar archives may survive elsewhere in the former British Empire, raising the possibility that more forgotten soldiers may yet be found.

For Madra, however, the work will not be complete until the names exist not only in a digital database, but on permanent memorials where descendants can stand before them. He believes the men should ultimately be commemorated physically, with their names carved in stone, just like those of other Commonwealth war dead.

For thousands of families, the project has transformed fading memories and family folklore into documented history.

After more than a century, the forgotten soldiers of undivided Punjab have begun their journey back into history.

— **Shyam Bhatia** is the London correspondent of *The Tribune*

Graves of soldiers at the Zehrendorf Indian Cemetery in Germany with inscriptions.



DHARMA



Devdutt Pattanaik works with gods and demons who churn nectar from the ocean of Indian, Chinese, Islamic, Christian, even secular mythologies

Punjab, watered by the tributaries of the Indus, was the original Vedic land. Yet today, the Veda is more closely associated with the Yamuna-Ganga doab, while Punjab is better known as the fountainhead of Sikhism. The eastern part of historic Punjab is now in Pakistan and is overwhelmingly Muslim. The western part, in India, is divided between Sikhs and Hindus.

Although Brahmins have never played a central role in the social management of Punjab, and although both Sikhism and Islam preach caste equality, the state has the highest proportion of Dalits in India, around 30%. A study of Punjab's history shows that Hinduism here developed along a path quite different from the rest of the subcontinent.

Punjab was a major hub of the Harappan civilisation; the city of Harappa itself stands on the Rabi. The region lies between the Indus and the Sutlej, with the northern hills opening towards the Swat Valley, where the Buddhist Gandhara civilisation later flourished, and

towards Jammu, Kashmir, and the hill states from which the five rivers descend. The northern hills and the southern flatlands together have shaped Punjab's history.

Harappa traded with cities in Sindh, Gujarat, Haryana, and Rajasthan over four and a half thousand years ago. Around 3,500 years ago, the Aryans entered India through this region, bringing horses. On its eastern edge, between the Sutlej and the Ganga, earlier Aryan migrants clashed with later ones, and it was here that the Rig Veda was composed. Even so, when Vedic civilisation matured, Punjab was treated as a frontier, the land from which horses came. This is why Kekeya of the *Ramayana* is ruled by Ashwapati, lord of horses, and why Madra of the *Mahabharata* is also a land of horses.

The eastern edge later fell to the Persians and Greeks, resisted by the Punjabi king Pururava. The Mauryans, 2,300 years ago, opened trade routes through the region, and along these routes Buddhism reached Punjab. Trade

flourished under the Mauryans and Kushans, who controlled the passes of the Hindu Kush leading to Persia and Central Asia. The Yaudheya tribes minted coins bearing Kartikeya, then seen as the son of Agni rather than of Shiva. Gandhara prospered as a major Buddhist centre until the Huns destroyed it 1,500 years ago.

Then Buddhism declined, and Shaivism took its place. The Siddhas arrived, Shiva *lingas* were said to spring up across the land, and goddess worship spread, especially in the hills. Today, we distinguish Himachal and Jammu from Punjab, but traditionally, these hill states were its extensions. Around the 8th century, temple complexes such as Masroor, Bharmour, and Chamba were built mostly to honour Shiva. This is when Puranic Hinduism appeared. Brahmins were invited to manage these temples and granted land, but this pattern is largely confined to the hills. In Kashmir, images of Vishnu Vaikuntha appeared with heads of the boar and the lion, but this was re-

placed by Kashmir Shaivism 1,000 years ago.

The lowland river valleys had neither temples nor Brahmins. They were the lands of mystics, of the Deras and Gaddis of various Nath *yogis* such as Goraknath, Jalandhar Nath, and Chaurangi Nath – wandering sages with magical powers. There were no major kingdoms in Punjab itself, because cultivable land was concentrated in the north. The economy ran on trade, and most people were settled pastoralists whose principal wealth was cattle and who often offered military service.

The arrival of the Sufis brought mystical Islam into this milieu. Sufis and Nath Panthis mingled, exchanged ideas, and shared an indifference to image worship. The Nath *yogis* revered Alakh Niranjan, the formless one; the Sufis, drawing on Central Asian Islamic thought, also rejected a god with form. This ecosystem welcomed the Nirguna Bhakti poet-saints who celebrated a formless divine.

Sikhism emerged from this soil, especially among the Khatri trading communities to

which Guru Nanak belonged. He rejected caste, saw God as formless, and held that everyone had equal access to the divine. Ten Gurus followed during a turbulent age of Delhi sultans and Mughals. Persian rulers introduced canals and water wheels, and Jatt pastoralists, especially in the east, became settled cultivators. This produced the dense Muslim concentration that would become Pakistan.

Hindus and Sikhs were not initially distinct; both followed Bhakti. To break the hereditary Dera-and-Gaddi pattern, the Sikhs enthroned the *Granth Sahib*, a book of devotional poetry in many languages, including verses by Namdev, Ramanand, Ravidas, and the Sufi Baba Farid, as the ultimate Guru. Conflict with the Mughals pushed Sikhism towards arms; Jatts joined in numbers, and the Khalsa rose, founding kingdoms that resisted the empire. Sikhism today still bears the imprint of its three streams: Khatri traders, Jatt warrior-peasants, and the Dalits who, despite egalitarian ideals, remain at the bottom.

THE Z FACTOR

Social judgment, private tragedies

A few years ago, when the show *Indian Matchmaking* aired on Netflix, many of my American friends were both mesmerised and jealous of the Indian arranged marriage process. “I wish I had help in finding a partner, too,” they said.

Western dating can get too lonely, they complained, and in this day and age, it has become increasingly difficult to find people to marry. It's a paradox arising from the fact that dating apps inundate you with choices but not enough intentionality. Arranged marriage, by contrast, is all about intentionality. Everyone is in it to get married rather than to goof around. And family and community support, my friends argued, helps make this rather emotionally draining and vulnerable process less lonely. It also keeps everybody more accountable.

For the most part, I agreed. I am myself a happy beneficiary of that system of family and community support. But then again, when that support system fails, it fails rather spectacularly.

Reflect on these recent stories, for instance. In Pune, a young woman and her long-time boyfriend (and reportedly, secret husband) have been accused of killing the fiancé her family had chosen for her. In the state of Washington, United States, an Indian techie has just been arrested on suspicion of having killed his wife, merely four months after their wedding. Police said that he had already been in a years-long relationship with another woman in India before his family had arranged his marriage to his late wife.

Both cases are still ongoing, so we don't know what else will be found or what will be proven. Neither case is shocking or unprecedented. In India, we are used to hearing stories of newlywed men and women killing and torturing each other shortly after being forced into marriage. We are also used to hearing of young couples eloping, and of the same couples then being chased, caught, brutalised and killed by their own parents, uncles and aunts.

All these stories are also a product of the same communitarian system, which is what makes them so quintessentially Indian. In the West, relatives kill each other for personal, individual or material reasons: mental illness, drug addiction, alcoholism or money troubles.

But in India, relatives kill each other to salvage how they are perceived by other relatives. In the Pune case, for instance, the girl accused of murder conceded that she killed her fiancé because she felt that calling off the wedding would bring dishonour to her family. Her parents responded by saying that their daughter should be thrown off a cliff if she's found guilty.

The pressure of “what will people say” does not always lead to death and murder. Sometimes, it tears families apart, robs people of their dignity, or bankrupts them. Parents drain their lifelong savings and even take out expensive loans to finance a lavish week-long wedding. They often sacrifice the education of their children – and especially their daughters – to pay for it. They force their children into awkward, even physically violating rituals, against their consent, just to honour somebody else's traditions. They also frequently lie during arranged marriage discussions to increase their perceived value in the marriage market.

The ghost of social judgment follows Indians everywhere they go. A female friend from college was hastily married off at the tender age of 20 because her father found her talking to a boy. Another one was pulled from college before she graduated because her parents were worried that she would become “too independent”. Yet another was married to a guy who lied about his age and turned out to be much older than he had originally claimed.

In the process, many of us have learnt to live a life of cognitive dissonance and double standards. We blindly follow traditions and rituals we find inconvenient, just to placate conservative members of our family. We eat meat when we're out with friends while pretending to be vegetarian at home. And if our parents are somewhat more liberal-minded, they would counsel us to “do what you want but don't tell anybody about it”.

Honestly, it does not have to be this way. The happiness of individuals should be worth far more than something as silly as the opinion of strange aunts. We don't have to keep going like this.



Mohamed Zeeshan is a student of all things global and, self-confessedly, master of none, notwithstanding his Columbia Master's, a stint with the UN and with monarchs in the Middle East

@profzeesays

THE LIVING STREAM

The sadness of rural Karnataka

Raithara Makkalige Hennu Kodi (Offer Brides to Farmers' Sons): the poster of this recent Kannada film caught my eye as I was suffering through traffic last week. Against an expansive sky, this old-style poster assembled the main cast: a young villager with a plough on his shoulder, a demure city woman, a blood-spattered, long-haired man, a concerned-looking head of a *matha*, a sinister-looking man and an affable-looking man. Curious about how this evidently dramatic film addressed a painful truth of rural India today, I checked to see where the film was showing, but it had already left the theatres.

The film's online preview gave glimpses: the hero, who had given up school to work on the family land, decides to study at a city college (there was a hint he would return in the end); a farmer pronounces to approving fellow farmers that it is not enough merely to produce – they must also become investors and market their own produce. I got the drift. Turning to me, my cab driver, who I knew had lost all his money producing a film that flopped, remarked that this film, too, dwelt on the tough marriage predicament of village men.

A couple of months ago, at a wedding ceremony of the son of a departed friend, a family member complimented the bride on the stage. (It was a *mantra mangalya* wedding where short speeches are made by relatives and friends). He said: “In these days when girls re-

fuse to marry boys from rural areas, you have set a bold example.” Loud applause followed. The groom has done a Master's in business in Bengaluru and is heir to a fifty-acre estate in Chikkamagaluru.

Four years ago, a convention or-

Chandan Gowda The Vidyashilp Professor looks for new ways of looking

@ChandanGowda73



girls, who were educated, were choosing to marry Havyaka men in city-based occupations or men from other castes who worked in cities.

The youths wished that the girls they married from outside their caste be accepted as their own by other caste members. The head of the *Matha* assured them that they were free to marry girls from among any of the Brahmin sub-sects.

The problem has deepened since. A telling symptom: in the last Assembly elections, the JD(S) promised to give Rs 2 lakh each to women who married young farmers. A few weeks ago, a farmer in favour of the Bidadi Township project reasoned that getting compensation for their acquired land would make it easy for young farmers to find girls.

Life in villages does indeed present major problems to women which need to be dealt with in great detail elsewhere.

Urban-centred growth is the key disruptor of the marriage realities across communities in rural Karnataka. Over half of the people in Karnataka continue to live in villages. When this is the case, reviving rural livelihoods, restoring their dignity and securing the future of village society should find high policy priority. Instead, we only see policy attention on expanding cities in the state. Is the threat of forced bachelorhood – along with falling rural incomes – expected to push rural youth towards cities and urbanise the state completely? I just don't know what the thinking is.

SARKARI SECRETS

EVMs and their deepening opacity

The third phase of the electoral roll clean-up through the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) has begun. Citizens are queuing up to prove their eligibility to elect their representatives to Parliament and state legislatures. When the demonetisation exercise was announced a decade ago, as a surgical strike on black money, people had similarly stood in front of banks to prove that the currency notes they held were earned legitimately. Subjecting people to such *agni parikshas* (tests by fire), repeatedly, has become a habit with the Union government. Very few have questioned the cramped SIR time-frames. We are made to believe, once again, that this is best for the country, regardless of the fact that many of us might board the same boat as the lakhs of people disenfranchised in West Bengal after SIR-II. The Calcutta High Court lamented last week that their appeals might be cleared in just about two decades!

We perform another ritual every five years by pressing the button on the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM). We are repeatedly made to believe that this is the best method for electing our MPs and MLAs because ‘no vote is wasted’, and the ‘results are declared in a few hours’. The 124 FAQs published by the Election Commission of India (ECI) apparently dispel all doubts about the efficacy of machine-based voting. But deeper probing throws up more questions. For example, after the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, I asked the two manufacturing companies under RTI: How many votes can be printed on the VVPAT units? BEL mentioned 1,300 slips, and ECIL said 1,400, at maximum. This year, answers to the same question, about the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, were 1,400 and 1,500, respectively.

So what is wrong with these replies? Nothing much, except that in a polling station like booth no. 8 located at St Mary's High School, Vettukadu, in the Thiruvananthapuram constituency, if all 1,396 electors turned up to vote, would one paper roll from a BEL-manufactured machine be enough? Every Presiding Officer is mandated to conduct a mock poll by printing 50 votes before polling begins. The handbooks for election officials are silent about the protocol for replenishing the paper rolls if they run out.

In the same RTIs, I asked these companies about the state-wise deployment of EVMs during the 2024 general elections. BEL said its EVMs were used for the Lok Sabha elections across the country, but only in Andhra Pradesh for the simultaneously held Assembly elections. ECIL claimed it does not know where its EVMs were deployed because they all go to a common pool. This reply is unreliable because their engineers know which polling station to visit if their EVMs become defective. And thousands of them do, every election season.

Few voters know that the patent protection granted to these companies for exclusively manufacturing the EVMs expired in March 2021. In January 2022, BEL secured a patent for an enhanced EVM (certificate no. 387537). It claimed several advanced features, including integration of the control unit and the ballot unit into a single body and a special unit for verifying the authenticity of a voter before he/she is permitted to vote. The patent documents do not explain how the ballot's secrecy will be preserved.

In 2025, BEL told me under RTI that it supplied these new machines to the ECI between 2022 and 2024. It told the Patent Office the machines were sold for Rs 1.19 crore in 2022-23. But in 2025, it claimed the machines were still under development/commercial trial, so it had not sold any. The latest RTI replies state these machines were not used in the 2024 elections, and ECIL is not manufacturing them at all. What has happened to them is a *sarkari* secret. Instead, the old M3 model of EVMs and VVPATs manufactured by these companies were deployed in the 2024 elections.

Except for the voters' records and their choice of candidates, all information about EVMs ought to be in the public domain. They will not tell if we do not ask repeatedly and loudly. It is every thinking person's obligation to get bitten by the Enlightenment bug of ‘permanent critique’ and question the grand narratives, to push past the boundaries set by the power structures about “what we cannot know”, like Michel Foucault, the French historian of ideas, wrote long ago.



Venkatesh Nayak wakes up every morning thinking someone somewhere is hiding something

THAT BLIND RHODES SCHOLAR

A quiet revolution in the queue for justice



Rahul Bajaj is a practising lawyer with expertise in disability rights and IP law, and is co-founder of Mission Accessibility. He wears more hats than he can himself sometimes count

@rahul400

It is no secret that India's justice system groans under its own weight. Three numbers tell the story. As of today, the National Judicial Data Grid records 5,04,12,584 cases pending before our courts. In the last month alone, 17,89,241 fresh cases were instituted. And behind this mountain stands a bench stretched impossibly thin: India has roughly 22 judges per million people, against the long-recommended benchmark of 50 per million, as a news report noted this January.

Where, in this vast and slow-moving machine, does a litigant with a disability figure? Until recently, nowhere in particular. Their matters joined the same endless queue as everyone else's and waited – frequently for years – regardless of the additional barriers, expense, and physical difficulty that attending court imposes on them. A blind litigant who cannot read an inaccessible paper-book, a wheelchair user for whom a trip to a court complex is an ordeal, a person with a psycho-

social disability navigating a system built for no one like them: all were left to the mercy of the calendar. The 2011 Census counted 2.68 crore persons with disabilities in India, a figure almost universally regarded as a gross undercount. For such a large population, an indefinite delay is not a minor inconvenience. It is a quiet denial of justice.

Against this backdrop, something has begun to change. Over the past several months, some of our most important courts have decided that these litigants need not wait their turn forever. By a circular in December 2025, the Supreme Court created a dedicated category in its miscellaneous-day case list for “cases relating to specially abled persons” – alongside new heads for senior citizens, persons below the poverty line, and legal-aid matters – and directed advocates and parties to flag such cases at the filing stage, backed by documentary proof, so the Registry can prioritise them. The Delhi High Court outstripped the Supreme

Court in this regard, deciding to prioritise such cases from April 2024 onwards, and its practice is by now the most settled. The High Court of Meghalaya, with effect from July 1 2026, has begun identifying cases involving persons with disabilities (as defined under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016) for priority listing, allowing even pending matters to be moved up on production of a disability certificate. The Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court has started collecting particulars of matters in which a disabled person is a litigant, precisely so that their hearing and disposal can be expedited.

This is a genuine expansion of access to justice for a class of litigants who have long been an afterthought. Its significance is sharpened by how poorly the RPwD Act has been implemented since it was passed. Digital platforms – government portals and increasingly private services – remain inaccessible to screen-reader users. Public buildings continue

to be sanctioned without any check for accessibility before approval. Reservation norms in public employment are honoured more in the breach than in observance. Reasonable accommodation, the statutory duty to make individual adjustments so a disabled person can participate on equal terms, is routinely denied. And the bodies meant to enforce these rights – the disability commissions at the Centre and in the states – carry only recommendatory power and are chronically short-staffed, unable to compel compliance even when they find a violation.

In that landscape, the courtroom is often the only forum where a disabled person can obtain a binding remedy. Priority listing means that this remedy will no longer be swallowed by the backlog. When the very rights that the executive machinery fails to deliver can be vindicated quickly through litigation, the practical value of those rights rises sharply.

It would be dishonest, though, to declare

victory. We still have a long way to go. Reforms of this kind live or die in the implementation, and the early signs are uneven. Despite the Supreme Court's clear direction, only one case, at last count, appears to have been properly categorised and prioritised under the new head: a reminder that a circular is only as good as the Registry's diligence and the Bar's awareness. Outside the Delhi High Court, the practice has not yet bedded down into routine. Categories can quietly lapse if no one insists on them.

Yet the promise is real, and it extends beyond the cases already in the system. The deepest impact will be on people who have never approached a court at all – those who assumed, not unreasonably, that pursuing their rights meant surrendering years of their lives to an indifferent docket. Knowing that the system will now hear them without an endless wait may embolden many to come forward and claim, at last, their day in court. That is worth building on.

Rapid Himalayan development has transformed connectivity, but brought ecological pressure and disregard for local wisdom

RATTAN DHILLON

I HAVE spent the last 15 years travelling across India, leading expeditions through some of the country's most remote and challenging terrains. Month after month, I travel with groups of people to destinations such as Ladakh, Spiti, Zaskar, and other Himalayan regions. Having witnessed these places evolve over the years, I believe it is important to highlight both the positives and the growing concerns surrounding development and tourism in these fragile ecosystems.

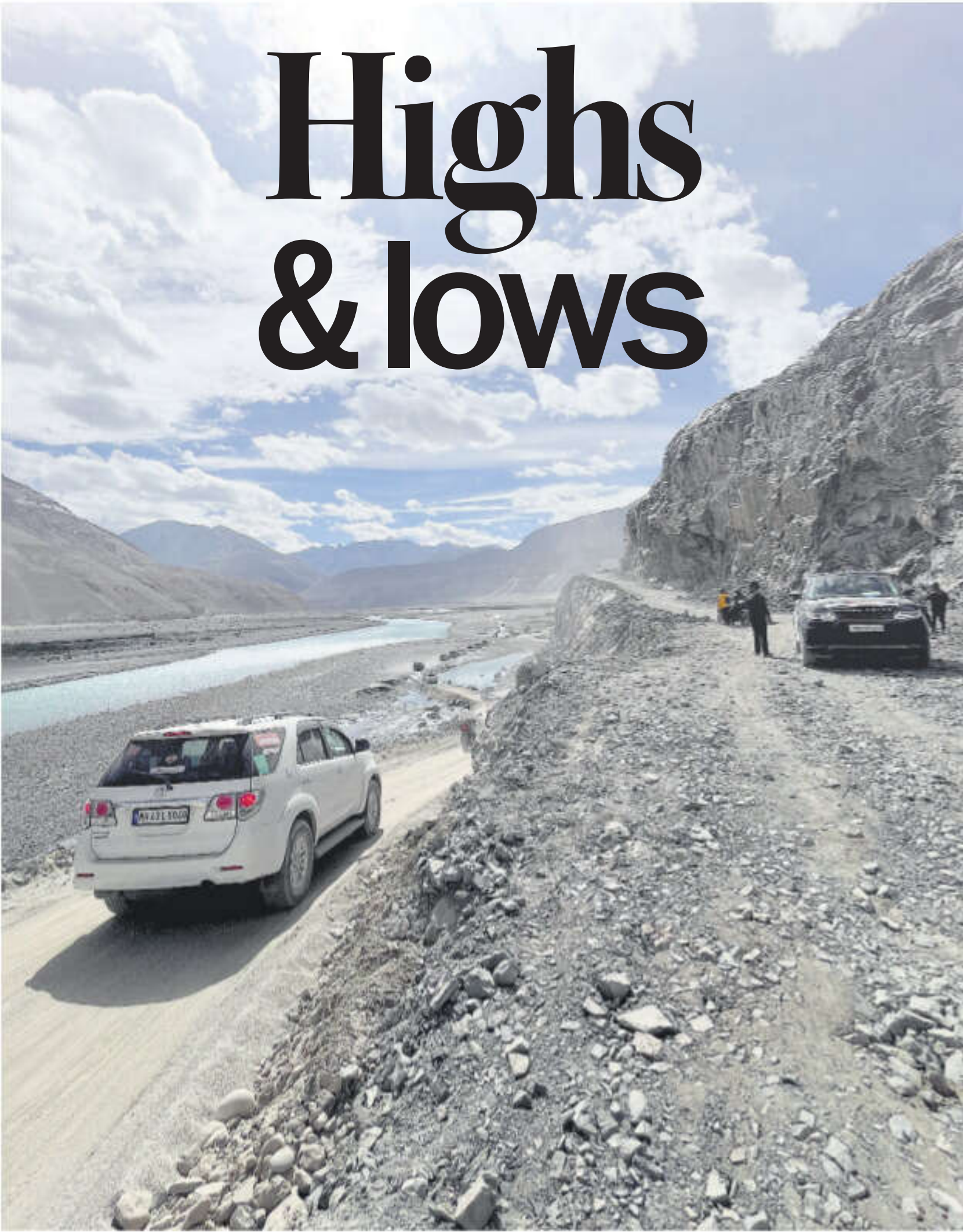
There is no denying that infrastructure development in the Himalayas has transformed connectivity. From a strategic perspective, better roads are invaluable for the swift movement of our armed forces and for improving accessibility to remote regions. However, every development project must be evaluated not only for its economic and strategic benefits, but also for its long-term environmental impact.

