

For over 14 years, you served in the Punjab and Haryana High Court, and during that time, you passed several orders dealing with the drug menace in the state. How serious is the challenge and could you elaborate on the judicial intervention?

I was assigned that matter around 2015. When I was among the senior judges in the High Court. And until I was transferred as Chief Justice to the Himachal Pradesh High Court, I made it a point to list it regularly, at least once a month, so that we could continuously monitor the issue and work towards improving the situation. If I may say, candidly, this was a true test of patience and, quite frankly, a labour of love in many ways. It wasn't the kind of case that could be resolved through one sweeping order or by issuing broad directions to the authorities. It required sustained oversight and constant engagement with all stakeholders.

At that time, the drug menace in Punjab was at a highly uncontrolled level. When the matter came to me, my first step

“To control social media... a harsh measure that risks curtailing liberty... When... people aren't given the full picture, it has the opposite effect... We could potentially reach a point where liberty feels like it exists more in principle than in practice and that would defeat the very purpose of openness”

was to understand the situation fully at every level. That meant listening to affected families, examining the institutional response, and interfacing with the government machinery.

During this time, I also had to prevent several attempts to transfer officers who were genuinely doing good work on the ground. Once every concerned authority had submitted status reports, and we finally had a clearer picture of what was actually happening, we were able to move forward in a more structured way. It was only then that we could begin addressing the crisis comprehensively, tackling the epidemic both at the macro and micro levels.

This case and its trajectory were truly all-encompassing when I think of it. We addressed the criminal dimension by constituting investigating committees and directing the extradition of major offenders who were profiting from the drug trade. At the same time, we focused on prevention: strengthening the borders through both physical measures and the use of technology.

But none of this meant we could overlook the victims. Directions were issued for the establishment of de-addiction centres and rehabilitation facilities, to support those struggling with addiction and to ease the immense burden placed on their families, many of whom came from economically vulnerable backgrounds. We also emphasised awareness among the youth by mandating changes in school and college curricula, through a committee of experts tasked with developing appropriate interventions.

‘My focus on appointments is to place emphasis on merit, integrity, experience, temperament required to serve as judge’

Opening up the Collegium process to tackling pendency, the new Chief Justice of India, Justice Surya Kant, outlines his roadmap for his 15-month tenure that began November 24, in an interview to Ananthakrishnan G



Every CJI brings their own way of working and their own systems. What's common is the commitment to the institution and to the cause of justice, says CJI Kant. FILE PHOTO

In that sense, the approach in this case was holistic: punitive, preventive, rehabilitative, and educational.

Time and again, criticism keeps cropping up about the Chief Justice of India being master of roster. Why do you think CJI should be the master of the roster?

It is correct that the CJI is also referred to as the master of the roster, but I think this role is often heavily misunderstood and misconstrued. The CJI is the senior most judge of the Supreme Court, and that seniority undoubtedly carries additional administrative responsibilities alongside the judicial role. One of these responsibilities would be overseeing the roster.

However, that does not automatically imply that matters are assigned in a unilateral manner. In practice, these decisions are taken after due discussion and consultation with other judges and keeping in mind various factors, including their availability, their areas of experience, and the overall functioning of the court.

One of your predecessors had said that judicial independence means not just freedom from executive but also freedom from pressure groups. Do you agree?

Absolutely, I would agree. Judicial independence is the cornerstone of an effective Justice Delivery System in our country, and it goes hand in hand with the Doctrine of Separation of Powers that is firmly embedded in our Constitution. Our responsibility is entirely to the Constitution and to the people it protects.

What would you like to do differently that your predecessors have not?

It wouldn't be right to say that I need to do something completely different from my predecessors. This institution has seen 52 Chief Justices before me. And of course, not all of them would have had the same set of priorities or the same vision for the role. Every one brings their own way of working and their own systems. But what has always been common is the commitment to

the institution and to the cause of justice. That has remained constant throughout, and that is what truly matters.

For me, what I would really like to focus on is the issue of pendency and ensure it is effectively tackled by streamlining our existing systems and strengthening mediation as a preferred mode of dispute resolution.

Alongside that, I want to work toward a system where every single person in this country has access to justice and proper representation. That, to me, is fundamental.

We have seen that comments by judges in the course of hearing cases sometimes invite backlash on social media, mostly uninformed. There is talk of the need to control social media; that apart, do you think judges also need to be careful with what they say in the age of social media?

I don't think there's any need to "control" social media. That would be the wrong word to use, and quite frankly, a harsh measure that risks curtailing liberty. When videos circulate, and backlash follows, I genuinely believe that is the nature of social media where no one really comes out unscathed. Apart from the entertainment factor, one of the objectives of social media, ideally, should be to create awareness and keep people engaged with democratic processes. However, when context is stripped away and people aren't given the full picture, it has the opposite effect. Ultimately, if we are n't careful, we could potentially reach a point where liberty feels like it exists more in principle than in practice and that would defeat the very purpose of openness.

EXPRESS interview

A lot of the criticism on social media is reaction to bits and pieces of videos of the virtual hearings being shared in the public. Don't you think it's par for the course, and that such uninformed trolling can be ignored?

The principle that 'bail is the rule and jail is the exception' has been developed through judicial interpretation and is an essential feature of our criminal jurisprudence. However, the application of this principle—and the perception that it may not always be followed uniformly—is deeply dependent on the specific facts, context, and gravity of each case before the court.

Often what gets shared on social media or becomes viral content are just brief snippets from court proceedings—a single comment, a question, or an expression—all without context. In hearings, judges test arguments, raise hypotheticals, and explore various legal angles. When those moments are isolated and posted online, misunderstanding is almost inevitable.

And of course, with that comes trolling, which must be ignored at all costs because it stems from a place of resentment and is not meant to be constructive. At the end of the day, we carry a significant workload and an enormous responsibility. The moment we shift our focus from our duties to what is being said on social media, justice will inevitably suffer.

There is criticism that though bail is the rule and jail is the exception, this is not followed by the various courts. How would you respond?

The principle that 'bail is the rule and jail is the exception' has been developed through

judicial interpretation and is an essential feature of our criminal jurisprudence. However, the application of this principle—and the perception that it may not always be followed uniformly—is deeply dependent on the specific facts, context, and gravity of each case before the court.

You have defended the Collegium system. Do you think it needs improvements? If yes, what?

Any system or practice, no matter how well-established, will at some stage require improvement. Change is the only constant, and as society evolves, institutions must also adapt their mechanisms accordingly. The same applies to the Collegium system, which is certainly far more open and transparent today than it once was.

There is, however, always room to do better. The introduction of in-person interactions with candidates, a reform that had been undertaken by my predecessors, has been a very welcome step. It allows

each member of the Collegium to assess the candidate directly and arrive at a more objective view.

Going forward, I believe an even stronger emphasis must be placed on the credentials of the candidate—their merit, their integrity, and their experience. These should remain central considerations in every appointment.

While the National Judicial Commission has been declared unconstitutional by the SC, what are a couple of aspects you can introduce to bring more transparency in appointments?

As I mentioned earlier, my focus on judicial appointments, whether to the High Courts or the Supreme Court, would be to place strong emphasis on merit, experience, integrity, and the temperament required to serve as a judge.

Regarding transparency, I believe we have already taken significant steps. For instance, we now try to provide reasons for approvals and disapprovals in elevation matters, marking

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an important shift towards greater openness.

At the same time, we must recognise that the process is inherently complex and, quite frankly, quite lengthy. There are several internal procedures and assessments involved that cannot be entirely placed in the public domain. So often, when we make efforts to make these decisions more transparent, it is crucial to strike a balance and also maintain the integrity of the system.

On subjects which require technical competence, for example, taxation or environment, how can the Supreme Court equip itself with substantive expertise to weigh in more effectively?

I believe many of my colleagues possess extensive experience and expertise specifically in taxation, so I feel we are well versed in that area of law.

Nevertheless, there are several niche and rapidly evolving areas of law that courts are increasingly dealing with. However, this is not entirely new. In such situations, we have often relied on the assistance of domain experts appointed to aid the court. At other times, we have established expert committees to engage with all relevant stakeholders and offer informed guidance.

This approach is especially important in environmental issues, where legal decisions need to be based on scientific knowledge. Protecting fragile ecosystems and avoiding further damage to flora and fauna requires us to seek expert advice, ensuring our actions are both effective and responsible.

Retd IAF personnel held for 'spying' in Assam

Sukrita Baruah
Guwahati, December 13

A RETIRED IAF personnel has been arrested in Assam's Tezpur for allegedly establishing links with Pakistani intelligence operatives and sharing defence-related documents.

Police said Kulendra Sharma, who retired as a junior warrant officer with the IAF in 2002, was arrested on charges including acts endangering the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India, waging war against the

government, criminal conspiracy and causing disappearance of evidence of offence.

"We have received information from a source that Kulendra Sharma was establishing links with Pakistani intelligence operatives, so we arrested him and the probe is on," said a police official. According to the preliminary investigation, we found that some documents were being shared with some unknown persons. We are verifying their originality," said Additional SP, Sonitpur, Hari-charan Bhunjil.

Upanishads tell us to unite, can't leave anyone behind: Karan Singh

Trisha Mukherjee
New Delhi, December 13

THAT IT is important for all human beings to move forward together is a learning that Indians have inherited from the Upanishads, politician and philosopher Karan Singh said.

"The Upanishads say 'truth is one, the wise call it by many names.' This is important because we cannot separate one person or community. We must unite, work together and be successful together. There shouldn't be any hatred," he said.

"Tension between commu-

nities is increasing in our society, it shouldn't happen. We have seen that because of such tensions how our country was divided. We must be together irrespective of religion, caste or region. We can't leave anyone behind. Until we all unite, India's strength, whether political or intellectual, will not be complete," Singh said at the curtain raiser of the Nalanda Literature Festival to be held in Raigarh from December 21-25.

Conceived by festival director Ganga Kumar, the event aims at reviving the country's linguistic heritage with a focus

on Bihar and the North East. The language at the centre of the discourse during the festival include Angika, Bajjika, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Assamese, and Bodo, among others.

While appreciating the initiative of bringing languages perceived as peripheral into the mainstream, Singh noted the importance of embracing all the languages in the country.

Citing Urdu as an example, which he described as a "beautiful language that very few people use these days," he said, "We can't let Urdu disappear. It is an important and a civilised

language. One must remember the importance of a language does not depend on the number of people speaking it."

"We must take this enlightenment from ancient Nalanda and apply those learnings to modern India. Prime Minister (Narendra Modi) is trying to do that across sectors but it will be incomplete unless you bring the entire society together," he said.

The event promises to bring together over 50,000 participants, including writers, poets, artists, translators, diaspora voices and cultural enthusiasts. Top names include food critic

and writer Pushpesh Pant, Indian-American author and polyglot Muzaffer Ali Shami, historian Vikram Sampat, Hindi writer Divya Mathur, actor Sanjay Mishra, mythologist Devdutt Patnaik, and Kathak exponent Shovana Narayan.

Veteran dancer Sonal Mansingh, the festival's cultural ambassador, noted that the event is a "step towards decolonisation." "This festival celebrates Nalanda once again in the right spirit and in the right time, decolonising our minds. Modiji said we must give up the slave mentality. This is a huge step towards that."

The festival is being supported by a number of institutions, Nalanda Mahavihara and Nalanda University. "Nalanda was a top global institution for seven centuries and it was where art and science blended because without that, knowledge is incomplete," he said.

Nalanda's heritage will also be celebrated through exhibitions of ancient manuscripts, including *Tripitaka*, a collection of sacred Buddhist scriptures, and a Pali to Hindi dictionary. Documentaries on ancient Nalanda and Buddha will also be screened.

Distortion of history, disdain for future



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

HISTORY is like the commons. Any one can enter the commons and write or re-write history—until the myths are blown by subsequent research and study. European historians, and some copy-cat Indian historians, portrayed the Aryans as a superior race who invaded and “civilized” India and other lands. It was myth. Ancient civilizations had flourished in many parts of India long before the Indo-Aryan movements; for example, archaeological discoveries in Keezhadi and other places in Tamil Nadu have traced a flourishing civilisation to 3500 BCE.

Christopher Columbus “discovered” America was an early lesson in history that we all learnt in school. It was inaccurate in many ways; the land now called America was populated by men and women for several centuries before Columbus landed on the continent. Research has proved that the North Vikings had reached North America nearly 500 years before Columbus.

Distortions abound

Politicians love to take liberties with history. The BJP (and the government) accused the Congress of mutilating the National Song, *Vande Mataram*, and insisted on a day-long debate in both Houses of Parlia-

ment in the winter session. The party’s speakers narrated their version of ‘history’; it was distorted history—distort. The chief distoristor was the prime minister, Mr Narendra Modi. To quote his words:

“*Vande Mataram was composed at a time when, after the 1857 freedom struggle, the British Empire was unsettled and imposed various pressures and injustices upon India... It was then that Bankim-da issued a challenge, responding with greater force, and from that defiance Vande Mataram was born...*”

“...*Mohammed Ali Jinnah raised a slogan against Vande Mataram from Lucknow on October 15, 1937. Instead of firmly countering the baseless statements of the Muslim League and condemning them, Jawaharlal Nehru, then Congress President, did not re-affirm his and the Congress party’s commitment to Vande Mataram and began questioning the Vande Mataram itself. Just five days after Jinnah’s opposition, on October 20, 1937, Nehru wrote a letter to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, agreeing with Jinnah’s sentiment...*”

“(Nehru said) ‘I have read the background of the Vande Mataram song. I feel that this background may provoke Muslims.’”

“...*Unfortunately, on October 26, 1937, the Congress compromised on Vande Mataram, fragmenting it in their decision... history bears witness that the INC bowed before the Muslim League and acted under its pressure, adopting a politics of appeasement... The INC has become MIM (Muslim League-Muslin Congress).*”

Mr Amit Shah said that dividing the national song led to the politics of appeasement which led to Partition. It was a leap of imagination so absurd that even distorisors

No one raised a controversy on the two-stanza national song since 1937. Why now? Parliament and the governments ought to be concerned with the pressing problems of the people in the present and on the ambitious goals of the country for the future

will squirm in their seats.

A short history

Here is a brief time line of the song:

1870s Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote a few stanzas of a hymn that remained unpublished.

1881 An expanded version of the poem was included in the novel, *Anandmath*

1905 Rabindranath Tagore sang the poem while leading nationalist protest processions; *Vande Mataram* became a political slogan.

1908 Tamil poet Subramania Bharathi immortalised the phrase *Vande Mataram* in his poem *Enthaiyum thayum*. Bankim Chatterjee’s song was on the lips of every freedom fighter.

1930s Communal politics was on the rise, the song became controversial.

28-09-1937 Rajendra Prasad wrote to Sardar Patel raising apprehensions about widespread opposition to the song and suggesting that the Congress’s policy should be laid down. On the eve of the meeting of the CWC, Netaji Bose sought the advice of Tagore.

19-10-1937 Netaji Bose wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru to discuss the song in the CWC

20-10-1937 Nehru wrote to Bose that the controversy was manufactured by the communists and that he would discuss the matter with Tagore and others.

26-10-1937 Tagore wrote to Nehru that the first part of the song stood on its own and had inspirational quality which was not offensive to any religious community.

28-10-1937 CWC adopted the two stanzas of the poem as the National Song.

JANUARY 1939 CWC reiterated the resolution

at a meeting in Wardha in the presence of Mahatma Gandhi.

The selection of a few verses for a national anthem or song is not unusual. *Jana Gana Mana*, which is the National Anthem, is an abridged version of the fuller poem by Rabindranath Tagore. National anthems of many countries are abridged versions of longer songs.

Mr Modi carefully avoided the fact that the RSS and the BJP’s predecessor had no role to play in India’s freedom struggle or in singing or popularising *Vande Mataram*. In fact, the RSS did not raise the national flag for 52 years in its national headquarters.

Wrong priorities

No one raised a controversy on the two-stanza national song since 1937. Why now? Parliament and the governments ought to be concerned with the pressing problems of the people in the present and on the ambitious goals of the country for the future.

China’s constituent bodies debate robotics, Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, the challenges of space, the oceans and data, and how these will profoundly transform human life on this planet. India’s Parliament should be concerned about the problems in the present that are poverty, education, healthcare, infrastructure, production of and access for all to goods and services, financial stability, trade deficit, climate change, and other *unknows*. In the future, India’s challenges will be growing inequality, population, internal migration, secularism, science and technology, and other *unknows*.

Distorting history is bad enough, disdain for the future is unpardonable.

Debate AQI, not Vande Mataram



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

THIS WAS going to be a critique of the dismal performance of the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament last week. His intervention in the election reforms debate left me baffled. He meandered from Khadi and Kanjeevaram sarees to university Vice-Chancellors and the evils of the RSS to threatening the Election Commissioner. It was a depressing performance. But as I settled down to write this column, Rahul Gandhi popped up on a news channel, speaking in the Lok Sabha. This time, he raised the issue of air pollution in our cities.

He said that this was a subject on which there could be no disagreement between the government and the Opposition benches. Sounding reassuringly sensible, he suggested that the rules of this debate should be that there would be no accusations hurled at each other about who did what and when. They should concentrate on solving a problem that has become a national health emergency.

Totell you the truth, I nearly fell off my chair when I heard him finally raise an issue that will resonate with ordinary Indians. So far, he has lost elections not because of votes being stolen, but because he has raised mostly issues that have been pointed personal attacks on the Prime Minister. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, he accused Modi of taking bribes in the Rafale deal. Through that campaign, he and his sister wandered about waving a toy fighter jet, making the point that the “chowkidar” was a “chor”. In last year’s Lok Sabha election, he waved a copy of the Constitution at his rallies and said that he was doing this to assure voters that he would save it from Modi. In state elections since then, he has banged on about votes being stolen. He appears not to have noticed that Modi is Prime Minister because it is his personal charisma that the BJP has used to win elections.

When Rahul made “vote chor!” the main issue in Bihar, he showed that he had no idea of the history of elections in our poorest state. No idea at all that before EVM machines came to be used, ballot boxes were routinely looted from strongrooms and polling booths were controlled by criminals. It surprised nobody, except him and his courtiers, that voters remained impervious to his demand that the Prime Minister resign on the grounds that he had stolen elections. In Hindi, the slogan was catchy “Vote chor, gaddi chhod”, you need more than catchy slogans to win elections.

It is my fervent hope that Rahul Gandhi now raises many more real issues. It is not just the air of our cities that is polluted, almost everything else as well. In Delhi, there are mountains of festering garbage that exude poisonous gases into the atmosphere, and nobody has managed to do anything about this despite promised deadlines. Nobody seems able to clean the filthy water of the Yamuna despite thousands of crore rupees of taxpayers’ money being poured into “cleaning” this river. Then there is the ugly truth that the Indian cities look like slums. Why? If poorer countries in the south-east Asia have managed to handle problems of urbanisation, why is it so hard for India to follow their best practices?

There are other issues that should be at the top of the Opposition’s list of priorities. Since Modi became Prime Minister, there has been more investment in roads, airports, ports and other infrastructure than ever before. What has not happened is investment in human beings. Government schools remain as bad as they were under Congress rule, as do government hospitals. Instead of investing in these things, the BJP has now discovered the art of buying votes with welfare schemes that materialise miraculously on the eve of elections. If anyone tells you that in Bihar, the Rs 10,000 that women were given just before voting did not make a huge difference, do not believe them. In Maharashtra, it was the same story with the gift of Rs 1,500 a month to our ‘beloved sisters’. Money for distributing largesse comes out of funds that would be much better spent on improving the abysmal conditions in which most Indians are forced to live.

Why do issues that directly impact people’s lives not get debated in Parliament? Frankly, I did not see the point of the *Vande Mataram* debate. The Prime Minister led the debate by saying that because young people needed to become acquainted with the history and power of the song of our freedom movement that the debate was necessary. If the Prime Minister had an interest in Indian popular music, he would have noticed that young people are very familiar with the song. On India’s 50th birthday in 1997, A R Rahman released an album called “Vande Mataram”.

In this album, the song in which he uses *Vande Mataram* to praise our beloved motherland became such a mega hit that it continues to be the song most identified with Rahman. I remember that it came out on August 12, 1997, and on Independence Day, three days later, I was at a dinner party in Delhi where we listened to it all night and like good Indian patriots danced to it till dawn. The debate in Parliament was meaningless especially when there are so many more important issues that need to be discussed. Like our filthy air.



INSIDE TRACK
BY COOMI KAPOOR

MISSING SPLENDOUR

A visit last month to the over 250-year-old palace built by France in Puducherry for its Governor-Generals, which later served as the Raj Niwas for the Union Territory’s Lieutenant Governors, was an eye-opener. The stately rooms have been stripped of the faded furniture and artefacts accumulated by the French over two centuries, including possibly some of the treasures looted by Governor-General Joseph Duplexe, who occupied an earlier building at the same site.

The missing treasures include porcelain statuettes, ornate French furniture carved from Burmese teak, Belgian mirrors, antique Chinese vases, a 200-year-old grand piano and paintings, including French artist Andre Marie’s depiction of the Malakottai rock temple. The explanation for the absent artefacts is that the building is unsafe as the foundation is sinking and the walls are crumbling—a fact certified by IIT-Chennai and the PWD.

The Raj Niwas staff, however, offer vague explanations as to where the absent pieces are presently. One clarification is that the furniture has already moved to the proposed new Raj Niwas, formerly a distillery and tail-incomplete. Another staffer suggests that the furniture remains in the original building, but a visit to the premises belied the claim. The conscientious former L-G Kiran Bedi, who officiated between 2016 and 2021, assigned an intern to prepare a booklet detailing photographs and descriptions of all major artworks during her tenure. Many of the pieces described in the brochure are no longer on display.

Those in-charge of the mansion’s interiors in recent years seem to have a pronounced lack of aesthetic sensibilities and the décor has a mockery of the building’s past glory. Plastic chairs were placed next to the few remaining French mantle clocks, cheap potted plants fixed close to the exquisite handmade Athangudi tiles with European designs and along with the few remaining Thanjavur paintings, someone has hung atrocious kitsch.

The question that begs an answer is who is in charge of the inventory of the artefacts? Why should the treasures be scattered between a building that is yet to be completely vacated and another that is still incomplete? One wonders why the entire collection could not have been temporarily housed in the museum across the road, which showcases a paltry display of French heritage. Unfortunately, the two L-Gs who succeeded Bedi, Dr Tamilisel Soundararajan and Vice-President C R Radhakrishnan, stayed at the Raj Niwas only briefly as Puducherry was an additional temporary residence and Telangana their principal responsibility. Present L-G Kailashnathan, once PM Modi’s trusted adviser as Gujarat CM, took charge only late last year. Shortly after he joined, he was informed that the building was unsafe and he shifted his family to residential quarters in the building under construction, though he still functions from the Raj Niwas.

SISTER OUTSHINES BROTHER

There is near agreement even in the Congress that Priyanka Gandhi outshines her brother as a parliamentarian. Her speeches in Hindi, clutching notes for reference, resonate with audience. She has met Amit Shah and J P Nadda seeking the Centre’s assistance for her Wayanad constituency. Priyanka is an active member of the parliamentary committee on home and friendly with fellow MPs across the board. In contrast, Rahul is generally stiff and standoffish with the ruling party. His choice of issues and confused, badly researched, extempore speeches are his weakness, be it his refrain about the Adani-Ambani monopoly or “vote chor”. After Operation Sindoor, Rahul taunted Modi that India had capitulated because of Trump and approved quietly that the US President’s description of the Indian economy as “dead”, oblivious that he was not merely mocking Modi but offending nationalist sentiments. On the other hand, Priyanka in her Parliament speech on Operation Sindoor, was restrained, raising the pertinent point that someone should be accountable for security lapses that permitted terrorists to enter Baisara Valley.

DANCING WITH ENEMY

The growing disenchantment with Rahul’s leadership is reflected in usually meek Congress persons not shy of being seen publicly consorting with his pet billionare, Gautam Adani. In Bhopal, Divyanshu Singh attended the wedding of the director of an Adani company, while Sushil Kumar Shrivastava posed with the controversial industrialist at his own granddaughter’s wedding. Telangana’s Congress CM Revanth Reddy is reportedly working on deals with both the Adanis and Ambanis. Meanwhile, Congress allies Supriya Sela and Mahua Moitra danced on stage together with BJP MP Kanganana Ranaut to the Bollywood song “Deewangi Deewangi” at former Congressman-turned-BJP MP Navan. Jindal’s daughter’s wedding.

Vande Mataram: The musical logic behind PM Nehru’s choice



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY SUANSHU KHURANA

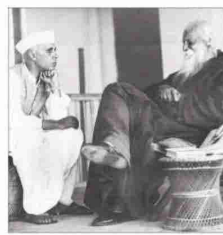
IN THE days leading up to the Centre’s decision to stage a 10-hour parliamentary debate on *Vande Mataram*—a move heavily influenced by poll prospects in West Bengal—an ensemble of classical musicians performed the country’s national song on the day of its 150th commemoration.

PM Modi gave a speech right after, revisiting Jawaharlal Nehru’s decision to drop two stanzas from the original *Vande Mataram* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, framing it as an act of appeasement toward Muslim leaders, which, according to the PM, “sowed the seeds of the division of the nation”.

At this point, BJP members are asking for, besides an apology from Congress and awareness of *Vande Mataram*, inclusion of the two stanzas dropped in 1937 and equal status for the national song as the anthem and the flag. The national song does have the same status; only that the anthem has legal backing as there are mandatory guidelines governing its performance.

But the status of a song also depends on the inherent idea that it is still a combination of melody, lyrics and rhythm, and is to be sung and performed. The musical structure of *Vande Mataram*, which is set in the evening *raag Desh*, comes with melodic lines that rest on emotional adornments.

One can hear these in Pandit Bhimsen Joshi’s voice as he sang it at the 50th anniversary of India’s Independence. The emotion was intact even when Pandit Omkarnath Thakur crooned it on All India Radio early on August 15, 1947—India’s first day as an independent nation. Even though he chose his guru DV Palus-



Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru with Rabindranath Tagore, WIKIPEDIA

kar’s composition in *raag Kafi* instead of *Desh*, and sang it with all the stanzas and not the truncated version, it is musically irresistible.

Both Thakur and Paluskar (also the founder of Gandharva Mahavidyalaya) attached mainly Hindu roots to Hindustani classical, not acknowledging the contribution of Muslim musicians and *gharanas* properly. There are stories of Thakur purifying the stage by sprinkling Gangalal on it to rid it of “unclean” influences. A gifted musician, he expressed admiration for fascist leader Mussolini and his patronage of the arts when he met the Italian leader in Rome in 1930 and sang for him. He was also impressed by Mussolini’s wife making a vegetarian meal for him—a gesture he told music critic BVK Shastri about.

If one looks at the performance of the ensemble during the commemoration celebration of *Vande Mataram* last month, it was often off-key. But the failure was not theirs. It lay in the architecture of the melody. Its melodic backbone is not inherently built on rhythm. It is harder to navigate for an orchestra but it works splendidly in the solitude of a single voice.

It moves like a lament, reminding us of the freedom struggle. Not like an anthem march.

Desh is completely unlike the bright, morning *raag Bilawal* with all *shuddh* (natural) notes, in which Rabindranath Tagore composed *Jana Gana Mana*. Not only does the tune structure scream alignment with its staccato metre, it also has one phrase atop another, almost like a building which has various communities living in its different homes. Just like a nation. It is balanced, even if just for 52 seconds, allowing India to stand together in attention in the same key used. That *Bilawal* is also equivalent to the Western major scale gives it a universality of sound across borders and regions. It is also perhaps why it was chosen over *Vande Mataram*.

In his ‘Notes to the Cabinet’, dated May 21, 1948, during discussions over national symbols, Nehru wrote, “*Vande Mataram* was associated with the struggle for our freedom. Hence it is bound to continue as a favourite national song which revives poignant memories,” adding that music-wise it was “plaintive, mournful and repetitive”.

“The music of the National Anthem is, therefore, the most important factor. A national anthem is to be full of life as well as dignity and it should be capable of being effectively played by orchestras, big and small, and by military bands and pipes. It is to be played not only in India but abroad and should be such as is generally appreciated in both these places. *Jana Gana Mana* appears to satisfy these tests,” he wrote.

Musically speaking, this is absolutely on point. *Vande Mataram* is sung to a mother; the latter to a republic. One promises intimacy, the other permanence. Both are and have been beloved in this country. The BJP would do well to grasp that *Vande Mataram* is secure, that removing the paras was an inclusive decision in 1937, while adding the paras now will be especially divisive. There are more urgent issues to be solved in India. The dignity of *Vande Mataram*, which is in place, is definitely not one of them.

The writer is Senior Assistant Editor, The Indian Express

The unhappiness of the young liberal

STUDY AFTER study in the West has shown, people who identify as politically liberal have lower levels of happiness and psychological well-being than Conservatives. The demarcation between the two categories in the US applies, broadly, to India too. Liberalism to be more tolerant and engaged with society’s realities, while a conservative mindset cares more about traditions, loyalty and binding values.

It stands to reason that anyone preoccupied with myriad problems like caste inequality, corruption and air pollution will be unhappy than someone who stoically shrugs their shoulders, knowing the world is what it is. And gets on with it. Indeed, there is wisdom in accepting what he cannot change, something like the lyrics of the 1990s hit song, *Don’t Worry, Be Happy*: “In life we have some troubles but when you worry you make it double.” That attitude makes everything a lot simpler because we’re all driven, to some extent, by the pursuit of happiness. But who is finding it? Not the dreamy progressive, beset with exist-

ential angst that their country’s politics is organised around fealty to a great leader.

Scan the data more closely, it turns out young, liberal, working women, are the unhappiest demographic. Economic freedom and #MeToo created awareness on gender equality, but the overall culture is lagging far behind. One of Delhi’s top marriage brokers told me, “In the last 30-something years, men feel entitled to pursue a never-married 28-year-old, and his chances remain good. But a divorced 30+ woman’s options for a man of corresponding calibre are far fewer. Despite financial success and education, the direction of their lives are subject to cultural market forces, so it’s hardly surprising that liberal women everywhere harbour a profound sense of disillusionment. Perhaps, the way forward is to acknowledge that equality between the sexes is a cruel myth. One has to wonder, does domestic bliss mean women simply keep over and go back to making the sacrifices a previous generation did to keep marriages afloat? Which was, bluntly, to put the needs of men above their own ambitions.



ON THE LOOSE
BY LEHRA KALA

It’s hard to thrive while severely curtailing aspects of oneself, even if research suggests marriage and motherhood contribute greatly to contentment. India remains one of the few societies where arranged marriages are the norm rather than the exception, and it examined closely the very concept is aligned with down-to-earth, conservative principles. Many young men, recognising the world won’t reorder itself based on our expectations, So matchmakers strive to eliminate pain points—differences in religion, political views and economic backgrounds—a sound and sensible approach, except it requires people to shut down their minds, stop questioning inherited beliefs and obediently follow the limiting moral standard that has existed for centuries. The thinking rightly goes, nobody gets everything they want; the beaten path is at least comfortably predictable. Maybe, the secret to happiness is figuring out how to live when what we desire, and what actually is, lie frustratingly far apart. A hard back to that great Indian aphorism, “to adjust”.

Where does this leave the romantic non-conformist who values truth over obedience, devoutness and determined patriotism? Despondent, for sure. The liberal must take solace in Byron’s words, that those who know the most, mourn the deepest. It takes courage to disregard a basic human instinct, to seek certainty in a world of many principles. Many young men, setting one free, hurts, to exit the metaphysical grounding of one’s history doesn’t exactly make for happiness. The thinker is never guaranteed peace of mind. Clarity comes only after much meandering into contradictory ideas and opinions but one may discover something far richer; that (wistful) intellectual awareness adds hugely to a meaningful existence if not a blissfully happy one. In an age shadowed by the clash of civilisations, we understand the dangers of systemic exclusion and the either/or binary. In actuality, the world is large enough to honour the many different ways people choose to live.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

SCIENCE

How mangroves' cells help plants survive in saltwater

Divya Gandhi

Saltwater would kill most plants, but it cannot felled the ancient mangroves species distinct for their giant stilt roots. So how do they survive on brine? International researchers and authors of a new paper in *Current Biology* have delved into their cells and discovered what makes mangrove shrubs and trees so different from all other terrestrial plants.

The scientists identified

cell traits that are critical to tolerating a surge in saltwater as climate change raises sea levels. And this could also help create plants, especially agricultural crops, to survive in salty water.

"This work reveals that just a few simple cell traits are critical to tolerating the extreme conditions experienced by some of the most distinctive and resilient plants in the world," said Adam Roddy, a co-author and assistant professor in New York University's department of environmental studies.

Mangroves have evolved 30 times over the last 200 million years as they adapted to saltwater.

The scientists analysed 34 mangrove species and across 17 plant families and found that, compared to their inland relatives, mangroves do not exhibit smaller or more stomata to enable higher photosynthetic rates. Mangroves however have unusually small leaf epidermal pavement cells and thicker cell walls, which together give them more mechanical strength to tolerate low osmotic potentials.

'Variety of mechanisms'
Different groups of mangroves use a variety of mechanisms. To exclude salt, some species have roots with a waxy layer inside that's able to filter out most of the salt, Dr. Roddy told *The Hindu*. "This requires them to create a lot of tension to essentially 'pull' the

water out of solution and into their bodies. Other species will take up a lot of salt, but then they concentrate the saltwater and secrete it out of their leaves through specialised tissues."

Mangroves are special as they're able to tolerate high amounts of salt and live along coasts, also protecting them against erosion, and they provide habitats for both sea animals and birds. Given so much of the world's popu-

lation lives along coasts, these functions directly benefit humans, Dr. Roddy said.

The study offers strategies to engineer salt-tolerant plants by manipulating cell size and cell wall properties.

"If we want to manipulate plants," Dr. Roddy said, "then focusing on ones of particular economic importance that would also be threatened by increasing salinity would be the way to start."

SNAPSHOTS



The tree of life is growing faster than ever

How fast is science adding new species to the tree of life? Using databases, researchers traced nearly 2 million living, named species from the mid-1700s and found additions have been accelerating since 2015, with about 17,000 species named in 2020. Animals, arthropods, insects, beetles, and ray-finned fishes have gained roughly a fifth of their current species since 2000. The team tentatively projected that fungi, arachnids, crustaceans, and reptiles may eventually contain up to 4x today's diversity.

Ramanujan's old formulae for pi echo in modern cosmology

An IISc team has linked Ramanujan's clever formulae to calculate π to ideas used in modern physics; the work hints that abstract mathematics and theories of boiling fluids or expanding universes could be closely connected

Jacob P Koshy

Earlier this month, IISc professor Aninda Sinha and his former doctoral student Faizan Bhat linked the esoteric mathematics of Srinivasa Ramanujan with the principles underlying the physics of turbulent fluids and the expansion of the universe using the number π (p).

Their paper appeared in *Physical Review Letters*. This irrational number, which the Greek mathematician Archimedes discovered 1,500 years ago could be approximated as 22/7, is the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter. Scientists have developed different ways to compute its value over the years, using different branches of mathematics, although the process is often laborious.

But more than a century ago, Srinivasa Ramanujan, who had at the time yet to be admitted to the pantheon of mathematicians, discovered at least 17 astonishingly fast formulae to calculate $1/\pi$. Each of these used a particular recipe: add the first term, you get a rough value; add a second, it becomes dramatically more accurate; continue a bit more, and the approximation converges very quickly to π .

Some of these formulae were so efficient that they underpin the Chudnovsky algorithm, which scientists have used to compute π to over 200 trillion digits on modern supercomputers.

"We were interested in

Bridge of wonder

Ramanujan's equations appear to be analogous to those in certain kinds of conformal field theories

■ IISc researchers have found similarities between Ramanujan's speedy methods to estimate π (1/n) with advanced theories describing critical phenomena

■ While reworking string theory problems, they unexpectedly discovered infinitely many new formulae for computing π

■ They noticed Ramanujan's mathematics shared the same hidden patterns as equations used to describe turbulent fluids

■ The same mathematical pattern also appeared in simple models of an expanding universe, deepening the connection

■ Thus far, the work offers a striking bridge between pure number theory and modern physics, rather than solves problems

■ Past examples like Riemannian geometry and Fourier transforms show today's abstract maths can transform future technologies



More than a century ago Srinivasa Ramanujan, an accountant in Chennai yet to be admitted to the pantheon of mathematical greats, discovered a set of astonishingly fast-converging formulae to calculate $1/\pi$. ASHWINI/ICC BY SA

the maths behind Ramanujan's thinking," Dr. Sinha said over the phone.

The trail began unexpectedly in string theory – one of the grand theories of theoretical physics that attempts to explain how the fundamental constituents of matter, including electrons, neutrinos, quarks, and gravitons, could have arisen as the vibrations of invisible little coils of energy called 'strings'.

Last year, Dr. Sinha and a collaborator were studying certain string-theoretic calculations and realised some of the existing answers in the literature were incomplete or incorrectly quoted.

"In the process of finding new representations of those string answers, we found a new formula for π ," he recalled. "In fact, an infinite number of new formulae."

A string, he said, can be thought of like a rubber band: you can stretch it in many ways and its elasticity can take many values.

"If π is somehow hidden in the string answer, it should have an infinite number of different ways of looking at it," Dr. Sinha said. "That is what we found."

"That's what pushed me to go back and look more carefully at Ramanujan's formulae. Once I looked at the modern presentation, something jumped out. Because of my training, I immediately recognised structures I had seen before in conformal field theories."

Conformal field theories (CFT) are the mathematical language of critical phenomena, those special points where systems are on the edge of change.

When water boils at 100°C and room pressure,

you can clearly distinguish the liquid and vapour. But at a much higher 374°C and 221 atm of pressure, it reaches a critical point where that distinction vanishes: the fluid becomes superfluid and is neither clearly liquid nor clearly gas, no matter how closely you zoom in.

"At the critical point, you cannot actually say which is liquid and which is vapour," Dr. Sinha said. "That is the point where CFTs enter – they are used to explain what happens in this kind of critical phenomena."

Ramanujan's equations appeared to be analogous to those in certain kinds of CFTs. The mathematical engine he intuitively used to find π , involving modular equations, elliptic integrals and special functions, exactly matched the structure of correlation functions in the CFTs.

As of now, their work doesn't yet settle any grand conjecture in number theory or cosmology. It only remains an intriguing bridge between two distant regions of thought: Ramanujan's intuitive modular equations and modern CFT.

History however is replete with examples of mathematical ideas developed in isolation resonating with the physics of the real world decades later.

"Riemannian geometry (or the geometry of curved spaces) was being developed in the 19th century as pure mathematics," Dr. Sinha said.

"Much later, Einstein's general theory of relativity showed that the geometry of spacetime itself is Riemannian (because of gravity's impact on space-time). Today, we even use it with GPS."

Similarly, Napoleon Bonaparte's mathematical advisor Joseph Fourier developed Fourier transforms as a mathematical tool to analyse heat flow. Today it supports digital image and music compression.

For now, the Ramanujan-CFT connection has already spawned a new line of inquiry in Dr. Sinha's group: the mathematical structure they identified appears again, he said, in models of an expanding universe.

On the mathematical side, the work hints that other transcendental numbers, of which π is one example, might admit similarly efficient representations rooted in physics.

Even premodern humans may have lit fires

Researchers excavated a 4-lakh-year-old soil layer containing shattered axes and a patch of reddish sediment in Barnham, England. The sediment had been repeatedly heated and its chemical traces didn't match natural fires. The layer also yielded some iron pyrite, a mineral that can be struck against flint to create sparks and is otherwise very rare in the area. The researchers interpreted all this to mean premodern humans could have lit fires, reshaping their diets and social lives.



Dugongs have been tending to the Persian Gulf

Fossils from Al Maszhabiya in Qatar have revealed that 'sea cow engineering' has shaped the Persian Gulf for over 20 million years. A team studied a dense bed of bones from shallow marine rocks dated to the early Miocene and identified a new, small species of dugongs. The condition of its bones suggested herds repeatedly fed in local seagrass meadows, implying the Gulf was a sea cow habitat across climates, even as the exact species has shifted.

The snail as a model for restoring vision in humans

SPEAKING OF SCIENCE
Dr. Balasubramanian

In Hindu mythology, Lord Shiva's third eye is said to open only in moments of great transformation. What if this isn't just a mythic symbol of cosmic vision but also a metaphor for renewal?

Ever wondered if there's a hidden switch that could unlock something just as extraordinary as the ability to regrow our own eyes? A camera-type eye, like that of humans and many other species, has a lens that focuses light onto a retina. Regeneration would be the ability of the eye to regrow itself after being completely removed or damaged. Recent work by Alice Accorsi and Alejandro Sánchez Alvarado's team (Na-

ture Communications 16, 2025) has shown how such regeneration of the eye occurs in a golden apple snail. The snail is a mollusc: a backboneless, shell-covered animal that can live equally well in land and water.

This miracle of regeneration isn't magic but beautiful molecular choreography. When the snail loses an eye, thousands of genes flip like switches: first those guiding wound healing, then those for cell growth and division, followed by diverse networks for new retinal cells, photoreceptors, and lenses. Among them, the *PAX6* gene plays a critical role in the early development of the eye. In snails, this process is carefully coordinated by several other genes. These include genes responsible for forming new nerve cells, guiding nerve fibres to their correct targets, and detecting light,



The snail is a mollusc: a backboneless, shell-covered animal that can live equally well in land and water. GETTY IMAGES

each becoming active at the right stage to ensure proper development. We as humans can't do the same yet but decoding these genetic triggers may one day help us awaken our own silent regenerative programs.

Just as snails can regrow their eyes, other animals such as frogs, planaria, and

the African spiny mouse also possess strong regenerative powers. In axolotls, a type of salamander, damaged tissue can revert to a flexible stem cell-like state and rebuild bones, muscles, and other body parts. CRISPR is a gene-editing technology that enables us to redesign, remodel, and regenerate the genome

structure we desire. At the L.V. Prasad Eye Institute at Hyderabad, scientists have used the CRISPR method to correct genetic eye diseases such as Leber congenital amaurosis (LCA) and Stargardt disease, using zebrafish as the animal model.

Animals to humans

Clinically, early trials have already targeted genetic disorders in humans – such as sickle cell disease; β -thalassaemia, a birth-related blood deficiency disorder; and LCA, a type of congenital blindness – using CRISPR editing.

Recently, a first-of-its-kind clinical trial outcome for the treatment of LCA in human patients using CRISPR technology has come from a team at Harvard University (N Engl J Med 2024;390:1972-1984), who showed improved vision in people with inherited blindness. These initia-

tives mark a shift from understanding regeneration in animal models to reactivating repair programs in human cells, establishing a framework for gene-guided regenerative medicine.

These examples remind us that regeneration isn't a rare miracle.

Instead it's an ancient biological program still written into the DNA of many species, and one that science is gradually learning to decode and revive. The new study, on the golden apple snail, has revealed how its genome re-members to rebuild what seems irreparable, and in decoding that memory, science moves closer to restoring human vision: not through divine intervention but through molecular understanding.

The author is thankful to his colleagues Sonali Mohapatra and Dr Vivek Singh for their inputs



Question Corner

Sudden boil

Why do microwave ovens sometimes overheat water?

Water has a property called surface tension: its surface behaves like a stretched skin that tries to shrink. When a vapour bubble forms inside hot water, surface tension tends to squeeze it. For a bubble to grow instead of collapsing, the water must be hot enough for the vapour inside to resist this squeezing. At normal air pressure, water boils at 100°C. However, stable bubbles need extra energy to overcome surface tension, so water can be heated a few degrees above 100°C without properly boiling.

This condition is called superheating. On a stove, the vessel's base and rough spots heat first and bubbles form here. In an oven, the microwaves heat the water more evenly through its volume. Most microwavable containers also have clean, smooth surfaces. As a result, water can sometimes sit in a superheated state without obvious bubbling. If you then jolt the container or drop something like sugar or instant coffee into it, you suddenly disturb it enough for the superheated water to form lots of vapour.

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

Why are Nvidia chips being sold to China again?

What are H200 graphics processing units? Why were their exports to China restricted in the past?

Aroon Deep

The story so far:

In December 8, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that Chinese firms will be able to import Nvidia's H200 graphics processing units, provided the company pays the U.S. government a 25% revenue surcharge.

What are the chips used for?

Nvidia designs and develops graphics processing units, or GPUs. While GPUs are what drive digital displays and help with advanced workloads like video games, some are designed to help with AI development, such as by training large language models (LLMs), and performing other resource-intensive tasks. H200 is one generation behind the Blackwell architecture, which is the cutting edge of Nvidia's product lineup. A key differentiator that Nvidia has is its proprietary CUDA software architecture, which it uses to improve the performance of its GPUs.

For geopolitical reasons, the U.S. has restricted or banned the export of highly advanced chips and the know-how to manufacture them since 2018. The U.S. has been joined in doing this by other countries whose firms hold critical leads in GPU and semiconductor technology, like South Korea, Japan and the Netherlands. One reason why the U.S. is wary of China having access to cutting

edge technology is the dual-use implications. The U.S. wants to prevent China from arriving at technology breakthroughs first, especially in sensitive fields like defence. Maintaining a technological lead is also beneficial from a commercial point of view for U.S. firms, which would enjoy an advantage from having access to equipment and gear that their Chinese competitors don't.

Why is export of H200 chips being allowed?

China has already faced a massive backlash to its semiconductor and AI industry from the U.S. Even previous generation H200 chips were subject to an export quantity quota, and reports indicate that the U.S. wanted visibility and control over who the end user for these technologies were. These restrictions spanned both the Joe Biden presidency and Mr. Trump's terms. These limitations have driven China to invest enormous amounts of resources in research and development, fed by the country's proceeds from its export-driven economy and generous support of industry champions like Huawei. The firm has been able to develop indigenous chipsets, and even an operating system for its new phones, that don't rely on Android, which drives most smartphones other than Apple's. Huawei's indigenous phones use chips that use older processes, but boast decent performance. While tech restrictions arguably provide the U.S. with some breathing room to maintain its technological edge, firms like Nvidia have nevertheless sought to access the vast Chinese market. The firm successfully lobbied the White House to allow its previous generation chips to be sold in China.

Will China allow their purchase?

Nvidia and the U.S. government's rationale is as follows: by allowing advanced GPUs to be sold to Chinese firms, the U.S. would take some momentum out of China's efforts to develop and grow its own alternatives, such as those under development at Huawei. If Chinese firms are able to achieve their ends with H200 chips, the appetite for the more advanced B200 chips may not be pressing. The argument rests on the prospect that Nvidia can make money from Chinese sales, without disturbing the U.S.'s tech lead, while also not speeding up China's research and development for foundational technologies. China knows of these strategies, and has in the past taken both paths before it: allowing firms to buy advanced chips from abroad, and in other cases mandating firms to use home-grown alternatives.

Reports indicate that the H200 chips that China will allow its firms to buy will be limited. That way, the country presumably hopes, the short-term needs of firms dependent on this technology will go on unimpeded, while a larger industry-level push for Chinese chip capabilities will reach U.S. levels. There remains a significant gap between the frontier of chip technologies and China's answer to them.

China has been known to close technological gaps with far more limited access to technology in record time. Its DeepSeek LLM, developed by a relatively small firm at a lower cost than U.S. firms and with older chips, highlighted this to global policymakers. However, the U.S. and allied countries with a technological edge in different parts of the AI and chip ecosystem continue to see value in prolonging their pole position for as long as possible, perhaps until artificial general intelligence (AGI) is achieved.

Does the Netflix-Warner deal threaten cinema?

What will be the impact on consumer choice and competition? How will it change the movie-going experience? Could the merger force further shake-ups or even abandonment of smaller players? What about Paramount's hostile takeover bid of Warner Bros.?

John Xavier

The story so far:

In December 5, Netflix said it will acquire Warner Bros., including its film, television studios, and premium streaming assets like HBO, in a massive deal valued around \$82.7 billion. This merger marks a paradigmatic shift where a new-age streaming platform is absorbing a traditional Hollywood studio and transforming it into a wholly integrated production-cum-distribution powerhouse.

What does the deal grant Netflix?

The deal potentially grants Netflix unparalleled control over content creation, ownership, distribution, and exhibition. While this merger will expand its content library, lower costs, and realise economies of scale for Netflix by integrating production and distribution, it may carry heavy costs for creative industries, independent voices, consumer choice, and the cinematic experience itself.

Have platforms changed viewing patterns?

Streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ and others have dramatically changed how viewers discover and watch movies. An on-device and on-demand viewing experience has disrupted the traditional model of theatrical releases and staggered launches. Streaming platforms have made vast libraries of movies, TV shows and documentaries instantly available to subscribers globally, creating a new home-viewing, binge-watching, and direct-to-streaming release experience. But this revolution has come with trade-offs. The rise of streaming has not only eroded the dominance of theatres, but has also changed the kinds of content platforms favour. For instance, serialised series, and content tailored for the

The deal comes with several interlinked risks for creative freedom and consumer choice

subscription model, are distributed more often than standalone films. This merger will further reshape the streaming medium from within, consolidating not only who owns content, but who decides what is created, what is promoted, and what the audience watches.

How is streaming shaping content?

When Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan said "the medium is the message," he meant that any new medium reshapes our patterns of association, scale and rhythm more profoundly than the actual content it carries. In that sense, streaming isn't simply a delivery mechanism for more films and shows, but a different medium entirely, one that reframes not just what stories are told, but how often, and under what constraints they are produced, distributed and consumed. The merger between Netflix and Warner Bros. crystallises this shift by concentrating not just libraries, but creative and distributive power in one integrated ecosystem.

In a world where films are consumed on laptops and phones, in fragmented viewing sessions, often alongside other activities, the aura of the cinematic event – dark theatre, collective audience, immersive scale – is lost. The medium of streaming has subtly changed the expectation of what a "film" is, from a crafted, singular, communal art event to a disposable content that can be viewed in isolation, and subsumed in an endless stream of short viewing sessions. With this deal, the streaming medium will get even more homogenised and centralised as the combined entity will control not only distribution but also production and curation of content at scale. And the "message" embedded in this medium will likely favour content optimised for streaming metrics like high volume, and frequent release, instead of bold, challenging, or experimental filmmaking that cares about cinematic form, pacing, or theatrical experience.

How will it threaten creative freedom?

This deal comes with several interlinked risks for creative freedom and consumer choice. After the vertical integration of production, content library, and distribution under Netflix, creative decisions may face greater corporate control and commercial pressures. Project approvals, budgets, and promotions will have to pass through an entity that prioritises algorithmic decision making, and rewards scale and predictability over new creative ideas.

Independent or risk-taking filmmakers may struggle to find space in such a system. Projects that demand slower pacing, unconventional narrative, niche appeal, or artistic experimentation may be de-prioritised in favour

of safer, formulaic content that drives subscriptions or data-driven viewing habits.

In such a system, consumer choice will be stunted by what Netflix recommends. Though streaming once promised variety and democratisation, consolidation can shrink the variety of voices and perspectives. Just look at the top 10 trending movies Netflix recommends you. Do you find any of those worth watching just for each film's intrinsic worth, or were they pushed on your screen because they followed a larger societal trend? This type of curation pushes heavily-advertised and controlled content towards consumers. Lastly, this deal will further erode the cinematic experience, which makes film-viewing immersive. Films may increasingly be tailored for streaming consumption that prioritises shorter attention spans, episodic structure, and immediate hooks.

How will competitors change their playbook?

Competitors like Disney+ and Amazon Prime Video, HBO Max (though subsumed under the deal), and smaller streaming services now face a dramatically altered terrain. As a dominant, vertically integrated super-studio emerges, rivals may be compelled to consolidate themselves by forming alliances, merging, or doubling down on niche strategies. A possible new wave of media consolidation may sweep across the industry, reducing the overall diversity of independent platforms. Some critics are already suggesting this merger could force further shake-ups or even abandonment of smaller players. The pressure will not only be commercial, but existential. The possible responses from remaining players could take different forms. Some may pivot to regional or niche content, banking on cultural specificity and local tastes to survive. Others could adopt boutique, art-house-oriented models, emphasising curation over quantity.

What has Paramount done?

Just days after Netflix's announcement, Paramount Skydance placed a hostile, all-cash, bid of \$108.4 billion to acquire Warner Bros. While the Netflix deal concentrates control of production and streaming distribution, the Paramount bid would combine two of Hollywood's legacy studios, plus multiple streaming platforms and news outlets.

What are lawmakers saying?

When reports emerged that Netflix was preparing to acquire Warner Bros., U.S. President Donald Trump said there "could be a problem" with the deal. Democrat Senator Elizabeth Warren labelled the deal an "anti-monopoly nightmare," warning it could lead to price increases, and reduced content diversity. However, this deal will not go through the Federal Communications Commission's approval process as neither Netflix nor Warner Bros. own broadcast stations. But, it could very likely need the Justice Department's go-ahead.



REUTERS

How will Australia's social media ban work?

Why did the government think this was necessary? What are the platforms blocked for children under 16? What do companies which don't comply with the rules face? What did internal filings of certain social media firms reveal with respect to their handling of accounts of teenagers?

Poulomi Chatterjee

The story so far:

In December 10, Australia became the first country in the world to implement a social media ban on users under the age of 16. The ban blocks children from accessing nearly 10 big social platforms, including X and Facebook. Platforms that don't comply with the new rules will face a fine of up to \$33 million (A\$49.5 million). Australia's ban caps a year-long debate over whether governments can effectively stop teenagers from using social media platforms. Now, about half a dozen countries have signalled that they will study Australia's new policy and see if they can emulate it.

What is the new law?

In November, 2024, the Australian government introduced the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024, which mandated a minimum age of 16 for accounts on certain social media platforms. The new law curtails parents giving consent to their children under 16 to use these platforms. The government's rationale is that banning social media will protect the mental health and

The Australian government sees social media as a fertile ground for cyberbullying and harmful content generation

well-being of children. The government sees social media as a fertile ground for cyberbullying, harmful content generation, and online predatory practices.

How have social media firms responded?

Prior to the ban taking effect on December 10, Meta said it was sending warnings to thousands of Australian teenagers between ages 13 and 15, notifying them to download their digital history and delete their accounts. However, it is unclear whether the process has been completed as verification is a lengthy, multi-step undertaking. The country's internet regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority, has noted that there are close to 1,500,000 Facebook users between 13 and 15 years, as well as 3,500,000 Instagram users. Meta's actions are in line with the restrictions imposed by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government on multiple social media platforms including TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, X, Reddit, Twitch and the livestreaming website Kick. These companies are required to take "reasonable steps" to keep underage users off their platforms, failing which they will face fines.

Despite doubts on whether regulation will lead to better mental health outcomes for children, companies are begrudgingly following instructions. A Meta spokesperson said that while they are committed to fulfilling the legal obligations, they have raised their concerns around the regulation, saying a "blanket ban" is hardly the solution. The company claimed this action will isolate teenagers from online communities and information while also giving "inconsistent protection." Mr. Albanese has responded saying that given this is the first time a law like this is being passed, there will be flaws while implementing it.

How are social media firms verifying age?

Meta advised affected users to update their contact details so that the company can SMS or email them once they turn 16. Once these children cross the cut-off age, users can resume operating their accounts and find the same reels, posts, messages and short videos. Users

can also choose to delete their account completely, if they wish. However, there is a fair chance that Meta might inaccurately flag a user as being under 16. An Age Estimation report published by the Australian government found that age verification systems using facial recognition showed false rejection rates higher than "acceptable levels", at 8.5% and 2.6% respectively, for users of 16 and 17 years of age. In case accounts are incorrectly flagged, Meta has said that users can verify their age either with a government ID or a video selfie via the third-party facial age-verification platform Yoti. Critics have voiced concerns about the surveillance risks of checking children's ages with age-verification technology.

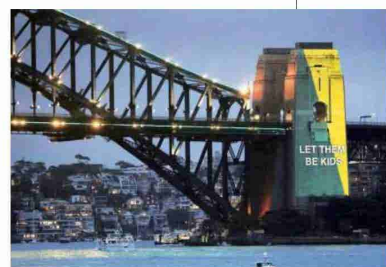
What are the drawbacks?

Meta vice president and global head of safety, Antigone Davis, stated that the company would like the app stores of Apple and Google Play to collect age-related data when users sign up, and verify whether they have reached 16 years on behalf of Meta. Ms. Davis added this would ensure a standard procedure and also maintain user privacy. Meta hasn't disclosed what methods they will use to determine the ages of users, so that children under 16 don't find a loophole through which to evade the ban. But varied options have been discussed, including government IDs, facial or voice recognition, or age inference methods that consider online usage data like interactions to estimate a user's age.

Gaming platforms like Roblox and Discord have recently been forced to introduce age restrictions for specific features, fearing that they could be potential targets.

Why has such a move been implemented?

The recent crusade by parents against social media platforms over their handling of accounts of teenagers has exposed the extent to which they evaded responsibility. The court filings in a lawsuit against Meta and TikTok cited internal chats within these companies. "Instagram is a drug... we're basically pushers," Meta executives reportedly noted in a conversation. Meanwhile, an internal report at TikTok said that "minors did not have executive mental function to control their screen time." The investigation also found that Meta had buried evidence linking higher usage of their platforms with "depression, anxiety, loneliness and social comparison."



New policy: A message reading "Let them be kids" is projected to mark a law banning social media for users under 16 in Australia, on December 10. REUTERS

PROFILES

America, First in the World

U.S. National Security Strategy

The document outlining the foreign policy thinking of the second Trump administration says the U.S. should not be seeking global dominance or trying nation-building in other countries; it seeks strategic stability with Russia, a new balance of power with China, and new terms of engagement with Europe

Varghese K. George

A nation's strategy is based on its ideas of the self, allies, enemies and interests. On all these aspects, Donald J. Trump has come to represent a radically different view from his predecessors, though his capacity to turn that into policy and action is uneven. On November 25, Mr. Trump released the National Security Strategy (NSS) of his second term, which is more in alignment with his America First politics than his first NSS in 2017. The NSS is a document that outlines the foreign policy thinking and approach of each President in each term. In his first term, Mr. Trump was still surrounded by the professional strategic class of the U.S. The 2017 NSS echoed familiar talking points of the past, leading many to conclude that Mr. Trump did not have plans, or the capacity, to shake off what Barack Obama had termed the 'Washington playbook'. The second coming is different, and Mr. Trump's new NSS makes that clear.