I first travelled to Leh-Ladakh in 2010. At that time, there were no proper highways, no mobile connectivity, and reaching Leh from Chandigarh often took nearly three days. Today, the same journey can be completed in around 14 hours on well-built roads, and 5G connectivity is available in many parts of the region. This transformation has undoubtedly boosted tourism and opened economic opportunities for local communities. However, it has also placed unprecedented pressure on landscapes that were never designed to handle such large numbers of visitors.

One issue that has become increasingly evident is the decline in civic sense among many tourists. During recent expeditions, I witnessed vehicles from different states being washed directly in sacred rivers such as the Shyok using detergents and chemicals. Plastic bottles, food wrappers, and other waste are frequently discarded in valleys, rivers, and mountain passes. These are not isolated incidents anymore; they are becoming common sights in places that were once untouched.

If we continue to treat these destinations as picnic spots rather than environmentally sensitive regions, we risk permanently damaging what makes them so unique.

Another growing concern is that travelling to high-altitude regions has become easier, but not necessarily safer. In the past, reaching Ladakh required preparation,



Digital maps and social media reels have created the illusion that remote destinations are just another weekend road trip.



Unmindful of local traditions and customs, tourists wash their vehicles in Shyok river. PHOTOS BY THE WRITER



A 2011 photo of the serene Pangong Lake before it was flooded with tourists.

DOs & DON'Ts

- Allow body to acclimatise. Stay hydrated. If driving through high passes, carry a portable oxygen cylinder.
- Seek advice from locals regarding the terrain, weather, and road conditions.
- Drive responsibly. Never litter or throw plastic in the mountains. Don't drive recklessly around blind corners.
- Don't disrespect local traditions, monasteries, wildlife.
- Watch out for signs of altitude sickness. In case of severe headache, breathlessness, persistent vomiting, or confusion, immediately seek medical attention.

research, and respect for the terrain. Travellers would spend weeks understanding altitude sickness, road conditions, vehicle requirements, and weather patterns before attempting the journey. Today, digital maps and viral social media reels have created the illusion that these destinations are just another weekend road trip.

Many visitors arrive without understanding the risks posed by high altitude, reduced oxygen levels, or rapidly changing weather conditions. It is increasingly common to see families travelling with very young children to elevations above 11,000 feet without adequate acclimatisation or medical awareness.

Many tourists ignore the importance of gradual ascent, proper hydration, and rest. Every year, local authorities and rescue teams respond to preventable medical emergencies caused not by the mountains themselves, but by a lack of preparation.

Equally concerning is the tendency of

many travellers to ignore the knowledge of local communities. The people who have lived in these regions for generations understand the mountains better than anyone else. They know which roads become dangerous after rainfall, how weather changes within minutes, and how visitors should acclimatise before travelling further. Yet many tourists rely entirely on navigation apps or social media recommendations.

Technology is a useful tool, but it should never replace local wisdom in environments as unpredictable as the Himalayas.

The increasing number of landslides across Himalayan states is another issue that deserves attention. While natural geological conditions certainly play a role, aggressive hill cutting for road widening and new highway projects has undoubtedly weakened mountain slopes in many areas. Roads that were originally designed as single carriage-ways are now being expanded, often requir-

ing extensive excavation. Development is necessary, but it must be carried out with careful environmental assessment and scientific planning rather than speed alone.

Tourism is essential for the local economy, and no one is suggesting that it should be discouraged. However, tourism must become sustainable. Ecologically sensitive regions cannot continue to receive unlimited numbers of visitors without consequences. Introducing a regulated permit system or seasonal cap on visitor numbers in highly sensitive areas would reduce pressure on infrastructure, minimise environmental degradation, improve the travel experience, and provide local communities with a more stable source of income throughout the year rather than concentrating tourism into only a few months.

Authorities should spread awareness to promote responsible tourism. Visitors must understand that preserving these places is

as important as enjoying them. Carrying back waste items, respecting local customs, avoiding pollution of rivers, and following advice from local residents should be considered basic responsibilities rather than optional choices.

The Himalayas are among India's greatest natural treasures. They are not merely tourist destinations but living ecosystems that support millions of people downstream. Development and tourism are both important, but neither should come at the cost of the environment or the well-being of local communities.

Progress and conservation must go hand in hand. If we fail to protect these mountains today, future generations may inherit roads and hotels, but they will lose the pristine landscapes that once inspired millions to visit them in the first place.

— The writer is an automobile enthusiast and expedition leader

CAPTION CONTEST 1570

HIMANSHU MAHAJAN



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

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1569



SPECTRUM JULY 5 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

- When kindness is served chilled — Madhav Bhatia via epaper, Khanna
- Mixing flavour with fervour — Narinder Sharma via epaper, Panchkula
- Rose to the occasion — Rajiv Sharma via epaper, Amritsar
- Sharbat for 'sarbat' — Shashi Kala, Shimla
- Refreshing tradition — Saubhagya Kalia via epaper, Chandigarh

From our streets to the kitchen



HARPAL SINGH SOKHI

IF you truly want to understand India, don't begin with its monuments. Begin with its streets. Stand in the bustling lanes of Mumbai and watch a vendor skillfully assemble a *vada pav*. It is more than a snack; it is the city's heartbeat — quick, humble, resilient, and full of character, much like Mumbai itself. Walk through the crowded *bazaars* of Delhi, where the aroma of *aloo tikki*, *golgappe*, and *chole bhature* fills the air. Every corner tells a story, every recipe carries generations of tradition, and every bite feels like a chapter from the city's rich history. In Kolkata, the streets come alive with *kathi rolls*, *puchkas*, and *jhal muri*.

There's nothing more comforting than a plate of *pakoras* paired with *chai*

Likewise, in Ahmedabad, evenings transform into celebrations. The aroma of *fajda-jalebi*, *khaman*, and *dabeli* drifts through the air, bringing families and friends together over shared plates and stories. The streets of Lucknow whisper tales of royalty through melt-in-the-mouth *galouti kebabs* and rich *chaats*, while Indore turns every night into a food festival, where *poha*, *sabudana khichdi*, and *bhutte ka kees* have become symbols of local pride. But

KANDA BHAJIYA BREAD ROLL

INGREDIENTS	
Mozzarella and cheddar cheese	1 cup
Green chilli (chopped)	1 tsp
Coriander powder	1 tsp
Red chilli powder	1 tsp
Garam masala	1 tsp
Chaat masala	½ tsp
Onion (sliced)	1 cup
Bread slices	6
Green chutney	½ cup
Gram flour (besan)	2 cups
Rice flour	1 cup
Turmeric	½ tsp
Carom seeds (ajwain)	1 tsp
Cumin seeds (jeera)	½ tsp
Salt	To taste
Water	As required
Oil	For frying
Chaat masala	For sprinkle

METHOD

■ In a bowl, combine mozzarella-cheddar cheese, green chilli, coriander powder, red chilli powder and *garam masala*. Add salt, if required.

■ Take a slice of bread and flatten it gently using a rolling pin. Spread a layer of green chutney evenly over the surface of the bread.

■ Apply the prepared cheese mixture on one end of the flattened bread and roll it tightly into a cylinder. Seal the edge gently to keep the roll intact.

■ In another bowl, add gram flour, rice flour, turmeric powder, carom seeds, cumin seeds, salt, and sliced onions. Gradually add water and whisk well to make a smooth, thick batter.

■ Dip the prepared bread roll into the batter, ensuring it is coated evenly on all sides.

■ Heat oil in a *karahi* over medium heat. Carefully place the batter-coated bread rolls into the hot oil and fry until golden brown and crispy. Remove and drain excess oil. Sprinkle *chaat masala* on top and serve hot with green chutney.

beyond the cities and specialties lies the true essence of Indian street food.

With the monsoon season in full swing, there's nothing more comforting than a plate of *pakoras* paired with a hot cup of *chai*. I couldn't help but think of one of

my all-time favourites and give it a little twist of my own. That's exactly what inspired these *kanda bhajiya* bread rolls — a delicious spin on a beloved classic.

— The writer is a celebrity chef and entrepreneur

ARTS

No stage, no light arrangement, not even a PA system was required for her art that brought *Mahabharata* to the ordinary Chhattisgarhis

ASHOK VAJPEYI

MANY decades ago, sometime in the mid-1980s, I arrived in Paris and knocked at my painter friend SH Raza's door early in the morning. He was awake. As soon as we settled down to the morning tea, he asked me who Teejan Bai was. He added that the Parisian high society was abuzz with scandal since Teejan Bai had stated in an interview, published the previous day in the French daily *Le Monde*, that "French women are beautiful, but they are so flat-chested!"

Teejan Bai, a dark-skinned, well-endowed woman from Chhattisgarh, was a Pandavani performer who narrated episodes from the *Mahabharata* with pithy and sharp comments, relating them to current affairs, to the eternal dilemmas and contradictions of humans. A solo actor, a dancer, a singer, she was all rolled into one, her body and an *ektara* her only physical assets.

No stage set, no complicated light arrangement, not even a public address system was required for Teejan's art.

It was an art that teased and brought the grand epic of *Mahabharata* to the utterly ordinary, infusing it with the earthiness of Chhattisgarh.

In her narrative, the classical was folk, and the grandeur and the heroics were teased into being everyday occurrences. Teejan creatively, and significantly, transformed the distant and inaccessible narrative into its inevitable everydayness. The living and the awe-inspiring and the interrogative were all pulled down, as it were, to be located and rooted in the mundane, and the earthiness and mess of daily life.

Pandavani, a popular folk form of Chhattisgarh, is the narrative art of telling the tales of the Pandavas from the *Mahabharata*. Teejan Bai, born and brought up in the lowliest of social and economic circumstances, almost single-handedly transformed this art into a vehicle of not only the epic episodes, but also of social and

moral criticality. She was very nearly the first woman performer in the exclusively male-dominated Pandavani. She took this Chhattisgarhi genre of creative expression to the national and international levels.

Teejan, through her self-chosen art, converted the lowliness of her circumstances into depth. She was able to transgress the conventional constraints into a bold, open-ended arena of moral and social interrogation. The irony of a low-caste woman making a foundational text, a classic of Hinduism, come alive could not be lost on her audience, nor its contemporary relevance be overestimated.

It became Teejan Bai's *Mahabharata*. She seemed to be possessed by it. On the stage, she almost owned it. Classics are classics because they allow constant discovery and reinvention. However, reinventions in performance often do not get the recognition that scholarly

or intellectual discoveries and explorations of the same classics get. In our time, if Buddhadeb Basu (Bengali),

Durga Bhagwat and Irawati Karve (Marathi), and Dharmveer Bharati (Hindi) have discovered the *Mahabharata* and reinterpreted it in literature, Teejan Bai has done so in performance.

We came to know of Teejan Bai through the atrepreneur Habib Tanvir in the late 1970s. He was already creating a new kind of modernism in theatre by engaging the energy and vitality of some of the folk performers of Chhattisgarh. When Teejan Bai performed for the first time in Bhopal, we were struck by the many elements of her performance; and

the ease and confidence with which she handled a variety of emotions and experiences: love, longing, grief, tenderness, waiting, wonder, shock, challenge, resolve to fight, retaliation, contemplation, moral dilemma, burning questions. She smoothly moved from one to the other, as she did from enacting a variety of characters such as Krishna, Duryodhana, Karna, Bheema, Arjuna, Draupadi, and Gandhari. While they were part of a narrative being said and sung, suggested and enacted, each one emerged with a marked and distinct persona.

She spoke, sang, whispered, shouted, wailed, laughed, and, in a manner, wove them together in her unending, almost interminable, episodes from the great epic.

In between, with humour and sarcasm, she would punctuate the narration with bits of contemporary happenings, commenting sharply on their import and implication. In her performance, we, who watched her, were transported to an epic time, in which the past and the present seamlessly merged. Teejan Bai spoke to the great epic *Mahabharata*, but she also addressed the clumsy, chaotic, clueless 'Mahabharata' we currently live in.

Teejan Bai had a troubled personal life, a depressing ethos of social stigma. But she fiercely protected her art from being soiled by it, refusing to carry the suffering visibly. Perhaps she was, in this respect, an unsuspecting classicist who did not use art for self-expression. And

yet she was a woman, her female presence and gesture undeniable, and sometimes stark. She was a woman who was telling us stories and episodes from a classical past, revealing aspects of our eternal human condition.

She became a human voice, a human presence, a human oracle, reaffirming that we are all human beings who have a lot to share with each other: songs, stories, strengths, foibles, dignity and arrogance — all markers of irrepressible humanity.

Teejan Bai was admired by lakhs of people, both in India and abroad. She received many honours: the Rajya Shikhar Samman of the Madhya Pradesh government, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, the Padma Shri, the Padma Bhushan and the Padma Vibhushan. She emerged as the most admired and awarded folk performing female artiste in India.

She travelled far and wide and carried both the *Mahabharata* and the Chhattisgarhi fragrance all along. I recall that when she went to Paris to perform for the first time, she was scheduled to give about a dozen concerts, but performed twice the number due to public demand.

From singing on small *chabutaras* and under trees in rural Chhattisgarh, she rose to perform in hallowed halls and glittering spaces, both within India and elsewhere. But she remained the same Teejan, always narrating and singing in Chhattisgarhi, in a *sari*, with an *ektara* in her hand.

She occupied the stage, as it were, for more than half a century. She has now left. If there is a heaven, the ultimate resort of gods and heroes, Teejan Bai must already be performing before them, singing to them their own tales, which might have disappeared from their memory due to widespread divine amnesia. She might also be reminding them how they were like other humans — earthy, fallible and lovable.

— *The writer is a Hindi poet-critic and art lover based in Delhi. As Secretary, Culture, Madhya Pradesh, in the 1980s, he brought Teejan Bai to international prominence*

From singing on small *chabutaras* and under trees in rural Chhattisgarh, Teejan Bai, who died on July 5 at the age of 70, rose to perform in hallowed halls within India and abroad. ANI



Actor Kani Kusruti recalls how directors wanted her to internalise the character, leaving her a wreck. Today, she draws the line

THERE are many methods to the craft of acting, and I've been fortunate to find those that allow me to inhabit a role without losing myself in it. I don't believe acting requires me to bleed for my art. You can separate the craft from your own personality. Your lived experiences, your emotions don't have to be the fuel for every performance. Acting, for me, is closer to manipulating a puppet. You move it, you shape it, but you are not it.

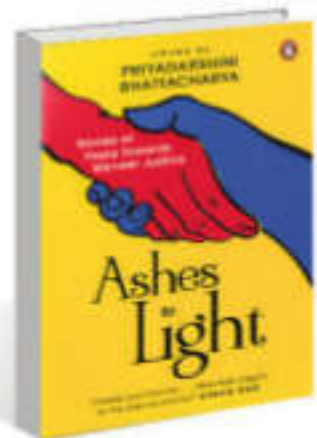
Early on, I worked with directors who wanted me to internalise — to become the character. And this wrecked me. It affected my mental health. I would walk away from sets feeling drained, thinking I hate acting. But then I discovered other methods — ones that didn't demand immersion yet upheld the integrity of performance.

Studying under teachers like Jacques Lecoq, my guru in Koodiyattam, Gopalan Nair Venu or Venuji, Kapila Venu's father — I learnt something invaluable: how to step into a role, embody it and then step out, without carrying its wounds with me.

I refuse to indulge in suffering for the sake of authenticity. If a scene demands an extreme emotional state, I may make a calculated choice to go there — for that moment, for that shot. But it's my choice. And the moment the director calls cut, I walk away. It's a method that keeps me healthy, that protects my boundaries. And as a woman, in an industry that is all too eager to blur those boundaries — to romanticise suffering as part of the craft — I insist on drawing that line.

I will emote, I will perform, but I will not surrender myself. My art does not

Stepping into & out of a role



ASHES TO LIGHT: STORIES OF HOPE TOWARDS GENDER JUSTICE

Edited by
Priyadarshini Bhattacharya.
Penguin Random House.

Kani Kusruti at a photocall for the award-winning 'All We Imagine as Light' at the 77th Cannes Film Festival in Cannes in 2024. REUTERS



require my self-destruction. For me, acting is about making choices consciously. My approach shifts with each story, the character, the style of the film and the director's vision. In *All We Imagine as Light* or 'Girls Will Be Girls', my process was different for each. If I know a certain method will strain my mental well-being, I step back. I choose to be vulnerable for a

role only when it is the only method left, the only way to serve the story. And even then, I make a promise to myself — to take care of my mind afterwards. That awareness, that negotiation, is crucial.

Perhaps my clarity comes from the way I was raised. My parents were deeply reflective and introspective, and they encouraged me to be the same. We had open, hon-

est conversations about everything — what was happening inside my body and mind, what was happening in the world around me. That kind of upbringing makes you attuned to yourself, to your own boundaries. And in a field like acting — where the lines between self and performance, between control and surrender, can so easily blur — that awareness is a gift.

WINDS OF CHANGE

One of the most significant, yet often overlooked, shifts in the film industry is the quiet but powerful restructuring of its workforce. When I was starting out, I could have never imagined seeing female cinematographers or women working in the light unit. These were spaces that belonged, unquestioned, to men. But now, things are changing. On the set of 'Girls Will Be Girls', the crew was predominantly female. I have worked with women directors of photography (DoPs), with women handling lights — tasks that were once considered beyond them, not because of ability, but because of an entrenched hierarchy that dictated who belonged where.

This isn't just about representation. It's about power. The structure of a film set, much like any workplace, is a reflection of deeper social hierarchies. And when those hierarchies start shifting — when more women and marginalised voices enter spaces where they were previously invisible — the power dynamic inevitably begins to change. It's slow, but it's happening. And that, I believe, is where the real transformation lies. Not just in the stories we tell on screen, but in who gets to hold the camera, who gets to shape the narrative, and who gets to decide what is seen and what remains in the shadows.

— *Excerpted from 'Ashes to Light', edited by Priyadarshini Bhattacharya, with permission from Penguin Random House*

BOOKS

The official Kerala experience

KP NAYAR

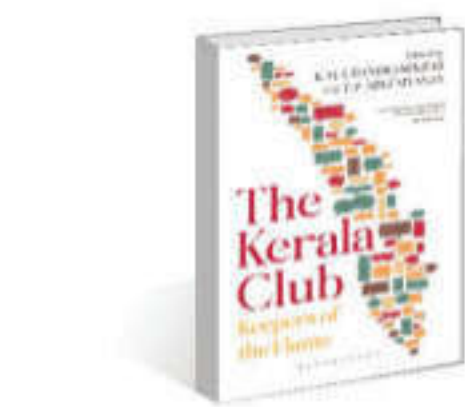
AN unintended book can sometimes be a great delight to read and a learning experience even for people conversant with its theme. ‘The Kerala Club: Keepers of the Flame’, edited by KM Chandrasekhar and TP Sreenivasan, is one such book.

What started as a casual WhatsApp group of retired civil servants — belonging to the Kerala cadre; Keralites who were sent to other state cadres or the Ministry of External Affairs or the United Nations; and non-Malayalis who embraced Kerala during their postings in the state — evolved into this absorbing compilation.

As the WhatsApp group thrived with vibrant recollections of bureaucrats, some of whom helped steer India’s sectoral destiny, Chandrasekhar, who was Union Cabinet Secretary for four years under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, came up with the idea of curating these valuable reminiscences by inviting their authors to expand their instant messages into full-fledged articles.

Chapters in this book are consequently on themes mostly about individual authors’ career-long experiences in government. There are 29 of them, each vastly different, lending variety to the volume.

The editors claim ‘The Kerala Club’ is “the first attempt of its kind to analyse the



THE KERALA CLUB: KEEPERS OF THE FLAME
Edited by KM Chandrasekhar & TP Sreenivasan.
Bloomsbury.
Pages 299. ₹799

Kerala experience of development diligently, honestly and with great attention to detail”. It is a claim that is difficult to conclusively verify.

Chandrasekhar’s co-editor TP Sreenivasan’s anonymous literary flourish is evident in the appropriate turn of phrase, such as the description of the book as a “beautiful tapestry — much like a *kasavu* (roughly *zari* for non-Malayalis) handloom fabric, meticulously woven with a delicate gold border”.

By way of full disclosure, I am personally familiar with Sreenivasan’s literary, editing and correcting abilities ever since he was my teacher of English language and literature — phonetics in particular — in college before he joined the Indian

Foreign Service (IFS) in 1967.

The book is a narrative about experiences of governance, each unique in its own way. So, learning from those experiences is important because many of the challenges facing Kerala today are the same that the authors have faced in their allotted state governments across India, Union ministries or as international civil servants.

The best example worthy of emulation is that of Gopalan Balagopal, an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer of the West Bengal cadre, who later joined the United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and was its Country Head in North Korea after postings in Dhaka, Geneva and New York. He now lives in Wayanad, Kerala, where he uses his UNICEF experience to make *anganwadis* realise their vastly underutilised potential.

He found that a common problem with *anganwadis* in Wayanad was “administrative data collection, which often discourages honest and accurate recording when the responsibility of data collection and implementation lies with the same individuals”. Luckily, the *anganwadi* ‘establishment’, so to speak, welcomed Balagopal’s interventions. The improvements he proposed came from his nationwide resources and global connections.

That was not the case with T Nandakumar, a Malayali IAS officer of the Bihar/Jharkhand cadre. In 1976, he was made liquidator

of the Patna Urban Cooperative Bank, which was plagued by embezzlement, including a loan given to a borrower who pledged Patna’s famous Gandhi Maidan and the city’s railway station platform no. 1 as collateral. The bank’s chairman, a ruling party MLA, fled but resurfaced when part of his house was attached by Nandakumar and his liquidation team. A hotel owned by the bank’s secretary was also attached. The MLA’s supporters provoked unrest. The liquidator’s team eventually recovered enough money to pay back every individual depositor. “The Chief Minister was furious, but held his silence... And I am alive to tell the story. In Bihar, that felt miraculous.”

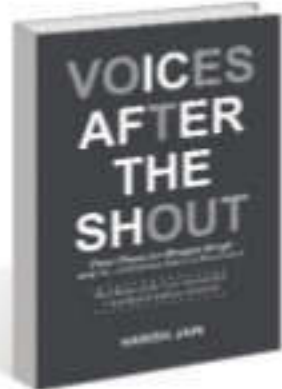
Indian Police Service (IPS) officer B Sandhya’s 12-year-long experiences as a nodal officer at the Kerala government’s Community Policing Project raise hopes that confidence can be restored in law enforcement, which has reached its nadir in some metros like Delhi and Kolkata. Sandhya cites the Saanjh Model of Punjab Police as a successful example of community policing.

A copy of ‘The Kerala Club’ is well worth its cover price for students who aspire to follow the authors and join the civil service, citizens who want to know about the soft underbelly of the corrupt politician-bureaucrat nexus and lay readers who simply want to enjoy reading the anecdotes its pages are peppered with.

— **The reviewer is a strategic analyst**



BACKFLAP



VOICES AFTER THE SHOUT
by Harish Jain.
Unistar Books.
Pages 134. ₹495

This volume brings together four plays that return to the Indian revolutionary movement not at the moment of explosion, but in the long, uneasy silence that follows it. Set in prison cells, courtrooms, *addas*, and remembered streets, these plays reimagine Bhagat Singh and his comrades as thinking, arguing, vulnerable human beings. They trace a deliberate movement — from endurance to articulation, to memorial distortion and finally to political responsibility.



IIT
by Prabhat Kumar.
HarperCollins.
Pages 268. ₹799

In 1956, PM Jawaharlal Nehru laid the foundation stone of the first Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Kharagpur. Seven decades later, the IIT is not just India’s most prestigious educational ecosystem, but its alumni are among the architects of the modern world. In his book, Prabhat Kumar, himself an IIT alumnus, unveils the story of these centres of excellence. The book portrays a multi-generational portrait of an institution that has established India’s presence on the world stage.



HERBARIUM
by Sonia Rafeek. Translated from Malayalam by Ministry S.
Niyogi Books.
Pages 340. ₹595

A work of eco-fiction of startling ambition and talent, ‘Herbarium’ revolves around Tipu, a sensitive boy growing up in Dubai who visits his maternal house in Kerala. In the hush of groves, he begins to see the world through his mother’s eyes. Plants become dearer to him, and the novel offers a profound exploration of nature.

Every border tells a story

SONALI GUPTA

THERE is something deeply reassuring about a book called ‘The Mapmaker’. It sounds like the promise of order — tidy lines, clear borders and someone sensible in charge of the pencils. You imagine a protagonist with excellent posture, ruling the world with rulers. The title suggests that reality can be measured into submission, preferably in neat, labelled sections. But Maitry Roy Moulik, thankfully, has other ideas.

In ‘The Mapmaker’, translated from Bangla, maps are not tools of certainty; they are tools of persuasion, and sometimes of gentle mischief. The novel begins as a calm story about charting land in Enlightenment-era England, with canals, coal mines, and gentlemen in wigs. But very quickly, it starts asking harder questions: Who gets to decide what is “official”? Who lives with those decisions? And how many cups of tea does it take to make a doubtful boundary look completely respectable?

The mapmaker is not simply measuring hills and fields. He is negotiating histories, egos and silences, plus the kind of bureaucracy that anyone in South Asia, or anywhere with a land office, will recognise instantly. Loosely following William “Strata” Smith, the self-taught surveyor whose geological map of England, Wales and Scotland was built “drop by drop” while the industrial world rushed ahead, the author gives us a protagonist who is brilliant, stubborn, and deeply alone. This is not the glamorous tale of a genius adored by his peers; it is the story of a man who keeps scratching at the earth while everyone else is busy laying railway tracks over his work.

The book unsettles you gently. No big speeches, no courtroom showdowns. The tone is calm, almost polite. It feels like a

well-mannered conversation in a drawing room until you realise, later, that your ideas about maps, truth and authority have quietly shifted. Instead of hitting you over the head, the novel taps you on the shoulder and says, “Look again.”

Roy Moulik’s England is full of small, revealing scenes. Learned men argue over strata and property lines. Everyone agrees a boundary must exist; nobody agrees on where. It is all civilised: tea is served, minutes are recorded, and someone’s future is quietly nudged to the wrong side of a map.

Chandana Dutta’s translation is crucial here. Translation, like mapmaking, is interpretation disguised as accuracy. She keeps the prose simple and smooth, so you forget you are reading a work crossing languages. Her English catches both the rhythm of the Bangla original and the feel of 19th-century Britain without becoming stiff-legged.

Underneath this polite surface, however, ‘The Mapmaker’ is deeply political. It asks: Who has the power to draw a line and call it truth? What happens to those placed on the “wrong” side of that line? How often do we treat a map or certificate as unquestionable simply because it has been signed and stamped? In Roy Moulik’s world, these questions decide who gets land, credit, and recognition, and whose labour is buried under someone else’s name.

In a time that loves speed, certainty, and clear answers, ‘The Mapmaker’ quietly argues for slowness, doubt, and attentiveness. It reminds us that every border has a backstory and every map has fingerprints. The earth may be made of rock and clay, but the lines we draw across it are made of politics, memory, and habit.

You close the book, step back into your own landscape and realise that the world you move through is far less fixed than it appears, especially when seen from the comforting, but deeply unreliable, safety of a map.

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



THE MAPMAKER
by Maitry Roy Moulik.
Translated from Bangla by Chandana Dutta.
Niyogi Books.
Pages 376. ₹595

Lotus in Indian imagination

SARABJEET GARCHA

TWO virtues make a pocketbook desirable: handiness and concision. Devdutt Pattanaik’s ‘Flower of India: Ways of Seeing the Lotus’ honours both. On the very first page, we are made party to a secret: the Botanical Survey of India “has never declared any flower as the national flower of India”, let alone the lotus. Yet centuries of reverence and fascination have rendered it a precious presence in the Indian imagination.

In George Santayana’s words, “The idea of the physical world is the flower or thick cream of practical thinking.” In India, the lotus is the flower infusing both thought and substance, the world it unfurls being a constant source of inspiration and mystique.

To meet the demands of brevity, it was a good choice on the author’s part to restrict his exploration to five aspects: “botany”, “resource”, “metaphor”, “design” and the “sacred”. Curiously, however, the omission of the definite article before the final item slightly trips the list’s parallel structure. But this is a minor stumble in an otherwise thoughtful survey.

Pattanaik begins with the essential elaboration of the distinction between the lotus and water lily. Although the book leaves the interesting history of this “ancient” confusion to the reader’s imagination, a look into the archives reveals just how prevalent the mix-up has been. If Carl Linnaeus, the father of binomial nomenclature, himself mistook the lotus for a water lily, it isn’t surprising that the confusion persists even today. Before him, in 1696, the English botanist Leonard Plukenet had labelled the lotus “the marsh-loving nut-bearing Indian water lily with large, navel-centred leaves, prickly stalks and rose-purple flowers”. Not until 1788 did the aquatic flower acquire its own genus, *Nelumbo*, thanks to the German botanist Joseph Gaertner.

The book is rich in mythical, religious, cultural and philosophical trivia associated with the lotus. For instance, although “the tragic



FLOWER OF INDIA: WAYS OF SEEING THE LOTUS
by Devdutt Pattanaik.
Aleph.
Pages 94. ₹399

tale of Tejimola, a young girl killed by her step-mother”, is narrated in only five short sentences, one is inspired to dig deeper into the folklore of Assam for other such gems. The philosophy of the ‘Lotus Sutra’, a fundamental Buddhist text, is summarised in three neat bullet points under the heading ‘Awakening’. That serves as a reminder to revisit the classic, alongside several others that find mention.

While the book is usually specific about such references, there are occasions when it is not — for instance, we come across the phrase “In a Vedic ritual manual” at least twice. Furthermore, the ungrammaticality of a sentence such as the following is not easily overlooked: “By the Upanishad philosophical texts (500 BCE), the image moves inward.” However, the author never runs out of lucid libation to wash away such grit: “The heart-lotus becomes the inner shrine — the small, secret space where Brahman dwells.”

In his conclusion, Pattanaik shares an intriguing “urban legend” about the BJP’s emblem, the lotus: “The addition of water enhanced the power of the logo and contributed to the party’s success and growth.” That shows his penchant for unearthing the peculiar. All in all, the true value of this brief study lies in its catalytic power. While focusing on the flower, he casts his gaze wide, thereby rendering the book a meaningful departure point for the reader’s own journey.

— **The reviewer is a poet**

Exploring the strands of freedom that define us

AMITABHA BHATTACHARYA

STILL remember a lecture delivered by the former Chief Justice of India, PB Gajendragadkar, in the late Sixties in Calcutta, where he said his favourite poem that he considered equally suitable for our National Anthem was Tagore’s ‘Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high...’ from ‘Gitanjali’.

The poet implores at the end: ‘Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.’ Although Tagore’s concept of freedom and his idea of inclusiveness, or even Amartya Sen’s arguments about development as freedom, are not touched upon in this book, Neera Chandhoke discusses, through five essays, her “idea of India in political theory, Bombay cinema and progressive Urdu poetry”, connected through “a restless search for freedom”.

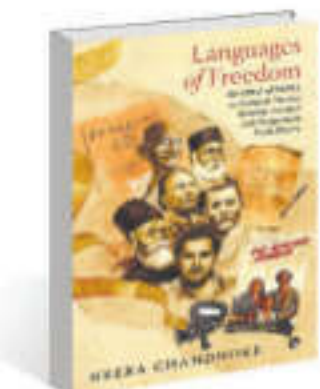
She analyses various notions of freedom as advanced by leading political theorists and practitioners — from Hobbes and Rousseau to Ambedkar and Gandhi. Although the book, in a way, is a critique of the current political climate in India, its scope extends

beyond that. The chapters, titled ‘Swaraj as Freedom’, ‘Thinking Freedom’, ‘The Poetry of Freedom’, ‘Films as Critiques of Unfreedom’ and ‘Writing Indian Political Theory’, cover a wide spectrum.

What stands out is the author’s virtual rediscovery of Krishna Chandra Bhat-tacharya (KCB), whose highly influential essay ‘Swaraj in Ideas’ was delivered in 1929, and published after his death in 1949.

KCB, as George V Chair of Philosophy at Calcutta University, raised the issue of “how the ideas and ideals introduced by a dominant culture to a colonised culture affect the freedom to think, reflect and evaluate. How do we acquire *swaraj* in ideas in an intellectually dominated society?”

The author quotes KCB: “When a person can shake himself free from it, he feels as though the scales have fallen from his eyes. He experiences a rebirth and that is what I call Swaraj in Ideas.” While KCB’s thesis made waves in the philosophical circles, it has been questioned by scholars like Rajendra Prasad and Dharmendra Goel on the grounds that it is conservative, vague about the definition of Indian culture and that KCB



LANGUAGES OF FREEDOM
by Neera Chandhoke.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 332. ₹699

meant “classical Hindu culture, and not medieval or modern systems of thought”.

The chapters that follow seek to unravel the languages of freedom as articulated through Hindi/Urdu cinema and poetry. Chandhoke does a competent job, citing example after example of how the progressive, secular and pluralistic idea of India was reflected through such channels.

As the author articulates, “As we walk through the gardens of the many religions and their culture in India, we become con-

scious that our cultural concepts are sculpted by the poetry of Ghalib, Iqbal, and Sahir as well as Guru Gobind Singh, the magnificent prose of Munshi Premchand and the genius of MF Husain...” If the reader, in her imagination, conjures up similar contributions of those from the vast areas outside the northern belt, one would get a comprehensive understanding of the diversity of our culture.

Although Chandhoke has focused largely on Bombay cinema and progressive Urdu poetry, she has covered the subject with insight. While discussing ‘The Poetry of Freedom’, she underlines the critical role played by the Progressive Writers’ Association. Equally interesting is her take on certain Bombay films as “critiques of unfreedom”. Here is an interesting story. Hearing that the film ‘*Achhut Kanya*’ (1936) was creating waves since it promoted inter-caste mingling, “Sarojini Naidu took Jawaharlal Nehru to see the film in Bombay. Nehru was greatly impressed by the presentation and wrote to the heroine Devika Rani a fan letter requesting an interview to discuss the film. The letter remained unanswered...”

The impact of the Indian People’s Theatre Association and that of Partition on Bombay films has also been analysed.

In the last chapter, both the need for and difficulties in “writing Indian political theory” have been dealt with quite adroitly. While highlighting the role of Vivekananda, who “established a firm and confident political identity for India by declaring its culture to be predominantly spiritual, and distinctive from the West”, as also of our first modernist Rammohun Roy and of the various reform movements, Chandhoke reflects that for Gandhi, religion was important but political struggles were more important. “...he reconciled the relationship between the two by transforming a predominantly spiritual philosophy, aimed at the liberation of the self, into liberation of the collective. He theorised *swaraj*, *ahimsa* and *satya* as not only individual virtues, but as also the attributes of a collective movement, and ultimately those of an ideal state...”

The book, which should have had an Index, achieves a great deal in exploring the languages of freedom in the Indian context.

— **The reviewer is a retired IAS officer**

REFLECTIONS

Cosmic lottery & a genius



PRADEEP MAGAZINE

IN the cosmic lottery of human existence, the distribution of nature's bounties is so uneven that one is compelled to wonder whether life was ever meant to be fair. It transcends the boundaries of everyday life, manifesting itself in countless ways — from the accident of being born into privilege to the possession of extraordinary gifts in different fields of professional life, including the sporting arena.

When you watch Lionel Messi glide across a football field, the ball seemingly strung to his feet, navigating crowded spaces that appear to open before him as if by magic, you know you are witnessing something that transcends mere training. Years of practice undoubtedly shaped the athlete, but they do not fully explain the phenomenon.

As the move unfolds, Messi appears to see possibilities invisible to everyone else. And when he applies the final touch to a symphony-like sequence and kicks the ball into the net, you are left with the unmistakable feeling that you are watching a rare gift at work: an intuitive grasp of space, time and creativity that lies beyond the reach of hard work alone.

Watching a genius unravel intricate patterns with effortless grace, accomplishing what countless others can only aspire to despite years of toil, one is inevitably led to an unsettling question: is life really fair?

An exceptional gift, almost a blessing from the heavens, among many other things, is the ability to retain perfect balance while the body is in motion. It is a universal truth that runs through almost every sport. A Messi or a Maradona, sprinting with the ball seemingly glued to their feet, keeps the body's centre of gravity intact despite tackles, nudges and des-

perate physical challenges. Their rhythm is rarely broken, because they never quite lose balance. They literally conjure space that, a moment earlier, appeared blocked to them.

Watch Roger Federer chase a ball that seems racing away from him. His long strides are rhythmic, his body perfectly aligned, every movement flowing into the next with weightless symmetry. As he reaches the ball, stretches for a backhand and unleashes a sweeping stroke, his shoulders rotating in a perfect arc, you wonder whether he is entirely human. It is not merely the difficulty of the shot that astonishes. It is the ease with which he executes it, maintaining perfect posture, balance and harmony even under immense physical stress.

Among the many enduring images of a sporting genius in action is that of Tiger Woods striking a golf ball. His skill lies not merely in

Messi or Maradona, Woods or Federer, Tendulkar or Richards, even opponents acknowledge their aura of greatness

landing the ball at the perfect spot or covering the exact distance required. It lies in his ability to keep his head perfectly still even as the rest of his body coils and uncoils in preparation of a pendulum-like swing that reveals the almost rubber-like elasticity of the human body. Through all the twists, turns and violent transfer of weight, his balance never deserts him. Nothing sways out of rhythm, nothing falls out of alignment. It is a body in motion, yet one with a centre of gravity that remains almost uncannily still.

Cricket offers a unique challenge. A stationary batsman has to strike a moving ball hurled at him at varying degrees of speed, spin and swing on different lines and lengths. His success depends on the precise timing of every body

movement, the stillness of head even as his arms unfurl into a stroke or defence, and the perfect balance of his body at the precise moment of contact with the ball. Those who can do this time and again with effortless precision and impeccable timing are, so to say, the chosen few.

The poise of Sachin Tendulkar in full flow, driving with masterful ease, or the nonchalant yet menacing presence of Viv Richards at the batting crease, chewing gum as he struck the ball with majestic authority that has rarely been replicated, are the lasting images of geniuses at their peak. That is why even as opponents feared them and longed to dismiss them quickly, they could not help but acknowledge the aura of greatness that illuminated their sport.

In this planetary interplay of luck, chance, hard work, training, guidance, intuition and the millions of unknowables that shape a life of success or failure, the genius stands in splendid isolation. What has earned him gifts that countless others long for but never possess? Like life itself, the world of sports has its own hierarchy that resists explanation.

Unlike the toiling masses, either bitter or resigned to the hardened, unresponsive line destiny has drawn for them, players of accomplishment acknowledge the presence of a genius with a gracious surrender to his superiority. I once witnessed this relationship of admiration bordering on hero worship when Richards came to Punjab with the West Indies team to play a tour game against the North Zone.

It was at a dinner hosted for the visiting West Indies team in Amritsar in 1983. Richards regally sat on a chair, while a few stars of the North Zone team sat around him on the floor. Like awestruck fans, they wanted to savour every moment in the company of a batsman they believed embodied the highest expression of skill that seemed to transcend even perfection. They were like stargazed children paying obeisance to a genius beyond their reach. They had graciously accepted the reality of the unequal distribution of talent in the sporting world, not with resentment but as a miracle to admire and celebrate.

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

Hunter-gatherers of the present day



RAAJA BHASIN

YET again, let me start with a book. Almost needless to add, this too has had its fair share of critics and detractors. In 2021, during the Covid pandemic, evolutionary biologists Heather Heying and Bret Weinstein published *A Hunter-Gatherer's Guide to the 21st Century*. They speak of our era, arguing that despite what all is happening around us and our being increasingly aware of the events that surround — and at times overwhelm — us, we, as a species, are living in the best time of human history.