This assertion of Mr. Trump's worldview in American strategy is most evident in the approach towards Russia and China. If he can push that through in the face of resistance and sabotage from within the U.S. establishment, NSS-2025 could form the basis of a new world order for the current century. In 2017, Russia was mentioned 25 times, always in negative terms, and 11 times along with China — clubbing these countries together as enemies of the U.S.

In 2025, Russia is mentioned 10 times and China 21 times, with no upfront acrimony towards either. Only once are they mentioned together, and that is to introspect on U.S. and European strategy towards both: "Today, German chemical companies are building some of the world's largest processing plants in China, using Russian gas that they cannot obtain at home." In 2017, Mr. Trump was confrontational towards China, but now he is more pragmatic, to use one of the qualities that the document



Strategic talks: Donald Trump speaks during a Cabinet meeting in the Cabinet Room of the White House in Washington DC. AFP

attributes to him. The discussion on China borders on admiration — of how it managed to develop itself and gain a global footprint in manufacturing and technology — and blames American strategy for allowing China to achieve all this through globalisation.

In 2017, Russia was blamed in the NSS for threatening Europe, undermining democracy and interfering in elections — charges raised by Mr. Trump's domestic opponents, who even linked his 2016 victory to Vladimir Putin's machinations. "The United States and Europe will work together to counter Russian subversion and aggression," the NSS said in 2017. In 2025, it is Europe that is exorciated for various reasons. As for Russia, it is a future partner, though the wording is less ambitious, in "re-establishing conditions of stability within Europe and strategic stability with Russia".

Global dominance

India's place in U.S. strategy has always been contextual, and the proposed changes could be beneficial for New Delhi. Any American strategy that

seeks to drive the world into camps pushes India to take sides it does not want to. Mr. Trump doesn't seem to be keen on reorienting international relations for any grand goals. The NSS discards the wisdom of Republican and Democratic administrations of recent decades that sought American primacy through trade treaties, international organisations and a global governance agenda. In fact, the NSS says the U.S. should not be seeking global dominance, or trying nation-building in other countries, and wants a default position of non-interference in the affairs of other nations unless core interests are threatened.

"The world's fundamental political unit is and will remain the nation-state. It is natural and just that all nations put their interests first and guard their sovereignty. The world works best when nations prioritise their interests. The United States will put our own interests first and, in our relations with other nations, encourage them to prioritise their own interests as well. We stand for the sovereign rights of nations, against the

sovereignty-sapping incursions of the most intrusive transnational organisations, and for reforming those institutions so that they assist rather than hinder individual sovereignty and further American interests," the document reads.

It is his reframing of the idea of the American self and interests that makes Mr. Trump a radical departure from the country's politics of the last half-century, which allowed liberal migration and trade. Core interests of the U.S. are in keeping the homeland safe, prosperous and stable, and its peripheries devoid of any outside players — a possible reference to Chinese influence in Latin America. The homeland needs to be insulated from economic threats and to re-industrialise, but equally importantly, its "spiritual and cultural health" must be preserved. Harder borders, curtailed immigration, and promotion of "strong traditional families" with "healthy children" are part of the plan.

It is exactly on this count that the NSS pushes Europe hard to rework its national and international politics. The

document acknowledges the cultural links between Europe and the U.S., and by implication sees Russia also in the same sphere. While the dominance of anti-globalism in American politics is clear, Europe continues to be under the control of a pro-globalisation elite. The Trump administration is of the view that this elite control is made possible only through censorship and curtailment of democratic rights. There are nationalist movements in all European countries, and the NSS seeks to encourage them. The NSS is putting European governments on notice that the new compact of the continent will include Russia and exclude China. The U.S. would have a separate balance of power with China in the Pacific.

Political liberty

"The larger issues facing Europe include activities of the European Union and other transnational bodies that undermine political liberty and sovereignty, migration policies that are transforming the continent and creating strife, censorship of free speech and suppression of political opposition, cratering birth rates, and loss of national identities and self-confidence."

While the NSS seeks to offer clarity on many issues, the debate within the U.S. on strategy is hardly settled. This document also reflects some of that confusion and contradiction. For instance, it says at one point that the U.S. does not want to dominate the world, but elsewhere it is clear about maintaining dominance in technology and finance, and even controlling global standards in frontier areas such as AI and critical minerals. It swings between taking pride in U.S. alliances and global leadership and discarding the wisdom of previous administrations. The general anti-war approach of Mr. Trump is not popular among America's strategic community and its military-industrial complex. What Mr. Trump's NSS could do to the world is clear, but whether it will pass the barriers of entrenched habits and interests of the Washington elite remains unclear.

THE GIST

▼ In the 2017 document, Russia was mentioned 25 times, always in negative terms, and 11 times along with China — clubbing these countries together as enemies of the U.S.

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▼ The document acknowledges the cultural links between Europe and the U.S., but seeks to encourage nationalist movements in the continent

Sacred claims

Preah Vihear

The ancient Hindu temple built by Khmer kings sits at the heart of the ongoing border tensions between Thailand and Cambodia

Stanly Johny

Perched atop a steep cliff in the Dangrek mountain range, Preah Vihear straddles the natural frontier between Cambodia and Thailand. The forested hills stretch from the Mekong River, Southeast Asia's longest, flowing from the Tibetan Plateau to the South China Sea, to the highlands of San Kamphaeng, Thailand.

Built between the 9th and 12th centuries by Khmer kings like Yasovarman I and Suryavarman I and II, the temple honours Shiva as a sacred mountain abode. Originally known as Sri Sikharavisara, meaning 'Glorious Lord of the Mountain', the temple is located in Cambodia's Preah Vihear province. Rising more than 700 metres above the plains, it commands sweeping views of the surrounding landscape. While access today is primarily from Cambodia, the temple's position has long made it a point of contention. It lies at the heart of the Thai-Cambodia tensions, which flared again last week with cross-border air strikes and artillery shelling.

Unlike the conventional east-facing rectangular plan of most Khmer temples, Preah Vihear follows a linear north-south axis. According to UNESCO, the complex comprises a series of sanctuaries connected by pavements and staircases stretching over



ISTOCKPHOTO

800 metres. Five ornate *gopuras* (gateways), carved with Hindu mythology and Khmer symbols, are built on the rugged cliff face. The dispute between Thailand and Cambodia has its roots in colonial-era borders. The Franco-Siamese treaties of 1904 and 1907 defined the frontier along the watershed line of the Dangrek Mountains.

When French surveyors created maps, they placed Preah Vihear on the Cambodian side despite the temple sitting atop a cliff more easily accessible from Thailand. After Cambodia got independence from France in 1953, its rulers renewed claims over Preah Vihear, but Thailand had deployed troops in the region.

ICJ ruling

Cambodia took the dispute to the Hague-based International Court of Justice (ICJ), which in 1962 ruled that the temple lay in territory under Cambodian sovereignty. The Court noted that the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1904 provided that the frontier was to fol-

low the watershed line, and that a map based on the work of a Mixed Delimitation Commission showed the Temple on the Cambodian side of the boundary.

Thailand claimed that the map had no binding legal status and had never been formally accepted by Bangkok. The ICJ rejected this contention. It ordered Thailand "to withdraw any military or police force stationed there." While the temple was awarded to Cambodia, the sovereignty around the surrounding land remained undefined, fuelling periodic flare-ups. UNESCO's decision to list the temple as a World Heritage Site in 2008 underscored its historical significance, but also sharpened sensitivities, leading to cross-border fighting.

In April 2011, Cambodia asked the ICJ to interpret the 1962 Judgment, arguing that while Thailand recognised Cambodia's sovereignty over the temple itself, it did not recognise the sovereignty of Cambodia over the surrounding area. In its ruling on No-

vember 11, 2013, the Court declared unanimously that the 1962 Judgment decided that Cambodia possessed "sovereignty over the whole territory of the promontory of Preah Vihear", and ordered Thailand to withdraw its forces from that territory. The court also affirmed that the temple was a site of religious and cultural significance for "the peoples of the region", and asked both Thailand and Cambodia to cooperate for its protection.

Despite the ruling, tensions continued to simmer. These flared into open conflict in July 2025, when cross-border fighting killed dozens and displaced more than 300,000 people. The five-day clashes were halted through diplomatic intervention by Malaysia and the U.S. But in November, Thailand announced it would suspend implementation of the ceasefire after a landmine blast injured several soldiers. The decision led to renewed fighting on December 7, with Cambodia accusing Thailand of launching air strikes.

On December 12, U.S. President Donald Trump claimed that he had talked to the leaders of both countries and secured another ceasefire. Yet, tensions continued to linger in the forested, hilly, and sparsely populated borderlands, an area dotted with ancient monuments and sacred cultural carvings.

Turbulent skies

IndiGo

The airline, which commands a 65% share of India's domestic aviation market, says operations are stabilising after days of chaos that saw hundreds of flight cancellations

Saurabh Trivedi

Over the last decade, India's skies have grown busier than ever. The country has emerged as the world's third-largest domestic aviation market, driven by rapid economic growth, rising middle-class travel and expanding regional connectivity. However, while the number of airports has surged, the number of airlines has shrunk, making IndiGo virtually synonymous with air travel in India.

As per the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), IndiGo currently commands a dominant 65% share of the domestic market. The Air India Group — comprising Air India and Air India Express — holds 26%, while Akasa Air has 5%. SpiceJet accounts for just 2%, with all other airlines together making up the remaining 2%.

Several national and regional carriers have struggled to survive in what is often described as the world's fastest-growing aviation market. The collapse of Jet Airways and Go First further accelerated consolidation, allowing IndiGo to significantly expand its footprint.

This dominance, however, has come under scrutiny following recent mass cancellations of IndiGo flights that caused widespread disruption to air traffic across the country. Regulators observed that



AFP

the airline had failed to adequately manage its operational resources, including aircraft availability and pilot crew planning.

In response, authorities decided that IndiGo's approved winter schedule should be reviewed and curtailed by at least 10%.

The issue was also raised in the Rajya Sabha on December 8, where Civil Aviation Minister K. Ram Mohan Naidu said the government would take "very, very strict action" against IndiGo to "set an example" for the industry. The Minister said the disruption stemmed from IndiGo's internal lapses, particularly its failure to manage crew availability and duty rosters.

Mr. Naidu also outlined the implementation of revised Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) norms, introduced following a High Court order in April 2025. Of the 22 guidelines, 15 were implemented from July 1 and the remaining seven from November 1. The updated FDTL norms represent a significant tightening of crew scheduling

regulations. Pilots are now mandated 48 hours of weekly rest, compared to previous rule of 36 hours and night landings have been limited to two from six earlier.

IndiGo board chairman Vikram Singh Mehta, in his message to air passengers, rejected the allegations that the crisis was engineered and that the airline tried to influence the government over the revised FDTL rules.

Flight safety

While airlines argue these measures disrupt roster planning and aircraft utilisation, especially at hubs with heavy night operations, pilot unions maintain that the caps are essential to reduce cumulative fatigue and enhance flight safety.

Financial data highlights the stark contrast within the sector. In a written reply, the Ministry of Civil Aviation said IndiGo was the only major airline to post a profit in FY 2024-25, earning ₹7,253 crore. Air India reported a loss of ₹3,976 crore, Air India Ex-

press ₹5,832 crore, Akasa Air ₹1,986 crore and Alliance Air ₹691 crore. SpiceJet also remained in the red with a ₹56-crore loss, while regional carrier Star Air was a rare exception, posting a modest profit of ₹68 crore. Air India is currently undergoing a massive transformation after being taken over by the Tata Group in 2022.

Meanwhile, IndiGo continues to plan aggressively for the future. The airline has placed a firm order for 500 Airbus A320neo family aircraft — the largest single aircraft order ever placed by any airline with Airbus. These deliveries, scheduled between 2030 and 2035, will further strengthen IndiGo's scale and long-term growth prospects.

Amid regulatory action, IndiGo has said operations are stabilising. Demonstrating "continuous operational normalisation" over the past five days, the airline said it is operating over 2,050 flights a day under its revised, scaled-down schedule in line with government directives. All 138 operational destinations remain connected, according to an IndiGo spokesperson.

As India's aviation sector continues its rapid expansion, the current episode underscores the challenges of balancing growth, safety, competition and accountability in an increasingly consolidated market.



Among the 442 persons who died in the fire at a school function in Mandi Dabwali on December 23, 1995, as many as 173 were children. (Right) A mass cremation being performed. TRIBUNE FILE PHOTOS



7 MINUTES THAT SHOOK DABWALI

30 yrs on, the survivors have just one wish — let's learn from fire tragedy before another town burns

ANIL KAKKAR

IQBAL SINGH 'SHANT' often looks at his hands before he turns his gaze upwards and thanks the Almighty. The fingers are curled, the skin is scarred, and the palms carry the memory of fire. A normal grip of the hands is not possible, yet he can drive a car, ride a two-wheeler and being a journalist, manages to type in three languages.

For Iqbal, his hands and the burns on his back and neck are proof that fate had other things in store for him on a day when hundreds did not return home.

Nearly 30 years after the Dabwali fire tragedy of December 23, 1995 — one of the deadliest fire disasters in India — Iqbal's scars are a daily reminder of the events of the day. When he meets someone who has lost both hands, he becomes emotional, because he feels he was luckier than many others who perished in the flames or survived with more severe injuries.

Iqbal was 19 when he accompanied his father, freedom fighter Gurdev Singh 'Shant', to a school function at the DAV School campus in Mandi Dabwali in Haryana's Sirsa district. They were attending as special guests.

Iqbal remembers every minute detail. He was seated in the first row, second or third chair, while his father sat beside the main guests. A lamp-lighting ceremony had just taken place, and Iqbal noticed a burning matchstick lying carelessly near

the stage. Instinctively, he got up, stepped forward and extinguished it.

He had barely taken his seat when screams erupted from the entrance gate of the pandal. Within seconds, someone shouted that a fire had broken out. Panic followed like a wave.

Iqbal first ran out to save himself. But as soon as he reached the open ground outside, the thought struck him: where is his father? Without hesitation, he turned around and sprinted back into the burning pandal.

The stage covering had already caught fire. People were pushing, stumbling, falling. Children were crying. Smoke choked the air. Iqbal somehow located his father and began pulling him towards the exit. Just as they neared the main gate, a huge burning cloth sheet from the *shami* on the stage collapsed upon them.

Iqbal instinctively put both hands over his head and bent low, trying to shield his father. Flames gripped his arms and back within seconds. His father was completely engulfed. Iqbal staggered out, burning, choking, desperate for air. His father never made it. That day, Iqbal lost the man who had taught him to be fearless.

Dabwali still remembers December 23 as its darkest day. The winter sky that afternoon carried no warning. Yet, at 1:40 pm, a suspected short-circuit triggered a blaze inside the tightly packed tent where the school function was underway.

Fuelled by plastic, cloth and wooden



Survivors Vinod Bansal (L) and Iqbal Singh 'Shant' at the Dabwali fire memorial where the names of all those who died are engraved.

frames, the fire shot upward and outward. By 1:47 pm, just seven minutes later, 442 persons were dead. Among them were 173 children, including 26 toddlers aged three or younger. The number represented nearly 26 per cent of the town's population at the time.

The fire was so sudden and fast that people didn't get time to stand, let alone run. Many died holding hands. Some families were wiped out entirely. Bodies lay charred beyond recognition; 13 children remained unidentified. The nation was shaken.

Even Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao visited the town to pay tribute.

Nearly 196 persons survived with burns of varying degrees. Some gradually

healed. Some lived the rest of their lives with permanent disabilities. And some, like Iqbal, learnt to rebuild life slowly, painfully, and bravely.



Dabwali survivor Vinod Bansal says the fire, though an accident, was due to negligence.

Another such survivor is Vinod Bansal, now secretary of the Dabwali Fire Victims Memorial Trust. His face, hands and body were severely burnt. Even today, when people look at the scars and ask, "What happened to you?" — it pulls him back to that afternoon.

Bansal helps maintain the memorial built at the site of the tragedy, a library for children and a wall engraved

with the names of all those who died. He says three decades after the fire tragedy, its memory is still alive.

For him, the tragedy carries a larger les-

son. "The fire was an accident, yes," he says, "but also the result of negligence. And we are still repeating the same mistakes over and over again."

Every time Bansal sees a news report of a fire incident, whether at the Goa nightclub recently or the blaze at a coaching centre in Kota where children had to jump off the building to save themselves, his wounds reopen. Wires tangled in electricity poles, unsafe wiring inside homes and shops, inflammable material stored carelessly, he sees danger everywhere.

"We treat rules as suggestions," he says, "until the day the flouted rules take revenge."

The walls of the Dabwali fire memorial carry painted lessons — how to store inflammable items safely, how to prevent short-circuits, what emergency exits should look like. These are visual guides, reminders, and warnings.

Yet, as both Iqbal and Vinod note, fire safety remains largely absent from school curriculums. "We teach children algebra," Iqbal says, "but not how to save their own lives or of others."

He believes the responsibility lies not only with governments but also with ordinary people. "We blame the authorities," he says, "but negligence often begins with us. A single careless act can cost hundreds of lives."

Today, Iqbal Singh 'Shant' writes stories, travels independently and fights daily battles to stay optimistic. He credits his survival to divine grace, to courage and to the belief that life must be lived fully even when flames have tried to consume it.

When he types, each keystroke reminds him of the day he protected his head with these hands. When he meets someone without limbs, he silently thanks the heavens. His story, like Vinod Bansal's, is not just about survival, it is about responsibility, memory and collective duty.

The Dabwali fire was not merely an accident; it was a warning against negligence, a lesson paid for with lives.

Three decades later, the survivors of the tragedy ask of only one thing from fellow citizens — learn from the fire before another town burns.

Simulating how the brain signals in a chemistry lab

ISER-Mohali research shows the way to potentially control molecules, as quest for artificial biological circuits continues

BHARTESH SINGH THAKUR

DURING the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, Dr Subhrajit Maiti of the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (ISER), Mohali, was diagnosed with a gall bladder stone though he experienced pain in the shoulder and not the abdomen. At the Fortis Hospital in the city, doctors explained that this kind of pain can radiate to other parts of the body. Trained in systems chemistry, Dr Maiti, 40, wondered how pain messengers from a diseased part of the body spread out to different organs. After his surgery, he decided to work on the mystery with his team at ISER.

"We do not always feel the pain at the exact location of the inflamed or diseased body parts. A problem in the heart can be felt in the left arm; inflammation in the liver in the right shoulder. This is because of the signal perceived by the brain via a complex neural network that connects it and different organs," Dr Maiti told *The Tribune*.

Messengers of pain may diffuse away from the diseased body part and activate afferent nerves, connecting the brain, away from the source, he says. "In a nutshell, the way our brain processes information is not a straightforward linear system. It's via a complex non-linear neural network."

To solve the riddle, Dr Maiti focused on the reaction-diffusion phenomena — first, something akin to a chemical reaction happens, changing one substance into another.

Then, new substances spread out or diffuse from a higher to a lower concentration area.

The reaction-diffusion process is apparent in the formation of patterns in nature — like the stripes on a zebra or the spots on a leopard; and in how signals travel within our bodies to trigger specific responses. Also, how, after division, only two cells, the sperm and ovum, begin to form different organs.

The reaction-diffusion models were first proposed by Alan Turing in 1952 to explain the formation of patterns in biological systems. "This is where molecules interact and spread out, creating complex patterns and controlling events in space and time. Imagine a system in which an activator molecule triggers a reaction, but another molecule, an inhibitor, controls its activity. What if the inhibitor works locally, close to the source, while the activator has a long reach, triggering reactions far away? This interesting scenario, called local inhibition and distal activation, or LIDA, is what we have explored. It is an important biological signalling event," explains Dr Maiti.

After receiving a grant of ₹40 lakh from the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) and ₹75 lakh from the Ministry of Education, he, along with two PhD students and a BE student, began developing a synthetic chemical system to mimic complex neural networks.

From 2022 to 2023, the team faced failure. The students grew discouraged. Still, the soft-spoken Maiti remained resilient. "After every failed experiment, there was Dr Maiti, who sat with me to discuss and



Dr S Maiti (centre) with researchers at the ISER-Mohali lab.

reconceptualise the experiments," said Dr Rishi Ram Mahato, who is now doing post-doctoral research in the Czech Republic.

Niranjani Adikesavane, who was collaborating as part of her final-year BE project, recounted, "There were many moments when I felt unsure about being able to produce results. I had to go back to the fundamentals many times over."

From January 2024, the results began to emerge. Dr Maiti and his team first created a gel containing the enzyme 'urease' and gold nanoparticles. Urease was derived from the jack bean plant. They then added two key ingredients — urea, which acts as a pro-activator, and adenosine triphosphate or ATP, which acts as an inhibitor. When urea encounters urease, it is converted into ammonium bicarbonate, triggering a chemical reaction in the gel.

Meanwhile, ATP inhibits the same reaction. Importantly, ATP binds to the gold nanoparticles, slowing its diffusion through the gel, while urea diffuses faster.

By injecting a mixture of urea and ATP into the centre of the gel, the team noted where, when and how quickly the reaction was activated.

The team also used mathematical models to simulate diffusion rates, enzyme kinetics and inhibitor strength. "In essence, we can control the molecules where and when to react, as natural systems do," says Dr Mahato.

Their work — that combines chemistry's precision with biology's power, leading to reliable, programmable life-like systems that solve real-world problems and resulting in a deeper knowledge of life itself — was published in scientific journal *Nature Communications* last month.

IMPLICATIONS OF EXPERIMENT

According to Dr Maiti, the capacity to control the spatial location and timing of a chemical reaction's activation ("distal programmability") suggests potential applications in creating artificial neural networks that use chemical signals for computation and information processing.

"If we imagine our brain works like a computer, it uses trillions of chemical molecules and their reaction without using electricity. It's like an office where workers are molecules (such as proteins, sugars, vitamins, DNA, etc) and they are working without phones, emails, or even talking.

The only way to communicate or decide anything is by moving (diffusion) and meeting or handshaking (reaction). This is the way our body computes even long-distance decisions," said Dr Maiti.

He added, "It is akin to the way a drop of coloured ink in a dish of water can create moving spirals and targets all by itself, using nothing but slow diffusion and local chemical reactions. Life is nature's original reaction-diffusion computer, running silently inside our body 24/7 until we die."

Traditional computers cannot work in the water media, whereas living systems or the brain can work in an aqueous fluidic system utilising massive sets of chemical reaction. "Making a brain-like molecular computer that operates in water, deriving energy from the chemical components within the system, is the ultimate challenge for researchers. Therefore, these chemical reaction network-based systems offer the potential for highly complex computation at significantly lower energy consumption compared to traditional electronics," says Dr Maiti.

Commenting on Maiti's work, his colleague at ISER and prominent biophysicist Dr Sabyasachi Rakshit says, "This work demonstrates how molecular properties (like diffusivity) can be engineered to programme complex reactions, allowing for the creation of artificial biological circuits and dynamic materials. In fact, it can also bridge the gap between theoretical biological models and practical nanobiotechnological applications."

PROSPECT



Swami Avimukteshwarand Saraswati Ji Maharaj felicitating New Delhi Station Manager Rakesh Sharma with the Marand Honour for dedicating his selfless service to hundreds of railway passengers during his three decades as a serving Railman. The honour was bestowed in the event organised by Kurukshetra Gurukul Foundation led by its Founder President Sandeep Doo. Sharma is credited with reaching out to people/passengers and help them in searching for lost and found items in trains, platforms

Raj Kumar Goyal to be sworn in as new CIC

Former IAS officer Raj Kumar Goyal will be sworn in as Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) by President Droupadi Murmu on Monday.

Former Railway Board chief Jaya Verma Sinha, former IPS officer Swagat Das, former CSS officer Sanjeev Kumar Jindal, former IAS officer Surendra Singh Meena and ex-Indian Forest Service officer Khushwant Singh Sethi have been recommended as Information Commissioners.

Senior journalists P R Ramesh and Ashutosh Chaturvedi, and Sudha Rani Relangi, Member (Legal), PNGRAB will take oath as ICs by newly sworn in CIC.

Cooperatives key to India's self-reliance: Minister Gurjar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Guwahati

Union Minister Krishan Pal Gurjar on Saturday emphasised the role of the cooperative movement in making the country self-reliant, with States like Assam to play a special part in it. He was speaking at the opening of the 4th Cooperative Mela 2025, organised by the State's Co-operation department, under the guidance of the Ministry of Co-operation.

The three-day event will showcase the strength, diversity and potential of the cooperative movement in the State. Gurjar, the Union Minister of State for Co-operation, said that the cooperative movement in Assam is a natural extension of the State's deep cultural and spiritual ethos.

He paid tribute to the great Vaishnavite saints, Srīmatā Shankaradev and Madhavadhye, whose teachings on unity, equality and service to society form the very foundation of the cooperative spirit.

He maintained that under the leadership of the Prime Minister, the focused guidance of the Union Minister of Co-operation, the national vision of 'Sahkar Se Samridh' (Prosperity through Co-operation) is transforming into a vibrant reality.

Gurjar highlighted the establishment of the Ministry of Co-operation in 2021 as a historic step, providing the necessary institutional impetus and a clear blueprint for an all-round, world-class cooperative system in the country. Praising Assam's reforms in this sector, the Union Minister said this State-level proactive implementation has posi-

tioned it as a leader in key national initiatives, including the 100 per cent computerisation of Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS), with over 800 PACS already adopting the new Model Byelaws.

He said that this progress is empowering youth and women, fostering entrepreneurship in diverse sectors and contributing to financial inclusion for over 32 lakh members. Assam is now firmly aligned with the National Cooperative Policy 2025's goal of establishing one cooperative in every village by 2026, Gurjar said, urging collective effort to build a prosperous, self-reliant and cooperative-led future for the State.

State Minister for Co-operation Jogen Mohan, also speaking on the occasion, said the exhibition is a celebration of grassroots empowerment. He praised the participants for achieving self-dependence and demonstrating remarkable resourcefulness by successfully turning waste into valuable resources using locally available materials.

He detailed the comprehensive benefits these cooperatives are bringing to the people, spanning diverse sectors—from the production of essential goods to the success of women's Self-Help Groups.

The Cooperative Mela features participation from 160 cooperative societies representing key sectors such as handloom, fishery, dairy, agriculture and youth, and women-led enterprises, providing a vibrant platform for showcasing local products, innovations and cooperative success stories.

C seeks unified judicial policy, tech for courts

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Jaisalmer

Pushing for a "unified judicial policy", Chief Justice of India Surya Kant on Saturday said technology can help align standards and practices across courts, creating a "seamless experience" for citizens, regardless of their location.

He said high courts — due to the federal structure — have had their own practices and technological capacities, and "regional barriers" can be broken down with technology to create a more unified judicial ecosystem.

Delivering the keynote address at the West Zone Regional Conference in Jaisalmer, Kant proposed the idea of a "national judicial ecosystem" and called for an overhaul of India's judicial system with the integration of technology.

"Today, as technology reduces geographical barriers and enables convergence, it invites us to think of justice not as regional systems operating in parallel,

but as one national ecosystem with shared standards, seamless interfaces, and coordinated goals," he said. He emphasised how the role of technology in the judiciary has evolved over time.

"Technology is no longer merely an administrative convenience. It has evolved into a constitutional instrument that strengthens equality before the law, expands access to justice, and enhances institutional efficiency," he said, highlighting how digital tools can bridge gaps in the judicial system. Kant pointed out that technology enables the judiciary to overcome the limitations of physical distance and bureaucratic hurdles.

"It allows the judiciary to transcend physical barriers and bureaucratic rigidities to deliver outcomes that are timely, transparent and principled," he said, adding that the effective use of technology can modernise the delivery of justice and make it more accessible to citizens across the country.

The CJ called for implementing a "unified judicial policy".

He said India's judicial system has long been shaped by its federal structure, and different high courts have their own practices and technological capacities.

"India's vast diversity has led to different high courts evolving their own practices, administrative priorities and technological capacities. This variation, though natural in a federal democracy, has resulted in uneven experiences for litigants across the country," he said.

Kant underscored that predictability is crucial for building trust in the judicial system.

"A core expectation citizens place upon the courts is predictability," he said, adding that citizens should not only expect fair treatment but also consistency in how cases are handled across the country.

He pointed to the potential of technology in improving predictability.

"Technology enables us to

track systemic delays and make problems visible rather than concealed," he said.

By identifying areas where delays occur, such as in bail matters or cases involving certain types of disputes, courts can take targeted action to address these issues and improve efficiency, Kant said.

The CJ explained that data-driven tools could identify the reasons behind delays or bottlenecks, allowing for faster, more focused solutions.

"Technology enables prioritisation by flagging sensitive case categories, monitoring pendency in real time and ensuring transparent listing protocols," he said.

Justice Surya Kant also discussed the importance of prioritising urgent cases where delays could result in significant harm. He highlighted his recent administrative order that ensures urgent cases, such as bail petitions or habeas corpus cases, are listed within two days of curing defects.

"Where delay causes deep

harm, the system must respond with urgency," he stated, explaining that technology can help courts identify and expedite such cases. Kant also raised the issue of the clarity of judicial decisions.

He noted that many litigants, despite winning cases, often struggle to understand the terms of their judgment due to complex legal language.

"Although the orders had gone in their favour, they remained unsure of what relief they had actually secured because the language was too technical, vague or evasive to understand," he said.

He advocated for more uniformity in how judgments are written. "A unified judicial approach must therefore extend to how we communicate outcomes," he said.

The CJ also discussed the role of AI and digital tools in improving case management. He pointed to the potential of AI-based research assistants and digital case management

systems to streamline judicial processes.

"Emerging technological tools are now capable of performing once-unthinkable functions. They can highlight missing precedent references, cluster similar legal questions, and simplify factual narration," he said, explaining how these technologies can help judges make more consistent decisions.

He also highlighted tools like the National Judicial Data Grid and e-courts, which are already helping to standardise processes like case filings and tracking.

Kant reiterated that the integration of technology into the judicial process is not just about improving efficiency but about upholding the integrity of the system and strengthening public trust. "The measure of innovation is not the complexity of the software we deploy, but the simplicity with which a citizen understands the outcome of their case and believes that justice has been served," he said.

Papon lights up IRC 40th Foundation Day

GYANVI SHARMA
■ New Delhi

The Indian Railways Finance Corporation (IRFC) celebrated its 40th foundation day on December 12, 2025 in a spectacular evening filled with music, joy and nostalgia.

The highlight of the evening was none other than the renowned singer Papon (Angaraag Mahanta), whose performance left the audience mesmerised.

The night began with a captivating short film showcasing Papon's journey — glimpses of his blockbuster hits, achievements and memorable past performances. The cinematic introduction seamlessly led to his grand entry on stage, greeted by the roaring applause of the audience.

Setting the tone for the evening, Papon opened with his iconic song "Kyon" from the movie Barfi, instantly winning hearts and raising the energy in the auditorium.

What followed was a performance that combined raw enthusiasm with a soft, enduring charm. Papon's voice resonated deeply, touching not just the ears but the hearts of everyone present. Among the highlights was his rendition of the latest hit

"Qayde Se" from the movie Metro In Dino, which had the audience swaying to the rhythm, their flashlights illuminating the hall like a sea of stars.

He delighted the crowd further with a surprise selection of ghazals by Jagjit

Singh, including the soulful "Tum Itna Jo Muskura Rahe Ho," along with evergreen classics like "Pehla Nasha" and "Khatrona Ka Khoon," originally rendered by Sadhana Sargam and Udit Narayan. Each note and each verse carried a serene and almost magical quality that held the audience spellbound.

The energy peaked when the crowd passionately requested the chart-topping song "Bulleya" from the movie Sultan. Papon answered with an intriguing performance, doing full justice to the audience's excitement.

Accompanied by a talented team of musicians, including skilled sitarists, flutists and percussionists, Papon's ensemble delivered a flawless musical synergy,

creating an unforgettable experience.

As the evening drew to a close, Papon and his band members were felicitated with mementos and warm appreciation from Indian Railways CEO Satish Kumar and the entire IRFC team led by CMD Manoj Kumar Dubey, recognising their remarkable contribution to the celebration.

The event was more than a musical performance; it was a celebration of talent, emotion and the enduring power of music to bring people together. The 40th foundation day of IRFC will be remembered not only for its milestone but also for the unforgettable night when Papon's voice transformed the evening into a heartfelt musical journey.



Chennai dams top: 27-year record broken after monsoon and cyclone

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Chennai

For the first time in nearly 27 years, water in three chief dams supplying drinking water to Chennai have reached their full reservoir level. Three other dams, too, are brimming with water as their levels have reached the maximum level, thanks to the northeast monsoon and cyclone Ditwah. The combined storage of water in all six dams accounted for a total 12,273.40 mcf (million cubic feet), which is 92.83 per cent, on December 12, as against a storage of 10,068.42 mcf of water during the corresponding period last year.

Poonidi and Puzhal dams have 100 per cent storage, while Chembarambakkam has 99.37 per cent water. As per the data available with the Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board, levels of water in Poonidi and Puzhal reservoirs have reached the FRL of 140 feet (3,221 mcf storage) and 50.20 feet

(3,300 mcf storage), respectively. The Chembarambakkam with a full tank level of 85.31 feet (3,645 mcf storage), currently has 3,622 mcf of water. All three reservoirs continue to receive inflows from the catchment areas.

"The water levels reached the maximum level due to cyclone Ditwah that triggered intense rainfall in Chennai and neighbouring districts during the northeast monsoon," officials said.

Cholavaram dam (65.50 feet height), Kannankottai Thevody Kandigai (115.35 feet), and Veeranam (47.50 feet) have water up to 59.22 feet, 116.32 feet, and 46.10 feet, respectively.

In 2015, when the city and suburbs reeled under massive floods, the water level at Poonidi dam stood at 139.26 feet, which was 98.91 per cent of the storage (i.e. 2,905 mcf). Puzhal stood at 48.60 feet — 88.85 per cent (2,932 mcf), and Chembarambakkam stood at 83.05 feet with 83.07 per cent storage (3,028 mcf),

India in talks with Mexico on high tariffs; reserves right to act to protect exporters

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

India is engaged with Mexico over the South American nation's decision to unilaterally raise tariffs on a number of products to find mutually beneficial solutions, even as New Delhi reserves the right to take appropriate measures to safeguard the interests of its exporters, an official said on Saturday.

These duties are imposed against countries that do not have free trade agreements with Mexico, including India, China, South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia. The official said that India, in fact, was engaged with Mexico during the initial tabling of a bill in this regard. The Embassy in Mexico raised the issue with the Ministry of Economy on September 30, 2025, itself, seeking special concessions to shield Indian exports from the new tariffs.

"India values its partnership with Mexico and stands ready to collaborate towards a stable and balanced trade environment that benefits businesses and consumers in both countries,"

the official added. Further, both the countries are looking to start negotiations for a free trade agreement, and terms of reference (ToR) to initiate the talks formally are expected to be finalised soon. Experts said that the trade agreement will help insulate Indian companies from these tariffs, which were imposed under pressure from the US to align with America on increasing tariffs against China and prevent transshipment to America.

Mexico's Senate has approved a new tariff measure on December 11, 2025, and it has since been cleared by both chambers of Congress. It is aimed at boosting manufacturing and reducing trade imbalances.

On the Indian exports front, Mexico will impose steep import tariffs — ranging from about 5 per cent to as high as 50 per cent on a wide range of goods (about 1,463 tariff lines) from countries that do not have free trade agreements with Mexico, including India, China, South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia.

However, the list of items covered is yet to be officially notified. The higher duties

will take effect on January 1, 2026. "The Department of Commerce is engaged with Mexico's Ministry of Economy to explore mutually beneficial solutions which align with global trade rules," the official said. A high-level meeting in this regard between Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal and Mexico's Vice Minister of Economy Luis Rosendo has already taken place and follow on technical meetings are expected soon.

India reserves the right to take appropriate measures to safeguard the interests of Indian exporters, while continuing to pursue a solution through constructive dialogue," the official added.

The Government official further said that the actual impact on Indian exports will depend on the criticality of Indian exports to domestic supply chains in Mexico and ability of Indian companies to secure exemptions or pass on the tariff cost to the Mexican consumers.

India believes that unilateral increases in MFN (most favoured nation) tariffs without prior consultations, do not align with the spirit of our cooperative economic

engagement or with the principles of predictability and transparency underpinning the multilateral trading system.

The official also said that the Government is currently examining the details and implications of Mexico's tariff revisions and remains engaged with all stakeholders to monitor the evolving situation. Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO) Director General Ajay Sahai said that Mexico's decision is a matter of concern, particularly for sectors like automobiles and auto components, machinery, electrical and electronics, organic chemicals, pharmaceuticals, textiles and plastics. "Such steep duties will erode our competitiveness and risk disrupting supply chains that have taken years to develop," Sahai said, adding that this development also underlines the little urgency for India and Mexico to fast-track a comprehensive trade agreement. Domestic auto component manufacturers will face enhanced cost pressures with Mexico hiking duties on Indian imports, according to industry body ACMA.

UNESCO meet at Delhi's Red Fort concludes; 67 new elements added to ICH lists

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ New Delhi

A key UNESCO meet on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) being held at Delhi's Red Fort ends on Saturday, with the panel adding 67 new living heritage elements from various countries during the nearly week-long session.

The next session of the Intergovernmental Committee (IGC) for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage will be hosted in December, 2026 in China's Xiamen city, a senior official of UNESCO said on Friday.

The closing ceremony was

hosted in the evening by India at the temporary pavilion, Plenary Hall, at the fort complex, as delegates will head out for sightseeing on Saturday after days of intense discussion.

The session was held for the first time in India with the Red Fort, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, as its venue. Fumiko Ohinata, Secretary, UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, in her address at the ceremony, described the Mughal-era fort complex as a "majestic backdrop" for the meeting.

The Mughal-era monu-

ment is famous for its massive fortified walls. "We enjoyed all India moments," Ohinata said.

Later, interacting with PTI, she said the next session of the IGC will be held in China.

Sixty-seven cultural elements, including India's Deepavali, Iran's art of mirror-work in Persian architecture, the UAE's traditional art form that blends performing arts with oral tradition and Switzerland's yodeling, have been added to UNESCO's various intangible heritage lists over the period of December 9-11.

Nominations were sent by nearly 80 countries. In a Statement, UNESCO

said over the course of the week, the 24 member States of the committee examined 67 living heritage elements, including 11 elements inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding and 53 elements inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity; and one programme selected on the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Furthermore, in response to the positive impact of the safeguarding measures put in place since their inscription, two elements

have also been transferred from the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and their corresponding safeguarding programmes have been added to the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices.

With this year's inscription, 849 cultural practices in 157 countries are now part of UNESCO's living heritage lists, UNESCO said.

"Fragile yet essential, living heritage remains a pillar of cultural diversity in a world that can at times feel fragmented and divided. Living, creative, and carried

by communities, it reminds us of what binds us together," UNESCO Director-General Khaled El-Enany was quoted as saying in the Statement.

"Let us keep alive the hope that unites us today; to share knowledge, strengthen connections, and build bridges across borders," he said.

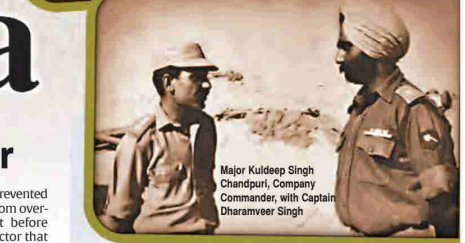
The 20th session of the panel began on December 8. The opening ceremony was held on December 7, with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar attending it as the chief guest. "We have reaffirmed the extraordinary diversity, creativity, and living wisdom of communities across the world. Each

inscription is not merely an addition to a list but a renewed commitment to safeguarding practices that give meaning, identity, and continuity to human societies," India's Ambassador and Permanent Delegate to UNESCO, Vishal V Sharma, said in his address at the closing ceremony. Union Culture Secretary Vivek Aggarwal said this session has reaffirmed the significance of intangible heritage in "sustaining communities, nurturing continuity and fortifying social cohesion, particularly at a time when globalisation, conflict and climate pressure challenge our cultural ecosystems".

CORRIGENDUM
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Online applications are invited from the candidate for admission in All India Service Centre of Preparation for Competitive Examinations (AIS-CCE) for preparation of UPSC/PCS (UGC/NET/JRF). The last date for admission of online applications is 15.01.2026. For online registration and more details, visit website <http://gndu.ac.in/aife>
(Deputy Director)
RO 2426/12025-26/6911
Dated CHD - 12/12/2025

The Pioneer AGENDA

War is an act of violence pushed to its utmost limits
— Carl von Clausewitz



Fought in the unforgiving sands of the Thar Desert, the Battle of Longewala remains one of the most extraordinary defensive stands in military history. From December 4-7, 1971, a small Indian Army company—vastly outnumbered and facing overwhelming armour—held its ground against a major Pakistani offensive. Longewala is now regarded globally as a case study in battlefield strategy, leadership and grit. It is celebrated as Vijay Diwas in December every year.

The Lions of Longewala

A Pivotal Engagement in the 1971 Indo-Pak War

The Battle of Longewala, immortalised in the film *Border*, was one of the most decisive engagements of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War. Fought between December 4 and 7 in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan, it showcased the extraordinary courage, tactical brilliance, and resilience of the Indian Army. This defensive victory not only halted a major Pakistani armoured thrust but also reshaped the outcome of the war. Owing to its unique character, Longewala is now taught as a case study in leading military academies across the world. The 1971 war was triggered by the Bangladesh Liberation movement, as East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) fought for independence from West Pakistan. As Indian forces advanced rapidly in the East, Pakistan-anticipating imminent defeat—planned a major offensive in the Western theatre. The strategy was to capture Indian territory and use it as leverage during post-war negotiations.

In Rajasthan, the Pakistani Army launched attacks along the border, with its main and most formidable thrust directed at the Longewala post. This post was defended by Alfa Company of the 23rd Battalion of the Punjab Regiment, commanded by Major Kuldeep Singh Chandpuri. On December 4, 1971, Captain Dharam Vir of Alfa Company was on patrol along the International Border. Around 8:00 pm, he detected the unmistakable sound of tank movement across the border—indicating a large mechanized column approaching Longewala. He immediately relayed the information to Major Chandpuri, who at first found the scale hard to believe. But repeated confirmations from Capt Dharam Vir soon made it clear: an enemy infantry brigade supported by a tank regiment and an armoured squadron was advancing towards them.

This timely intelligence allowed the Indian defenders to quickly assume battle positions. Capt Dharam Vir was ordered to shadow the enemy column, provide continuous updates, and then withdraw to join the main defensive stand. Battalion Headquarters at Sadhewala rushed two recoilless guns to reinforce the post.

Defence Against Impossible Odds
As darkness descended, the Pakistani armour advanced towards Longewala. Outnumbered and outgunned, Alfa Company held its fire until the enemy came within striking distance. Major Chandpuri moved across the defences, encouraging his men and coordinating urgently requested reinforcements and air support. Throughout the night of December 4, Alfa Company withstood repeated enemy assaults, repelling them with fierce determination. Their

defensive stance prevented Pakistani forces from overrunning the post before dawn—a critical factor that would change the course of the battle.

The Turning Point

At first light on December 5, the Indian Air Force launched a devastating air campaign. Hawker Hunter and HF-24 Marut aircraft, guided by a Forward Air Controller, conducted precise bombing runs. Pakistani tanks, stranded in the dunes and unable to manoeuvre effectively, became easy targets.

By evening, the Pakistani advance had collapsed. They abandoned the battlefield, leaving behind 37 destroyed tanks and numerous vehicles. The Indian Army had secured a resounding victory.

Honours and Legacy

Major Kuldeep Singh Chandpuri was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra for exceptional leadership. Many soldiers of Alfa Company received honours for their valor. The battle stands as a powerful reminder of the importance of defending sovereignty, adapting under pressure, and leveraging joint operations.

Strategic Significance

- **Decisive Defensive Victory:** Longewala demonstrated India's ability to repel a major armoured offensive with minimal resources.
- **Protection of Rajasthan:** The stand at Longewala prevented Pakistani forces from advancing towards Ramgarh and Jaisalmer.
- **Impact on the Eastern Theatre:** By failing in the West, Pakistan lost its only potential bargaining tool during the liberation of

Bangladesh.

- **Morale Booster:** The victory significantly uplifted Indian Army morale.
- **Global Military Lessons:** Longewala continues to be studied for its exemplary use of defensive tactics, intelligence, and air-land coordination.

Key Factors Behind the Victory

Timely Intelligence: Capt Dharam Vir's early detection of Pakistani armour was critical in preparing the defences.

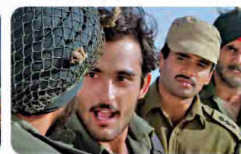
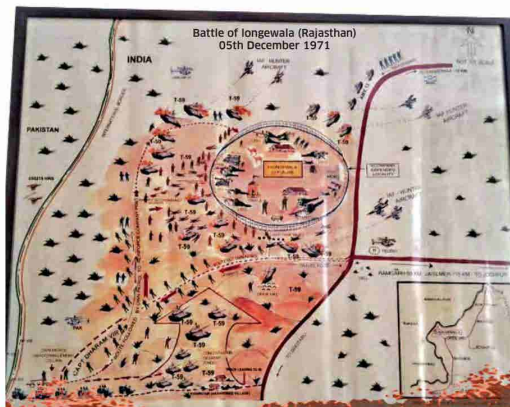
Effective Air Support: The Indian Air Force's relentless assaults played a decisive role in neutralising enemy armour.

Strong Defensive Positioning: The Indian Army's well-prepared positions and coordinated firepower proved superior despite being heavily outnumbered.

The Battle of Longewala remains one of the greatest examples of courage under fire. It is a testament to how determination, leadership, and strategic clarity can overcome overwhelming odds—and how a single night's stand can alter the destiny of a nation.



IN RAJASTHAN, THE PAKISTANI ARMY LAUNCHED ATTACKS ALONG THE BORDER, WITH ITS MAIN AND MOST FORMIDABLE THRUST DIRECTED AT THE LONGEWALA POST. THE POST WAS DEFENDED BY ALPHA COMPANY OF THE 23RD BATTALION, THE PUNJAB REGIMENT



Behind the Scenes: The Making of Border

The 1997 war epic *Border*, directed by JP Dutta, remains one of Indian cinema's most iconic portrayals of patriotism. Based on the Battle of Longewala during the 1971 Indo-Pak War, the film's creation is filled with fascinating behind-the-scenes stories that shaped its authenticity and legacy.

INSPIRED BY A TRUE HERO

JP Dutta drew heavily from the real-life experiences of Major (later Brigadier) Kuldeep Singh Chandpuri, who commanded the outnumbered Indian troops at Longewala. The film's character played by Sunny Deol is closely modelled on him, and the officer himself visited the sets during shooting.

SHOT IN REAL DESERT TERRAIN

To recreate the harsh conditions of the Thar desert, the crew

shot extensively in Bikaner and Jaisalmer. The temperatures soared above 45°C, posing challenges for actors and crew, but lending the visuals a raw, authentic feel.

AUTHENTIC MILITARY SUPPORT

The Indian Army offered extensive support to the film, providing tanks, artillery, vehicles, and access to border posts. Many soldiers even appeared as extras, adding remarkable realism to the battle sequences.

A TRIBUTE BORN FROM PERSONAL LOSS

Director J.P. Dutta dedicated *Border* to his brother, Squadron Leader Deepak Dutta, who lost his life in the 1971 war.

This personal connection infused the film with emotional depth and sincerity.

REAL TANKS, REAL EXPLOSIONS

Modern CGI-heavy battle films, *Border* used real explosives, controlled blasts, and actual military hardware. This practical approach gave the combat scenes their gritty impact.

THE ICONIC MUSIC WAS ALMOST DIFFERENT

The now-classic soundtrack by Anu Malik—featuring "Sandese Aate Hain" and "Mere Dushman"—was recorded with live orchestration. Interestingly, the producers initially considered a different composer, but Malik's patriotic melodies became immortal.

SUNNY DEOL'S POWERFUL DIALOGUE DELIVERY

It was one of the best performances by Sunny Deol who shined in his role. His powerful dialogues are still remembered and float on social media.

A MASSIVE ENSEMBLE CAST

Putting together the star-studded team—Sunny Deol, Jackie Shroff, Suniel Shetty, Akshay Khanna, Tabu, and others—was a logistical feat. Many actors agreed to reduced fees due to the film's patriotic subject.

ONE OF INDIA'S BIGGEST BLOCKBUSTERS

Despite being over three hours long, *Border* became one of the highest-grossing films of 1997 and remains a benchmark for Indian war cinema.

"ALL DAY LONG I KEEP WISHING, LET PARTITION BE A PAST NOW. IT SHOULD ONLY REMAIN A PART OF HISTORY."
— GULZAR

Partition of India A Human Catastrophe

In August 1947, India was partitioned into India and Pakistan. What was intended to be a political solution to terminate colonial control resulted in one of history's largest, most violent, and most inhumane partitions, fuelled by religion. Millions were uprooted; communal riots, massacres, abductions, forced conversions, and sexual assault ensued as people fled over hastily formed borders. The human toll—lives lost, families fractured, and communities torn apart—became the defining tragedy of the subcontinent's fall from empire.

A History of Cultural Integration

Long before 1947, the Indian subcontinent was a layered, composite civilisation. Over many centuries it assimilated migrants and conquerors. India developed as a cross-cultural civilisation; Greeks, Kushans, Huns, and Persians all contributed to the development of India's culture. Amir Khusrau shaped early Hindavi-Urdu; Akbar's Din-i-Ilahi and Sulh-i-Kul promoted pluralism; Dara Shikoh connected Sufism and Vedanta; and Jayasi's Padmavat combined Islamic mythology with Indian ethos, creating a shared, composite civilisation that transcended strict boundaries.

The Tragic Anomaly

Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi opposed syncretism; Altaf Hussain Hali emphasised a distinct Muslim identity. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan advocated for separate Muslim sociopolitical interests; Muhammad Iqbal envisioned an autonomous Muslim destiny; Muhammad Ali Jinnah turned this into political separatism; extremist sects later inflamed hostility—but some humane stories of partition emerged amidst the chaos.

Their swords were gleaming, icy, and ruthless

I was only 12 years old when Pakistan was formed, but those moments still live inside me as if they happened yesterday. My mother, Gyanvati; father, Anant Ram; uncle, Santaram; older brothers, Ramnath and Prannath; and my six-month-old baby sister all resided in Bahdemalli at the time. Before everything turned red one day, life was straightforward and tranquil.

I can recall the thudding footsteps of men hurrying into our home and the sound of angry voices. Their swords were gleaming, cold, and ruthless. They attacked and killed my father, my uncle, and my older brother Ramnath before I could comprehend anything. I saw firsthand how repeatedly they struck them. I can still hear their cries of "hai, hai!" They cried out, but nobody responded. As a small child witnessing her world being torn apart, I was frozen.

My brother Prannath grabbed my hand, crying and shouting. We ran. My mother carried my infant sister in her arms and ran. She looked for a well to jump into to save their honour. To her shock, the well was already filled with women's dead bodies. Unfortunately, my little sister died due to suffocation. My mother survived, along with around thirty-five other women. Hours later, the military arrived and pulled the 35 survivors out of the well. From there, they were taken to the refugee camp, where my mother and I were reunited—thanks to the jawans of the Gorkha Rifles.

Even now, when I try to talk about it, the words break on my tongue. My heart starts to shake. I survived, but I lost my father, uncle, brother, and my youngest sibling at home, whom I never saw again. That youngster inside me is still looking for them.

Name: Darshana Rani
Born: 1935 Baddomalli, Tehsil Shakargarh,
Now lives in: Ghuman, Punjab

Terror consume even the toughest men

I was around thirteen or fourteen when Partition tore through our lives. We lived near Shakargarh, in a community where Hindus and Muslims had coexisted for years. My father, Ram Lal; my mother, Chaman Dai; and all of our relatives were present. We never anticipated that one day we would be running for our lives.

I visited Gota Sarajwari with my maternal grandparents a few days before the actual violence began. I had no idea that I would be separated from my entire family. When the killings began, people in my community started fleeing on foot—afraid, unarmed, and trying to save their children. My family crossed the Rawi Bridge and arrived in Sarajwari. There, Muslims urged us, "If you want to save your life, convert," and we all converted to Islam. For nearly a month, this continued, and I witnessed terror consume even the toughest men. "Many who converted then used to go to the masjid for namaz, adopting a distinct identity."

One day, Indian military vehicles entered the village. Their voices broke through the dread like a miracle. They saved the surviving Hindus and led us to safety. I was reunited with my mother and brothers in a refugee camp, and it felt as though I had been given my life back.

Years later, we rebuilt our lives in Ghuman. I married there, my family expanded, and life progressed. Her son Rajakumar has narrated this account.

Name: Kamala Rani
Born: c. 1933-34 Kanjur area, Tehsil Shakargarh
Ghuman, Punjab

They gave the girls poison pills

My father, Sardar Gulab Singh, was an industrialist. He owned a cotton factory. We were four brothers and five sisters. The population of the Sillanwali mandi was about 10,000. More than half of them were Muslims. Inside the town there were Hindus, and around the outside were Muslim bastis. There were mostly bhatti (labourer) Muslims there. There was a municipality.

We had a very big haveli. The haveli's name was "Guru Arjun Building." There were many servants.

Nawab Allahbakhsh, who was the uncle of CM Malik Khizar Hayat Tiwana and happened to be my father's friend, told us that we need not worry as long as he was with us. My father told all of us brothers and sisters that if ever there was an attack on our haveli by the Muslims, how would we face it? What should we do in that situation?

Above all, he worried about his three daughters, who were aged about 12 to 17. He gave them, one by one, small sachets of poison (zehar ki pudina) and told them that if such a situation arose and they fell into the hands of Muslims, then at that time they should take this poison.

Pakistan was formed, and conditions became worse and worse. Nawab Allahbakhsh said, "Sardar ji, now it is not right for you to remain

here. Now you must leave this place." Another friend from the bhatti also said, "Now you should leave and sell your kothi to me; I will give fifty thousand rupees for it." But my father said that he would give him the haveli without him purchasing it and come back later on when all this ended—little did he know that we would not be able to return.

So one day we decided to leave the place and went to the station in the dark. Others soon followed, saying, "If you leave, we will leave as well." Unfortunately, we could not leave because the train was full of dead bodies. By mid-August 1947, tensions in Punjab were rising, with allegations of looting and killings. Many Muslims' behaviour in Sillanwali had also changed, causing concerns.

We fled in a truck to Sardogha and from there to Amritsar, then spent a year in Rajasthan before settling in Ludhiana. There my father reopened our ration depot and rebuilt life from scratch. In 1963, I joined the Punjab Police, later serving in anti-terror operations and eventually becoming IGP. I also led the RAF and handled communal crises, retiring with Partition's memories still engraved in my soul.

Name: Charanjit Pal Singh
Born: 2 December 1926, Sillanwali Mandi, District Sardogha. Now lives in: Sector-40, Noida

THE 1947 PARTITION WAS A TRAGEDY ON A MASSIVE SCALE. SIR CYRIL RADCLIFFE, THE BRITISH LAWYER WHO DREW THE LINES, WAS UNFAMILIAR WITH INDIA'S GEOGRAPHY. HE DIVIDED THE PROVINCES OF PUNJAB AND BENGAL BASED ON MAPS AND RELIGIOUS/CASTE DATA, A TASK HE CARRIED OUT WITHOUT EVER VISITING INDIA. AROUND 15 MILLION PEOPLE WERE DISPLACED, AND AROUND 1-2 MILLION PEOPLE WERE KILLED.

Diljit Rai Wadhawan

I was born in Gujranwala, in my nanaka, in 1936. My Nana ji, Nand Lal Chopra, was always ill, and I mostly remember him lying on his bed. Nani ji, Goma Devi, was active in Congress—always going to meetings. I spent my first four years with them before returning to Muraliwala, our village in Gujranwala district. As 1947 approached, the atmosphere worsened. Muslims in nearby villages began turning

hostile. Even the local police were Muslim, so their "assurances" meant nothing.

One day, some friends came to warn my father. Muslims were planning a raat ka hamla, a midnight attack. My father refused to put Hindu guards outside; he did not want to provoke anyone. But the attack still came. Around midnight, hundreds surrounded our haveli. Cries of "maar do, kaat do!" echoed from all sides. Rain began pouring, making the chaos even darker. My father shouted, "Musalm? no? ne dhokha de diya!" as we scrambled inside. Father locked my mother, siblings, and me inside a small room, saying, "Main apne

saamne tumhe marta hua nahi dekh sakta." He and my elder brother hid elsewhere.

I was looking through the tiny ventilation hole, at the faces who were very well known to us from our neighbouring houses, assassinating my relatives and family members in wrath. We heard blows, screams, and the pounding of doors through the night.

Even today, that night feels like it never truly ended.

Name: Diljit Rai Wadhawan
Born: 20 May 1936, Khu Wali Gali, Abadi Hakimval, Gujranwala
Now lives in: Sector-26, Noida

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the author, Krishnanand Sagar, who wrote the book titled *Witnesses of Partition-era India*, and who preserved these precious testimonies with such dedication and care. Because of your patient interviews, sensitive listening, and commitment to documenting lived memories, we were able to compile these stories with depth, authenticity, and respect. These voices—once scattered by violence and displacement—have found a place, a dignity, and a permanence through your work, ensuring that these experiences are not forgotten and giving future generations the chance to understand the courage, loss, and resilience of Partition survivors.

Opinion

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2025



File photo of England's Ben Stokes and Australia's Pat Cummins after the 2023 Ashes series

How Bazball bubble burst Down Under

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

CRICKET IS PLAYED on the field, not in the imagination of the contestants. But it seems England's Ashes plans were based more on hope and bravado than on pragmatic analysis.

Calling Australia a 'Dad's Army' would have felt good, as if youth is a guarantee of success. Then when several players of the first-choice XI for the hosts dropped out due to injury, they would have thought they were halfway to regaining the urn.

But as things stand, Australia are 2-0 up after less than six days of cricket, and though England winning the remaining three Tests to take the series is still mathematically possible, reality suddenly seems to have dawned on those who had felt Ben Stokes and his men simply had to turn up to get the job done.

Suddenly, the Bazball ship is full of holes. The emphasis on having a good time despite defeats is being interpreted as players and the coaching staff not caring enough.

Batsmen are now reckless and bowlers bite-less. And the less said about the fielding, the better. Brendon McCullum's stint as coach is said to have revolutionised the way England play Test cricket. They had won one of the previous 17 Tests before the New Zealander took over. But as the honeymoon period gave way to cold logic, it became obvious that 'style of play' and 'vibes' had taken precedence over results on the field.