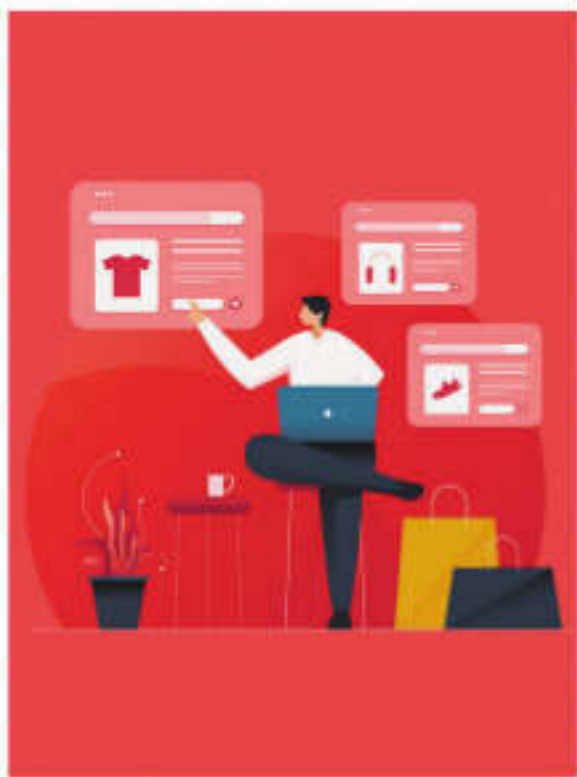
The world that these wife-and-husband writers inhabit — and the one they speak of — is largely West-focused, where both wealth and comfort are substantial. Yet people are lonely and life itself can seem unhinged. The authors question many mainstream modern practices and posit that the accelerating rate of change in today's world has outpaced our capacity to adapt. Our brains and bodies have simply not been able to keep up. Human beings evolved to live in clans, but today many of us don't even know the names of those who live next door. Nor do we care, supposedly.

As I step out of those pages, permit me to return to my true self of being a life-long vagabond. And a person in that lowly category of human is not necessarily one who physically wanders, aimlessly, from place to place, but can also be someone who lets his mind do some of that tramping. Now, I'm going to wander off in another direction — and tongue in cheek at that. As may be known, in order to survive, vagabonds are hunter-gatherers. That said, let's change the targets of the pre-historic hunter-gatherer and transport him to our dog-eat-dog digital/AI world that is ruthless in its sameness.

We are still hunting and we are still gathering, only what we hunt and what we gather has changed from the time our ancestors rushed out with sticks and stones, and knocked off the closest edible animal — or colourful fruit (forbidden or otherwise).

Today's battle is to jump the queue or to overtake on the highway. That said, one has managed to piece together a couple of categories of present-day hunter-gatherers where the weapon is a phone, the hunting ground is an app, danger comes in the form of broken Internet connectivity and the trophy is something bought on Amazon at a hefty discount.

Let's start at the top of the food chain and the (not so) venerable politicians, who begin by hunting for a political platform and then gather enough votes to take over the platform. These are the alpha versions of the hunter-gatherer. They may be easily recognised by the number of followers that they have hunted-gathered. The social media accounts of these persons gauge their successes and failures. (My apologies: there are no failures, there are only successes). Every hunt brings back more



ISTOCK

We are still hunting and we are still gathering, only what we hunt and what we gather has changed

followers, more likes, assorted emojis and emoticons that rivals may drool over. These, with the blessings of the deities of the contemporary hunter-gatherer, may translate into actual votes at the hustings.

Next, in India, we don't just marry. We enter the marriage market. We slide into it or are shoved, willingly or otherwise, into it. In the present context, that may be treated as the hunting ground that is packed with biped livestock. It is an area as vast as the sea where little streams exist and are based on caste, religion or some other means of identification. In this ocean, some hunt for husbands and others for wives. Once the desired spouse has been identified, it is time to hurl the spears. There is a process involved. All sorts of people have a say in this. As is obvious, the individuals who make up the couple are first hunted and then gathered.

To balance the load of all this hunting-gathering, it is appropriate that something must be said at one's own expense. Some years back, a friend and I joined some others on a longish hike. It was expected to take most of the day. For this, I had packed a food bag with assorted sandwiches, fruit and other edibles. As the day progressed, my friend and I dug into the bag. After every round of eating, he'd declare: "This is very nice. See how organised I am." At some point, given that one had laboured over getting this together when dawn had barely broken, I snapped with some irritation: "What do you mean you are organised? I'm organised. I've brought all this along." He calmly smiled back and said: "No, I'm organised. I've got you along." This should stand out as a fine example of management-driven hunting-gathering.

At the moment, I'm on the lookout for some accessories for our dog — a raincoat and other sundries. So, in a manner of speaking, I'm also still hunting and gathering, only this is being done on the Net. The hunting ground is the infinity of Net-based markets, but the instincts are the same.

— **The writer is an author based in Shimla**

Why the missing 'h' in my name

SUJATA GULATI RAJPAL

MY name is Sujata, and there is no 'h' in my name — that's how I introduced myself when I made Mysuru my home 25 years back. Landing straight from a Punjabi North Indian household into Mysuru, a city deeply immersed in South Indian ethos, was a cultural shock. I noticed that 'h' seemed to be the default letter in names — Geetha, Aniketh, Parvathi, Bharath, Pramodh, Vidhya...

Initially, I thought the extra 'h' was for good luck like the extra 'a' some celebrities add to their names for an additional dose of auspiciousness. It was only later that I understood that in the South, people spell names the way they pronounce them, so the 'h' naturally finds its place.

It wasn't that people in the South are partial to 'h'; they love all letters equally. Because the English alphabet lacks separate letters for these specific phonetic characters, South Indian transliteration traditions use the 'h' to signal a harder or aspirated pronunciation: same name, different linguistic traditions.

My gas connection records and even my bank spell my name as Sujatha. Initially, my Aadhaar card also had an 'h'. I had to apply for a correction. The authorities obliged, but wondered why I didn't want my name to be 'spelt correctly'.

Despite repeatedly informing my bank, I continue to be Sujatha. The spelling doesn't match my Aadhaar card or passport, but nobody seems to care. The 'h' must follow the 't'. Period.

Explaining this every single time became exhausting. Eventually, I stopped resisting and accepted it wholeheartedly. After all, if you can't convince them, join them. I, too, started adding an 'h' after 't' and 'd' in names without a second thought, and I was right every time. Well almost. Clearly, I had imbibed the culture of my adopted state rather quickly.

A while ago, I interviewed an accomplished woman and wrote her name as Shruthi.

"Why did you add an 'h'? There is no 'h' in my name," she said. I could empathise.

"But you're from the South, aren't you?" I reasoned. "Yes, I am. But there is no 'h' in my name," she said.

Note to self: when you do things blindly, you may be right most of the time, but not always.

Another cultural surprise was the practice of using a father's or husband's name after a woman's first name. Initially, I was puzzled. Why did women have two names but no surname?

For years, and even now, some people assume Rajpal is my husband's first name.

"How is Rajpal doing?" they ask.

We may pronounce, spell it differently, but every name deserves to be called just as its owner chooses

"Which Rajpal?" I reply. "We have three and a half Rajpals in our family. My husband and sons are authentic Rajpals, whereas I'm only half a Rajpal. Gulati is my maiden surname."

It took me some time, but I eventually understood the cultural logic behind using a father's or husband's name. Once I did, it made perfect sense. But when you assume that things work the same way everywhere, mishaps happen. Recently, I met a friend and asked, "How is Kumar doing?" Pat came the reply: "You're the only one who calls him Kumar. His name is Kiran."

"Oops."

"Kumar is our family name," she explained. "We use our family name."

Another cultural variation. In many families, especially in South India, surnames don't always follow the same pattern. Father, mother, brothers, and sisters may all have different second names because they may use their father's name, grandfather's name, ancestral village, or family name in different ways.

It is fascinating and often becomes a wonderful conversation starter. In North India, surnames often openly signal caste. In Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, many dropped caste surnames due to Dravidian movement politics.

Well, that is what makes our country such a beautiful potpourri of cultures, traditions, and identities. We may pronounce, spell our names differently, but every name deserves to be called just as its owner chooses. My name. My choice.

— **The writer is an author**

Within every dystopia is a little utopia, like in our cities



BINDU MENON

ON a recent cab ride through one of India's sprawling metros, the driver vented his frustration at the notorious traffic. "This is no city, it is a crowd," he exclaimed. Looking at the unmoving rows of vehicles stretching endlessly ahead, the streams of people attempting to cross a chock-a-block road, and the continuum of construction projects rising above and burrowing beneath the ground, I conjured the image of the city as a hapless Gulliver pinned down by the tiny yet relentless armies of people, vehicles, buildings and bridges.

"But this city is my only hope," the driver said, after a pause. One among the countless migrants who had found no worthwhile

employment in his hometown, the city represented chaos but also possibility. It was both burden and refuge for him. I was instantly reminded of the haunting song 'Seene Mein Jalan, Aankhon Mein Toofan' from 'Gaman', picturised on Farooq Sheikh against the backdrop of a restless Bombay — a metropolis that promises everything while demanding even more.

Decades ago, Khushwant Singh described Bombay, before it became Mumbai, as "the only city" in India with enough high-rise buildings to resemble "a miniature New York". He added, with characteristic wit: "It has other things to justify its city status: it is congested, it has traffic jams at all hours of the day, it is highly polluted and many parts of it stink." Today, Mumbai faces stiff competition from almost every Indian metropolis in fulfilling those criteria.

Architect Gerson da Cunha once observed that a city is the sum of its economic opportunities and its quality of life. Judged by that measure, which Indian metropolis can truly claim to offer both opportunity and a life of dignity for its citizens?

The debate surfaces repeatedly on social

media, where those who have lived in both India and the West compare the quality of urban life. The arguments are familiar: efficient civic infrastructure versus vibrant community life, cleaner air and water versus richer cultural life, order versus spontaneity. But the verdict remains elusive. Is a good city one that functions with mechanical precision, or one that accommodates the unpredictability of human life? Are Indian cities dystopias or utopias?

Perhaps they are both. Or, as writer Margaret Atwood perceptively observes, "Within every dystopia, there is a little utopia." The converse too is true, for can there truly be a perfect city? Atwood in fact coined the word 'utopia', combining both the words and the disparate worlds they hold. Utopia, she wrote, "is the imagined perfect society and its opposite — because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other". Utopia, she said, is also "a state of mind, as is every place in literature of whatever kind". This idea extends naturally to the city. It is never merely a collection of roads, buildings and infrastructure; it is also an emotional landscape, shaped by the histories, memories

and everyday lives of its inhabitants.

A city lives many lives and undergoes many rebirths. No single narrative can ever exhaust its meaning. Whether it is Singh's 'Delhi', where the city becomes a layered chronicle of its past and present; 'City of Djinns', where William Dalrymple explores Delhi as a palimpsest, uncovering the overlapping histories and traditions that continue to shape its identity; 'Maximum City', where Suketu Mehta reveals Mumbai as a restless creature of ambition, crime, cinema and survival; or 'City of Joy', in which Dominique Lapierre portrays Kolkata through extraordinary resilience amid poverty — each offers a different way of seeing the city.

For the historian, the city is a chronicle in stone and memory, for the sociologist, a pulsating social landscape, and for the political observer, it is a theatre of power. Every walk on its streets becomes an act of reading for the flaneur. For the storyteller, it offers an inexhaustible crucible of characters and contexts. And for the poet, it is indeed a state of mind — an emotion, a longing, a rhythm of life. That idea found a poetic

expression: *Poocha jo maine rooh se, 'Yeh Dilli kya hai?' Yeh sun ke boli, 'Jism kul aalam hai, aur Dilli us ki jaan hai'* (I asked my soul: What is Delhi? She replied: The world is the body, and Delhi is life).

Ultimately, the city each of us inhabits is intensely personal. One may not feel at home in it even after years of living there, while a passing traveller may forge an instant connection. Graham Greene wrote that however large a city may be, it finally consists for each person of only "a few streets, a few houses, a few people". Remove those, and it survives only as "a pain in the memory, like a pain of an amputated leg". The city we remember, however, is rarely the one that continues to exist.

Perhaps that is the enduring paradox of the city: it belongs to everyone and yet to no one. Dalrymple has remarked that the Delhi he first encountered had become almost unrecognisable within two decades. That may well be the destiny of every city: to outgrow the stories written about it, even as it invites new ones.

— **The writer is a journalist based in Bengaluru**

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee says it follows a stringent, multi-layered system of checks and balances to manage daily offerings and donations at the shrines under its control

FAITH & FINANCES

GS PAUL

AMID concerns over allegations of theft of donations and financial irregularities at Ayodhya's Ram Temple, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) claims to have an elaborate mechanism in place to manage the offerings and donations received at Sikh shrines.

Under the Sikh Gurdwaras Act, 1925, gurdwaras generating an annual income exceeding ₹25,000 fall under the SGPC's administrative jurisdiction.

The SGPC currently manages 83 historic gurdwaras under Section 85 and another 200 shrines under Section 87 of the Act. Offerings from devotees remain the backbone of the SGPC's finances.

According to the SGPC, during the 2025-26 financial year, the total income was approximately ₹1,480 crore. Of this, the major share — nearly ₹632 crore, or 42.5 per cent — was of offerings and donations in cash by devotees.

Apart from physical donations, devotees also contribute securely through the SGPC's online donation portal and Dasvandh platform. Foreign contributions are accepted through designated channels in compliance with the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA).

ALLEGATIONS OF FUND MISUSE

The SGPC, too, has faced allegations of misuse of donation funds for its "extended political arm", the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD).

Bibi Jagir Kaur, the first woman to serve as the SGPC president, says the mechanism to manage SGPC funds is flawless, "yet these were misused, though just on a couple of occasions".

A former Cabinet minister who represented Bholath as an Akali Dal MLA several times and is now a 'rebel', she cites the 2015 instance. At that time, the SGPC sparked a controversy by spending over ₹90 lakh from gurdwara funds on advertisements to justify the Akal Takht's exoneration of the controversial Dera Sacha Sauda head, Gurmeet Ram Rahim, for his alleged blasphemous act in 2007. The pardon was revoked within a month.

Years later, on December 2, 2024, the Akali Dal leaders were penalised and made to return the money.

Similarly, last month, the SGPC drew condemnation for installing hoardings across gurdwaras in Punjab, including the Golden Temple complex, in support of an Akal Takht edict declaring Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann as "Guru Dokhi"



Devotees make offerings in the golak placed near the Akal Takht in the Golden Temple complex at Amritsar. According to the SGPC, during the 2025-26 financial year, cash offerings and donations totalled ₹632 crore. TRIBUNE PHOTO: VISHAL KUMAR

(anti-Guru) and "Khalsa Panth Virodhi" (anti-community) over an alleged objectionable video that hurt Sikh sentiments.

"Except on these two occasions that I can recall, SGPC funds have seldom been misused. It was absolutely wrong on the SGPC's part to misutilise the devotees' donations for political gains," says Bibi Jagir Kaur, while refuting the allegations being levelled against the Sukbhir Singh Badal-led SAD of misusing SGPC funds for organising political rallies.

"That is not true. If, on a rare occasion, an Akali Dal meeting was organised in a gurdwara and langar was served, it cannot be termed misuse of funds as it is the Sikh principle of *sangat* and *pangat* which is observed in all gurdwaras. Even members of farmers' unions conduct their meetings in gurdwaras and partake of *langar*. No one objects to that. So, these are politically-motivated allegations meant simply to target opponents," she adds.

Bibi Jagir Kaur says there is a "fool-proof" mechanism in place to obtain approval for the use of funds from the SGPC House, which is then routed through several administrative layers.

"This is done for social causes only. Like, a mammoth amount was spent during the trying times of the Covid-19 pandemic and natural calamities like floods. Similarly,

At the Golden Temple, counting takes place five days a week, while at other shrines, it is carried out weekly or fortnightly. The counting process is conducted under CCTV surveillance

funds are spared for granting scholarships to children or fee concessions to deserving ones in academics and sports," she says.

The former SGPC chief says that when the counting of currency is undertaken, strict measures are adopted. "Maybe 0.5 per cent people with mala fide intentions indulged in siphoning off small amounts during the counting, but they were nabbed on the spot."

THE OFFERINGS

The scale of offerings varies according to the footfall of devotees, festivals and the prominence of individual shrines. The

Golden Temple in Amritsar, it is estimated, receives between ₹20 lakh and ₹25 lakh daily in its *golak*s (donation boxes) directly, which amounts to a monthly collection of around ₹6 crore to ₹7.5 crore.

At Takht Sri Kesgarh Sahib in Anandpur Sahib, the monthly collections average a little over ₹1 crore. Takht Sri Damdama Sahib in Talwandi Sabo receives approximately ₹35-40 lakh every month.

Other shrines generate enough income to independently support their religious activities and *langar* services.

ELABORATE SECURITY SETUP

SGPC Additional Secretary Bhagwant Singh Dhangera says donation boxes placed in the sanctum sanctorum and *parikrama* areas are secured with three-level locking systems and special seals. The opening of donation boxes, he points out, is carried out under the strict supervision of authorised SGPC officials, shrine management representatives, inspectors and flying squad personnel.

"One set of keys remains at the shrine and carries the SGPC seal, while another set remains with the SGPC and carries the shrine's seal. Whenever a *golak* is to be opened, the SGPC deputes an inspector-level officer from Amritsar who is authorised to break the seals and supervise the

counting process," Dhangera says.

MONITORED COUNTING

At the Golden Temple, counting takes place five days a week, while at other shrines, it is carried out weekly or fortnightly, depending on the volume of donations. The counting process is conducted by designated teams under continuous CCTV surveillance. "The monitoring system is online, allowing officials sitting in Amritsar to oversee counting operations at any shrine in real time," Dhangera says.

Cash and valuables are transported to the designated counting centres where trained staff, supervisors and committee members jointly undertake the exercise.

Currency-counting machines are used for notes, while coins are segregated and counted separately. "After counting, every bundle of currency is duly signed by the authorised staff members. Those engaged in the counting process are not permitted to carry personal belongings, cash, purses or jewellery inside the counting area," he adds.

HANDLING GOLD, SILVER

Offerings are separated into different categories, including cash, coins, foreign currency and precious metals such as gold and silver. The precious metals are evaluated daily by empanelled jewellers under official supervision. These are weighed, documented and securely stored in gurdwara treasuries for further processing.

PUBLIC DISCLOSURE

Amidst allegations of politically-influenced "misuse" of *golak* money, the SGPC claims it maintains transparency by publishing a monthly Gurdwara Gazette detailing the income and expenditure of SGPC-managed shrines. It is available at a nominal cost within the Golden Temple complex.

"Every month, the Gazette carries comprehensive details of receipts and expenditure across SGPC-controlled shrines," Dhangera says, underscoring the committee's emphasis on accountability.

NO SHORTAGE OF FUNDS

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the offerings at the shrines had fallen sharply due to nationwide lockdowns and international travel restrictions. An official, preferring anonymity, said the average daily collection at the Golden Temple complex was ₹15,000-₹20,000, down from the usual ₹20-25 lakh. Yet this was no deterrent for the SGPC to dole out funds.

While a multi-specialty hospital chain was charging ₹72,550 per day for treatment with a ventilator, the SGPC announced a subsidised treatment package for Covid-19 patients at Sri Guru Ram Das Charitable Hospital in Amritsar. It also arranged extra ventilators and announced it would charge just ₹50,000 for a 'seven-day' treatment, including testing, food and medication.

The SGPC utilised its funds to establish additional Covid care centres and invested heavily in oxygen generators. It also offered shelter to Covid-positive patients in its hospitals and *serais*.

How misleading food claims undermine safety

Regulator signals that action against leading manufacturers is only the beginning of a broader crackdown on violations

PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

IN a sector where exaggerated, unsubstantiated and misleading claims are increasingly becoming a norm rather than an exception, the consumer protection regulator's recent action against two leading food manufacturers for their misleading claims is a welcome development. Of particular significance is the Central Consumer Protection Authority's (CCPA) unequivocal message to the food industry that all claims relating to composition, quality, nutrition or health benefits must be truthful, verifiable and non-deceptive. And that these will be assessed from the perspective of a reasonable consumer.

Signalling that this is only the beginning of a broader crackdown on such violations of consumer rights in the food sector, the CCPA has made it clear that exaggerated claims made for commercial gains cannot be allowed to undermine consumers' right to information and informed choice.