If drawing home series against India and Australia — England's two most high-profile opponents — is the regime's biggest achievement, it suggests hyperbole and performance had not gone hand in hand. England had not won a Test Down Under since 2010-11, losing 13 of 15 matches before the start of the current tour, so it was never going to be a cakewalk, irrespective of the quality of the Australian squad. But things always look better through rose-tinted glasses.

England overestimated their strength and the merit of the players they were taking into battle. Zak Crawley and Ollie Pope led the odd spectacular knock, surrounded by lot of average ones. Harry Brook is highly rated and ranked, but his risk-heavy game is unsuitable to anything other than the flattest of pitches. Jamie Smith was largely unproven.

A lot was made of the English pace battery, the fastest they had taken to Australia in more than half a century. But if history was anything to go by, it was always going to be an effort to keep them on the park. Those who managed to stay fit lost pace and potency, not being effective enough as the heat, pressure and dogged resilience of the Australians took their toll. The lack of experience meant there was no leader of the attack. There is no quality spinner to speak of. Shoaib Bashir was selected keeping in mind conditions in Australia and without any first-class record to speak of — a common approach under the current dispensation — but as of now, there's no assurance of him getting any game time in this series.

The best men

The two quality players in the touring party, undeniably, are skipper Stokes — who seems to have the burden of the world on his shoulders as he hardly gets much support and guidance when England are in the field — and Joe Root, one of

the greatest batsmen in the longest format of the game. The latter got a monkey off his back with his first Test century in Australia at Brisbane, but there's hardly anyone else who can be relied upon to keep the home side bowling for a long time.

Stokes' statement after the defeat in the second Test that 'Australia is not a place for weak men' and 'the dressing room I'm captain of isn't for weak men either' has been much talked about. But strength doesn't always mean running towards the danger — as the mantra of the McCullum era seems to be.

Australia, on the other hand, have relied on old-fashioned virtues of dogged determination, hanging in through tough times, and finding someone to do the job at every juncture. Travis Head had to open in the second innings at Perth with the hosts facing a stiff fourth-innings target. What the left-hander achieved in the subsequent couple of hours has gone down in Ashes folklore.

No player is indispensable for the Aussies. This is in contrast to what former England captain Michael Vaughan said on commentary to emphasise Stokes' importance to his team: "With Ben in the side, they can beat anybody. Without Ben, they can beat nobody."

For Australia, no Pat Cummins, no Josh Hazlewood, no problem. Steve Smith stepped in seamlessly in the captain's job while Mitchell Starc seemed to grow an arm and a leg as he led the attack light on Test experience. Leaving out veteran off-spinner Nathan Lyon was probably the wrong move in Brisbane, but Michael Neser ensured Australia didn't feel the pinch by taking his maiden five-wicket haul in Tests.

Respect Tests

Test cricket has been here for almost a century and a half, and it cannot be played like its younger cousins — One-Day Internationals and Twenty20s — especially for a significant period of time. One has to respect the conditions and the game situation; one's natural game can't always be the go-to option.

Like it or not, an Ashes series defines Australian and England players — especially the latter, who had been preparing for this series ever since the last one ended with honours even in 2023. It has been more than a decade since England won the Ashes, and it has much to do with the fact that they make their obsession with it — everything else is just a preparation or warm-up — pretty apparent.

The Australians, while being immensely passionate about these contests, don't make it be all and end all of their existence. They focus on what's ahead of them and as a result win more often against different opponents, making themselves a better team in the process.

The penny seems to have dropped on the fourth day of the Brisbane Test when Stokes and Will Jacks took the old-fashioned approach to stay in the game. They would have seen the match-defining partnership between Starc and Scott Boland in the Australian first innings. In the final analysis, it only delayed the inevitable but was a viable blueprint to follow.

The last three Ashes series in Australia have finished 5-0, 4-0 and 4-0 in favour of the hosts. England, publicly at least, still hold the ambition to reclaim the urn. A draw on an Aussie victory in the Adelaide Test, starting on Wednesday, could end all that speculation. But if the visitors want to avoid this tour becoming the most disappointing in recent history — as it was considered their best chance to win away from home — they need to go back to basics.

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



No one raised a controversy on the two-stanza national song since 1937. Why now? Parliament and the governments ought to be concerned with the pressing problems of the people in the present and on the ambitious goals of the country for the future

HISTORY IS LIKE the commons. Any one can enter the commons and write or re-write history — until the myths are blown by subsequent research and study. European theorists, and some copy-cat Indian historians, portrayed the Aryans as a superior race who invaded and 'civilized' India and other lands. It was a myth. Ancient civilisations had flourished in many parts of India long before the Indo-Aryan movements: for example, archaeological discoveries in Keezhadi and other places in Tamil Nadu have traced a flourishing civilisation to 3500 BCE.

Christopher Columbus 'discovered' America was an early lesson in history that we all learnt in school. It was inaccurate in many ways; the land now called America was populated by men and women for several centuries before Columbus landed on the continent. Research has proved that the North Vikings had reached North America nearly 500 years before Columbus.

Distortions abound

Politicians love to take liberties with history. The BJP (and the government) accused the Congress of mutilating the National Song, *Vande Mataram*, and insisted on a day-long debate in both Houses of Parliament in the winter session. The party's speakers narrated their version of 'history'; it was distorted history — distortion. The chief distorter was the prime minister, Mr. Narendra Modi. To quote his words:

"*Vande Mataram was composed at a time when, after the 1857 freedom struggle, the British Empire was unsettled and imposed various pressures and injustices upon India... It was then that Bankim-das issued a challenge, responding with greater force, and from that defiance Vande*



Congress activists protest over the Vande Mataram controversy

Distortion of history, disdain for future

Mataram was born...

"...*Mohammad Ali Jinnah raised a slogan against Vande Mataram from Lucknow on October 15, 1937. Instead of firmly countering the baseless statements of the Muslim League and condemning them, Jawaharlal Nehru, then Congress President, did not reaffirm his and the Congress party's commitment to Vande Mataram and began questioning the Vande Mataram itself. Just five days after Jinnah's opposition, on October 20, 1937, Nehru wrote a letter to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, agreeing with Jinnah's sentiment...*

"...*(Nehru said) 'I have read the background of the Vande Mataram song. I feel that this background may provoke Muslims'.*

"...*Unfortunately, on October 26, 1937, the Congress compromised on Vande Mataram, fragmenting it in their decision... history bears witness that the INC bowed before the Muslim League and acted under its pressure, adopting a politics of appeasement... The INC has become MMC (Muslim League-Maoist Congress)'*

Mr. Amit Shah said that dividing the national song led to the politics of appeasement which led to Partition. It was a leap of imagination so absurd that even distorters will squirm in their seats.

A short history

Here is a brief timeline of the song: 1870s Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote a few stanzas of a hymn that remained unpublished.

1881 An expanded version of the poem was included in the novel, *Anandamath*

1905 Rabindranath Tagore sang the poem while leading nationalist protest processions; *Vande Mataram* became a political slogan.

1908 Tamil poet Subramania Bharathi immortalised the phrase *Vande Mataram* in his poem *Enthaiyum thayum...* Bankim Chatterjee's song was on the lips of every freedom fighter.

1930s Communal politics was on the rise, the song became controversial. 28-09-1937 Rajendra Prasad wrote to Sardar Patel raising apprehensions about widespread opposition to the song and suggesting that the Congress's policy should be laid down. On the eve of the meeting of the CWC, Netaji Bose sought the advice of Tagore. 17-10-1937 Netaji Bose wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru to discuss the song in the CWC. 20-10-1937 Nehru wrote to Bose that the controversy was manufactured by the communists and that he would discuss the matter with Tagore and others.

26-10-1937 Tagore wrote to Nehru that the first part of the song stood on its own and had inspirational quality which was not offensive to any religious community.

28-10-1937 CWC adopted the two stanzas of the poem as the National Song.

January 1939 CWC reiterated the resolution at a meeting in Wardha in the presence of Mahatma Gandhi.

The selection of a few verses for a national anthem or song is not unusual. *Jana Gana Mana*, which is the National Anthem, is an abridged version of the fuller poem by Rabindranath Tagore. National anthems of many countries are abridged versions of longer songs.

Mr. Modi carefully avoided the fact that the RSS and the BJP's predecessor had no role to play in India's freedom struggle or in singeing or popularising *Vande Mataram*. In fact, the RSS did not raise the national flag for 52 years in its national headquarters.

Wrong priorities

No one raised a controversy on the two-stanza national song since 1937. Why now? Parliament and the governments ought to be concerned with the pressing problems of the people in the present and on the ambitious goals of the country for the future.

China's constituent bodies debate robotics, Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, the challenges of space, the oceans and data, and how these will profoundly transform human life on this planet. India's Parliament should be concerned about the problems in the present that are poverty, education, healthcare, infrastructure, production of aid and access for all to goods and services, financial stability, trade deficit, climate change, and other *unknowns*.

In the future, India's challenges will be growing inequality, population, internal migration, secularism, science and technology, and other *unknowns*. Distorting history is bad enough, disdain for the future is unpardonable.



Website: pchidambaram.in
Twitter: @PChidambaram_IN

INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



Missing splendour

A visit last month to the over 250-year-old palace built by France in Puducherry for its Governor-Generals, which later served as the Raj Niwas for the Union Territory's Lieutenant Governors, was an eye-opener. The stately rooms have been stripped of the fabled furniture and artefacts accumulated by the French over two centuries, including possibly some of the treasures looted by Governor-General Joseph Duplexe, who occupied an earlier building at the same site.

The missing treasures include porcelain statues, ornate French furniture carved from Burmese teak, Belgian mirrors, antique Chinese vases, a 200-year-old grand piano and paintings, including French artist Andre Marie's depiction of the Malaiakkottai rock temple. The explanation for the absent artefacts is that the building is unsafe as the foundation is sinking and the walls are crumbling — a fact certified by IIT-Chennai and the PWD.

The Raj Niwas staff, however, offer vague explanations as to where the absent pieces are presently. One clarification is that the furniture has already moved to the proposed new Raj Niwas, formerly a distillery and still incomplete. Another staffer suggests that the furniture remains in the original building, but a visit to the premises belied the claim. The conscientious former L-G Kiran Bedi, who officiated between 2016 and 2021, assigned an intern to prepare a booklet detailing photographs and descriptions of all major artworks during her tenure. Many of the pieces described in the brochure are no longer on display.

Those in-charge of the mansion's interiors in recent years seem to have a pronounced lack of aesthetic sensibilities and the décor makes a mockery of the building's past glory. Plastic chairs were placed next to the few remaining French mantle clocks, cheap pink tiles fixed close to the exquisite handmade Athangudi tiles with European designs and along with the few remaining Thanjavur paintings, someone has hung atrocious kitsch.

The question that begs an answer is who is in charge of the inventory of the artefacts? Why should the treasures be scattered between a building that is yet to be completely vacated and another that is still incomplete? One wonders why the entire collection

could not have been temporarily housed in the museum across the road, which showcases a paltry display of French heritage. Unfortunately, the L-Gs who succeeded Bedi, Dr. Tanilasi Radhakrishnan and Vice-President C P Radhakrishnan, stayed at the Raj Niwas only briefly as Puducherry was an additional temporary charge and Telangana their principal responsibility. Present L-G K Kaishashnath, once PM Modi's trusted adviser as Gujarat CM, took charge only late last year. Shortly after he joined, he was informed that the building was unsafe and he shifted his family to residential quarters in the building under construction, though he still functions from the Raj Niwas.

Sister outshines brother

There is near agreement even in the Congress that Priyanka Gandhi outshines her brother as a parliamentarian. Her speeches in Hindi, clutched notes for reference, resonate with audiences. She has met Amit Shah and P Nadda seeking the Centre's assistance for her Wayanad constituency. Priyanka is an active member of the parliamentary committee on home and friendly with fellow MPs across the board. In contrast, Rahul is generally stiff and standoffish with the ruling party. His choice of issues and confused, badly researched, extempore speeches are

his weakness, be it his refrain about the Adani-Ambani monopoly or 'vote chori'. After Operation Sindoor, Rahul taunted Modi that India had capitulated because of Trump and approvingly quoted the US President's description of the Indian economy as 'dead', oblivious that he was not merely mocking Modi but offending nationalist sentiments. On the other hand, Priyanka in her Parliament speech on Operation Sindoor, was restrained, raising the pertinent point that someone should be accountable for security lapses that permitted terrorists to enter Baisaran Valley.

Dancing with enemy

The growing disenchantment with Rahul's leadership is reflected in usually meek Congresspersons not shy of being seen publicly consoling with his pet target, billionaire Gautam Adani. In Bhopal, Digvijay Singh attended the wedding of the director of an Adani company, while Sushil Kumar Shinde posed with the controversial industrialist at his own granddaughter's wedding. Telangana's Congress CM Revanth Reddy is reportedly working on deals with both the Adanis and Ambanis. Meanwhile, Congress allies Supriya Lele and Mahua Moitra danced on stage together with BJP MP Kangana Ranaut to the Bollywood song 'Deewangi Deewangi' at former Congressman-turned-BJP MP Naveen Jindal's daughter's wedding.

Mind & Games

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2025

'It's fake news': A natural history of misinformation

It is not just humans who suffer fake news. So do fish, flies and even bacteria

CARL ZIMMER

EARLIER THIS YEAR, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine issued a warning about the dangers of misinformation. Social media platforms are now rife with scientific falsehoods — that the Earth is flat, that climate change is a hoax, and soon. Misinformation can lead to large-scale harm, undermining public health and the well-being of the planet, the authors of the National Academies report said. "The stakes in understanding the origins, spread, and the impact of misinformation about science are high," they warned.

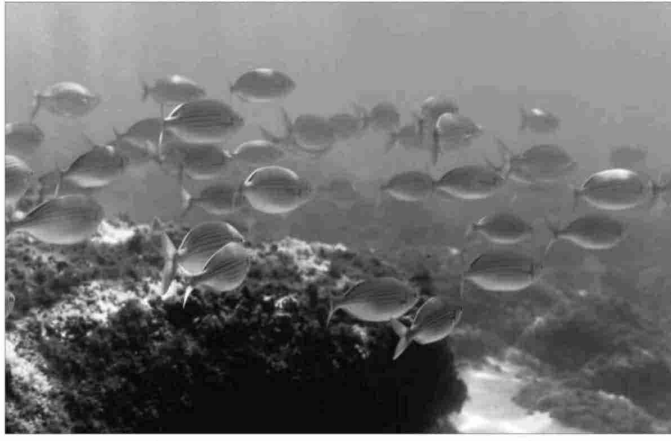
For some fresh inspiration, misinformation experts can look beyond our species. That's the advice from a team of Cornell researchers writing on Wednesday in the journal *Interface*. It's not just humans who suffer from the effects of misinformation. So do fish, flies and even bacteria. "I hope we can learn something from these natural systems," said Andrew Hein, a computational biologist and an author of the new study.

Hein was drawn to the natural history of misinformation through his research on fish. He and his colleagues observed the movements of schools swimming around the coral reefs of the French Polynesian island of Moorea.

By staying in large groups, the fish enjoyed advantages that they lacked on their own. For instance, they could collectively stay alert for predators. When one fish noticed a threat, it darted in a new direction. That information quickly spread through the whole school, which could then escape together.

But Hein was struck by how often a fish got things wrong. "It's safe, there's nothing going on," he said. "But all of a sudden, it will just flee for its life."

He then observed how other fish noticed the fish fleeing for no reason, and fled as well. Soon numerous animals were trying to escape together, from nothing. The observation made Hein think about all the research on the ways misinformation spreads over the internet. "It just clicked in my mind that that's what we're seeing here," he said. "We're seeing misin-



By staying in groups, the fish enjoyed advantages that they lacked on their own. When one fish noticed a threat, it darted in a new direction. That information quickly spread through the whole school

formation cascades happening."

Hein and his colleagues went on to survey misinformation cascades among other species. Animals that live in big groups, from baboons to termites, are constantly communicating information to each other — creating the potential for misinformation to creep in.

But animals are not the only organisms that exchange information. Bacteria send signals to each other about their environment, using the information to mount collective defenses against attacks. Inside our bodies, the cells of our immune system stay in constant communication as they ward off diseases.

Yet relatively few researchers have investigated how information in the natural world can turn into misinformation. "It's a really hard thing to study," Hein said. "You can't ask a bacterium, 'Did you believe what that other bacterium told you or not?'"

Adding to the challenge is the fact that bacteria and other species live in big social networks. Information flowing through these societies can get distorted along the way. In their new study, Hein and his colleagues developed mathematical models for investigating misinformation in any species. Researchers can use them to esti-

mate the accuracy of an organism's beliefs and the extent to which information from other organisms changes their beliefs. Exploring these models, Hein and his colleagues came to the conclusion that misinformation is probably fundamental to all communication systems in the natural world. And it's a potent threat to their survival.

Previously, some biologists looked at misinformation as a minor nuisance. If a fish darts away for no reason, it loses some time it could have spent eating. But that's a small cost, outweighed by the benefit of being able to escape predators. But Hein argues that overly skittish fish, reacting to too many false alarms, can risk their survival. "The cost isn't missing one lunch," Hein said. "It's missing all lunches."

Walter Quattrociocchi, a data scientist at Sapienza University of Rome, who was not involved in the study, agreed.

"It shows that misinformation is not an anomaly or a moral failure, but a structural consequence of communication systems operating under noise, limited context and imperfect decoding," he said.

In his own research on fish, Hein found one strategy for stopping misinformation. When the animals swim in small groups, they are keenly sensitive to

the movements of the fish around them. But in bigger groups, their brains dial back that sensitivity. It takes the movement of many more fish to get them moving.

This strategy doesn't eliminate false alarms, Hein observed. But it does limit their size; the false alarms die out before they can take over an entire school.

Caitlin O'Connor, a misinformation expert at the University of California, Irvine, who was not involved in the new study, said the models that Hein and his colleagues offered were too simple to capture the complex effects of misinformation. A single piece of information can affect more than one belief at a time, for example. "If you're going to say, 'This piece of information, in a biological sense, is misinformation,' you're going to need something more complicated," O'Connor said. Some researchers argued that fake news did not represent the biggest threat to society; more concerning was information that was narrowly true but left a misleading impression.

Without a consensus about what defines misinformation, solutions will be hard to come by. Nature might offer some inspiration, O'Connor said. "We're really going to get to good things. What we really need are good algorithms." —NYT

Archaeologists find oldest evidence of fire-making

New study reveals Neanderthals made fire 400,000 years ago than the 50,000 years believed

CARL ZIMMER

SOME 400,000 YEARS ago, in what is now eastern England, a group of Neanderthals used flint and pyrite to make fires by a watering hole — not just once, but time after time, over several generations.

That is the conclusion of a study published on Wednesday in the journal *Nature*. Previously, the oldest known evidence of humans making fires dated back just 50,000 years. The new finding indicates that this critical step in human history occurred much earlier. "A lot of people had a hunch that they were making fire at this date," said Nick Ashton, an archaeologist at the British Museum and an author of the study. "But now we can convincingly say, 'Yeah, this was the case.'"

The oldest evidence for human ancestors using fire, dating back to between 1 million and 1.5 million years ago, comes from a cave in South Africa.

Ashton and his colleagues caught their first glimpse of ancient fires in 2013, as they were digging at an archaeological site called Barnham in eastern England. For decades, researchers had found ancient tools and other signs of early humans there. In 2013, Ashton and his colleagues found something new: pieces of oddly broken flint.

Only an intense heat could have shattered the hard rocks. On a summer day in 2021, Ashton had a thought. As he prepared to take a nap under an oak tree, he recalled how, a couple of years earlier, he had glimpsed an intriguing streak of red clay.

"I thought, 'I'll have a little poke around,'" Ashton said. He found the red streak, and quickly realised that it was a two-foot-wide band of burned ancient soil. Had humans burned it, or had lightning? Ashton and his colleagues put the two possibilities to a test. Over the next four years, they analysed the chemistry of the sediment, while conducting further digs around it. Eventually they determined that, about 400,000 years ago, the site had been a watering hole, which Neanderthals probably visited in search of game.

A wildfire would have left evidence far from the site, but the researchers found none. What's more, the same patch had



been burned repeatedly over the course of decades. And the fires there reached intense temperatures and burned for hours. A last major clue came to light with the discovery of pieces of pyrite alongside heat-shattered flints.

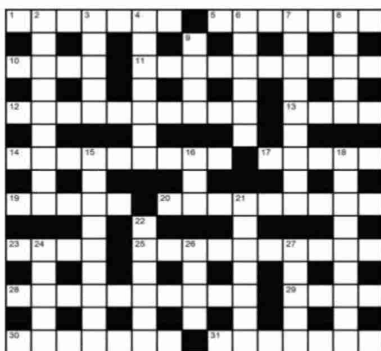
All the more notable was that the rocks for miles around Barnham don't contain pyrite. He speculated that the fire-making Neanderthals must have brought pieces of it to Barnham. The nearest known source of the mineral is some 40 miles to the east. The pyrite was "the icing on the cake," said Sébastien Valette, an archaeologist at the University of Quebec in Chicoutimi who was not involved in the new study. "Altogether, it's a really convincing case."

But a question remains: How widespread was fire-making 400,000 years ago? Perhaps not very, said Michael Chazan, an anthropologist at the University of Toronto who was not involved in the research. "This experiment seems to be local in scope," Chazan said. Ashton is more optimistic. He speculated that fire-making might have become widespread hundreds of thousands of years ago, not just among Neanderthals, but also among Denisovans in Asia and modern humans in Africa. Anyone encountering people who had mastered fire would have wanted to copy them.

"Once something suddenly takes off, I think it will spread very quickly," Ashton said. For the time being, Barnham remains the only place known for any evidence of fire-making hundreds of thousands of years ago. —NYT

FIRE-MAKING MIGHT HAVE BECOME WIDESPREAD, NOT JUST AMONG NEANDERTHALS, BUT IN ASIA & AFRICA

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Achievement of victory (7)
- 5 Quickness or nimbleness (7)
- 10 The nodal agency for formulating and administering foreign direct investment (abbr) (4)
- 12 Avoiding waste (10)
- 12 A specialised division of a large organization (10)
- 13 Economics guru Greenspan (4)
- 14 Ex-Governor of RBI (1,5,3)
- 17 Slightly drunk, feeling just a little bit high after consuming alcohol (5)
- 19 Not sharp; rather rude (5)
- 20 Converted black money into white, should we say (9)
- 23 Long, deep cut (4)
- 25 The green stuff most youngsters tend to avoid at meals (10)
- 28 "V" in JVSJ, the Jindal Group's steel unit (10)
- 29 A kind of moose (4)
- 30 Winning it may well be the dream of a horse-racing enthusiast (7)
- 31 Least fast? (7)

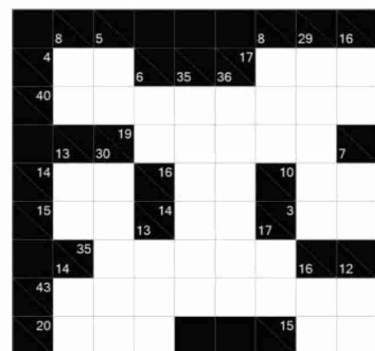
DOWN

- 2 Famous studio of Hollywood (9)
- 3 Major pharmaceuticals manufacturer (5)
- 4 Ranges of colours produced by prism (7)
- 6 Applies or covers with thin fluid mortar (6)
- 7 Saved to use at a later time, as in "some money" (4,5)
- 8 Jewelled head-dress (5)

'H' of DTH, in broadcast (4)

- 15 Prime Landing Rates (BPLR in short) (9)
- 16 Assoc. of Natl. Advertisers (3)
- 18 Co-Founder of Apple Computers along with Steve Wozniak (5,4)
- 21 "N" in ONGC (7)
- 22 Despite anything to the contrary (4,2)
- 24 Global insurance company headquartered in London (5)
- 26 Dancer type (2-2)
- 27 Lower or underneath (5)

KAKURO



In Kakuro sum puzzles, the numbers in the black squares refer to the SUMS of the digits, which you are to fill into the empty spaces directly below or to the right of the black square containing the number. No zeroes are used here, only the digits one through nine. An important point: A digit cannot appear more than once in any particular digit combination.

BIZ QUIZ

1. Which global company has tied up with four Indian IT firms to boost agentic AI?
2. IndiGo is offering coupons to flyers hit during Dec 3-5 for worth how much?
3. Which international fashion brand has tied up with Indian agencies for sandals?

BUZZ WORD

The Buzz Word is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.

Today's clue: FAV equals KID

Adcsn knst frnk lqpl xmnv vmln ovgdgnln idm cuqpgnwg gm gtcvn qnt gdn heoraj xnmv - Cvel Blag!

ANSWERS



ANSWERS



BRIDGE BOUTS L SUBRAMANIAN

WINNING BID AND WINNING PLAY - I

Five of a minor, at times may seem one trick too many in a competitive auction. Take the south seat in today's deal from a match-point event. You are not vulnerable and opponents are. East opens 1S in first seat and you overcall 2C with S 4-2 H K-Q-9-3 D 7 CA K-Q-T-9-6. LHO bids 2S and partner competes with 3C. Rightly is not the one to give up so easily and so he bids 3S. What do you do?

Analysis: You do not want to rule out four or even five hearts in partner's hand. So, you offer a game of games by bidding 4H to show fair to good suit. Everyone passes West leads the 3D. Dummy hits. Plan the play.

Dlr: East
Vul: E-W

SA 3 W - N E S
HT 6 4 - - 1S 2C
DK J 5 3 2 2S 3C 3S 4H!
C 7 4 2 All pass

N
S

S 4 2
H K Q 9 3
D 7
CA K Q T 9 6

Analysis: Suppose you win and play a heart to your king and let us say it wins. With no entry to dummy, you will exit in a diamond. RHO will win and lock you in your hand by shifting to a club, after cashing a spade trick. You cannot escape losing two trump tricks.

Correct play: Play a heart and insert the nine from your hand. Luck is with you as LHO wins with the ace and shifts to a diamond. East wins dummy's king with the ace, cashes the SK, and plays another diamond. You ruff and break the trumps 3-3 and claim the balance. Partner appreciates the play and notices the beaming smile on your face. The complete hands are:

SA 3
HT 6 4
DK J 5 3 2
C 7 4 2
ST 8 7 5
HA 8 7
DK T 6 4
C 5 3
N
S
S 4 2
H K Q 9 3
D 7
CA K Q T 9 6

Discussion: You have to play for H J-x-x with east. A J-x can also be handled.

LEXICON

NTH SCREEN

■ N. Technology that displays video content on many different screens, particularly multiple, synchronized screens.

The 'nth screen' has been lingering around the tech world for several years, but is expected to hit the big time in 2014. It basically means devices that are able to connect and share content between multiple displays. Sharing is caring, apparently, and companies will let you connect their devices together for a greater user experience.

"Top 5 tech buzzwords for CIOs in 2014," *Computer Business Review*, February 06, 2014



Art installations getting ready for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale
PHOTO: JIPSON SIKHERA



A graffiti artist adds the final touches to a venue of the Kochi Biennale
PHOTO: JIPSON SIKHERA



Birender Yadav's Only the Earth Knows Their Labour
COURTESY: KOCHI BIENNALE FOUNDATION



Ashish Anand, CEO, DAG, Delhi

Highlights of 2025

- Moderns have stayed the strongest, with Husain's *Gram Yatra* fetching \$13.8 mn
- Husain museum in Doha has given global visibility to Indian art
- Arrival of younger collectors and from tier-2 and -3 towns

Artist Watch MV Dhurandhar, Madhvi Parekh, Sohan Qadri, British artist Thomas Daniell, Danish painter Marius Bauer



Sagarika Sundaram's show at Nature Morte

Aparajita Jain, MD, Nature Morte, Delhi & Mumbai

Highlights of 2025

- First-time buyers have gone up
- Widespread and diverse collector base across ages and cities
- Growing art ecosystem with more museums, more conversations and PPP push
- GST for art dropping to 5% from 18%

Artist Watch

Asim Waqif

Ayesha Parikh, founder, Art & Charlie, Mumbai

Highlights of 2025

- New art hubs in tier-2 cities and within metros
- Galleries have become less highbrow
- Affordable art is in
- Collector interest in socio-political art

Artist Watch

Yogesh Barve, Sukanya Ayde, Kumar Misal



Sayvika Lopes's show at Art & Charlie



Sukanya Ayde's The Garden of Two Selves

Sunaína Anand, director, Art Alive, Delhi

Highlights of 2025

- Growing demand for art across different collector groups
- New buyers looking beyond well-established names
- Rising interest in material-based art like textiles and paper
- Social media as a means of discovery and sales

Artist Watch

Smriti Dixit, Vipul Rathod



Vipul Rathod's Inward Voyages-VIII

As the sixth edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale opens, **ET** looks at what is powering the Indian artscape. Galleries and auction houses are enthusiastic about the rise of younger collectors, new audiences and a growing interest in mediums like textiles

Nupur Amnath & Glynda Alvars

It was on a sweltering April day at the India Art Fair (IAF) in Delhi in 2022 that gallerist Aparajita Jain, MD of Nature Morte, felt a shift. She has been co-managing the gallery, founded by the American artist Peter Nagy in 1997 to promote Indian contemporary art, since 2012. She remembers the relentless Delhi heat. But what she recalls most is how they were notching up sales. For the first time, she saw first-time buyers walk in, inquire and, without hesitation, book art works. She remembers thinking to herself: "What's going on?"