The authority's orders against Stora Foods and Beverages stemmed from the fact that the company used words such as "100% natural tender coconut water" and "100% tender coconut water" to describe its product. However, the CCPA found that the ingredients on the packaging showed that it was not natural, but reconstituted coconut water. The product also contained class II preservative, thereby making the accompanying claim of "100% natural" untenable, the CCPA observed in its order. Similarly, the company's pomegranate



For an industry thriving on exaggerated claims, the CCPA has said that '100% is a precise expression and cannot be used loosely, approximately or as a marketing slogan'. ISTOCK

juice, with the pictorial representation of pomegranate, claimed it was "100% juice". But the actual composition was "water, pomegranate juice concentrate: 4 per cent, and apple juice concentrate: 10 per cent". There were similar misleading claims about its mixed fruit, mango and guava chilli flavours.

In the case of Mrs Bectors Food Specialties, the English Oven bread was projected as "100% attabread", "100% whole wheat bread". However, the CCPA found that the product contained only 87 per cent wheat flour.

In two separate orders issued last month, the CCPA, headed by Chief Commissioner Nidhi Khare and Commissioner Anupam Mishra, directed the companies to immediately discontinue such claims and pay a

penalty of ₹1 lakh. For an industry which thrives on exaggerated claims and uses the numeral "100%" indiscriminately, the CCPA's message was unambiguous: "100% is a precise and absolute numerical expression and cannot be used loosely, approximately or as a marketing slogan. Any such claim must correspond exactly with the actual composition of the product."

With consumers increasingly becoming health-conscious, demand has surged for foods marketed as sugar-free, fat-free, organic, probiotic, high-protein, millet-based and the like. At the same time, the market for nutraceuticals — products derived from food sources that claim to provide health or medical benefits — has also expanded rapidly. The

food industry has responded with a proliferation of such products, but in many cases, the products fall short of the claims made about their composition, nutritional value or health benefits. The extent of such misrepresentation can be gauged from the large number of show-cause notices issued by the regulator, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), last month and again this month to food business operators for misleading claims. In its notice to Marico Ltd-Saffola Total Heart Pro Multi-source cooking oil, for example, FSSAI said the use of the term "Heart Pro" along with heart device imagery could create an impression among consumers that the product itself imparts heart-health benefits and was misleading.

It also took objection to Cipzer Nutraceuticals' Juice Capsule proclaiming "Boost your immune system" and "Remove toxins from your body" without any substantiation.

SAJ Food Products' claim of "No added sugar" was misleading as it contained maltodextrin and glucose syrup solids, the FSSAI pointed out. In case of Pluckk Mango Fruit Juice, too, the claim was "No added sugar", but the ingredients declared mango pulp as 51 per cent and sugarcane juice 49 per cent! In the case of Raw Pressery Alphonso Mango fruit drink, the regulator said it claimed to contain only naturally occurring sugar, despite the presence of fructose as added sugar.

The regulator has also sent notices to several beverage brands for claiming to be "energy drinks" and to several "organic

brands" for making the claim without recognised certification. I do not know if the regulator has looked at millet-based foods because that is also an area where misrepresentation is rampant.

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), a self-regulatory body of the advertising industry, which scrutinises advertisements on all media platforms for violations of its comprehensive code on advertising, in its latest *Annual Complaints Report* has flagged the rise in unsubstantiated health, nutrition and well-being claims in the food and beverages sector.

The seriousness of the issue can be gauged from the fact that the ASCI, which strongly promotes self-regulation, said, "The food and beverages sector, particularly the nutraceutical segment, requires immediate, stronger pre-publication guardrails as many claims carry real-world consequences for physical well-being."

The CCPA's regulatory action in the food sector appears to have nudged the FSSAI into a more proactive mode. Together, however, the two regulators have created a much-needed momentum. This is the right time to institutionalise preventive compliance mechanisms for advertising claims in the food sector, rather than relying primarily on post-publication enforcement. Since advertisements shape consumer perceptions and purchase decisions, misleading claims can inflict considerable harm from the moment they are in the public domain.

— *The writer is a consumer affairs expert*

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YOUR VOICE

A visit to the Obama Presidential Center reminded my family of the promises of pluralism

By Jenan Mohajir
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

When my children and I walked into the newly opened Obama Presidential Center, a three-story mural map of Chicago greeted us. We stood to take it in — “City of the Big Shoulders,” painted by Mark Bradford, one of many original works displayed at the center. We absorbed the colors marking the lakeshore, landmarks and neighborhoods; the train tracks that looked like stitches holding the city together.

It reminded me of Barack Obama’s words from his first inaugural address as president: “Our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness.” In that moment, the mural felt less like a map and more like a mirror — reflecting the city that shaped him and the pluralistic promise he spent a lifetime urging us to fulfill.

In one of the most powerful sections of the center, the exhibits place the Obamas’ personal stories alongside the long arc of American social movements. We walked through galleries tracing the journey from slavery to emancipation, from Jim Crow to the Civil Rights Movement, from redlining to the fight for voting rights. These rooms did not treat history as distant; they braided it directly into the lives of Barack and Michelle Obama — a reminder that their rise was not an isolated miracle but part of a continuum of struggle, resilience and progress.

By placing the Obamas’ story within this lineage, the center makes clear that their journey belonged to a much larger American narrative shaped by generations of leaders and ordinary citizens who came before them. And for this South Side family, we saw how it belongs to us.

A quote there from the president’s 2008 campaign reads: “We rise or fall as one nation, as one people.” It is the kind of line



Mark Bradford’s artwork “City of the Big Shoulders” is displayed in the entry lobby at the Obama Presidential Center on Wednesday, in Chicago’s Jackson Park.

BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

that could sound aspirational — that is, until we stood in a room filled with the stories of people who believed it enough to act on it. It brings home the realization that our country’s current polarization is a stranglehold on our collective humanity — and that perhaps the only way out is when we can all breathe freely.

The first lady’s presence is felt throughout the center, which highlights her journey from a South Side girl to the White House. A video plays her words: “When they go low, we go high.” My daughter watched, and I wondered whether the first lady’s lessons on dignity, resilience and staying true to one’s values in the face of challenge resonated with her — whether she connected them to the trials she was

facing in middle school, the archetypal questions of belonging and beauty that have filled our home conversations.

On the eighth floor, the Sky Room offers a panoramic view of the South Side — Hyde Park, Woodlawn, South Shore — neighborhoods that shaped the Obamas and continue to shape the city’s future. My children pressed their faces to the glass, pointing out places they knew: the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry, the lakefront and the South Side YMCA where we go for our Eid prayers.

Etched on the ceiling is Barack Obama’s speech from the 50th anniversary of the protest marches from Selma to Montgomery in Alabama. In that speech, he said, “The arc of the moral universe may bend

toward justice, but it does not bend on its own.” The center invites visitors to trace that arc themselves — from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement to the present — and to consider the unfinished work ahead.

Standing among these words, I hoped my children began to understand that pluralism is not simply about diversity; it is about shared destiny. Building a pluralistic America requires us to work together to actualize the values of the nation’s foundational promise. The center’s design makes clear that we are not passive observers of history; we are part of the larger story, and our individual actions etch pathways into our collective imaginations.

We ended our visit exploring the grounds and the park. Walking back toward our car, I asked my children what their favorite part of the center was. “The Oval Office and the big slide,” my son said — a reminder that he was 10, and a moment of gratitude that his life circumstances allowed him to enjoy carefree play while also imagining himself at the Resolute desk.

For my daughter, the “Yes We Can” chant screen — interspersed with images from the campaign trail and major moments from the Obama administration — was particularly inspiring.

I told them that my favorite part was all the stories we witnessed, showing us that our future is built not by extraordinary people but by ordinary people choosing, again and again, to show up for one another.

And that the story of America — the story this center enshrines — is still being written, one act of community at a time.

Jenan Mohajir is vice president of external affairs at Interfaith America, a Chicago-based nonprofit that equips leaders with the tools to respect, relate and cooperate across differences.

Voice of the People

Don’t leave out Ulysses S. Grant

The list of Illinois’ most influential people impressively touches on nearly every aspect of American life, but I was surprised by one glaring omission — Ulysses S. Grant (“Meet the state’s most influential people, from architects to a pope and future presidents,” July 5).

It’s true that he was — like Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama — not born and raised in Illinois. However, Galena was his home during his unlikely rise to prominence. He helped recruit some of the first regiments of Illinois volunteers for the Civil War in Mattoon, Belleville and Anna. A Galena paper gave him his first press exposure. And when Grant had the option of his first Civil War command being an Illinois or Ohio regiment, he led the Illinoisans.

While I would accept arguments that Grant isn’t truly an Illinoisan, I will not accept that he was not influential. As Lincoln dealt with inept, plodding generals in the war’s eastern theater, Grant was handing the Confederates loss after loss in the war’s western theater, ultimately securing the Mississippi River and likely tipping the war permanently in the Union’s favor. After his 1864 promotion to lieutenant general put him in charge of all Union armies, he finally coordinated previously disjointed military actions, bringing about a quicker end to America’s bloodiest war.

Grant’s influence did not end at military matters. Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, but Grant put it into practice. He worked out the details and provided resources for people formerly enslaved, and 179,000 Black troops would ultimately fight for the Union under his command. As commanding general, Grant oversaw Reconstruction, including his use of federal troops to protect Black people in the former Confederacy. As president, he supported the 15th Amendment to ensure its passage, appointed the first Black diplomat in American history and negotiated former Confederate states returning to the Union.

Love him or hate him, it’s hard to argue that the person who prosecuted the Union’s war against the Confederacy, executed the Emancipation Proclamation and reintegrated Confederate states was not influential.

— Alex Mariani, Chicago

Why omit these celebrated people?

Regarding the “Illinois 250” series: Two Mayor Richard Daleys but no Harold Washington? Not a single labor leader in the nation’s strongest union town, even the storied Mother Jones?

I detect a hint of ideological bias.

— Merrill Goozner, Chicago

Illinoisans’ influence on medicine

Regarding the “Illinois 250” series: Somewhere in between our two presidents, the pope and Hugh Hefner, the Tribune might have included several influential medical people. For instance, Dr. Bernard



BILL BRAMHALL

Fantus in 1937 established the world’s first blood bank at Cook County Hospital, and Charles Brenton Huggins was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1966 on how hormones influenced prostate function, which later led to hormone treatment for prostate cancer.

— Dr. Michael Ellman, Wilmette

A history lesson during vacation

The Sunday article (“Ghosts of Kaskaskia”) about Kaskaskia, Illinois’ first capital, brought to mind a family vacation in 1959. We headed south from Chicago for what would turn out to be an in-person history lesson. We made stops in Cahokia to see the oldest church in Illinois and the old courthouse, both built with vertical logs. We spent the night in Chester and then visited the home of Pierre Menard before driving past the correction center named for him. And then we visited Fort Kaskaskia where he is buried.

I remember looking down to the Mississippi River to an island my dad told us had been the first state capital. We were pretty impressed. And years later, I still am.

— Dorothy Evenhouse, Waukegan

Make Idaho stop the law

Complaints about bicycles blowing through stop signs, such as we saw in the

July 5 letters, miss the point. Four-way stops are substantially less efficient for all traffic than two-way stops and are intended as traffic-calming measures to prevent reckless, high-speed driving on quiet boulevards. Bicycles have shorter stopping distances, unimpeded road vision and lower top speed than cars, making this sort of traffic-calming unnecessary for cyclists.

In fact, coming to a complete stop alongside car traffic introduces a new hazard. The mismatch in acceleration and speed between cars and bikes, and increased time at intersections, creates opportunities for collisions that do not exist for drivers alone.

I want to challenge the reader: Go to your nearest four-way stop on a quiet street and count how many drivers come to a complete stop. I can guarantee it is fewer than 1 in 5; these vehicles can do a great deal more damage than a 30-pound bicycle.

There is a solution that has been successfully implemented in cities around the world: the Idaho stop. This allows cyclists to treat stop signs as yield signs and no longer arbitrarily subjects them to traffic control measures designed for other types of vehicles.

This has proved to improve safety and efficiency where it has been adopted.

Let’s bring the Idaho stop to Illinois and put this talking point to bed.

— Derek Eller, Chicago

License plates for bicycles

I have read the opinions in letters on bicycle lanes that appear to be slanted favorably toward the wishes of all the bicycle owners and not to the impact that the lanes have on motorists and pedestrians. I agree that bicycle lanes are needed for safety reasons.

My question is: Why do the rest of us have to pay for this infrastructure of bicycle lanes? Why is this not being funded at least partially by owners of bicycles who use these lanes, through the purchase of bicycle license plates? And why are these bicycle lanes being put on busy streets where there is already congestion? Lastly, I would like to see the owners of bicycles be required to pass a rules-of-the-road test before a license is granted.

It has been my experience that bicycle owners do not obey the rules of the road that are required of motorists. I have seen cyclists go through stop signs and traffic lights, weave in and out of traffic, and ride on sidewalks, impeding the rights of pedestrians.

Cyclists should be ticketed and fined for these violations, just like motorists. The only way that cyclists can be held accountable is through having license plates on their bicycles.

— Louise Rohr, Chicago

OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Gad Saad | By Tunku Varadarajan

Suicidal Empathy and Western Decline

The threat to flee to Canada if a Republican is elected president has become a trope in American liberal politics, though few ever actually make the move. Gad Saad is about to do it in reverse.

Mr. Saad, 61, is an evolutionary psychologist, a professor of marketing at Concordia University in Montreal. He is the author of “Suicidal Empathy: Dying to Be Kind,” published in May, a cri de coeur against “maladaptively irrational altruism.” On immigration, crime, homelessness, taxation, schooling, environmentalism and transgenderism, he argues, Western elites have embraced policies that allow them to bask in a glow of self-satisfied virtue “while being fully decoupled from the negative consequences.”

In a conversation by Zoom from his home in Montreal, Mr. Saad says he has been driven from Canada by the “orgiastic commitment to diversity, inclusion and equity, or ‘DIE,’ across all Canadian institutions, but especially Canadian universities,” as well as by the unprecedented levels of antisemitism in the country. After Oct. 7, Jews, around 1% of Canada’s population, have been on the receiving end of 70% of all religion-related hate crimes.

Canada’s official reaction takes Mr. Saad’s breath away: “Mark Carney, the prime minister, has proudly proclaimed that Islamic and Canadian values are the

Civilization is destroying itself, says the Canadian scholar who is fleeing Montreal for the U.S.

same,” he says. The mayor of Toronto, Olivia Chow, “repeatedly mentions Islamophobia, because it would be too bigoted to reserve her empathy strictly to the Jews.” Suicidal empathy, he says, “requires that whenever Jews are attacked, Western leaders should urge us to redouble our efforts to defeat Islamophobia. To do otherwise would be mean, racist, bigoted.”

Mr. Saad has also had enough of Canada’s “soul-crushing parasitic taxation,” which has hit him afresh in the form of an exorbitant “departure tax.” The fair market value of his taxable assets will be calculated on the day of his departure from Canada. He will then be deemed to have sold and reacquired these assets, with the difference between the market value and the original purchase price being taxed as capital gains. “No human being in a free society should have their hard-earned money stolen in this manner,” he tweeted. He declines to say how much he expects to pay, but the top rate works out to more than 25% of the appreciation in value.

His move to the U.S., where he will be a professor at the Univer-

sity of Mississippi, will make him a two-time immigrant. Mr. Saad was born a Lebanese Jew. “It’s not an oxymoron, though it sounds like one,” he says. He was 11 when his family fled his native Beirut in 1975, at the outbreak of civil war. “It became impossible to be Jewish in Lebanon.” The Arabic-speaking Saad family, Mizrahi Jews, settled in Quebec.

“You didn’t see a single veil back then,” he says. Today in some Montreal neighborhoods, “50% of the women are veiled,” largely the result of immigration from North Africa, especially Algeria. In seeking to bolster the French language, the province of Quebec encouraged immigration from French-speaking but Muslim Algeria. “Thank God the French language has been protected,” Mr. Saad says. “Never mind the elementary-school teachers wearing the niqab or the influx of Muslims praying on sidewalks, parks and streets.” (In a rare departure from Western policies of cultural accommodation, the Quebec government in April passed a law banning public prayers. “They didn’t say it was in response to Islamic gatherings,” says Mr. Saad. “But there are no Jains blocking the streets, no Seventh-day Adventists, no Orthodox Jews.”)

“Suicidal Empathy,” Mr. Saad’s fifth book, is a sequel to his third, “The Parasitic Mind: How Infectious Ideas Are Killing Common Sense” (2022). That book caught the eye of Elon Musk, who said its message gave him nightmares. Mr. Musk wrote a blurb for “Suicidal Empathy,” and his endorsement made the outspoken Mr. Saad even more reviled on campus.

“The great majority view me as a dangerous ideologue, an evil Jewish professor trying to create a dark, sinister world with no empathy,” he says—never mind that he has nothing against empathy: “You need empathy to serve as the lubricant of our sociality,” he observes. “I’m saying what Aristotle explained to us millennia ago in his ‘Nicomachean Ethics’: everything in moderation. Too little or no empathy makes you a psychopath. Too much empathy, invoked in the wrong situations, toward the wrong targets, is suicidal.”

“The Parasitic Mind” argues that “idea pathogens” have taken root in the Western mind. “In order to fully hijack your ability to reason, I need to parasitize both your cognitive or thinking system, as well as your emotional affective system.” Brainwashing isn’t enough: “To turn you into a willful collaborator, I need to also attack your emotional system. Empathy is an adaptive virtue. Suicidal empathy is the misfiring of this adaptive process.” Empathy, in this view, has both a cognitive component (“I understand your pain”) and an affective one (“I feel your pain”).

The academic literature, he says, differentiates between “sympathy, empathy, compassion, kindness. There are very small, granular differences between each.



KEN FALLIN

Empathy itself has 43 different definitions.” In his book, he treats empathy in a largely colloquial sense, “as both a way of exhibiting sympathy towards someone, as well as a means of putting myself in your shoes.”

For empathy not to misfire in the policy sphere, he contends, we need a “cultural theory of mind,” where “one culture puts itself in the mind of another culture.” The West, he says, lacks such a facility. “We presume that beneficence, compassion, empathy, sympathy or kindness will be processed by this other culture in ways similar or identical to ours.” But other cultures aren’t always in sync with us. Islam, in particular, “hears and sees these virtues and processes them as weakness, weakness, weakness, weakness and weakness.”

Mr. Saad offers a list of parasitic ideas that distort the way we think by denying or playing down objective truth: postmodernism, cultural relativism, social constructivism and “biophobia” (the fear of using biology to explain human behavior). “All of these idea-parasites were spawned on university campuses, in some esoteric humanities department,” he says. “But they’ve broken out of the ‘lab’ and have caused people to abandon their capacity to think properly.” Now “we’re adjudicating what constitutes being a man or a woman, when up until recently tens of billions of people who’d existed on earth were fully able to navigate that conundrum.”

Mr. Saad calls postmodernism “the granddaddy of all parasitic ideas.” That would make the great-granddaddy cultural relativism, the brainchild of German Jewish anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1943). Boas and his acolytes argued, in Mr. Saad’s summary, that “there are no human universals. Every culture has to be judged in its own idiosyncratic reality.” For the West to “impose absolute deontological statements on a culture”—to hold a normatively ethical view of civilization—“is racist. Who are you to

judge female genital mutilation? Honor killings? Child brides?”

To see how this leads to suicidal empathy, consider immigration. “We refuse to argue that some people stemming from certain cultures may be less likely to assimilate into the ethos of the Western tradition,” Mr. Saad says. “That feels non-empathetic. So we end up acting as if 500,000 new immigrants from Waziristan are the same as 500,000 from Denmark.”

Relativism leads to a toxic form of diversity. “People like Justin Trudeau”—Mr. Carney’s predecessor as prime minister—“believe that greater diversity results in only positive outcomes. And that’s just laughably, demonstrably false.” As an example, Mr. Saad says, “there shouldn’t be diversity in the West when it comes to what we do with gays. Gays should be allowed to flourish and live peacefully like anyone else.” And we don’t want a society “where there is a debate and diversity as to whether Jews are cockroaches. But if you import millions of people who think that, then you will get that diversity of thought.”

Nothing sets Mr. Saad off more than postmodernism, “a dreadful idea” that came into vogue in the 1960s thanks to a trio of Frenchman, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault. “Postmodernism purports that there are no objective truths, other than this one objective truth—that there are no objective truths.” That lays the ground for all the other parasitic ideas: “Men are women. Gaza is peaceful. Zionists are terrorists. Up is down.”

Only the West is suicidal in its empathy. Israel is mostly an exception, “because they don’t need anyone’s help to die. You don’t commit suicide when someone’s trying to kill you already.” The Japanese aren’t committing what Mr. Saad calls “civilizational seppuku,” even though the word for ritual suicide is theirs. Neither are the Chinese. “If I’m very self-assured about my cultural identity and heritage, I’m much less likely to succumb to suicidal empathy,” he says. “If you truly believe the

West is built on stolen land, slavery, Islamophobia and genocide, then it makes perfect sense for me to kill my society because it’s so corrupt.”

Aren’t there robust forces in the West pushing back against Western self-destructiveness? Mr. Saad responds by conceding that “the welder, the trucker, and the corrections officer are not suffering from suicidal empathy.” But they aren’t the ones dictating policy: “Those are the intelligentsia: academics, journalists, boards of corporations. It’s not the Navy SEAL who’s suicidally empathetic. It’s Justin Trudeau and the invertebrate castrati, lacking in spine and testicles, who make up our elites.”

In case you haven’t noticed, Mr. Saad can be vivid and blunt. In his book he describes Kamala Harris as a “lobotomized cackler.” On Joe Rogan’s podcast he called the Quebecois accent “an affront to human dignity.” Quebecers accused him, among other things, of “glottophobia”—prejudice against dialects or accents. In a recent tweet, he offered “congrats to two proud Islamic countries, France and Morocco,” for reaching the soccer World Cup quarterfinals.

It’s no surprise that he admires President Trump, perhaps the least suicidally empathetic politician in the Western world. Can Mr. Trump and his administration turn the tables on the suicidal empathizers?

Mr. Saad fears not. “He’s only here for a limited time, right? So, he’s a doorstop, an ephemeral doorstop to the tsunami of suicidal empathy. If there isn’t a longer-lasting change that actually shifts the culture away from regarding suicidal empathy as the highest virtue, then Donald Trump will only have served as a pause button.” While it was “much better, in my view, that Trump won instead of the lobotomized one, there’s too much more that needs to be done.”

Still, the U.S., he says, is in much better shape than Canada, which is in a “Stage 5 state of civilizational seppuku—one higher than Stage 4, which is the worst stage of cancer.” Other countries that are as “doomed” as Canada include Sweden, Norway, the U.K. and Germany. Part of the problem is that the end of the Cold War has meant that Western societies no longer have to affirm their own values: “We no longer believe that we are exemplars, better than other societies.”

How far along is the process of civilizational seppuku? “Let’s say the ceremonial blade is 7 inches long. We already have it in 2 inches deep. Demography is destiny. Go to France, go to Britain, come to Canada. We are starting to disembowel ourselves.”

Mr. Varadarajan, a Journal contributor, is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and at New York University Law School’s Classical Liberal Institute.

Will Washington State Choose Stagnation Over Growth?



CROSS COUNTRY
By Howard Schultz

The Seattle suburb of Kent, home to a Starbucks roasting plant that employs hundreds of people and processes more than 75 million pounds of coffee a year, has long been for me a bellwether of Washington’s state economy.

Recently, however, I’ve been watching a building less than 2 miles away, where a startup, Stoke Space, is developing reusable rockets to launch satellites into orbit.

Stoke plans a major launch this year. Regardless of the outcome, the company’s growth—and that of dozens of other advanced-manufacturing startups in Washington—poses a make-or-break test for state leaders: As Microsoft, Amazon and Meta shed thousands of jobs in the race to build artificial-intelligence data-center capacity, will the state figure out how to cultivate a new wave of entrepreneurs?

Or will Washington, which has been raising taxes on businesses while failing to prepare students for the jobs of the future, lose out to states that are courting entrepreneurs and realigning their education systems to meet employer demand?

Washington used to be a favored destination for entrepreneurs because state leaders understood the vital role businesses play in creating jobs and sustaining a tax base that enables government to operate. Companies like Boeing, Microsoft, McCaw Cellular, Paccar, Amazon, Costco and

Starbucks helped define Washington’s economy and create opportunity across generations.

Lately, however, Gov. Bob Ferguson and the Democrats who rule the state capital have chosen to burden businesses with one tax increase after another. They recently ratcheted up a revenue-based business-and-occupation tax that penalizes growth and profitability. Meanwhile the biennial state operating budget has grown from \$33 billion (\$46 billion in 2025 dollars) in 2013-15 to \$80 billion in 2025-27.

As the Evergreen State throws money at AI data centers, it ignores the builders of tomorrow.

Corporate leaders and small entrepreneurs are concerned about the antibusiness statements and tax proposals of Seattle’s inept new mayor, socialist Katie Wilson. But the problem is bigger than Seattle.

The state’s education system is failing to deliver graduates ready to work in the manufacturing, aerospace and technology businesses that will help reindustrialize the U.S. Only 40% of the state’s 2021 high-school graduates are projected to obtain a post-secondary credential by age 26.

Meanwhile the economics of the rush to build data centers are coming into view. An investigation by ProPublica and the Seattle Times two years ago found that tax breaks for

data centers have grown into one of the state’s largest corporate subsidies. These incentives were justified as engines of rural development, job creation and local investment. Yet lawmakers have weakened hiring requirements, expanded eligibility and extended the benefits without a clear accounting of the results. The jobs remain difficult to quantify, but the subsidies keep flowing to new data centers.

At the same time, a powerful coalition has formed around AI infrastructure: technology companies, organized labor, utilities, construction industries and state governments. Each has legitimate interests. Microsoft and Amazon need computing capacity. Unions see demand for electricians, welders, and skilled trades. Public officials want investment and economic growth. But what happens to everyone who isn’t at the table?

For young people, the debate over AI isn’t abstract. The way states allocate incentives, design workforce systems and support entrepreneurship may decide whether opportunity is broadly shared or not.

The construction jobs and trade careers supported by data-center construction are valuable, but a healthy economy needs to diversify beyond the expansion plans of a few trillion-dollar companies. Long-term prosperity also requires entrepreneurs, small businesses, healthcare innovators, energy and aerospace companies, software startups, manufacturers and founders building the next generation of industries.

It requires investment in people and pathways that connect young

people to skilled trades, technical careers, entrepreneurship and emerging industries. It requires a fairer tax system that doesn’t penalize entrepreneurs while handing out benefits to big tech. It requires collaboration among philanthropy, business, government, education and investors to create opportunities beyond the footprint of a data center.

One innovative idea would be to connect the next generation of builders—the entrepreneurs seeking to re-industrialize America—with young people seeking apprenticeships in a physical space that enables both to realize their ambitions.

Mr. Ferguson seems to see the warning signs. He recently announced the formation of an economic development council. But it’s packed with big-business leaders and other institutional players. Few startup entre-

preneurs are invited to the table.

That’s not surprising. Public policy is increasingly organized around the immediate needs of the largest players in the AI race. Smaller founders compete on a tilted field. Workforce systems increasingly align with AI-industry labor demand. States continue writing checks without fully measuring the return.

We should all be watching Stoke Space, not only to see its first rocket launch. We should be checking whether it and dozens of other companies of the future decide that Washington is the best place for them to grow, creating much-needed jobs. Or will the companies at the vanguard of American reindustrialization pull up stakes and move to states that welcome entrepreneurs?

Mr. Schultz is a former CEO and chairman emeritus of Starbucks.

Notable & Quotable: Mamdani

Adam Lehodey reporting for City Journal, July 9:

The top official in the Zohran Mamdani administration’s Office for International Affairs made plans to meet with Iran’s ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations.

Commissioner Ana María Archila was scheduled to meet with Amir-Saeid Iravani, Iran’s permanent representative to the United Nations . . . on July 7 . . . The meeting between Archila and Iravani was called off af-

ter the State Department . . . met with the Mamdani administration to clarify acceptable conduct. . . .

The development is a continuation of Commissioner Archila and the Mamdani administration’s ongoing use of public resources to advance an agenda that extends well beyond New York City. On April 16, a message . . . was sent to staff within the Mayor’s Office for International Affairs asking them to prioritize diplomatic engagement in part based on whether foreign officials “are . . . in political alignment/leftist.”

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Trump Fires a Federal Election Board

President Trump on Thursday forced out the entire bipartisan leadership of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC), which is his latest flexing of the principle, now endorsed by the Supreme Court in *Trump v. Slaughter*, that executive agencies aren’t constitutionally independent. On the practical implications, however, the partisan rhetoric is ahead of reality.

Democratic Sen. Chuck Schumer, reacting to the firings, accused Mr. Trump of “a brazen attempt to seize control of our elections before a single vote is cast.” Yet voting in America is run by states and localities, and the EAC’s role is appropriately modest. Created in 2002, it hands out grants for election security, last year \$15 million. It publishes a biennial report full of voting statistics. It oversees certification of election equipment to a set of Voluntary Voting System Guidelines.

While some of the EAC’s functions are useful, the November elections would go on even if the agency were hit by an asteroid and vaporized. The agency has four bipartisan seats. Mr. Trump fired two Democrats, Thomas Hicks and Benjamin Hovland. A Republican, Christy McCormick, was “allowed to resign,” news stories say. A fourth seat was vacant. Basic functions can continue under the EAC’s staff. When Mr. Hovland arrived in 2019, the press release said it was “the first time in a decade that the commission has had a full quorum.”

Yet there’s a turducken of ironies nesting in the response to Mr. Trump’s firings. Democrats have sought for years to nationalize election rules in their favor. H.R.1, the bill they pushed under President Biden, would have let the EAC dole out money for recruiting poll workers and running state redistricting commissions. Mr. Trump’s move to assert control of the EAC is a chance for Democrats to repent and embrace

Here’s a chance for Democrats to embrace decentralized elections.

the wisdom of decentralized elections. The last national freakout involving the EAC was in early 2025, when Mr. Trump issued an executive order telling it to add a citizenship check to the “national mail voter registration form.” This was blocked by the courts.

Now that Mr. Trump has fired all the commissioners, can he even make a second attempt? Or does he have to wait until the Senate confirms replacement commissioners? Three EAC members are required for major action, including a Democrat.

Mr. Trump’s cleanout of the EAC is probably the first of many such firings after *Slaughter*. That makes this a ripe moment for lawmakers to reconsider all of the authority they spent decades handing to Washington’s alphabet soup of “independent” agencies. “Would Congress have delegated so much power,” as Justice Neil Gorsuch asked in his *Slaughter* concurrence, “had it known that the President would come to control them?”

If Democrats decide they want to pare back the federal bureaucracy, they’ll find many willing Republicans. The details might vary agency by agency, but maybe the EAC’s work could be done by, say, the National Association of Secretaries of State. Yet many Democrats are too busy instead imagining what a President Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez could do with the same power if they win in 2028.

Meantime, states and counties are busy with the actual work of making the midterm elections happen. Mr. Trump is probably willing to do whatever he can to help Republicans keep Congress in November. At every twitch, Democrats will cry havoc. Both the right and the left are happy to cast doubt on elections, when it suits them. The comforting reality is that the ballots are controlled by thousands of different state and local officials.

California Is High on Illegal Pot

More than 63,000 pounds. That’s how much illegal marijuana California Gov. Gavin Newsom said on Wednesday that law enforcement officials have seized over the past three months, carrying a market value of \$104 million. Wait, didn’t Mr. Newsom say legalizing pot would eliminate the black market?

Yes, he did. It was one of many doubtful promises Mr. Newsom and other progressives made to convince voters to legalize the drug. In 2016 Californians approved a ballot initiative to permit the recreational use and sale of weed. The state was then supposed to set up a comprehensive scheme to license, regulate and tax the drug.

“We moved towards legalization to get people into the daylight and into the sunshine of a regulated environment,” Mr. Newsom said in 2017. “There is no more black market.” He needs to get out more. The black market continues to thrive, especially in the state’s rural areas where transnational gangs have used the cover of legalization to grow weed.

Some of California’s illicit harvest is sold on the street in the state at lower prices than in legal dispensaries. (Marijuana remains illegal under federal law.) Much is also exported to places with less permissive laws. California

marijuana is known worldwide for its high potency, and the United Kingdom has been seizing suitcases full of the stuff smuggled in on planes by gangs.

Licensed pot businesses also continue to complain that they are being undercut by illegal operators. This prompted Democrats in Sacramento last year to cut taxes on the industry. Mr. Newsom said the tax cut would promote “the long-term success of the legal industry.” Lo, progressives turn out to be supply-siders when the supply they want is reefer.

The tax cut also hasn’t snuffed out the black market, as evidenced by the Governor’s press release this week. It notes that state and local law enforcement have in the last three months eradicated nearly 90,000 cannabis plants, confiscated 17 firearms and made 24 arrests at illegal cannabis sites.

Since 2022, “the state has seized and destroyed more than 841,000 pounds of illicit cannabis valued at more than \$1.3 billion,” Mr. Newsom’s office said. Some has been grown using toxic chemicals that “are harmful to fish and wildlife and the habitats they depend on to survive, and they’re a threat to consumers,” explained the state fish and wildlife director.

Where are the Sierra Club protesters when you need them?

waiver process to lift Iran sanctions and said the memorandum of understanding with Iran didn’t need Congress’s approval despite the language of the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act. It could try a similar maneuver with the F-35, but is it worth the political lift?

Rewarding Erdogan isn’t enough reason for Trump to stiff Congress.

Republican Sens. Jim Risch (Idaho), Tom Cotton (Ark.), James Lankford (Okla.), Lindsey Graham (S.C.), Ted Cruz (Texas) and John Cornyn (Texas) have all raised concerns and urged caution. So have Democrats. Rewarding Mr. Erdogan isn’t a compelling enough need to overcome the defense issue.

Mr. Erdogan said he has been promised the jets, but if he doesn’t dump his Russian system, Mr. Trump may not be able to deliver. Even if the sale can get past Congress, delivery could take until the next Administration, which may have no interest in subverting the law for Mr. Erdogan as he jails domestic opponents.

Mr. Trump keeps giving the Turkish strongman credit for not entering the Iran war to attack Israel, even though Mr. Trump says Mr. Erdogan wanted to. One would think that expressing interest in fighting a U.S. wartime ally on behalf of Iran would be disqualifying to receive high-end U.S. fighter jets.

The President also lauds Mr. Erdogan for backing the rebels who overthrew Syria’s Bashar al-Assad. But those rebels faced little resistance on their late 2024 offensive to seize power. Israel had already removed the Syrian regime’s Hezbollah defenders from the equation.

Turkey remains a patron of Hamas and Hezbollah and is moving arms into the new Syria, for which Mr. Trump’s praise may be premature. The Erdogan regime’s aggressive rhetoric is matched by its military deployments across the region, so arming it with F-35s is a head-scratcher. But if Mr. Trump wants to sell Turkey the jets so badly, at least have it play by the rules and surrender its Russian system.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

What Greenspan’s Legacy Might Have Been

Regarding your editorial “The Myth of the ‘Maestro’ ” (June 23): The death of former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan invites reflection on one of the great ironies in modern economic history. Long before he became the nation’s chief central banker, Greenspan authored an insightful 1966 essay, “Gold and Economic Freedom,” in which he identified the Federal Reserve’s easy-money policies as the primary cause of the unsustainable stock market boom of the 1920s.

Greenspan argued that central bank credit expansion and artificially low interest rates fueled speculative excesses that inevitably ended in the Great Depression. He also explained that the Fed enables chronic federal deficit spending by creating money and suppressing interest rates below market levels, allowing politicians to finance government expansion with-

out immediately imposing the full cost on taxpayers.

Greenspan contended that a gold-backed monetary system would restrain government spending, prevent reckless money creation and largely eliminate the destructive boom-bust cycle that has plagued modern economies. Gold, he wrote, protects citizens from the confiscation of wealth through inflation.

Ironically, as Fed chairman, Greenspan pursued many of the same policies he once criticized. His tenure was marked by easy money and below-market interest rates that contributed to the dot-com bust, followed by the housing bubble. Had Greenspan remained faithful to the principles he articulated in 1966, his legacy might have been far different.

MURRAY SABRIN
Naples, Fla.

Trump, Balogun and a Suspended Red Card

The U.S. soccer team was clearly victimized by the red card assessed to Folarin Balogun (“Donald Trump, World Cup Referee,” Review & Outlook, July 7). A yellow card would have been the appropriate decision, but heinous calls are implicit in major sporting events, perhaps nowhere more so than the World Cup. The U.S. team would have managed through Mr. Balogun’s absence, perhaps spectacularly, but now we’ll never know.

Like a helicopter parent leaning into a middle-school teacher to let their child submit a project after a deadline, President Trump had to insinuate himself into the controversy. I doubt he ever considered not intervening, and anyone who thinks his conversation with FIFA had no effect on the reversal decision is naive. Irre-

sistible corruption met immovable dissolution. As such, the U.S. team was deprived of the opportunity to rise to the occasion in epic fashion as Americans have so frequently done.

BRADFORD MILLER
Murfreesboro, Tenn.

The referee who issued the red card to U.S. striker Folarin Balogun ought to have his ethics questioned. There was no severe offense by Mr. Balogun that breached the laws of the game. On the other hand, Cristiano Ronaldo shouldn’t have had his red card suspended. The suspension of his red card was pure politics. The suspension of the red card issued to Mr. Balogun was common sense.

PETER MCCARTHY
Scarsdale, N.Y.

Cuba’s Market Lesson for American Socialists

In his op-ed “Decades Late, Cuba Approves Serious Market Reforms” (July 8), Roberto Gonzalez succinctly describes Cuba’s effort to break free from its more than six decades of “disastrous economic policies of the socialist experiment.” This should be mandatory reading for all students taking any economics course.

Mr. Gonzalez makes a clear distinction between economic and political reform. His point is that, over time, economic prosperity often brings po-

litical pluralism. We can look at one-party states in America—California leads the pack, but my state of Massachusetts is firmly blue—and see glimpses of efforts to break out of the one-party ruling-class pattern. The timeline unfortunately is long.

CHARLES H. GESSNER
Marblehead, Mass.

In his discussion of Cuban reforms, Mr. Gonzalez mentions Deng Xiaoping’s willingness to leave Mao’s religious dedication to Marxist failure and embrace some capitalism. Deng’s philosophy was to let some people get rich first, so that they can help others get rich later, and eventually achieve “common prosperity.” Our U.S. socialists would never accept the rich as a source of prosperity since it can only be through government overlords that we succeed.

JOE BOCCUZZI
Tomball, Texas

Trump’s Wealth Opportunity

Adam Michel (“The Trouble With the Trump Accounts,” op-ed, June 23) proposes changes that would make parental Trump account contributions tax-advantaged and reduce restrictions on how funds in the accounts can be used. These would be welcome changes, but it would be unfortunate if these criticisms prevent anyone from using these accounts as intended.

Next time your compensation is up for reconsideration, ask for maximum Trump account contributions for your kids. Employers can make tax-deductible contributions up to \$2,500 per child per year, and when the kids turn 18 they can convert the accounts to IRAs at their own tax rates, which will likely be low because 18-year-olds don’t have much income.

Then the power of compound returns will grow it into a huge after-tax retirement nest egg. This is a wealth-building opportunity for the next generation, even without a tax advantage for parental contributions.

PHIL KERPEN
Washington

The Cure for a Lonely Drive

Patrick Henry writes that he is reminded of why he always sits in the front seat of a taxi—so he can talk to the driver (“My Cab Driver and America,” Letters, July 7). I am reminded of why I never hail a Waymo, the driverless taxis on the streets of San Francisco. There’s no one to talk to.

PHILIPPA NEWFIELD
San Francisco

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



“And with climate change, you’ll be getting beachfront property in just a couple of years.”

Opinion

SpaceX, Musk are the 'dumb money' problem

Must what goes up also come down?

Bethany McLean

The recent initial public offering for SpaceX was the biggest stock sale the world has ever seen, with shares priced as if life on Mars were a sure thing. The company's debt, on the other hand, is priced as if it were junk. Is this what F. Scott Fitzgerald meant when, nearly a century ago, he wrote, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function?" How could the same company simultaneously be viewed as a top-tier investment and something that might not be able to pay its bills?

The answer starts with Wall Street's long-held distinction between "smart money" and "dumb money." In that view, the roughly \$2 trillion value that the stock market is affording SpaceX — about the same as Amazon's value, and more than JP Morgan's and Exxon Mobil's combined — is being set by naïve investors who think Elon Musk's promises will all miraculously be realized. The debt, on the other hand, is being priced by seasoned investors, the ones who understand that profits actually have to be earned, and who are rightly skeptical of Mr. Musk's grand pronouncements. The stock market tends to let big dreams, bold narratives and the men (they are mostly men) who can sell them. So when Mr. Musk says humanity is going to Mars, these equity investors see a civilization in space, not a black hole of costly delusions. There is a lot of logic to their approach: SpaceX's offering documents claim the size of the company's market is \$28.5 trillion, nearly as large as the entire United States economy. Mr. Musk does have an uncanny ability to bend the world in his direction. If his company can make good on even a fraction of the market it claims, then SpaceX's valuation of more than 100 times sales — almost 50 percent richer than the closest contender — might not be extreme.