ART MART

The numbers speak for themselves, says Jaya Asokan, fair director, IAF. The Art Basel-UBS Global Art Market Report 2025 found that global art sales fell by 12%, y-o-y, in 2024 to around \$57.5 billion, with the sharpest slowdown at the highest price points. By contrast, India and South Asia have shown resilience. The Hurun India Art List 2024 recorded sales of around ₹301 crore for the top 50 living Indian artists, up 19% y-o-y. The 2025 list takes that further to roughly ₹310 crore.

Asokan says: "That is not a spike; it is evidence of a maturing market." The IAF, which turns 17 in 2026, the recently concluded Art Mumbai and the Kochi-Muziris Biennale that opened this week have contributed to building this market. Uday Jain of Delhi-based Dhoomimal Gallery—that will be opening its third floor to show only contemporary artists—says these art events account for 60-70% of their new clientele. Roshini Vadehra, director of the Vadehra Art Gallery, believes the speculative phase of the early 2000s has given way to a far more stable, informed and mature ecosystem.

"Collectors today are far more intentional; they research, understand career trajectories and prioritise long-term collecting over impulse purchases. A significant development is the rise of younger collectors and first-generation wealth creators," Aparajita Jain calls the new art buyer a lot more democratic. "They are more used to buying to far more stable, income. People are aspirational and willing to spend. We are seeing the emergence of a new kind of consumer for art in India."

NEW COLLECTORS

Divyana Kakkar, founder-director of Delhi-based gallery Latitude 28, says a variety of media has shaped the year. She points to the recent works of artist like Waseem Waseem who has created modern miniatures:

Juhikadevi Bhandode who works with textiles; and multi-disciplinary visual artist Yogesh Ramkrishna. "Art is increasingly being viewed as a serious asset class, with strategies of diversification, legacy building and inflation protection. In 2025, the frenzy of the previous years has settled. What we see now is a far more reflective, research-driven market," says Kakkar.

Galleries are turning savvy. Like Art & Charlie, founded by former McKinsey consultant Ayesha Parikh. She started the gallery in Bandra because she felt many younger professionals in Mumbai were not engaging with the traditional art circuit. "While the contemporary gallery scene in Colaba was strong, those spaces felt intimidating for a 30- or 40-something first-time buyer," she says. Bandra, for her, is the cultural melting pot where people from all walks of life—entrepreneurs, finance professionals, creatives—exist. She runs busy weekend calendars with programming beyond art. "The problem isn't disinterest but access and atmosphere."

Galleries are no longer just sellers of art, says Vadehra. "We are educators, facilitators of institutional relationships." Kakkar says, "Young collectors approach art with excitement. They are not intimidated by the ecosystem. They are curious, informed and unafraid to form their own taste. Their relationships with art works feel personal rather than performative." Latitude 28 is seeing a rise in customers from overseas, including NRIs and expats. For Bengaluru's Artsera, founded by Varun Backliwal and Lisa Jain, 30% of sales are exports mainly to Indians in US, UK, UAE and Singapore. A large part of IAF's audience is in their 30s and 40s. It even has a Young Collectors' Programme, now in its seventh year. "Many are first-time buyers, but they come prepared with research: price histories, references, saved works and an increasingly sophisticated understanding of what they want to support," says Asokan. Aparajita adds, "They are definitely more art-educated. And there are first-time buyers in all age groups."

Serious collectors are spread beyond the metros and there's a rise in women collectors. Ashish Anand, CEO of Delhi-based DAG, says new collectors don't confine themselves to a few names. "They are willing to diversify their interests and, therefore, demand more of the art market. The lowering of goods and services tax (GST) on original art works from 18% to 5% has also been a hugely helpful in attracting buyers," he says.

Anand adds that within families, there are second and third generation collectors. "While this has built a strong Indian market, the next leap should be the global collecting community showing a deeper interest in Indian art."

MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

Parikh says the new collector wants art that is relatable to their reality: "Younger collectors are responding to socio-political art." She says her recent showing of Saviya Lopes's works, through a feminist lens, resonated with the audience. Big homes are creating a demand for sculptures too. "With sculpture, the new demand is linked to lifestyle—people with larger homes now commission big outdoor works," she says, adding that upward mobility has made art the next natural step in lifestyle upgrade.

Younger collectors are also going for affordable art. Parikh says: "Collections don't start at ₹5 lakh, they're starting with a ₹20,000 print or a smaller work."



Auction turnover for Indian art has risen 265%

Uday Jain says art conversations were earlier dominated by euphoria over record prices and fears about fakes. "All that made art intimidating to the public. It is now far more democratic." He says, internationally, the demand for PN Souza, SH Raza, Amrita Sher-Gil and VS Gaitonde stays the same; what's exciting is that greater recognition is finally coming to artists like Shobha Broota, Prabhakar Kolte and Anupam Sud.

Sunaína Anand, director of Art Alive Gallery, Delhi, saw a noticeable rise in first-time collectors in all age groups at Art Mumbai this year. "There has been a growing interest in newer media like material-based art, say, textiles or paper," Kakkar says contemporary miniature-based narrative vocabularies of artists like Gopu Trivedi, Ketaki Sarpotdar and Khadija Ali, and sculptural and ceramic works by Hasseena Suresh and Shalina Vichitra gained momentum in 2025.

Jose Krishnamachari, president of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, which opened its sixth edition on December 12, says this is the best time to enjoy art. "In the mid-80s, there were hardly any systems or institutions. Mumbai had four galleries when I was studying."

Platforms like the India Art Fair and the Kochi Biennale brought new opportunities, new audiences and a cultural curiosity. Today, cultural tourism and the larger ecosystem like institutions and foundations are finally catching up in a way I've seen in cities like Paris, London and Berlin."

He says the Kochi Biennale gives people exposure and access to art. "Collectors today are coming with new perspectives—they are looking for not just familiar figures but new talent and different ways of seeing. They want conversations with art and artists."

Asokan says there is clarity on India's art map for 2026. "Textile, weaving, ceramics, quilting, beadwork and other material practices—often led by women and rooted in collaborative or community-based processes—have moved decisively into the centre of contemporary art discourse," she says. These are no longer peripheral but are the core of an expanded art vocabulary. Collectors are also interested in artists working with family archives, state records, colonial histories and legal documents, as questions of memory, identity and decolonisation become central to how South Asia sees itself.

Anand adds, "Another important thing is the rise of digital art. Collectors are interested in supporting women and historically marginalised voices, with a willingness to back complex, research-driven and politically aware work."

GOING ONCE, GOING TWICE Manoj Mansukhani, director-marketing of AstaGuru Auction House, says in 2024-25, the mid-range of ₹20-50 lakh has shown unexpected strength. "While the appetite for blue-chip modernists continues to be robust, collectors are acquiring works with a long-term vision of building their cultural legacies." According to Dinesh Vazirani, co-founder of Saffronart, 2025 was the year of modern Indian art, with pretty much every modernist breaking their world record—like MF Husain's *Gram Yatra* fetching \$13.8 million.

Vazirani says, "Young buyers, aged 25 to 45 years, take more risks. Their sensibilities are more edgy. They have grown up with a different generation of imagery through social media and are very savvy with technology. So, photography, mixed media, installation, like MF Husain's *Gram Yatra* resonate with them." The trend that

has surprised Vazirani is the rise of second rung of moderns like Narayan Shrivastha Bendre and KK Hebbur who were once overlooked. There is also a growing focus on antiquity—miniature, stone, bronze.

Mansukhani says another striking development is the rise in cross-category collecting—art collectors expanding into heirloom jewellery, timepieces, rare books and other collectibles. The heightened interest in narrative-rich works and the speed with which younger buyers have adapted to competitive digital bidding have also reshaped the auction landscape.

Lisa Jain says new collectors are comfortable with online buying. "Art preferences have become incredibly diverse, and the blend of online and offline discovery is here to stay." She adds that they are trying to bring new people who are not necessarily buyers into the art fold: "Art isn't an impulse purchase; it takes time to develop. We focus on programming to engage fresher audiences, including children." Meanwhile, their prices, with works starting at ₹30,000, also make art accessible.

Gallerists are social media to attract new collectors. Sunaína Anand uses social media not only to connect to audience across geographies but also to engage with different art practices. "For any kind of collection to happen, it is imperative for collectors to understand the different genres of art, be inquisitive about different art practices, engage with them and make an informed choice. Social media gives that opportunity," she says. Art Alive recently previewed Smriti Dixit's solo exhibition and ran an Instagram campaign for audience to engage with her mixed-media works.

Latitude's social media strategy usually focuses on studio visits and process videos. Vadehra says they have expanded their engagement model. "Today, most conversations begin digitally—through preview PDFs and social media—and then move to studio visits and exhibition walkthroughs. We respond far more time understanding what new collectors connect with emotionally and give them range of options in terms of scale, mediums and price points," she says.

Lisa Jain says galleries are now curating quality across a wide price range and are focusing on the more affordable segment. "The audience can now start building collections in the ₹3-4 lakh bracket," she says. For Vadehra, younger contemporary artists, whose works are in the ₹5-15 lakh price bracket, are seeing strong demand, while works of mid-career artists typically fall between ₹15 lakh and ₹60 lakh.

ROAD AHEAD While there's definitely interest, gallerists say there's a lot to be done. Aparajita Jain says, "Internationally, they can't afford to ignore India anymore—not only in terms of our economy, ideas or our soft power." India will have a pavilion at the 2026 Venice Biennale after a hiatus. But gaps remain. Parikh says, "Structural challenges remain. In India, the burden of supporting artists falls almost entirely on commercial galleries because public institutions lack strong acquisition and education programmes."

Asokan emphasises the need for better facilities, conservation expertise, logistics networks, valuation frameworks and insurance services, as values continue to rise. "The sharp growth in auction turnover tells us that more high-value works are travelling, changing hands and entering collections. The ecosystem now needs to catch up with that momentum."

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Manoj Mansukhani, director, marketing, AstaGuru Auction House

Highlights of 2025

- Collectors acquiring works with a long-term vision
- Mid-range art of ₹20-50 lakh, showing unexpected strength
- New wealth sectors like tech and finance engaging with art as cultural capital and asset
- Rise in cross-category collecting: heirloom jewellery, timepieces, rare books
- Heightened interest in works with stories, historical context, cultural resonance

Dinesh Vazirani, cofounder, Saffronart

Highlights of 2025

- Every modern Indian artist broke their world record in 2025
- Rise of conceptual art, mixed media, photography, installations
- Rise of second rung of moderns like Narayan Shrivastha Bendre and KK Hebbur
- Focus on antiquity—miniature, stone, bronze—as a reflection of India's culture

Artist Watch

Atul Dodiya, Bharti Kher, Jitish Kallat, Heta Patel, Nikhil Chopra, Vyom Mehta



Shilpa Gupta's work at Vadehra

Roshini Vadehra, director, Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi

Highlights of 2025

- Collectors have become far more intentional than before
- Galleries are turning into advisors, educators, and facilitators of institutional relationships
- Demand for younger contemporary artists whose works are in the ₹5-15 lakh range
- Strong global appetite for Indian art

Artist Watch

Atul Dodiya, Shilpa Gupta, Rameshwar Broota, Arpita Singh, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh and Sudhir Patwardhan

Steady demand for Progressives



Textile-based artwork by Insha Manzoor at Dhoomimal



Laxman Aley's The Rider Within

Lisa Jain, cofounder, Artsera, Bengaluru

Highlights of 2025

- Growing demand for contemporary art
- Demand from Indian diaspora
- Galleries focusing more on the affordable segment
- Buyers in the 30s and 40s

Artist Watch

Laxman Aley



Aley's untitled work

Uday Jain, director, Dhoomimal Art Gallery, Delhi

Highlights of 2025

- Galleries becoming more accessible
- Art fairs and festivals bringing in new crowds
- New art hubs beyond Delhi and Mumbai
- Interest in mediums like threadwork or textiles

Artist Watch

Anupam Sud, Dhraj Choudhary, Shobha Broota, Ashok Bhownik, Prabhakar Kolte



Uday Jain's work

Coast to hills, India is running out of clean air

Even as Delhi-NCR hogs the headlines, data shows the pollution crisis is widening, with new hotspots appearing from Goa to Guwahati

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Last year around this time, Mumbai-based entrepreneur Kirti Poonia and her husband packed their bags and moved to Goa, imagining a cleaner, more sustainable, close-to-nature lifestyle for their toddler son. "I was so happy and proud as a new mom for taking this decision for my family," But the joy didn't last. Within weeks, the couple could smell smoke in the air every evening. In many Goa villages, waste disposal means burning garbage in bonfires at the nearest crossroad, sending up thick clouds of smoke that residents are forced to breathe.

Then came another unpleasant surprise. All around Poonia, extra floors, pools and cafes were being added to meet the surge in demand from newly arrived residents from Delhi and Mumbai. It felt, she says, like living on a construction site — dust and noise everywhere.

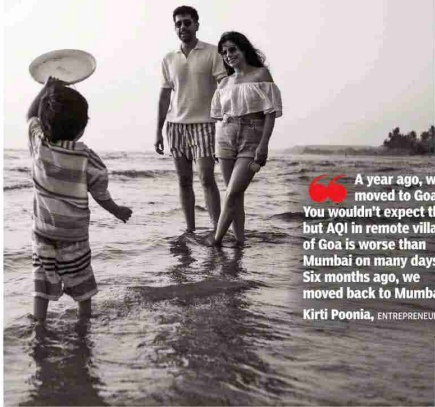
"At first, I couldn't believe that Goa was polluted but then I started measuring the air quality index (AQI) at home. The AQI in Mandrem village, which was close to the beach, turned out to be as high as 150-180. There have been times when the AQI in Goa was 180 while in Mumbai it was 40. It was shocking," she says. Earlier this year, Poonia moved back to Mumbai, abandoning what she calls the mirage of idyllic village life.

Poonia's experience underscores a hard truth for many looking to escape Delhi NCR or Mumbai's polluted air by moving cities: there is nowhere to run. Experts warn that nearly all Indian cities are polluted — the difference lies only in degree. Coastal towns and high-rainfall regions may average lower AQIs, but local factors can create severe pollution pockets with serious public health implications.

Satellite and ground monitoring data captured between Feb 2024-March 2025, analysed by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), found that 60% of India's 749 districts breach the annual National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) of 40 µg/m³. Not a single district met the World Health Organisation (WHO) PM2.5 standard of 5 µg/m³. Predictably all Delhi NCR districts — including Gurugram and Ghaziabad — ranked among the top 13 most polluted places in India. But the data also revealed that all districts in Tripura, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Chandigarh recorded AQI levels above the NAAQS threshold.

Smog, Smog Everywhere

The worst-affected districts are concentrated in a handful of states, highlighting regional clusters of severe air quality problems. Delhi (11 districts) and Assam (11 districts) together make up nearly half of the top 50, followed by Bihar (7) and Haryana (7). Uttar Pradesh (4), Tripura (3), Rajasthan (2), West Bengal (2), and one district each from Chhattisgarh, Meghalaya and Nagaland also feature.



A year ago, we moved to Goa. You wouldn't expect this but AQI in remote villages of Goa is worse than Mumbai on many days. Six months ago, we moved back to Mumbai

Kirti Poonia, Entrepreneur

STATES WITH MOST POLLUTED CITIES

States with most polluted cities	
Cities exceeding NAAQS*	Highest number of polluted cities in India
1. Rajasthan	23 (out of total 34 cities)
2. Haryana	22 (25)
3. Uttar Pradesh	14 (20)
4. Madhya Pradesh	9 (12)
5. Odisha	9 (14)

*Source: CREA. NAAQS is National Ambient Air Quality Standards which are India's official limits for major air pollutants, set by CPCB

TOP 10 POLLUTED CITIES

WHO standard: 40	NAAQS: 100	PM2.5 (mean in µg/m³)
1. Ghaziabad, UP	224	224
2. Noida, UP	217	217
3. Bahadurgarh, Haryana	215	215
4. Delhi	215	215
5. Hapur, UP	209	209
6. Greater Noida, UP	205	205
7. Bagpat, UP	181	181
8. Sonapat, Haryana	177	177
9. Meerut, UP	170	170
10. Rohtak, Haryana	164	164

Data for Nov 2025

5 CLEANEST CITIES

PM2.5	Cities
1	Shillong, Meghalaya
2	Gangtok, Sikkim
3	Koppal, Karnataka
4	Chamarajanagar, Karnataka
5	Palkalapur, Tamil Nadu

Data for Nov 2025, PM2.5 mean in µg/m³

difficulties and related health concerns.

With winter setting in, AQI levels have climbed nationwide. Last week, Kolkata's air quality was worse than Delhi. Patna recorded several 'poor' days across 10 cities. In Gujarat, Rajkot touched an AQI of 300 followed by Gyaaspur at 258 last month. A Climate Trends study found that Lucknow, Varanasi and Ahmedabad also show persistently high AQI values. Sunil Dahiya, founder and lead analyst at Envirocentrals, notes, "Lack of data ensures many cities are missing in our conversation when we talk of pollution. It is only when we see its physical symptoms that the invisible becomes visible."

The worsening smog is altering daily life even in smaller towns like Assam's Margherita, which is surrounded by scenic tea gardens but has a coal mining history. Manoranjan Bhuyan, a retired

65-year-old schoolteacher, recalls clearer days. "Twenty years ago, we could see the hills clearly from our homes. Now, most mornings, there's a gray haze hanging over everything," he says. Ajanta Baruah, a young mother in Ledo, worries about her children. "My six-year-old son has developed a persistent cough that won't go away. The doctor says it could be related to air quality," she says. Families try to keep windows closed in the early mornings and evenings, but as Baruah adds, "What else can we do? Some families with means have sent their children to study in other cities, but that's not an option for most of us."

One can go from Byrhnath in Meghalaya to Bihadi in Rajasthan, and the polluted air remains constant. In north Rajasthan, AQI levels surged this week to 218 (poor) in Sri Ganganagar and 131 (moderate) in Hanumanagar. Residents say the deterioration is visible. Lawyer Balram Bidasara, who lives near the Hanumanagar-Sri Ganganagar border, says, "You can feel the heaviness in the morning air. I had to shift my walk for later because breathing becomes difficult."

Silent Attack

Environmental analysts attribute the decline to multiple sources: vehicle emissions, industrial activity brick kilns, waste burning and dust from roads and construction. These pollutants linger more in winter because low wind speeds and temperature inversion traps them close to the ground. Waste management is almost non-existent in rural and peri-urban India, says Sree Kumar Kumaraswamy, program director, Clean Air Action, WRI India. "Burning garbage, road dust, traffic congestion, using older vehicles all act as contributing factors. We need a pan-sector approach to identify all pollution sources and find local remedies," he says. Doctors are seeing the impact first-hand. Dr. Manoj Gupta, a general physician in Margherita says, "We have seen an increase in patients suffering from asthma, chronic cough, and bronchitis. The elderly and young children are particularly vulnerable. Parents often report that children have trouble breathing during early morning hours when the smog is densest." Dr. Brijesh Gaur, a senior chest specialist at the Hanumanagar govt hospital, agrees. "Cases of respiratory distress, asthma attacks, pneumonia, throat and nasal burning, eye irritation, and chest tightness have nearly doubled compared to normal AQI days."

Data Gaps

Despite worsening conditions, many polluted cities rarely attract national attention. Policymaking is hampered by an inadequate number of monitoring stations and the high cost of installing new ones. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) relies on about 560 stations nationwide — and at any given time, some are offline. In Haryana, all 22 monitoring stations were shut for nearly a year from Nov 2024 because a maintenance contract wasn't renewed.

A single monitoring station costs around Rs 1.5 crore, says Dahiya. "We need more than one or two per city. More stations should be added, and we need to integrate data from low-cost monitoring stations, which are relatively cheaper (costs between Rs 30,000-Rs 1 lakh) for a better picture," he adds. CREA analyst Dahiya points out another problem: poorly located stations. "Monitoring stations are often located in cleaner areas, away from industrial zones or busy corridors, which leads to underestimating pollution levels."

Additional reporting by Rajib Datta in Dibrugarh, Kangkan Kalita in Guwahati and Ajay Singh Ugras in Jaipur

Which city are you from? Grab a chair

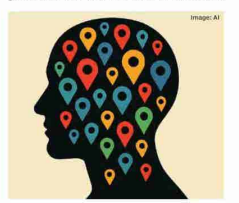
Vishal Dayama

We are at our go-to restaurant to grab a quick bite, one that can call two sabbis, one dal, two starters, three desserts, and fifty-seven naans a quick bite. My wife, who for some reason has become a gym freak, is starting down my soul, wondering if I have any shame left. "Cheer slowly," she says, but I can't hear her because I have started stuffing naans into my earholes by then. You can't expect me to eat all this with just one mouth-hole. Anyway, she is getting bored, so she starts chatting with the waiters. "Where are you from?" she asks. Invariably one of them turns out to be from the Bengal region, and their conversation switches to Bangla as it is illegal for two Bengalis to speak in any other language. Tagore might get offended. Everything is still okay until the waiter asks, "Where is she from, your wife?" he asks. An elongated sigh. Stretched to the extremes. Like a long dadaji fart echoing in the void. A new intern, not more than 25 years old, is still hanging around. Full of energy. "Where are you from?" he asks. "Delhi." "I see. End of conversation, I thought." "But didn't you used to live in Mumbai?" "Yes." End of conversation, I thought. "And now you live in Bengaluru?" "Yes, that's correct." End of conversation, I thought. He then goes on to tell me about the city he has lived in. I am thinking of my wife because at this point, she would have taken over, and the intern would have had to make an "urgent" call if he didn't want a midnight lesson on Indian geography. I am not great at small talk. Or medium-paced talk. Or any kind of talk. Especially the kind where people discuss their past lives, where they were born, whether there were pregnancy complications, how the nurse reacted to their ugly face, and so on. The people around me, however, are great at this. So, I have never bothered trying. They take over, and all I have to do is small-listen to their small talk before I find myself in my own small subconscious thoughts.

My wife tells the waiter about how she was born in Guwahati, did some schooling in Kolkata, then in Lucknow, Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru. By this time, the waiter has been freed for standing at one table for too long. The other diners have died of hunger. The police are beating their bodies. The manager has hung himself from the chandelier. Being from everywhere also means being from nowhere. I was born, brought up, schooled, and college in Delhi. And until a couple of years ago, I was perfectly okay with saying "Delhi" in response to the famously probing question, "Which city are you from?" But in recent months, I have realised and mathematically calculated that I have lived

more years outside Delhi than in it. So technically the answer should be something else. This question is spiralling. Is there a correct answer to this question at all?

When you are a child (and by child, I mean anyone who does not earn their own money, even if you are 28 and doing your Master's), you change cities based on your parents' will. You have little to no say in it. You are in one city till sixth standard, another till twelfth, then college somewhere else if your parents allow it. A few years later, when you start changing cities for work, you start listing every city you've lived in, hoping people will find your story interesting enough to like you. Instead, they tell you the same thing with two extra cities, and now you both resent each other and want to leave the party. By the time you hit your thirties, you start asking the question yourself. Which city do I belong to? For most people, the answer is the current one. You have a home, the place where you get out of suitcases like those animal bachelors. You get panic attacks when someone mentions



My wife tells the waiter she was born in Guwahati, did some schooling in Kolkata, then in Lucknow, Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru. By this time, the waiter has been freed for standing at one table for too long

moving. You live with your partner, possibly married now. You are emotionally invested in a plant and its future, and your best friend is the friend who visits your place without asking you to reciprocate. So, the city you live in is, unofficially, on its way to becoming the city you are from. In casual conversations, at least. But I feel the city you belong to is the one that changed you. It does not matter if you stayed there for only two years. But while you were there, did you learn a skill that shaped your career? Did you find joy in solitude and realise you were enough? Did you meet someone who became closer than family? If yes, then that is your city.

Because sometimes, a city doesn't just house you, it redefines you. It quietly watches as you fall apart and slowly find your way back. It gives you your people, your rhythm, your purpose. It becomes the backdrop to the version of you that finally made sense. The city that changed you may not be the longest chapter, but it is the one that turned the page. It's like that song you remember in a 3-hour long shift movie. And maybe, that is the answer to "Where are you from?". This city. The city that made a difference.

Dayama is a writer, director and creative consultant

Australia wants teens off social media. These Indian kids got there first

They don't need lectures. Some teens are cutting back on screens by using muting tricks, app blockers and willpower

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Australia may be yanking under-16s off social media with a new ban, but closer home, some Indian teens are managing the feat on their own. For a generation chafed for being glued to their screens, a few are breaking character and coming up with their own hacks to keep their scrolling in check.

"I am not on Snapchat because I feel I'd get addicted to it," says Amol, 16. Though his friends are on it, he has chosen not to test his own limits. Across town, 15-year-old Rhea Francis had her wake-up call when Class 10 began. "Once I got into 10th, I sort of got that reality check. Focusing on studies is more important right now," she says. A continent away, 18-year-old Yuvraj Sawant, a Mumbaier who has just moved to the Netherlands to study, remembers his tipping point. "I realised that I was scrolling through reels about two, three hours a day."

What unites them is what they chose to do next. Instead of

endless scrolling, this tribe of teenagers sets their own rules around screens. Amol, for instance, knows exactly what pulls him in. "I think the most addictive are Instagram reels and YouTube shorts." Instead of swearing off the apps altogether, he found a workaround. On his laptop, he runs a browser extension called Stay Free that scrambles the interface just enough to keep him from sliding into infinite scrolling. "I can open the apps, check my chats, or search for a video I want, but it prevents reels or shorts from showing up. It's still possible to bypass it, but that ten seconds of extra effort really helps me snap out of it." Rhea's method is to mute, not delete. "I'm on WhatsApp and Snapchat. What I did was mute notifications from people I don't want to see."

A major distraction, I also limit my social media usage to 15 minutes a day max." Yuvraj uses Instagram's own time-limit feature. "I went to settings and put a 40-minute time restriction. My friends actually introduced me to it. Once the time limit is reached, it prompts you. You can still use it, but it gives you a reminder." The reminders nudged him off the app and back to family time, sports and karate. Soon, with the IB programme and college prep kicking in, he didn't need the prompt anymore.

Both Android and iOS now come with Digital Wellbeing and Screen Time dashboards that track usage, set daily limits and mute notifications at bedtime. Some even throw in a "bedtime mode" that, theses, switches the screen to grayscale and hints that it's time to put the phone away. Instagram and Facebook display "Your Activity" stats to guide you into log-

ging off, while YouTube invites you to "take a break." Then there are newer third-party apps like Opal, Freedom and AppBlock that can lock you out entirely or slow you down with deliberate delays. But as teens like to point out, these only work if you stick with them, otherwise they're just one more notification you learn to ignore.

Teens also experiment with different tricks. Amol once tried what his sports psychologist called the "two-phone method" with one stripped-down device for calls and WhatsApp, another with social media apps which he left at home. It lasted ten days until a friend sent him something on Instagram. "I couldn't resist downloading the app back on the main phone... I's

Banning social media isn't the solution. If one type of platform is banned, another will emerge. We are learning self-control. I already limit social media usage to 10-15 mins a day, and never while studying

Rhea Francis, 15

a good idea in theory but I don't know how we'll live in practice," he shrugs. Amol's digital detox now comes in waves. He deletes his apps for stretches of time, only to reinstall them during exam time. "Because I'm stressed and just feel like I need to be productive," he says. "Never while studying because I know once I start I will keep going on." She saves her 10-15 minutes of Snapchat or WhatsApp for bedtime or the odd lazy time of the day. Yu-

vraj cleared the clutter altogether. Snapchat was the first casualty. "I realised that there's no value add. But I didn't delete Instagram because you got to keep up with current affairs, trends, news and stuff like that." Then he deleted YouTube. "It was just reaching reflexively for something that isn't there. Amol calls the withdrawal — "psychological rather than somatic" — but says it's manageable. For Rhea, the absence of constant pings was a relief. "You feel more calm and focused on one thing at a time." Yuvraj felt it most in his mornings. "Earlier, the moment I would wake up, I'd look at my phone. Now I have a bath, eat breakfast, then speak to my friends or scroll through a few reels later in the day."

For Amol, the biggest win has been sleep. He no longer keeps his phone in the bedroom, a rule enforced after his father noticed he was sleeping poorly. The habit stuck. He recalls, "During a summer programme at MIT, he slipped back into keeping the phone by his bed. 'I'd wake up in the middle of the night and open my phone, and it definitely affected my sleep. Keeping it outside made a difference.' Cutting back on notifications has given Rhea breathing space to read, rest, or simply sit with family. She says it was easier because she had a small support squad. "Five of us friends decided to limit our phone usage," she says. Without the social media pressure to stay constantly online, cutting back became easier. Yuvraj depended on his mother. "In 2023, she would take my phone for a bit while I was studying. Later, I'd ask her to take away my device whenever I needed to focus." But now, she would raise her hand. "I self-regulate when I feel it's getting too much."

And for yet another generation branded as dead to adult advice, this may perhaps be the most unexpected rebellion of all.