And some of those investors are just gambling. They don't actually care about the company's long-term prospects; they're simply placing a bet that they can cash out before anyone else catches on. In addition, the company sold just under 5 percent of its shares, a tenth of what the average public company sells. That creates a supply-and-demand imbalance that will help to keep share prices high. SpaceX's spot in the Nasdaq 100 index forces passive funds that track the index to buy in, straining that imbalance even further. So the equity investors' optimism has a structural support. Not incidentally, it also has the support of Wall Street analysts, 80 percent of whom on Tuesday issued "buy" ratings. Then again, their firms stand to make money when SpaceX sells additional securities. Debt investors, on the other hand, are supposed to be skeptics. Their job is to look at the numbers, because belief doesn't pay the bills. Unlike equity investors, they don't get paid with Mr. Musk's deliveries on his promise to "extend the light of consciousness to the stars." They succeed only if the company pays

its debts. Well, promptly after going public, SpaceX issued \$25 billion in new debt. Credit rating agencies gave the bonds the lowest investment grade rating possible, meaning the company was viable but much higher risk than, say, Alphabet. The bonds promptly plunged in value. Traders told Bloomberg they couldn't recall another deal where prices sank that quickly.

Debt investors are often the first to see problems in shaky companies. Long before Enron's share price started to plunge, its debt investors were demanding sharply higher prices for tools that could insure against a bankruptcy. Their fears were realized in what was at the time the biggest bankruptcy in U.S. history. And in the summer of 2007, while the stocks of investment banks like Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers were still near their highs, credit spreads for AAA-rated mortgage bonds began to blow out, the first tremors of what by the next year would become a global financial crisis.

Something similar happened at WeWork before it went public. In 2019, SoftBank invested \$2.5 billion, insisting WeWork was a world-transforming technology company, even as the bond market saw a cash-burning real-estate

The quality of a company's management is often the decisive variable.

business facing serious risks. Again, the bond market asked the right questions: Within a few years the company had filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. But the bond market's skepticism isn't always correct. Sometimes the stock market's irrational beliefs pay off. In 2009, Amazon's bonds plunged in value amid widespread skepticism that the company could survive, given its negative cash flow and its debt load. Amazon's stock, which had already begun to decline, followed the bond market's cue and plunged too, hitting a low of \$6 in 2001. If you had invested \$10,000 at that point, you'd have almost a half a million dollars today.

More pointedly, take Tesla. It issued \$1.8 billion of high-yield bonds in 2017; by March 2018, its high-yield debt was trading around 87.5 cents on the dollar, a sign of skepticism that the company could repay the money. Since that time, its stock has gone up about twentyfold.

Neither equity nor debt investors have a monopoly on truth, especially not when a business is, like SpaceX, a coin still spinning in the air. The future hasn't declared itself yet. But a few simple lessons help narrow the possibilities.

One is that the more debt a company has, the more risk there is. By that measure, SpaceX is dangerous, now and for the foreseeable future. The Morgan Stanley analyst Adam Jones just predicted that to fund its operations, SpaceX will have to raise \$84 billion a year from 2027 to 2034.

Another lesson, courtesy of Enron, is that fraud isn't good! A third is that you can't outrun a flawed business model. WeWork had no term lease on its headquarters, but later found out that it was a short-term rental revenue. Enron had speculative businesses that were losing money, but also a trading business that

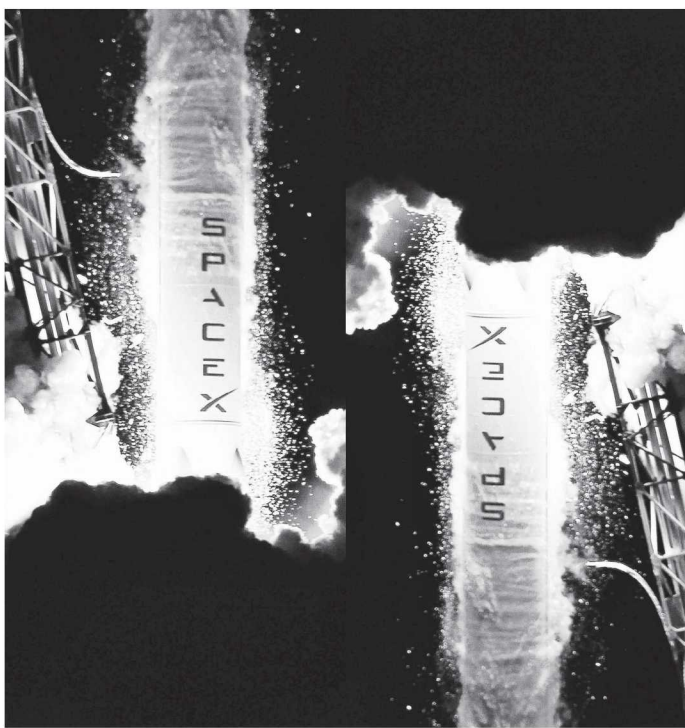


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depended on the confidence of the capital markets. SpaceX? Well, it's an amalgamation of a very profitable business (Starlink), a business that the U.S. government relies on (SpaceX) and a money pit with an uncertain future (xAI). There isn't much clarity.

Probably the most important lesson, though, is that the quality of a company's management is the decisive variable. Leaders need not just the ability to sell big promises — to make people believe — but also the ability to deliver on those promises. Despite his grand words, Adam Neumann couldn't make WeWork into more than a purveyor of office space, while Jeff Bezos was able to seize opportunities others didn't see to make Amazon into far more than a book seller.

As for Mr. Musk: Doubters have argued for years that he's a just modern-day P.T. Barnum, a showman who never really delivers on his promises, whether those are solar roofs, self-driving cars or Optimus robots. But there's no denying that he's done big things. He's built cars, launched rockets and created a global telecommunications company. Skeptics have been waiting for years for the thing that brings it all crashing down. They're still waiting.

Fitzgerald wrote his famous line not in a work of fiction, but in an autobiographical essay called "The Crack-Up," about his attempts to manage his own mental descent. Although most of us remember only the start of the quotation, there's a second line: "One should, for example,

be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise." As long as something is still in the process of becoming, the belief itself can change the outcome, and that's no doubt why Mr. Musk promises as much as he does. As long as he can keep his company's equity afloat, he can keep raising money and delay the day of reckoning it's debt requires.

The hardest thing — for investors as much as for novelists — is resisting the urge to choose between the two possible futures before the coin lands. For now, the two opposed ideas exist simultaneously.

BETHANY MCLEAN is a financial journalist and the co-author of "The Smartest Guys in the Room."

Can the United States hold on?

America could go the way of Byzantium and the Abbasids.

Nicholas Kristof

America's 250th birthday party seemed to me as divisive, troubled and angsty as the nation itself. The evacuation of crowds from the Washington Mall because of extreme weather captured the moment. President Trump tries to deny and deny natural forces of climate change even as they shape lives. Under Trump, America is doubling down on fossil fuels and allowing China to dominate green energy technologies that will be central to the 21st-century economy. Myopia squared and not a good omen.

In that sense, the unsettled birthday makes me ponder the fates of some places I've visited over the years. Kaifeng is today a sleepy Chinese city on the Yellow River, but a millennium ago it was probably the most important place in the world. It was then China's capital and was crowded with a population of about one million. London's population was then about 15,000.

Other contenders for global leadership in the year 1000 were the Byzantine Empire based in Constantinople, the Abbasid caliphate based in Baghdad and the Ghaznavid Empire in West Asia, headquartered in what is now Ghazni, Afghanistan. None were able to adapt and preserve themselves.

So I wonder: Can the United States

hold on? Will the United States still be vibrant on its 500th birthday? Or will we go the way of Byzantium and the Abbasids?

Our vulnerabilities are obvious, with two-thirds of Americans saying we're "not ready seriously off on our own track." I worry in particular that we are undermining the tripartite approach that has made the United States dominant, starting with heavy investments in human capital such as education. The United States was a world leader in mass education in the 19th and 20th centuries, but we now rank ninth in reading, 16th in science and 34th in math, according to the PISA global ranking of student test scores.

Human capital is also about our health and well-being, and that likewise is discouraging: The United States now ranks 61st in life expectancy globally, according to the World Bank.

A second prong of America's growth path was the welcome we (inconsistently and imperfectly) at times offered immigrants. When my father was on a ship in New York Harbor, arriving as a refugee in 1952, a Boston woman next to him on the deck welcomed him as a "young American." He was awed that he — a refugee who couldn't even speak English — was being hailed as an American before he even set foot on American soil.

For now, that welcome mat has mostly been removed (except perhaps for white refugees from South Africa). The number of foreign graduate students studying at American universities last fall fell 12 percent from the year before, and further declines are expected.

The third element of America's growth formula — a reliance on free markets — remains largely intact, at least by inter-

national standards. But inequality appears to have soared since 1980, and there's evidence that while some inequality is necessary for growth, too much dampens it. The dollar remains overwhelmingly the world's currency but has weakened, and its supremacy is being challenged at the edges.

And it's more than that. "What do we mean by the Revolution?" John Adams asked in an 1815 letter to Thomas Jefferson. He answered his own question, saying that the revolution was not a war but rather something that unfolded "in the minds of the people."

Yes! True, our animating ideas — of equality of opportunity — of openness to immigration — were in part rhetorical flourishes, for they don't explain Jim Crow, the Chinese Exclusion Acts or

tight curbs on Jewish immigration. But these ideas were aspirational, and over the centuries they inspired real progress. Now I fear we've retreated even from the aspirations.

As I see it, we've lost two wars in the past half-dozen years — one against the Afghan Taliban and one against Iran just this year — not to mention last year losing a trade war with China. We may be retreating from NATO and from efforts to buttress Taiwan.

Our position — divided at home and weakening abroad — is reminiscent of the decline of great powers in the past, not just the Abbasids and Ghaznavids but also Spain in 1588 and Britain in the late 19th century.

Still, for all the uncertainties about the country's trajectory, I think I'm a bit

more optimistic than many of my fellow Americans.

Maybe that's because my wife and I were in small-town America — Ashland, Ore., for a theater festival — on July 4. Ashland's annual Independence Day parade was an uplifting celebration that included free American flags and Popsicles, a military flyover and parade participants calling for universal health care and welcoming immigrants. Far from the toxicity of Washington, D.C., it captured all the contradictions and beauty of the country.

My very guarded optimism about America's long-run prospects is based on three factors: First, we appear to have maintained an edge (partly by importing scientists) in technology, which since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution has been a driver of progress and global leadership. Then it was the steam engine and spinning jenny. Now it is artificial intelligence, materials science and biotechnology. And our technological sophistication pairs well with the world's deepest financial markets, and far from stocks accounting for roughly two-thirds of global stock value, compared with less than 30 percent in 1988.

Second, other nations have their own problems. America's principal competitor for now is China, which has enormous strengths but also is aging fast and declining in population and is led by an aging dictator.

Third, prophecies of American decline are nothing new. "My hopes of the long continuance of this Union are extinct," John Quincy Adams wrote in 1834, during a crisis in South Carolina. In the 1980s and '90s, when I was a foreign correspondent in Asia, it was "Japan as No. 1," and in the 2000s experts debated in which year China's economy would



MAN CALLED FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

surpass America's. Now some believe that may never happen. And the United States has not seen the collapse of population growth that many other industrial countries have. Its more youthful population, partly because of immigration, confers vitality and vigor.

So I don't believe that our decline is inevitable. But much will depend on whether we have the wisdom to revert to our proven strategy of investing in human capital, welcoming immigrants and embracing free markets against a backdrop of some equality.

Onward to the 500th!



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‘Without fear and without favour’

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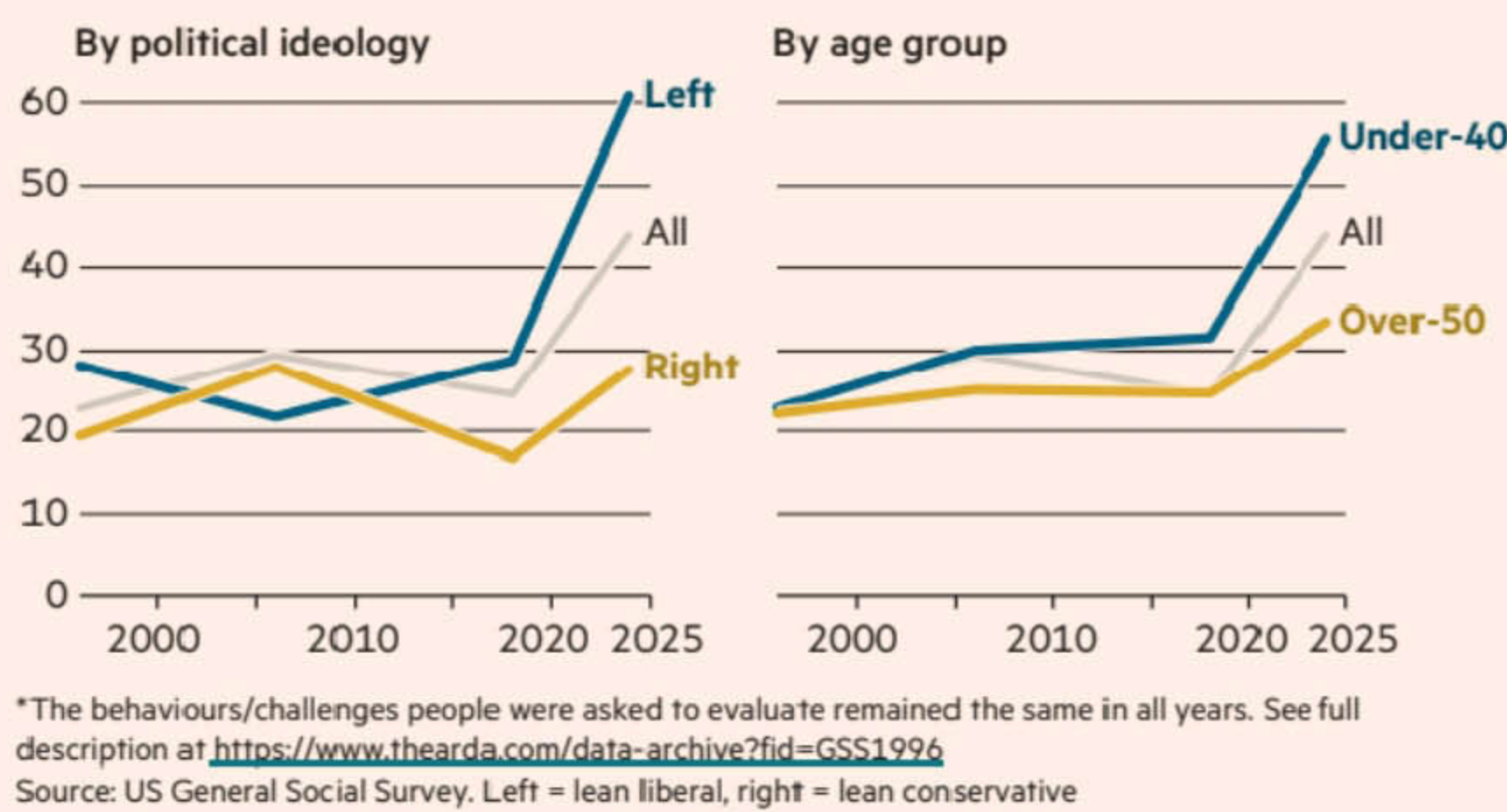
Opinion Data Points

What’s really going on with mental health around the world?

John Burn-Murdoch

Young people and progressives have become much more likely to interpret day-to-day challenges as mental health problems

% of each group who believe that ‘sometimes feeling worried, a little sad, or having trouble sleeping at night...’ is a sign of poor mental health*



One of the biggest stories of the past decade has been worsening mental health among young adults. Countries across the globe have seen a marked rise in reports and diagnoses of conditions such as anxiety, autism and ADHD and a steep rise in the share who report a disability.

I want to be clear that this is a phenomenon I take very seriously. The rise in young people’s psychological distress is certainly real – it shows up most unambiguously and alarmingly in sharply rising rates of hospitalisation for self-harm among teenage girls and young women.

But this acute and narrow signal – self-harm is the extreme end of the spectrum – is where the high-quality data ends.

Over several months I’ve been digging into what different measures of mental health tell us about the picture in different countries, contexts and communities. It is anything but clear, hampering the ability of policymakers and society more broadly to fully understand, let alone respond to, these shifts.

In some countries the share of young people who report a long-term illness has risen, while their self-reported health overall has remained unchanged; in others we see the opposite. A study published last week finds similarly conflicting patterns: it depends on the question asked. Christoph Henking and Ben Baumberg Geiger found that while there has been a steep rise in the share of young Britons reporting a mental illness, the share of people who say a mental health problem limits their day-to-day functioning has barely budged.

They propose a range of hypotheses for what’s going on. One I find particularly interesting is “systems medicalisation” – the idea that outdated and inflexible frameworks in workplaces and the education and welfare systems force those with *any* level of need, whether debilitating or distracting, permanent or fluctuating, into a binary of “disabled” or “not disabled”.

More broadly, the idea that societies are struggling to interpret the results of reduced stigma and increased openness about mental health conditions finds strong support in the data.

One of the most striking patterns – which shows up in multiple countries

– is that different groups of people label the same behaviour or symptoms very differently, and this has seen a rapid change over the past decade. In both the UK and the US, the rise in reports of mental health problems has been much higher in young people than old, and in those on the political left than the right, but subtle variations in how questions are worded cause those gaps to disappear.

Perhaps the most informative piece of evidence here is that when asked if they would consider someone experiencing typical fluctuations in mood (described as broad happiness but occasional moments of worry, frustration or loss of confidence) as having a mental illness, more than half of young Americans say yes, up from just a fifth 15 years ago. Older people’s views show no such change.

This shift in how people conceptualise mental health could be seen as a positive – the hard-won result of years of campaigning to reduce stigma and raise awareness and inclusivity – but if it is happening more among some groups than others, it will distort our sense of what is really getting worse and for whom.

It’s important to note, too, that this doesn’t mean the rise in reported mental health problems is a mirage. In addition to concrete evidence of self-harm, another defensible reading of the data is that older and more ideologically conservative groups are also struggling – they’re just disinclined to label these struggles as mental health problems. Perhaps mental health has worsened only for the young and progressive; perhaps it has worsened for everyone but only some label it in these terms; perhaps it has not changed much at all for most, but the way we talk about it has; or perhaps the shifts in how we conceptualise our mental health even *cause* it to change.

The point is that inconsistent measures and a change in how some but not all people interpret the concept mean the state of young people’s mental health is far less clear than we think. For the sake of everyone – from the individuals in most critical need to worried parents and policymakers – we need a push for much better and more precise measures of psychological difficulties.

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Nato’s carnival of Trumpian caprice

Summits have become an exercise in managing an erratic US president

Donald Trump’s cheerleaders have long trumpeted his unpredictability as the leitmotif of his leadership, if not his strategic superpower. So they will surely be cock-a-hoop about the fusillade of policy U-turns, geographical malapropisms, abuse of US allies and general whimsy that characterised his opening contributions to this week’s Nato summit in Ankara.

The US president seemed to arrive in a terrible mood. Nato’s European leaders had hoped the summit could skirt yet another public bust-up with America, avoid further undermining the alliance’s unity and focus on how to shore it up at a time of acute uncertainty. On their minds was how to reimagine and re-equip it for war in the 21st century. Instead they were treated to

a vintage carnival of Trumpian caprice.

He berated Europe’s leaders over their failure to support his war in Iran, which flared back into life during the summit. He appeared to confuse Japan with Iran, claiming that the “Islamic republic of Japan” had fired 111 missiles at the USS Abraham Lincoln. He threatened to cut off trade relations with Spain, lambasting it as a “wasted cause” and “a terrible partner in Nato”. (It is a laggard in trying to meet the alliance’s target of spending 5 per cent of GDP on defence and resilience by 2035.)

More seriously, and worryingly, for the alliance, Trump returned to his fixation that Greenland should be part of the US, drawing a steely response from Denmark that Greenland is not for sale. All in all, for Chinese and Russian diplomats watching from afar, this was hardly a display to inspire awe over the state of the alliance that guaranteed peace in most of Europe after 1945.

There was a second – and for the Europeans, happier – chapter to the

summit. Trump is said to have been more emollient in private. He delivered some of the most pro-Ukrainian remarks of his presidency, saying he was ready to license Kyiv to co-produce the Patriot interceptor missiles critical to fending off Russian ballistic missiles. Before Trump left he made clear the US would stay in the alliance – though it is a sign of how bleak the outlook has been that such a declaration was not a given.

Nato officials also drew heart from announcements that suggest its strategy of taking over more of the burden from America is bearing fruit. These include the joint purchase of surveillance and transport aircraft. These deals will help to reduce Nato’s dependence on US kit and are a positive sign of Europe beginning to step up procurement initiatives. Germany’s announcement that it will buy Tomahawk missiles from the US is similarly to be welcomed. Washington had said earlier this year it was scrapping plans to deploy a battalion equipped with them to Germany.

For Chinese and Russian diplomats watching from afar, this was hardly a display to inspire awe over the state of the alliance

These are steps forward for Europe as it seeks to take on greater responsibility for its defence. But US allies have learnt not to set too much store by Trump’s remarks. No one could be surprised if he turns on Ukraine next week and disowns his remarks on Patriots.

The only Nato member that had a reason to be truly happy this week was the host, Turkey. Trump suggested he would overturn his 2019 ban on Turkey buying F-35 fighter jets. He added the US would lift sanctions that were imposed on Turkey the following year. For Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey’s autocratic president, who has just overseen a fresh crackdown on his opponents, this was a tremendous result.

For Nato’s European leaders, the worst scenario – Trump walking out – was avoided. But the battle to transform the alliance has barely begun. Broadly their policy is to indulge Trump, and keep their misgivings to themselves. No wonder there is a lukewarm appetite for a leader summit next year.

Letters

Golden visas would send the wrong message about Britain

The proposal to revive a “golden visa” scheme (“Ministers split over ‘golden visa’ to woo super-rich”, Report, June 27) sends precisely the wrong message: that while everyone else is expected to play by the rules, the super-rich should be offered a privileged route to residency and citizenship.

I write as someone who came to Britain mid-career, and built a considerable amount of wealth here. We chose to live, invest and raise our family in this country because of its opportunity, institutions and security, not because we were offered a bespoke

deal. In fact, we even turned down the opportunity to take advantage of non-dom rules that would have (inappropriately, in my view) legally allowed us to pay less in UK taxes – because we wanted to invest in the future of this country, by paying our fair share of taxes.

Recent polling by Patriotic Millionaires UK found that 88 per cent of UK millionaires are proud to live in this country. Those who choose to make Britain their home can build their lives within the same legal framework that applies to everyone

else. Britain does not need a separate immigration system for those wealthy enough to write a large cheque.

Creating special pathways for the ultra-wealthy would send the message that while everyone else is expected to shoulder rising costs and contribute their fair share, those with the deepest pockets can sidestep the responsibilities that come with living in Britain. Ministers should also be wary of allowing firms – such as the sponsors of this policy, Mishcon de Reya – that stand to profit from a revived investor visa scheme, to

shape the case for bringing it back.

If the government wants to attract investment from those considering making Britain their home, it should instead focus on ensuring the UK remains the best place to build businesses and create jobs, rather than resurrecting a scheme previously abandoned over concerns about corruption. The UK should remain open to talent, but everyone should play by the same rules. To me, that is the essence of patriotism.

Tim Stumpff
London W3, UK

What the Declaration of Rights left unsaid

Simon Schama’s brilliant reflection on the 250th anniversary of American independence rightly celebrates the intellectual lineage of liberty, but it overlooks a critical fork in the road of economic history (FT Magazine, July 4).

When Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, he famously substituted John Locke’s “property” with “the pursuit of happiness”. In doing so, he left out the far more precise formulation penned weeks earlier by George Mason in the Virginia Declaration of Rights: the inherent right to “the means of acquiring and possessing property”. Crucially, this explicit right was entirely absent from the document adopted on July 4.

To my knowledge, Mason’s Virginia text was the very first constitutional document to specify the universal right of access to the means to become an owner of productive property. This implies that a just society must ensure every citizen has the structural opportunity to become an owner of capital – productive property – and derive an independent income from it.

Universal access to a sound, stable money and credit system that connects every citizen to ownership of new capital formation and production would provide the economic equivalent of the vote in a political democracy. Had Mason’s language been adopted in Philadelphia 250 years ago, the trajectory of America’s economy and political system towards concentrated wealth and power might look entirely different.

Dawn Kurland Brohawn
Director of Communications,
Center for Economic and Social Justice,
Arlington, Virginia, US

Rock ‘n’ roll, not jazz, was America’s greatest export

Had I been born around the time of Robert Shrimpsley, I, too, might not have mentioned the enormous impact that American rock ‘n’ roll music had on Britain, and on other countries besides, such as Australia (“What has America ever done for us?” FT Magazine, July 4).

Growing up in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the young simply could not get enough of it. By the mid-60s and into the 1970s, rock music was much more of a mixed western effort, with British and other top acts even taking the music back to America on their tours and playing to packed stadiums. While I agree that jazz was indeed a great American artistic gift to the world, it did not have quite the same revolutionary effect upon our culture as rock ‘n’ roll.

John Webster
Aldershot, UK



Rock ‘n’ roll was born in the 1950s, with Elvis Presley at its vanguard

The data centre boom needs a reality check

IT companies are in a mad rush to set up hyperscale data centres wherever possible (“Americans lead AI data centre backlash, global poll finds”, FT.com, June 4). Some analysts have projected investments of the order of \$7.6tn to be made on data centres between now and 2031.

As a result of local resistance in the US, Google and others are shifting operations to developing countries like India where environmental regulation is fragile, data sovereignty laws are inadequate and crony capitalism is rampant. In India, as a result of huge subsidies on water, electricity and land, coupled with liberal tax subventions, taxpayers and land losers are going to subsidise companies promoting data centres. In India, accurate information on adverse environmental implications of data centres is yet to reach the people. Once they become aware of it, they are going to oppose data centre projects vehemently. Already, some people have filed cases against a few data centre projects, contesting summary environmental approvals given without public consultation.

A centralised hyperscale data centre with a capacity of 1-1.5GW consumes between 24mn and 36mn kilowatt-hours of electricity and between 120mn and 180mn litres of water each day. Hyperscale data centres being set up near Visakhapatnam (India), which is located in a water-scarce area, have displaced small landholders and are damaging the environment. Is that model sustainable in the long run?

A growing body of research suggests that the present centralised model of data processing will soon become outdated, overtaken by more decentralised hybrid edge-cloud technologies that reduce electricity and water use by 70 per cent. One should

not therefore be surprised if even those hybrid models yield place to more decentralised models in the coming decade.

In other words, hyperscale data centres being set up globally at present may soon turn out to be museum pieces, the huge investments made on them becoming infructuous. If it happens, the investment bubble will burst sooner than thought, causing widespread economic distress.

The fundamental question we should therefore ask at this juncture is, “is this mad rush prudent?”

EAS Sarma
Former secretary to the government of
India, Visakhapatnam, India

Trump’s freedom from constraint has appeal

I’d already started reading Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan’s book *Regime Change: Inside the Imperial Presidency of Donald Trump*, and found Edward Luce’s review “Inside the court of America’s new king” (Books, Life & Arts, June 27) interesting, educational and the cause of lengthy and uncomfortable reflection.

I already knew President Trump believes his actions are limited only by his “own morality” (“Trump and Emerson – great minds thinking alike?”, Letters, May 23). Having read both the book and the review, I feel that he, possibly uniquely, exercises complete autonomy in his own life, apparently unrestrained and without consequence. I wonder if it is this that is the basis of his status.

To my chagrin, I realise that even I don’t regard this Midas-like quality negatively.

Louis Clearkin
Oxton, Wirral, UK

Nato should follow the Madonna model

Ludovic Hunter-Tilney’s review of Madonna’s Confessions II (Life & Arts, July 2) accurately detects a “sense of purpose” running through the album. Having attended its London launch party in North Greenwich, I can vouch for it. I was struck by Madonna’s ability to draw fans of every age and background into one room; proof, if any were needed, that her purpose is as much about unity as reinvention.

It reminded me of the claim made in 2008 by the defence analyst Dr Peter van Ham, who argued in the Nato Review that the alliance should follow the “Madonna-curve” and reinvent itself as boldly and regularly as the singer has, or else risk fading into irrelevance. The scenes in North Greenwich were a reminder that reinvention, when done with conviction, still pays dividends. Nato might do well to take note.

Cameron Finlay
Thames Ditton, Surrey, UK

University matters – but so does timing

Jo Ellison’s column “Why bother with university” (Life & Arts, June 6) resonated with me, as I officially graduated from HEC Paris business school last weekend, at the age of 51.

Among the vast insights I gained during my global executive masters in management, the core takeaway was clear: the question is not whether higher education is worthless, but rather when it should be undertaken.

My experience of executive education has shown me its value. Returning to study after gaining professional experience means learning alongside peers from diverse backgrounds while challenging long-held assumptions.

Nonetheless, I do concur that defining the exact “when” may not be easy. For me, the time came when I needed a new challenge, a boost in confidence and validation that my professional experience had real value.

When it comes to AI, I agree that it “doesn’t make higher education worthless” either, and that it’s just a matter of refocusing, “a need to recalibrate”, as Ellison says.

My thesis explored how AI could foster and support entrepreneurship and, while this sounds obvious, the company founders I interviewed all stated that the human role will still prevail. AI is not yet at a stage where it can replace leadership, conflict resolution, advocacy, and all the nuanced areas where human input remains essential. I am convinced that these topics will become the new centres of gravity in education.

As stated by Jamais Cascio, “uncertainty is the rule” in the Bani (brittle, anxious, non-linear, incomprehensible) world we live in and the key is to “seek for clarity”. The rapid advance of AI only reinforces the need to adapt throughout our careers.

My advice to young students is that if they feel the need to embrace the professional world now and build initial experience, there’s plenty of time ahead to return to academic studies, especially in a country with a highly flexible system. And my advice to “old” students like me is that it’s never too late for a fresh start.

Maxime Heinisch
Toulouse, France

Corrections

● The Iliad depicts events in the latter stages of the Trojan war, not the whole war as wrongly suggested in an article in Life & Arts on July 4.

● Longborough Festival Opera was first among UK summer festivals to stage Wagner’s “Ring cycle”, not Grange Park Opera as wrongly suggested in an article in Life & Arts on July 4.

Opinion

Mass immigration is not the silver bullet economists think it is

US ECONOMY

Oren Cass



When entering debates about immigration, economists have often checked their credibility at the door. This happens especially when the question is immigration of large numbers of unskilled workers (attracting the globe’s top talent is a separate issue). Common sense and market dynamics suggest that this causes job quality for existing workers to decline and public services to suffer. Yet arguments to the contrary have poured forth from economists, conveniently coinciding with the self-interest of employers dependent on large pools of cheap labour and progressives eager to square their opposition to

restrictions on immigration with their support for worker power.

The current is now reversing. On both sides of the Atlantic, left-of-centre political parties are discovering that unchecked immigration poses an existential threat to their electoral prospects. Enforcing the law and limiting the influx are suddenly on the agenda. And lo and behold, the economic arguments are now trickling in, confirming that this may indeed be wise.

In March, economists at the Federal Reserve Banks in Dallas and San Francisco attributed 30 per cent of the rapid increase in US housing prices from 2021 to 2024 to the surge in illegal immigration. When JD Vance made that point in the 2024 vice-presidential debate, calling illegal immigration “one of the most significant drivers of home prices”, economists fell over themselves to chastise him for supposed overstatement. But he seems to have been right.

Switzerland’s June referendum on a population cap provided another occasion for rethinking. Immigration is not a

solution to an ageing population, according to economics professor Alan Manning, and spending on it can reduce productivity. One Swiss business leader called addressing labour shortages through immigration the “lazy solution” while another lamented that “pressure to improve productivity in industries and the service sectors has disappeared”.

This last point is especially important. If employers believe they will always have access to a large pool of readily exploitable labour, why would they shift their business models and operations towards better jobs or invest in higher productivity? A “job Americans won’t do” exists only if employers know they will be given someone else to do it.

A new paper by 2024 Nobel Prize-winner Daron Acemoglu, fellow MIT economists David Autor and Keelan Beirne, and the London Business School’s Andrew Scott provides another line of evidence. While they studied birth rates, not immigration, their findings bear directly on the latter.

Economists generally assume that a decline in available workers will mean stagnation and contraction and make the case for high levels of immigration on those grounds. Acemoglu and colleagues found the opposite: “In contrast to the prevailing wisdom, we find that lower birth rates so far have led to higher growth in GDP per worker across

If employers believe they will always have access to ready labour, why would they shift business models?

countries and higher wage growth across local labour markets in the US.”

Their explanation? “The endogenous, labour-saving response of technology to the scarcity of younger workers.” Simply put, less available labour led to technological innovation and investment, leaving the economy intact and, by boosting productivity and wages,

improving outcomes for workers.

These arguments still warrant further research. But they alter the default in the debate. The idea that mass immigration alleviates housing shortages by providing more construction workers is now much harder to take seriously. The 1,470 economists who signed a letter in 2017 arguing that “immigration brings young workers who help offset the large-scale retirement of baby boomers” now need to proffer actual evidence to support their case.

The most telling line in that letter was the assertion that “on some issues there is near-universal agreement. One such issue concerns the broad economic benefit that immigrants to this country bring.” This claim of unanimity recalls the similar show of force on free trade during the debate in 2000 over China’s entry to the WTO. Among economists, testified then Treasury secretary Lawrence Summers, “there has been only one answer. That welcoming China into the global economic system is right for the American economy.”

Having to walk that judgment back has been humiliating for the economics profession. Just last month Nobel laureate Paul Krugman admitted that he had got it wrong. He had previously asserted that “a country serves its own interests by pursuing free trade regardless of what other countries may do.” But now Krugman confesses that he has “been shocked not only by my own change of mind, but by some of my colleagues’, people who are longtime advocates of globalisation.”

We are not there yet on the immigration debate. The situation more closely resembles the state of free trade discourse in the mid-2010s, when research on the “China shock” by Autor and others first appeared. But history suggests that any dogmatic consensus can hold back reality only for so long. The next few years are unlikely to be kind to proponents of mass immigration as economic policy.

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Elevated to fix Microsoft’s gaming division, she is making tough decisions, write Richard Waters and Michael Acton

Asha Sharma was not an avid gamer when she became head of Xbox, one of the world’s biggest gaming businesses, in February. This week she has had to resort to the sort of drastic actions that any new CEO must dread: sweeping lay-offs announced just months after taking on her first high-profile job.

The move to cut 3,200 jobs and shed a number of games studios caps a frantic first few months for the 37-year-old boss of Microsoft’s Xbox division, an empire that extends from the games console to hits like *Call of Duty*, *Minecraft* and *Candy Crush*.

Sharma was elevated from relative obscurity by Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella earlier this year to take on the job of fixing his company’s struggling gaming division despite her lack of previous experience. She is a rare female boss at the top of a tight-knit industry that has faced its share of misogyny accusations. Piers Harding-Rolls, a games industry analyst at Ampere Analysis, calls her appointment “a significant watershed moment”.

Sharma’s route to the top of the gaming world has been an unlikely one. It follows a tour through increasingly senior operational and technical roles at a number of tech companies, including Facebook (as it was then known) and delivery app Instacart.

A person at one company she worked at along the way questioned her level of commitment to those roles, given her tendency to hop jobs every three or four years, the typical time it takes for an executive’s personal stock awards to vest in the tech world. It is a trajectory that has left her an unknown quantity in an industry whose leaders tend to be long-serving. Her predecessor joined the Xbox team 25 years ago and was known to be an enthusiastic gamer.

Tim Sweeney, CEO of Epic Games, developer of *Fortnite*, says he only met Sharma for the first time at the games industry’s annual bash in San Francisco in March. However, he was complimentary about her grasp of the sector. “It was clear Asha understands what’s working and what isn’t in our industry,” he says, adding that she is “super-smart and tells it like it is”.

Intellectual sharpness is the first thing mentioned by most people who have had dealings with Sharma, while “telling it like it is” has become part of a strategy to win over those who might doubt her understanding of Microsoft’s gaming business. That has included disclosing the division’s profit margin – a meagre 3 per cent – for the first time.

Sharma has spent out her cure for what ails the company in usually detailed public explanations: cut back Microsoft-owned studios producing mediocre content; refocus on the Xbox console, rather than streaming from the cloud; and seek to reverse layers of bureaucracy and technical complexity that have built up around the business.

Matt Ehrlichman, founder of Porch, an online home services marketplace where Sharma worked early in her career and rose to become chief operat-



Person in the News | Asha Sharma

The outsider handed the Xbox controls

ing officer, calls her “an operator through and through”. Her “intellectual horsepower” and an aptitude for “learning most anything quickly” left her well suited to hopping between different industries, he said.

Born in Racine, Wisconsin, and a graduate of the University of Minnesota’s Carlson School of Management, Sharma has developed a style that one person who works with her calls “very analytical”. Another says she “starts with first principles” in stripping down problems to their root causes. Her appetite for devouring information on complex technical issues has been compared to that of Nadella, who lifted her from a previous role as head of product in CoreAI, one of the company’s central engineering divisions.

Sharma, who has three young children, also holds a second-degree black belt in Taekwondo, something she says helps her with mental clarity and the ambition to see things through.

She is fluent in Silicon Valley execu-

tive speak, crediting Nadella with teaching her the lesson that “optimism is a renewable resource”. After subscribing to the “regret minimisation framework” – a concept for plotting out one’s future popularised by Jeff Bezos – Sharma says she has shifted to “maximising option value” when balancing family and work.

‘It was clear she understands what’s working and what isn’t in our industry’

Perhaps inevitably, her recent elevation – she has said that no one was more surprised than she – has resulted in a level of public scrutiny that was initially heavy on scepticism. Her claim that she was an enthusiastic convert to gaming brought forensic scrutiny of her gamer profile – prompting her to fight it out with critics on X.

Why AI could be a financial ‘sludge’ buster

FINANCE

Gillian Tett



Why are so many people in America (and elsewhere) so negative on AI? There are many reasons: horror at tech companies’ excess power; fears about impending job losses; alarm about AI’s impact on mental health, energy and the environment.

Then there is a practical issue. While AI can theoretically deliver miracles – in life sciences, say – few people have yet seen much tangible improvement in their own lives. Win-wins are proving elusive.

Techies and governments are now trying to address this public relations problem. In the UK, for instance, Doug Gurr, former chair of the Alan Turing Institute, tells me that the Met Office is revolutionising flood forecasts with AI, and that the Natural History Museum can now identify dinosaur bones 30,000 times faster. Jurassic Park is optimised.

But finance might soon produce another win-win too. As Michael Hsu, formerly one of America’s top bank regulators, told the Cambridge Digital Innovation and Regulation Initiative (which I co-convene), AI could also slash regulatory red tape. If so, that would not just help harassed regulators and bankers but consumers of financial services as well.

“AI is a force multiplier,” says Witit Symsatayakul of the Asian Development Bank, which has published a potent recent paper on the topic.

The key issue is what Cass Sunstein, the behavioural economist, calls “sludge” – the fact that 21st-century life is beset with red tape, generating “excessive or unjustified frictions, such as paperwork burdens, that cost time or money”. In 2015 alone, Americans spent 9.78bn hours on federal paperwork.

That makes “life difficult to navigate” for citizens because sludge is “frustrating, stigmatising, or humiliating”, he notes, calling for “firms, universities, and government agencies [to] regularly conduct Sludge Audits” – and cut it.

But this “sludge-busting” can be a nightmare too. Hsu says that when the Reserve Bank of India tried to turn 9,445 circulars into a more rational 244 “master directions”, it took almost 40 staffan entire year. And when Congress introduced a law in 1996 requiring US regulators to audit – and cut – rules every 10 years, it proved so “extraordinarily labour intensive” that “the mere planning for the [review] process” took over a year.

The problem is multi-faceted. There is “vertical sludge”, where top-down laws become increasingly complex when turned into practical rules. And there is also “horizontal slush”, where adjacent regulators create overlapping rules, and “time slush”, when new rules are piled on top of old ones.

And now we have “geopolitical slush”: conflict and rising protectionism mean that national regulators are less eager to co-ordinate laws. Just look at what Brexit has done or how US regulators reject new Basel banking rules.

But this is precisely why AI could help, given its ability to scan swelling mountains of text, then synthesise and check it for inconsistencies, gaps and overlaps.

Stanford University has already partnered with San Francisco city leaders to pilot this idea: a team recently studied municipal rules (totalling 16mn words), then focused on the legislatively mandated reports to find duplications. The legislature then cut and consolidated 36 per cent of them. Yes, really.

“Because of the length of our code . . . it’s likely a project we would never have undertaken [without AI],” notes David Chiu, city attorney.

Now regulators want to replicate that in finance. And it seems a good moment, given that institutions like the European Central Bank and the UK Treasury face mounting political pressure to slash red tape. Moreover, policymakers face an “arms race” in dealing with

Red-tape-reducing robots might yet make markets more efficient

bankers’ own AI innovations, a top UK regulator says.

So can this sludge-busting work? It won’t be easy, alas. One problem is that large language models are better at tackling conversational or literary texts than regulators’ ghastly legalese. Another is the limited AI skills of regulators, while a third is the danger the machines might go mad without a human in the loop, or impose excessive standardisation.

But the technical problems are now being solved by new innovations. And Hsu says new legal tools such as Harvey, Irys, CoCounsel, Norm AI and Kimi are outperforming mainstream platforms like Claude and ChatGPT for regulatory tasks. Regulators are hiring staff with AI skills and pledging to maintain all-important human oversight.

Will that cut financial rules by a third, as happened in San Francisco? It seems an ambitious dream. But any reduction would help. So three cheers for red-tape-reducing robots – they might yet make markets more efficient and perhaps encourage money-making humans to be a bit more optimistic about AI as well.

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