INQUIZITIVE

by JOY BHATTACHARJYA

- 1 Usually used to refer to streaming video services like Amazon Prime and Netflix, what is the expansion of the acronym OTT, which could also mean 'an excessive degree'?
- 2 The Leidenfrost Effect is the physics principle where water droplets dance on a sufficiently hot pan, creating a vapour layer that prevents sticking and allows a specific culinary item to cook evenly, becoming crispy outside and soft inside. Which Indian snack is perfectly created by the Leidenfrost effect?
- 3 Which specific international organisation puts out green and red notices for offenders, mostly used for tracing owners in the Goa nightclub industry?
- 4 Who was appointed as a Deputy Magistrate of Jessore in 1899, and served in the civil service till 1891, but is primarily remembered for a song in his novel Anandamath set around the Sanjasi Rebellion of the late 18th century?
- 5 Which real life personality was the inspiration for the 2010 biopic, The Social Network?
- 6 Which acclaimed actor and director, whose career spanned nearly 75 years, had to leave the US in 1952 for alleged communist sympathies and only returned to receive an Honorary Oscar in 1972?
- 7 New Guinea is regarded as the second largest island in the world, north of the Australian mainland. Two countries straddle the island, the first is Papua New Guinea. Which is the other country, which has six of its provinces on this island?
- 8 In which Indian city is the central business district named Hazratganj, home to many malls, cinemas and schools like
- 9 What is the two-word term used to refer to the generation of adults born between 1946 and 1964, named for the number of children born in that post war period?
- 10 Which Indian ruler's pioneering rock division is featured in a painting in the main reception lobby at NASA's Wallops Flight Facility at NASA's Walter of great pride to A.P.J. Abdul Kalam when he visited there?

ANSWERS

- 1 | OTT: Over the Top
- 2 | Leidenfrost Effect
- 3 | Interpol
- 4 | Bankim Chandra
- 5 | Charlie Chaplin
- 6 | Mark Zuckerberg
- 7 | Doaa
- 8 | Lucknow
- 9 | Over the Top
- 10 | A.P.J. Abdul Kalam

DECCAN Chronicle

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Krishna Shastri Devulapalli
Off the beaten track

A melody that truly knows no borders

I saw S.P. Balasubrahmanyam for the first time in the late '60s, when he came to visit my grandfather. We had just moved from Hyderabad to Madras. He had come in a yellow-and-black taxi that he had kept waiting. I distinctly remember — a trim young man, little more than a boy, really, come to think of it, with big eyes and little bunny teeth. It was four or five then. I don't remember what the visit was about. But I remember the buzz in the house. He had by then sung Grandfather's "Medante Meda Kadu" in *Sukha Dukhalu* and many of the songs in K. Viswanath's *Undanna Botu Pedata*, which we would play constantly on the gramophone.

I saw SPB — or Balu as he was popularly known — next in the '70s. He was standing in the singers' booth of the recording theatre at Vijaya Gardens. He had the lyricist's grandson, I was allowed to sit in the big soundproof room which housed the large orchestra, a bewildering mix of Indian and Western instruments, on the promise that I wouldn't so much as breathe. As the rehearsals were in progress, turning around in my chair, I wondered why I couldn't hear (the by now slightly larger) Balu singing, while I could hear all the instruments. The singers' booth was still off-limits, of course. Thus, I ended up being among the very first people in all of Telugu-land to listen to "Kusalama" (*Bali Peetham*) and "Cheekati Velugula" (*Cheekati Velugula*) before they became the hits they did.

My third encounter with a live Balu was in 1979, when my school decided to have a concert to raise funds for a new block. The '70s being the '70s, the school authorities permitted an elite gang of insane, unsupervised schoolboys to run amok on the streets of Madras. Unleashed on the general public, we rode our cycles madly, stopping to ring random doorbells in the Boat Club and Poes Gardens neighbourhoods — with the goal of selling tickets to the moneyed Madras but finding their bewildered house help instead. (That the lot of us survived to actually see the concert proves that those were relatively safer times.)

On concert day, in the packed Music Academy auditorium, Balu and his troupe belted out his many hits to a wild (by '70s Madras standards) audience of moms, dads, and random folks from the posher localities of the city who had been persuaded to buy tickets by delinquent schoolboys.

SPB had saved the best for last. He said that he was going to present a song from an unreleased K. Balachander movie called *Ninaithele Inikkum*. He sang, for the first time to a live audience, what was to become the cult hit "Engayum Eppodum." And did an encore.

The next day, along with a bunch of older kids, I was summoned to the headmaster's room (number a good thing) and threatened with suspension.

"Are you all country fellows?" he said with a perfunctory show of disgust (the concert had been a disaster). "What kind of boys dance in the aisles?"

My final meeting with Balu was in the late '80s. I had graduated from dancing in the aisles to going to big boy parties. And it was at such a gathering, in a private cottage in a Madras hotel, that I met him with a small group of Telugu film types. All of them much bigger boys than me.

Balu, at the behest of a famous Telugu film director, sang "Pibare Rama Rasam". At 1 a.m. To a small and intoxicated (entirely by his voice) audience.

Later, I naively asked him, "Sir, in that song (I was referring to an *Itaiyaraaga* composition from the film *Sri Kanaka Mahalakshmi Recording Dance Troupe*), how did you insert, you know, that effortless little laugh into that line?"

He showed me. Effortlessly. I remember seeing him leave in a Premier 118 NE.

The point is, while I may have had a few chance personal encounters with the great man at different stages in my life — as a child, adolescent and young man — so has every south Indian. Not meeting him personally doesn't make any of those encounters any less personal.

We've all met Balu. In our childhood, youth and adulthood. We will continue meeting him. Into our old age. Constantly. Irrespective of which part of India (or the world) our feet are planted on. And he'll always be there. With the perfect song. And though we've heard it a hundred times, it'll feel like the first time.

Last year, in this space, in a piece featuring Keats, Shelley, and my grandfather, the poet Krishna Shastri, I remember writing "How naive of me to think poets need visas, planes and entry passes to meet when they already possess the greatest vehicle of all, one unfettered by time and distance — imagination."

How futile, therefore, to squabble over a statue — something so immovable — that attempts to contain someone who moves us so.

Krishna Shastri Devulapalli is a novelist, columnist, playwright and screenwriter

Subhani



Five ideas to overhaul our broken election machine



Manish Tewari
State of the Union

On December 9, 2025, when I stood up in the Lok Sabha to open the debate on electoral reforms, I experienced both the gravitas of the moment and the responsibility it placed upon my shoulders. For democracy is not an ornament, it is a system of trust, rules and institutions that must be continuously defended and reinvigorated. Today, that trust has frayed. My remarks were not rhetorical flourishes but five concrete recommendations aimed at restoring confidence in our electoral machinery and protecting the sanctity of the vote cast by the sovereign who stands long hours in sun and rain to exercise his franchise.

Revamping the Election Commission's Leadership Selection: The Election Commission of India was only consecrated as a permanent, independent, neutral institution by the founding fathers of the Republic for they envisaged a continuous series of elections in the country after the first 10 to 15 years beginning in 1952. It was meant to be the impartial umpire of our democratic contests. Yet today, it must be stated with profound regret that many citizens and political parties have raised serious questions about whether this neutrality still exists. The 2023 amendment to the law governing the selection of the Chief Election Commissioner represented a significant departure from principles of institutional independence.

The current selection mechanism comprises only three members — the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha, and a Cabinet Minister. This narrow composition creates the perception that the ruling establishment has undue influence over the selection process. I strongly advocated for the inclusion of two additional members: the Chief Justice of India and the

The time for incremental reform has passed. We need bold, comprehensive changes to restore the health of our electoral system and the faith of the people in our democracy.

Justice of India and the Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha. With these two additional voices, the Commission would perhaps genuinely function as the impartial umpire our democracy desperately needs.

Stopping the Illegal Special Intensive Revision: One of the most troubling developments in recent electoral cycles has been the widespread conduct of Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls across 12 states and Union territories. I must state with absolute clarity: The Election Commission has no legal or constitutional basis to conduct SIRS on such a sweeping scale. The Representation of the People Act, 1950, clearly states that corrections can be made only at a constituency level only if something is found to be manifestly wrong, and reasons for such corrections must be recorded in writing, made public, and the whole process must be transparent and subject to scrutiny. What was designed as a scalpel is being used as a sledgehammer.

The Election Commission is conducting blanket revisions across entire states without adequately publicising specific reasons for such an exercise. This is not electoral administration; this is institutional overreach.

Democracy Cannot Run on Black Boxes: For nearly two decades, I have raised questions about the trustworthiness of Electronic Voting Machines. Today I return to this issue with renewed urgency: Can a machine be trusted more than paper? Who possesses the EVM source code? Where is it stored? How is it audited? These are not academic questions; they go to the heart of democratic accountability. A machine can always be manipulated. This is a fundamental principle of information technology. No amount of procedural safeguards can

overcome the basic vulnerability of a black-box system. Advanced nations like Germany, Japan, Netherlands, etc., there is recognition of the need for voter verification and paper trails. I, therefore, proposed two complementary solutions: Either we must mandate 100 per cent verification against EVM (Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail) slips, or we must return to paper ballots entirely. The VVPAT was introduced as a safeguard against EVM manipulation, yet we conduct random verification of only a tiny percentage of these paper records. This defeats the entire purpose. If we cannot afford to verify all VVPAT slips, we should acknowledge that electronic voting has failed the test of democratic legitimacy and revert to paper ballots.

This is a call for prioritising democratic integrity over administrative convenience. **Pre-Election Cash Transfers and Fiscal Responsibility:** As elections approach, governments transfer cash directly to voter bank accounts. This practice represents grave misuse of governmental power and systematic manipulation of national reserves. It is a form of bribery on a systemic scale.

The data is sobering. As of March 24, 2025, the combined liability of Central and state governments stood at ₹2.67 lakh crore. Eighteen out of 28 states have debt-to-GDP ratios exceeding 30 per cent. Some states take new loans merely to service interest on existing obligations. Yet governments use elections as occasions for massive cash transfers, further ballooning debt. I proposed a new constitutional provision: Article 283A, that would prohibit governments

with debt-to-GDP ratios exceeding 10 per cent (ideally) or 20 per cent (at minimum) from engaging in cash transfers to voters. The rationale is clear: If government debt is already unsustainable, it has no moral or fiscal right to further burden the exchequer. When governments take new loans to fund cash transfers, they are not giving people their money; they are mortgaging their future. The grandchild of today's beneficiary will pay for it through higher taxes and reduced public services. This is in fact intergenerational theft conducted in the name of electoral politics.

Reforming the Anti-Defection Law: Finally, I addressed the Anti-Defection Law, which has inadvertently deepened political instability rather than curtailing it. The law was conceived as a remedy for the 1960s "Agya Ram Gya Ram" era, yet it has evolved into an instrument of whiplash-driven tyranny that transforms elected representatives into mere voting machines, stripping them of the imperatives of constituency, conscience and common sense. I have introduced a private member's bill three times 2020, 2021 and now in 2025 proposing that MPs should incur losses of ₹25 lakh only when they violate party discipline on confidence motions, no-confidence motions and financial matters. On all other bills, MPs should be free to vote according to their conscience and constituents' interests.

These reforms are fundamental to preserving our democratic republic. Our institutions are under strain and public confidence is eroding. The time for incremental reform has passed. We need bold, comprehensive changes to restore the health of our electoral system. These are ideas whose time has come.

Manish Tewari is a third-term Lok Sabha MP and former Union minister. Twitter handle: @ManishTewari.

LETTERS

VIZAG IN FOCUS

During 2019-24 when the YSRC was in power, N. Chandrababu Naidu, then as opposition leader, opposed anything connected to Vizag including the proposed executive capital (Naidu sets foundation for Cognizant in Vizag, Dec. 13). Now he is locating everything related to technology in and around Vizag, apart from many other aspects. Moreover, he is dumping thousands of crores of rupees in the flood-prone Amaravati. He neglected its construction during 2014-19. We lost Hyderabad city in this manner earlier. Another loss in future should not be allowed to happen.

Govardhana Myneedu
Vijayawada

INDIGO CRISIS

The article "Time to change branding of IndiGo to 'Indi: GoToHill'" (Dec. 13) takes off with a provocative suggestion to rebrand the IndiGo airline, but in doing so, it may brush over the significant contributions the airline has made to affordable air travel. It is clear that the need for continuous improvement, bringing up a substantial thing is the best approach. IndiGo has carried out an impressive job in making air travel accessible to many. Rebranding should be based on carrying out thorough market research and consumer feedback. The focus should be on building on strengths and ironing out operational issues. Let's focus on promoting positive change.

P.R. Ravinder
Kakinada

GHASTLY ACCIDENT

One more ghastly accident occurred in the wee hours of Friday near Chintoor in ASR district (9 pilgrims dead, 22 hurt as bus rolls into hill slope, Dec. 13). Whatever the reason(s) within a period of months tens of people lost their lives in road accidents that took place across Telugu states whether they were in Kurnool or Rangareddy or now in ASR district.

Pratapa Reddy Yaramala
NTR district

Email your letters to: info@deccanmail.com, editor@deccanmail.com.



John J. Kennedy

Beyond American dreams: Indians doing a rethink on study abroad plan

For decades, studying abroad has been the destination for many Indian families — the United States. The plan was almost ritualistic — secure admission, take an education loan that stretched household budgets, pray for a visa, and trust that work experience, residency, and even citizenship would follow. That script was so deeply embedded in the middle-class imagination that the American university route was a default pathway. However, over the last couple of years, that assumption has begun to crumble under the weight of policy unpredictability, lengthy visa queues, and a more intense global climate surrounding migration.

Let us now take a closer look at the numbers to understand the current landscape. In 2024, an estimated 13.36 lakh Indian students were pursuing higher education overseas. Of them, Canada hosted approximately 4.27 lakh, while the United States accounted for around 3.38 lakh. The UK had about 1.85 lakh and Australia 1.22 lakh. Indian students were pursuing higher education overseas. However, in 2024, the number of students leaving India fell by nearly 15 per cent, compared to 2023, from 8.56 lakh to 7.5 lakh, as reported by the Bureau of Immigration. The decision was visible across major destinations, though not uniformly.

Still, the trend reveals a significant shift — even the United States, once considered the unquestioned first choice, is now being scrutinised more thoughtfully by Indian students.

Parallel to this slowdown, other destinations are gaining attraction. Germany is the finest example. In the 2023-24 winter semester, German universities hosted 49,493 Indian students, a 15.1 per cent increase from the previous year and nearly double the figure from five years ago. Indians now form the largest international student group in the country. The drivers are clear: low or zero tuition at many public universities, robust engineering and research ecosystems, and post-study work pathways that are less opaque than the H-1B lottery. France, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries are also attracting more Indian students, with English-medium programmes in technology, business analytics, design, AI, and sustainability, often backed by scholarships. The European landscape of quality across many public universities reduces the risk of paying premium fees for a mediocre degree, a risk that Indian students have occasionally faced in the US.

Why this rebalancing? Because the American visa process now feels like a gamble. Even academically strong appli-

cants face unpredictable outcomes, long waits and sudden rejections. Add to this, tuition, soaring rents in cities and a weakening rupee, and the US route suddenly looks far riskier than before. More than admission, the calculation is about the return, yet the risk remains high and the realistic odds of migration.

So, the shift of Indian students to look beyond the US can be beneficial. By consciously widening their lens, students not only manage financial and visa-related risks, but they also discover alternative pathways with equal or better career potential. Germany, for instance, offers affordability, structured post-study work visas, and a growing Indian peer community. The Netherlands, Sweden and Finland emphasise research-led programmes in emerging fields such as AI, clean energy, and sustainability. West Asian countries, including the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, are investing heavily in STEM education, hosting branch campuses of major Western universities, and providing job prospects to gain long-term residence visas tied to skills.

Singapore, while highly selective, provides access to a growing Asian market and stable work pathways. By diversifying their options, students reduce dependence on a single country or system and

create multiple avenues to achieve their career and life goals.

Of course, the traditional Anglo-American destinations haven't disappeared, but they no longer enjoy unquestioned primacy. Canada, Australia, and the UK remain attractive, yet the return equation has shifted. Visa rules, living costs, post-study work rights, and settlement norms must all be evaluated along with academic reputation. What was once a straightforward aspiration has evolved into a comparative exercise in risk, return and sustainability. In this context, the decision to look beyond the US is as much about pragmatism as opportunity.

Another noticeable shift is in how students pursue foreign education. Twinning programmes allow them to split their degree between India and abroad, easing the cost and reducing visa risks. Many now choose hybrid models, such as one year online and one year on campus, or short, job-oriented courses. These flexible formats enable students to gain global exposure without straining their finances, allowing them to build a varied educational profile instead of relying on a single destination. The evidence of change is clear. The number of Indian students overseas increased from approx-

imately 9.07 lakh in 2022 to 13.36 lakh in 2024. Interest remains high, but the choices are wider. The old US-centred dream has shifted to multiple destinations, as students now compare courses, job prospects, and costs with far greater care. Studying abroad is no longer a status symbol. It's a strategic investment.

This does not render the United States irrelevant. Thousands of Indian students continue to aspire to study there. It's just that the path is no longer as straightforward. The benefit ratio is harsher. The old assumption of inevitability is gone. For parents and students, the shift is both philosophical and practical — all the decisions must be strategic, not sentimental. Understandably, therefore, the focus is on the afterlife of the degree — debt load, employability, visa security, and long-term alignment with career and life goals. It is appreciable that Indian students have learnt to balance aspiration, practicality and opportunity. In such a scenario, looking beyond the US undoubtedly promises greater resilience and better alignment with personal, academic and career goals.

The writer is retired professor and former dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at Christ University in Bengaluru.

OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Yechiel Leiter | By Elliot Kaufman

The Israeli Case for Optimism About America

The Israeli ambassador has had a tough morning. “We had a meeting with the New York Times,” his spokeswoman tells me as I join them for lunch, “so we’ll be emotional-eating.”

“No,” Ambassador Yechiel Leiter replies. “After that meeting, *they’ll* be emotional-eating.” I take it he gave the editors a piece of his mind, but he orders a hamburger just in case.

“It was inhuman,” he says. “They just had no understanding, no feeling for what Israelis have suffered, what we have gone through, and what we still face.” Mr. Leiter arrived in Washington in January and must be used to it by now. But this is no ordinary day. Exactly two years earlier, his son Moshe Yedidya Leiter, a company commander in the reserves, was killed by a Hamas booby trap. It was at a tunnel shaft next to a mosque in northern Gaza. He was 39, with a wife and six children.

This, Ambassador Leiter recognizes, is part of the reason he was asked to represent Israel in the U.S.: “We were on a war footing, and I represented a large swath of Israeli society that was contending with the war” in ways that many in the American media seemed to forget.

It also helped that Mr. Leiter,

Despite hostility on both left and right, the Jewish state’s ambassador to Washington sees the alliance becoming even stronger in years to come.

66, was born and raised in Scranton, Pa. He immigrated to Israel at 18, served in the 1982 Lebanon War as a combat medic and later earned a doctorate in political philosophy at the University of Haifa. “My doctoral thesis happens to be on one of the ideological foundations of American society, the *rebbe* of the Founding Fathers”—John Locke.

Mr. Leiter had also worked with the prime minister before, as Benjamin Netanyahu’s chief of staff from 2004-05 when he was finance minister. Mr. Netanyahu’s free-market reforms of those years are often credited with unlocking Israel’s economic potential.

“Bibi was at the U.N. during the Reagan-Thatcher years, and he studied Reaganomics,” Mr. Leiter says, “so he came in with a clear philosophy of deregulation, of privatization.” Without those latter-day returns from Reaganomics, Israel might not have been able to sustain the long war of the past two years, fighting through Iran’s proxies to reach Tehran and the nuclear facilities.

Mr. Leiter points to two other returns: winning Israel off U.S. economic aid (though military assistance continues) and enabling the government to sponsor major offshore gas finds. “This is bringing us energy independence—energy power, really,” he says.

“We’re about to sign a \$35 billion gas deal with Egypt. I mean, imagine that—we’re supplying Egypt,” to which Israel gave up the oil fields of the Sinai for peace in the 1970s.

Mr. Netanyahu offered Mr. Leiter the new job in Washington on five minutes’ notice. “I hesitated, and I guess he heard the hesitation. So he asked me, ‘What would your son say?’ In that split second, it became so clear to me what I had to do—not only to go to Washington, but I had to pick myself off the floor. I had to live for him.”

Mr. Leiter, who earned orthodox rabbinical ordination, breaks into a homily connecting his son Moshe to the biblical original, Moses. “If the Jewish people would fall into victimhood throughout the ages, they never would have come back to the land of Israel,” he concludes. “When people say the state of Israel was created because of the Holocaust, it’s just the opposite. The state of Israel was created despite the Holocaust. Any other people would have slid into victimhood, would have said, ‘It’s all over.’”

Even today, there is a reason to worry it’s all over. I present Mr. Leiter with the pessimistic outlook for Israel: The American left’s hostility has all but conquered the Democratic Party. Antisemitism is rising on the right as well, so that the Republicans can’t be relied on after President Trump departs. Europe is lost and will get even worse. Israel’s future is total abandonment and isolation.

To explain where that analysis errs, Mr. Leiter begins with “Moby-Dick”: “There’s a great paragraph where Melville describes a boat. The one side is Locke, and the other side is Kant. It says Locke goes up, Kant goes down; Kant goes up, Locke goes down. It’s like they create a balancing act because of their opposing philosophies. So I see great potential, long-term good, in the extremes of the right coming to the surface. Because until now, there was nobody to balance the craziness of the woke left.”

The “woke right” will work to move everybody toward the center. For cooler, saner heads, both sides are going to have to come to the conclusion that we have to deal with our extremes and find more in common in the center of the horseshoe than on the extreme ends.”

Mr. Leiter says he finds “much more sobriety” in Israel “when you get out of the border lands” and arrive in Middle America. He asks: “Why would Tucker Carlson go on this crazy offensive about hating Christian Zionists if there weren’t 50 or 60 million of them? No, the natural inclination is still wholesomeness.”

The history of the U.S.-Israel relationship also adds some perspective. “When we bombed the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq in 1981, Reagan was irate,” Mr. Leiter recalls. “He threatened [Prime Minister Menachem] Begin with sanctions.” When Israel bombed Syria’s nuclear reactor in 2007, “Bush 43 doesn’t threaten sanctions, but he’s not very happy about it.”



Then came the attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities. “In 2025, we almost became one intelligence community. People don’t understand the level of collaboration that we had for three, four months.”

“While all these idiots were writing about ‘daylight’ and ‘anger’ between the U.S. and Israel or between Messrs. Trump and Netanyahu,” Ron Derner and I used to come out of the White House laughing. ‘Let them say it. It’s perfect. We couldn’t break this cover if we tried.’” It appears the Iranians fell for it as well. (Mr. Derner was Israel’s strategic affairs minister until stepping down in November. Mr. Leiter will likely take up some of his duties in Washington.)

“We reached a situation where we begin the operations, and the U.S. completes the operations,” Mr. Leiter says. Israel helped the U.S. by swallowing the big initial risk and doing most of the “dirty work,” as German Chancellor Friedrich Merz put it. The U.S. helped Israel by finishing off what only it had the military capability to do.

Much of Mr. Leiter’s case for optimism rests on what Israel can offer America. “Looking into the future, the U.S. is moving its focus to the Far East,” he says. “In Europe, that means NATO has to step up to the plate—do its share, pay its share, take responsibility.” In the Middle East, “the potential is an extended Abraham Accords, to the degree that Israel and its neighbors enter into a regional entente, so the U.S. could reduce its footprint and have its allies take responsibility for the region.”

This vision hinges on Israeli strength. “Without that, Saudi Arabia is not going to protect the region itself. And we can’t just put all our eggs in the basket of Turkey.” While the conspiratorial mind imagines Israel dragging the U.S. into Middle East wars, Mr. Leiter views Israel as America’s only realistic way out. “We’ve excited the ‘unipolar moment.’” he says. “In this realignment, the U.S. will need fighting allies.”

Nonfighting allies like Saudi Arabia spend more on fancy mili-

tary equipment but get pushed around by Iran.

The Abraham Accords can empower Arab neighbors to act in coordination with Israel—against shared U.S. adversaries—in what is ultimately a battle within Islam. “Does everybody have to be subservient to Islam, as Iran and its proxies believe?” Mr. Leiter asks. “Or can Muslim states live side-by-side with Judeo-Christian civilization, represented in the heart of Islam by Israel?”

From this angle, defeating the Iranian axis has also created opportunities for what the ambassador calls a “reformation” in the Islamic world’s relations with the West. Mr. Trump said much the same in October: “Now, because you don’t have that threat [from Iran], everybody’s open to peace.” The president credits the Iran strikes, and even Israel’s strike on Hamas in Qatar (though he considers it a “tactical mistake”), with clearing the path to a Gaza deal.

Mr. Leiter rejects the perception that Mr. Netanyahu was forced into that deal. “The deal is a commitment to get all hostages out, Hamas disarmed and Gaza demilitarized. That’s what we wanted and insisted upon. In the end, Turkey and Qatar were left with no choice,” he says, but to pressure Hamas to take it. “Basically, the U.S. adopted our position. . . . So what, are we not going to be thrilled?”

Mr. Trump did, however, pressure Mr. Netanyahu into treating Hamas’s hedging response to the deal as if it were a full acceptance. The issue persists in Hamas’s refusal to disarm.

“What we need now,” Mr. Leiter says, “is full implementation. Anything less will be a repeat of Oslo’s smoke and mirrors, of which we’ve had enough.” He’s referring to the failed peace plans of the 1990s, of whose folly he tried to warn the world at the time.

From 1989-92, Mr. Leiter led the Jewish community of Hebron, the ancient city where Arabs slaughtered Jews in 1929 and subsequently expelled them. After Jordan invaded Israel in 1967 and lost the territory of the West Bank, Hebron became home to one

of the most ideological and vulnerable of the new Jewish settlements. “In the eye of the storm” is how Mr. Leiter remembers it.

There’s a new storm brewing. Does the ambassador worry about younger Americans, who seem much less friendly to Israel? “They won’t be a Biden Zionist or a Trump Zionist,” he says, “but they’re going to be a new distilled American Zionist. Something runs very, very deep between the American and Israeli psyche.” He cites “The Arc of a Covenant,” the 2022 book by Journal columnist Walter Russell Mead. “I don’t think it’s going to get lost.”

Mr. Leiter offers Vice President JD Vance as an example. “He may not have the same intestinal identification with Jews that Donald Trump has,” he allows. “He didn’t grow up in New York, and probably he didn’t light Hanukkah candles with Jewish friends and business partners. But so what? I’ve been in a dozen consequential meetings with JD, and I haven’t noticed in him a scintilla of anti-Israelism or distance from Jews or Israel.

“People tell me he’s a friend of Tucker Carlson. Well, maybe he doesn’t like all the friends that I have. I don’t know how to answer that. I wouldn’t be friends with Tucker Carlson. But where it matters, I’ve only seen good and positive stuff. JD believes in America first, and I think he believes that part of America first is having a strong ally like Israel.”

We conclude by discussing what kind of relationship Israel would like with America. “In Israel,” he says, this illness of extremes,” he says. “Yesterday, it was ‘daylight’ with Trump. Our media was saying we’re all on our own. Today, the same journalists say we’re a ‘vassal state,’” too dependent on Mr. Trump and the U.S. to make its own decisions. The ambassador’s advice: “Calm down, everybody. There’s a whole lot in between.”

He would like a gradual end to U.S. military aid to Israel, a long-term objective of the Israeli right that Mr. Netanyahu has been raising again. “We’d like to see the nature of the military assistance become military collaboration,” Mr. Leiter says. “That means moving into a mode of enhanced joint development, joint R&D and joint production that benefits both countries in a way everyone can see.”

Like Iron Dome? “Like Golden Dome,” he replies. Israeli technology can help realize Mr. Trump’s missile-defense vision for America. As of this month, Israel’s Arrow 3 system now defends Germany. Times have changed.

“Now that Israel has a GDP per capita on par with the most powerful and wealthy Western nations, it’s not the same relationship we had with the U.S. in the 1950s,” he says. “So, let’s have that evolve now that we are in a position where our technologies benefit the U.S. It’s not just a one-way street. It’s a real partnership.” With a fighting ally.

Mr. Kaufman is a member of the Journal’s editorial board.

Miami Will Do Just Fine Under a Democratic Mayor



CROSS COUNTRY
By Alex Witkoff

In the hours after Miami elected Democrat Eileen Higgins mayor on Tuesday, a wave of pessimistic commentary swept across social media. “Miami is going to be turned into yet another Chicago or NYC,” one tweet claimed. “Violent criminals will now be allowed to roam the streets and destroy everyone’s lives.” Others said the city had swung sharply left or that the result threatened Miami’s economic momentum. These claims misunderstand how Miami actually works and why the region’s trajectory remains fundamentally strong.

Miami’s recent growth took shape during the Covid pandemic, when firms and individuals left high-tax, slow-growth cities like New York and San Francisco in search of economic opportunity, regulatory clarity and quality of life. Miami offered a growth-oriented environment, openness to new industries and a clear regulatory framework. Mayor Francis Suarez played a pivotal role in signaling that the region welcomed investment. But the forces shaping Miami’s rise were broader: demographic momentum, low taxes, a pro-business and low-regulation climate, and an East Coast location with access to Europe and Latin America.

The results are visible in the companies that have moved or expanded here. Citadel, Starwood Capital, Millennium Management, Thomas Bravos and Kirkland & Ellis all expanded their presence in Miami. Citadel committed to building a new headquarters campus expected to exceed \$2.5 billion in total investment, underscoring the confidence major institutions have in Miami’s future. My firm, the Witkoff Group, relocated to Miami for the same reasons.

To understand why the city will continue to grow, it is important to understand how the region functions. National commentary often treats Miami as if it were a unified political structure, but the reality is far more distributed. Miami-Dade County has 34 mayors across municipalities such as Miami Beach, Coral Gables, Aventura, Bal Harbour, Doral and Key Biscayne. The city of Miami is just one of these 34 jurisdictions that people lump together as “Miami.”

This diversification exists within the city of Miami as well. Many foundational functions operate through a distributed framework rather than through a single executive. Zoning, development approvals, permitting and critical municipal decision-making run through the City Commission, which provides continuity as administrations change.

Miami-Dade County manages the regional systems that make a metro-

politan area of this scale work. Transportation, water and sewer, major public works, long-term planning and regional development strategy are overseen at the county level. Daniela Levine Cava, a Democrat who has served as county mayor since 2020, has worked closely with municipal leaders throughout this period of growth.

Public safety follows a similar distributed design. The Miami Police Department reports to the city man-

Eileen Higgins is known as a practical problem-solver, and local institutions are built for good governance.

ager, creating professional continuity across political cycles. County-wide law enforcement and major regional responsibilities are increasingly managed through the elected Miami-Dade sheriff, now Rosie Cordor Stutz, who is widely respected for steady leadership and a track record in public safety.

Florida’s state government provides essential guardrails. Gov. Ron DeSantis and the Republican Legislature have limited the downside risk of local elections by removing the most economically destructive policies from the menu entirely. Tall-

hassee has pre-empted local rent control, capped property tax increases, banned sanctuary city policies and prevented municipalities from imposing their own minimum wages or restricting plastic bags.

This structure also provides context for interpreting the election. In 2024 Donald Trump became the first Republican to win Miami-Dade County since 1988, while Kamala Harris won the city of Miami, where registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans by roughly 9,000. Turnout in this race was low: fewer than 40,000 voters out of 2.7 million county residents. The mayor result wasn’t an indication of a national trend but a local decision in a politically mixed city where party registration has never neatly predicted municipal outcomes. Despite the Democrats’ registration advantage, most recent mayors have been Republican.

Not all, though, contrary to the often-heard claim that it’s been 30 years since Miami elected a Democratic mayor. Manny Diaz, who served as mayor from 2001 to 2009, was widely recognized as a Democrat and later served as chairman of the Florida Democratic Party.

Ms. Higgins prevailed because she is adept at problem-solving and practical governance. As a Miami-Dade County commissioner (2018-25) she focused on transportation, infrastructure, housing and service deliv-

ery. That experience—not partisanship—resonated with voters.

Miami’s biggest challenge is housing affordability. Rent has risen to the sixth-highest level nationally, and climbing insurance costs have made homeownership unaffordable for many. The wrong answer is rent control or blocking development—policies that locked in San Francisco’s housing crisis. The right answer is what Miami has begun to pursue: encouraging public-private partnerships, expanding private-sector incentives and taking advantage of state tools such as Florida’s Live Local Act to accelerate the creation of workforce and attainable housing.

Pessimistic interpretations of the election miss the broader reality. Miami enters its next chapter with structural advantages—from distributed governance to competition among municipalities—that have historically reinforced stability and growth. But advantages aren’t self-executing. The question now is whether Mayor Higgins will maintain the regulatory restraint, fiscal discipline and openness to development that have defined Miami’s success. The foundation is strong, the opportunities are significant, and the next phase will depend on sustaining the policies that made Miami a magnet in the first place.

Mr. Witkoff is CEO of the Witkoff Group.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Pete Hegseth's Zombie Reaganism

You almost have to admire Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth taking the stage at the Ronald Reagan presidential library and immediately opening fire. "Most who invoke Ronald Reagan's name today, especially self-styled Republican hawks, are not much like Ronald Reagan," he said. "Donald Trump is the true and rightful heir of Ronald Reagan." Who says the Gipper is irrelevant in Republican politics?

Mr. Hegseth aimed to locate the Trump project in Reagan's mantra of peace through strength, and their slogans are the same. But the history of Reagan's success is worth recalling as Mr. Hegseth accuses others of besmirching the 40th President's legacy. Reagan rebuilt the U.S. military but also took political risk to negotiate with communists to win the Cold War, and Mr. Hegseth says President Trump is rerunning that playbook.

That doesn't get the Reagan history right. Reagan negotiated from strength because he first built up that strength, both military and economic. He deployed midrange nuclear missiles in Europe despite ferocious Soviet opposition. The Soviets tried to break the U.S. alliance with Europe, and they only turned to serious negotiating when they concluded they couldn't compete with the U.S.

Today the U.S. faces two nuclear peer adversaries, China and Russia, both global and ideologically hostile powers like the Soviet Union. And they are working together. Mr. Trump is so far making concessions to both and is spending less on defense as a share of the economy than Jimmy Carter did in 1979.

Mr. Hegseth said the defense budget is going up. "My kids and yours will someday talk about the Trump buildup," he said. We're ready to help the President make the case, and his one-time cash infusion in this year's Republican budget bill was a start. But now what? Mr. Trump's fiscal 2026 budget proposed a defense cut after inflation.

The defense secretary is right that Reagan hesitated to use military force abroad. But then Mr. Hegseth revived Reagan Defense Secretary Cap Weinberger's test for U.S. intervention abroad. That doctrine prescribes force only as a last resort for a vital interest, and only if it's popular, among other requirements. "This is sound stuff," Mr. Hegseth said.

But Reagan and his Administration never fully accepted those tenets. Bill Safire, the conservative columnist, described the doctrine in the New York Times at the time as "only the fun wars" and a vow not to defend ourselves until the stakes are dire. As Safire put it: "Our

tradition has been to accept risks for a just cause."

That point matters because you can't reduce Reaganism to "out with utopian idealism, in with hard-nosed realism," as Mr. Hegseth averred. The Reagan grand strategy blended idealism with realism—naming an evil empire, while arming the enemies of communism across the world.

The Chinese Communists may not be fomenting revolution abroad the way the Soviets did—for now—but their ambitions are still to become the pre-eminent global power, and Vladimir Putin is their junior partner. Mr. Trump casually said recently that Ukraine is losing its war, but Reagan would understand that Ukraine's defeat would be a loss for the West that makes the U.S. less secure.

Mr. Hegseth's lines that the "unipolar moment" of American primacy "is over" and talk about "respecting" China's massive military build-up—designed to defeat U.S. forces—is a call for detente. But Reagan rejected detente with the Soviets in the 1970s. He rejected the view, common at the time, that the best the U.S. could do was negotiate a balance of power. This also may not be the best week for Mr. Hegseth to denounce "globalism" as the Trump Team argues that America can't trust Beijing with Nvidia's advanced AI chips.

Mr. Trump has made several policy choices worthy of Reagan, notably his Golden Dome homeland missile shield and enforcing his word that Iran can't have a nuclear weapon. Both Presidents evince a genuine hatred of nuclear weapons and the awful human cost of war. President Trump carries an instinct for U.S. primacy in the world, albeit without Reagan's decades of arguments about freedom and the virtues of free societies.

America's enemies are doubtless pleased that Mr. Hegseth is so focused on settling scores about the Iraq War and firing inside the GOP tent. But if there's a silver lining to his historical rewrite, it's that the Trump team understands that Reagan's legacy is important to embrace. Some in the MAGA coalition have dismissed this as "Zombie Reaganism" and claim that the U.S. would be better off if Pat Buchanan's isolationism had prevailed.

Don't believe it. The Administration is associating with Reagan because Republican voters still see themselves in his tradition and coalition. Mr. Trump knows who is the standard bearer for Republican electoral and strategic success. We wish his policies were as similar to Reagan's as his slogan.

His history of the 1980s omits some points Trump could learn from.

Republicans for Ineffective Government

President Trump doesn't brook dissent, especially within his own party. So perhaps he'll call out the 20 House Republicans who joined Democrats Thursday to pass a bill to reverse his executive order that stripped collective-bargaining rights from federal workers.

Mr. Trump this spring exempted roughly one million workers at some 40 agencies from collective bargaining. The Federal Service Labor-Management Relations Statute grants most federal workers collective-bargaining rights, but it lets the President carve out agencies involved in "intelligence, counterintelligence, investigative, or national security work."

Mr. Trump applied these exclusions to the Department of Veterans Affairs, Food and Drug Administration, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Federal Communications Commission and other agencies whose work can affect national security. Unions sued to block the order, but the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals let it take effect in August.

Labor agreements make it harder to reward merit and punish poor performance and mis-

conduct. They also reduce government efficiency, which can slow project permitting, deregulation and pharmaceutical reviews. The VA's unionized workforce and prescriptive labor agreements are one reason its hospitals are often frustrating for patients.

President Franklin Roosevelt understood that collective bargaining for federal workers would undermine good government. "Upon employees in the Federal service rests the obligation to serve the whole people, whose interests and welfare require orderliness and continuity in the conduct of Government activities," he said.

Most Democrats today disagree, and apparently some Republicans do too. Five Republicans gave federal unions an assist by signing a discharge petition championed by Maine Democratic Rep. Jared Golden to force a vote on nullifying Mr. Trump's executive order this year. It passed Thursday, 231-195.

Many of these Republicans represent swing districts, but making government less efficient and responsive to the American people is unlikely to help them win re-election.

The New College Unemployment Line

An NBC News poll recently found that only one-third of Americans believe a four-year college degree is worth the cost. A new study by the Cleveland Federal Reserve Bank helps explain why: Many young college graduates out of work are having a harder time than high-school grads finding jobs, and artificial intelligence isn't to blame.

The share of Americans who believe a college degree pays off has fallen by 20 percentage points since 2013. Today, 63% say that it's "not worth the cost because people often graduate without specific job skills and with a large amount of debt to pay off," according to the NBC poll. Only 46% of those with college degrees believe they are worth the cost, a 17-point decline.

You don't need an economics degree to notice that young college grads are struggling. According to the Cleveland Fed study, the unemployment gap between high-school and college grads between the ages of 22 and 27 has tightened to a mere 2.5-percentage points, compared with about five percentage points in previous decades.

Young high-school grads are still more likely to become unemployed. However, college grads who become unemployed are now more likely to remain so than high-school grads. The fall in the job-finding rate for young college grads began around 2000, which suggests AI isn't the cause.

The jobless gap between high-school and college grads is shrinking.

Instead, the study suggests that the declining job prospects for young college grads "may reflect the continued growth in college attainment, adding ever larger cohorts of college graduates to the ranks of job seekers." It's also possible that college grads are more likely to have parents who can support them, so they can be choosier

in job searches. A government bias toward four-year college and declining academic standards have produced too many college grads who are ill-prepared for the modern workplace—and a dearth of young people skilled in the trades. The unemployment rate last year for 20-to-29-year-olds who had recently received an associate degree was 2.1% versus 15.3% for those with a bachelor's degree.

"The labor market advantages conferred by a college degree have historically justified individual investment in higher education and expanding support for college access," the Cleveland Fed study concludes. "If the job-finding rate of college graduates continues to decline relative to the rate for high school graduates, we may see a reversal of these trends."

All of this is a warning to colleges and a cry for Congress to reduce subsidies for four-year degrees that may cost more than they're worth in the labor market.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

America's Eyes Are on the Wrong Hemisphere

The first pages of President Trump's national security strategy outline many laudable, if obvious, goals. What America wouldn't want his government to "ensure that America remains the world's strongest, richest, most powerful, and most successful country for decades to come?"

Yet after listing several superlatives, the document doesn't provide a coherent strategy for achieving them. The diagnostics of threats to U.S. security are flawed and so the prescriptions for advancing our interests won't deliver.

The NSS is heavily oriented toward the Western Hemisphere—something former Trump administration official Alexander Gray calls "logical" prioritization (Letters, Dec. 11). But the Western Hemisphere doesn't pose the primary threat to U.S. security—China, Russia and their autocratic allies do. To pretend the Chinese threat in Asia and the Russian threat in Europe can be ignored as we turn our attention to Venezuela feels like 1930s-era foolishness.

Elsewhere, the document insults our European allies, while offering nothing concrete to strengthen our

ties to them or other partners in Asia. During the Cold War, our geopolitical friendships were a major comparative advantage over the Soviets. We will need strong, loyal, enduring allies again to compete effectively with China and Russia this century. Opinion polls show that most people worldwide prefer democracy to dictatorship. Better to use this to advantage against adversaries rather than throw it away.

The good news is that the NSS should spark a healthy debate about the purposes of American power. Public opinion polls again show that the American people value allies, don't support Mr. Trump's embrace of Vladimir Putin, and want to give more support to democratic Ukraine. The president's fatalistic assumption that this NSS represents an immutable pivot toward unilateralism and isolationism, with no regard for values is premature.

MICHAEL MCAFUL
Hoover Institution
Stanford, Calif.
Mr. McAful was U.S. ambassador to Russia, 2012-14.

Small Businesses Can't Escape Price Controls

Tomas Philipson ably details how "Biden's IRA Is Harming Cancer Patients" (op-ed, Dec. 1). Those who had a bit of economics training would have seen that coming. It doesn't matter whether it's rent control, groceries or healthcare—government-imposed price ceilings curtail investment in maintaining and improving the quality of consumer products. In the pharmaceutical industry, that means fewer new drugs to improve health and longevity, and fewer discoveries of how to use existing medicines better.

Small businesses drive innovation because they are less bureaucratic and have fewer worries about protecting existing products. They are the least able to survive a policy that shortens effective patent lives and caps prices as

their discoveries approach the market. According to the 2023 Business Enterprise Research and Development survey, about 2,970 small firms are engaged in U.S. biotechnology research and development. Their business models depend on a handful of potential "home run" projects. When price caps truncate the payoff window, many of their projects never get financed or are abandoned.

The Biden administration's legacy not only harms cancer patients; it's choking off tomorrow's small-business breakthroughs before they leave the lab.

CASEY B. MULLIGAN
Washington
Mr. Mulligan is chief counsel for advocacy at the Small Business Administration.

Where Did All the Free Scottish Thinkers Go?

The first recorded Scottish Parliament in 1235 was known as a colloquium, a place of conversation. Its democratic successor in 2025 is too often a place of conformity, as Barton Swaim and Allan Massie rightly observe in "What's the Matter With Scotland?" (Weekend Interview, Dec. 6).

Earlier this year, JD Vance described the country's new "buffer zone" laws around abortion facilities as policing "thought crimes," undermining fundamental freedoms of speech and religion. Tellingly, the Scottish parliamentarians approved the bill by a vote of 118 to 1. None of the 31 Conservatives voted against it.

If there were a political game in town, it'd have much to tackle. Birth-

rates are at their lowest since records began in 1855. By 2050 there will be nearly twice as many Scots over 85. Half of rural Scotland is owned by fewer than one-thousandth of the population. About one in four Scottish children lives in poverty.

Mr. Swaim wonders about the source of this stifling consensus. It isn't to be found in the country's communitarian instincts but in the misdirection of those traditional dispositions toward statism. There seems to be little in modern Scotland that isn't controlled, directed or funded by the state. Civil society is squeezed, private initiative limited and debate dead. We need a Scottish Spring. As John Steinbeck assured Jackie Kennedy in 1964: "You talked of Scotland as a lost cause and that is not true. Scotland is an unwon cause."

DAVID KERR
Lansing, Mich.

A Double Standard for Death

William McGurn establishes the stakes of Gov. Kathy Hochul's assisted-suicide decision ("To Sign or Not to Sign, That Is the Question," Main Street, Dec. 9). Here's how I see it: Approving a lethal dose only for people whose life expectancy is under six months means the government is valuing their lives less than those of healthy people. A little poem I wrote a few years ago indicates why disability-rights groups consider the double standard discriminatory:

"If you seek to end your life,
Will you get support or strife?
Healthy people meet resistance,
Sick old people get assistance."

PROF. FELICIA MINUS ACKERMAN
Brown University
Providence, R.I.

The Best Ally: Grandparents

A key to young couples having more children: getting grandparents to pitch in (Letters, Dec. 9). Everyone wins. The parents are relieved. The children get time with treasured family members who will care for them better than anyone else. The grandparents get precious moments with little ones. It's a beautiful thing, but it takes close proximity to work—and grandparents young enough to handle their most important accomplishment.

DAO SUNG
Queens, N.Y.

An Ibo-speaking taxi driver from Nigeria recently told me his mother died when he was young. "So your father raised you?" I asked. In keeping with Bethany Mandel's concerns about what Americans lose when our birthrates collapse, he responded: "It's not like that in my village. Everyone helps." What we also lose is community.

PHILIPPA NEWFIELD
San Francisco

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College Board Beats the Field

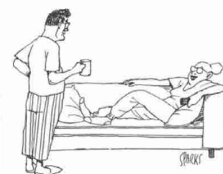
The College Board high command is defensive about the value and predictive power of the SAT and AP exams (Letters, Dec. 9). But on the whole the company is right: The tests are better predictors of college performance than anything anyone else is using, especially in California, where diplomas seem to be handed out by the bushel with little or no attention to student learning.

External measures akin to audits, like the SAT and APs, tend to be more reliable and accurate than grades and statewide tests, for which the standards and cut scores keep fluctuating. The College Board's products aren't getting "easier" as such. But the company keeps introducing more variants, including subjects widely thought to be easier. It's removed some elements—such as SAT essays—that many find more revealing than multiple-choice questions. And it does occasionally recalculate its scoring in various ways. It isn't pure. It's simply the best available, and in my view pretty darn good.

CHESTER E. FINN, JR.
Chevy Chase, Md.
Mr. Finn is president emeritus of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"I did all my steps, now I'm going to do my sit-around-and-do-nothings."

OPINION

Trump May Be Losing His Touch



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

Donald Trump and his tumult nearly 11 months in: He's a rocket going not up but sideways or down. All polls say down. On Thursday AP-NORC reported his approval on the economy and immigration has "fallen substantially" since the spring, with 31% of Americans approving his handling of economic matters, down from 40% in March, and his approval on immigration at 38%, down from 49%. Recent Democratic sweeps in New Jersey and Virginia, and this week's Miami mayoral race, make 2026 look distinctly blue-tinted.

In fairness, 11 months as president is long enough to get on everyone's nerves—to disappoint your fans and infuriate your foes. But he's in a fix, surrounded by mood shifts, challenges and bad signs.

At the end of his 11th month, he's surrounded by mood shifts, challenges and ominous signs.

His Capitol Hill base for once and famously began to kick away this summer, with loyalists breaking with him on the Jeffrey Epstein files and Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene on other issues as well. She's leaving Congress but not looking like someone who lost her battles with Mr. Trump. His problem: Once someone makes a successful jailbreak, all the other prisoners know a jailbreak is possible. This changes the conversation in the prison yard. Guards are eyed differently, the warden's mystique is diminished.

Outside Washington Mr. Trump's base is fighting with itself. America

is saying "I'm not MAGA." Conspiracists all over: "Israel killed Charlie." The assassination of Charlie Kirk looks increasingly like an epochal event. Did he understand how much he was holding together the Trumpian right? Without the force of his mediating presence they are cracking up.

Percolating below, unseen, is the price you pay in time for success. The president's border triumph will likely weaken his and MAGA's political position. He shut down illegal immigration on the southern border, which had been more or less open for decades. But it was anger at illegal immigration that kept his base cleaved to him and allied with each other. Remove the issue that made you, and you can no longer use it to gain votes or maintain unity.

This is the paradox of politics: Every time you solve a major problem, you're removing a weapon from your political arsenal.

What happens when you lose your great issue? What happens when all that remains of that issue is its least popular aspect? Immigration remains in the news only because of brutal deportation practices. It isn't "build the wall" anymore; it's "Don't arrest the poor guy working the line in a second job at the chicken-processing plant." Americans don't want that guy thrown out. The longer the deportations continue, the more unpopular and damaging to the administration they will become.

There is the matter of his mouth. The president's supporters have for 10 years put up with his babyish obsession with insulting people. They think of it as the Trump Tax, the price you pay for getting someone bold and tough. But his hate-stoking now, in an era of political violence, is going to get someone hurt. In his Truth Social post Tuesday night he used criminal language about the



press—news outlets and reporters are "seditious, perhaps even treasonous." They "libel and demean THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES." They are "true Enemies of the people, and we should do something about it." Like what?

It isn't 2015, we're more on edge. In a darker time, he's going to find in the polls fewer people willing to pay the Trump Tax.

Obviously inflation is the so-far-immovable thing, and he's bungled his response—"affordability" is a Democratic "hoax," a "scam," a mere political talking point.

He sounded like Lyndon B. Johnson, who late in his second term was reported to have said, when the public started turning on the effects of his economic policies, "You've never had it so good!" That's the sound of true presidential detachment: *I work so hard, you're a bunch of spoiled babies.* House Minority leader Gerald Ford beat Johnson around the head for that at a 1967 Lincoln Day dinner: "I cannot conceive of a Lincoln telling the people 'You never had it so good,' when consumer prices are soaring, the workingman's real spendable earnings are slipping, and the farmer's parity ratio is

falling hard and fast."

People on the ground feel tremors presidents can't feel. They see Mr. Trump flying around the world on his missions and tearing up the White House East Wing to build a ballroom. All that feels like what presidents do when things are going well, in a boom everyone is experiencing. People don't feel that way now.

It isn't only inflation spreading unease. Artificial intelligence is coming. It's going to change the entire employment picture in America over the next few years. It's going to eat jobs, and people with imagination—and America is nothing if not imaginative—can see it coming. This is part of the background music in America: Americans who *aren't* unemployed and *do* have a house are afraid that in the next few years they could lose their job, their security. And they're worried about their kids.

A woman in a service industry, an immigrant to America from Eastern Europe who's been here about 20 years, took me aside recently. Her eldest child, a senior in high school, is looking around at local colleges. She was worried about AI and asked for advice on what her son might

study so that in four years he could get a job. We asked ChatGPT, which advised "embodied in-person work" such as heating and air conditioning technician, pool cleaner. She wasn't happy with that. She'd worked herself to the bone to get her son higher in the world than she is. She wants him to own the pool.

That is how Americans think: rise. They want to know their government is *thinking about AI*. They want a sense that someone in charge sees the big picture. They want to hear there's a plan. Mr. Trump sees the development of AI simply as a matter of competition with China and of economic growth, which is dependent right now on AI.

He shows no sign of seeing any dark side to it, has no apparent plans to regulate it, and is beating back state attempts to impose limits. He's given his friends the AI "brogliarchs," in Ed Luce's term in the *Financial Times*, "carte blanche." What happened the last time Mark Zuckerberg had carte blanche? Haven't we read about all the billionaires powering AI who have safe houses and bunkers to which to flee if and when the world they're inventing goes under?

Mr. Trump seems alive to none of this, but regular people are, and this has more to do with our economic unease than we credit.

Those around the president believe the next big moment for him comes in January, with the State of the Union address, when he can reset the table with a great speech.

Maybe. Those addresses don't have the power they once had but still retain some. He might focus on these people are really thinking about—AI, inflation and how Americans in their 30s and 40s can get it together to buy a house and have a baby and keep this whole lumbering thing called America going.

Kathy Hochul Faces a Life-or-Death Decision

By Jack Butler

New York On a cold, windy December night, a bundled-up group gathered outside a Midtown Manhattan office building. Some were in wheelchairs. A few waved signs. Others held candles. They had come to Gov. Kathy Hochul's New York City office to oppose a bill legalizing assisted suicide.

The Legislature passed the bill in June. Its fate is now in Ms. Hochul's hands. If she too vetoes it, the bill will pass automatically and threaten New York's most vulnerable—like some of those who gathered in front of her office on Dec. 4.

Twelve states and the District of Columbia currently allow some form of what is euphemistically called "medical aid in dying." That some places have already gone down this path shouldn't automatically entail an endorsement. The record in other places has shown the dark places legalization leads.

Requests for assisted suicide require a motivating dire diagnosis. But legalized jurisdictions have stretched the meaning of "dire." Bills like New York's, once enacted, have "led to people with conditions like anorexia, diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure being abandoned by their physician and given lethal drugs," says Jessica Rodgers, drama, "A House of Dynamite," are making the rounds, calling the movie "journalism." A compliant PBS interviewer all but browbeats Mr. Oppenheim into confessing: "You approached writing this film as a journalist would, talking with top experts, defense officials, to really ground this film in reality."

Except it's not grounded in reality. The movie—about the minutes between detection and impact of an unattributable sea-launched warhead aimed at Chicago—is among Netflix's most watched. Credit it with being

Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled. People, that is, like her. Ms. Shapiro came to protest the bill in her wheelchair. She requires help to get through the day and fears that this bill, if enacted, would make New Yorkers forget that "a life is a life."

She fears people like her would come to be seen as a burden on those around them—or even come to think of themselves that way. "If one life is lost needlessly or shut or ended early because of this, that is one life too many," said Jose Hernandez, 45, advocacy and policy associate at New York Association on Independent Living. He also came to the vigil in a wheelchair. Mr. Hernandez recalled the example of his mother, diagnosed with Stage 4 ovarian cancer—the kind of condition that would furnish a rationale in this bill's understanding. Told she had six months, she lived for 13 years.

Gov. Hochul has suggested adding

safeguards to the bill, including a seven-day waiting period, a mental-health evaluation, and restriction of life-ending drugs to New York residents only. But the record in other states shows that such safeguards usually fade before the inexorable logic of physician-assisted suicide:

New York's governor touts her efforts at preventing suicide. She should veto an assisted-suicide bill.

Six of the 12 jurisdictions that legalized assisted suicide have since loosened their initial criteria.

The record of U.S. jurisdictions where assisted suicide is already legal provides plenty of reason to worry. But there is another source of concern beyond our borders. Canada, which shares a border with

New York, long ago abandoned the terminal-illness requirement for requesting assisted suicide. Now a range of illnesses and conditions can justify a request for lethal treatment.

The criteria up north may get looser still. There have already been many cases of people requesting and receiving assisted suicide even though their conditions are treatable. There is evidence some have done so without a full understanding of what they were doing—possibly under pressure from care providers. Assisted suicide is now the fifth-leading cause of death in the country, according to a report from Cardus, a Canadian think tank.

There are other reasons to be worried about a regime of assisted suicide in New York. The possible proliferation of lethal drugs in circulation on the streets. Pressure placed on doctors and nurses who oppose the practice to participate in it. The erosion of medical care's fun-

damental nature as life-giving, hence the American Medical Association's continued opposition to the practice.

But Ms. Hochul herself might be most receptive to one particular argument. She has made suicide prevention one of the hallmarks of her administration. She declared September Suicide Prevention Month and noted she had increased state funding for suicide prevention. Why prevent suicide on the one hand, and open up an entirely new avenue for it on the other?

Even in New York, on a cold night at the end of a workday, passing drivers stuck in traffic honked and gestured in approval of the assembled vigil. Ms. Hochul should listen to those gathered outside—and to everyone else standing against the culture of death this bill would usher in.

Mr. Butler is a deputy opinion editor at the Journal.



BUSINESS WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

Now I'm triggered. Kathryn Bigelow and Noah Oppenheim, director and screenwriter of Netflix's nuclear war drama, "A House of Dynamite," are making the rounds, calling the movie "journalism." A compliant PBS interviewer all but browbeats Mr. Oppenheim into confessing: "You approached writing this film as a journalist would, talking with top experts, defense officials, to really ground this film in reality."

Except it's not grounded in reality. The movie—about the minutes between detection and impact of an unattributable sea-launched warhead aimed at Chicago—is among Netflix's most watched. Credit it with being

emotionally wrenching. But it's also full of dangerously misleading innuities despite the gushing of certain experts who seem overly swayed by gratitude toward the filmmakers for calling attention to their subject area.

Example: An intelligent ninth-grader could say how many interceptors, assuming a 50% success rate, are needed for a 99% chance of knocking down a single warhead before it lands on Chicago. The answer isn't two. Nor would the Pentagon skimp on interceptors the first time its multibillion-dollar system faced exactly the limited contingency it was designed for.

Neither, in such a situation, would the high command recommend an out-of-the-blue retaliation against Russia, China and North Korea to "neutralize" them. *They wouldn't be neutralized.* Even innocent moviegoers must be familiar with terms like "second-strike capability" and "mutually assured destruction."

Most bizarre is the film's insistence that President Idris Elba, who isn't in Chicago, must decide how to respond before the presumed warhead lands in Chicago. Every other race-against-the-clock movie gives a logical premise for why the clock must be obeyed. This one doesn't. Even quite bad movies deploy MacGuffins to make their plots cohere. "A House of Dynamite" leaves a viewer feeling the producers couldn't be bothered—which seems weird for a movie taking on such a solemn subject.

If Ms. Bigelow wants to plead artistic license, fine, but don't call it journalism.

Last year's Annie Jacobsen book, "Nuclear War: A Scenario," is appar-

ently about to become a movie too. Like the book, Ms. Bigelow seems to be guided by a fundamentally unhelpful premise. That premise is embedded in her film's title, as if nuclear weapons are a scourge that might go off for no good reason.

Unfortunately nuclear arms won't be uninvented, so our only hope is that their possessors act with reason, according to a purpose, and therefore are amenable to being deterred.

If further Armageddon films are coming, let them be more serious than 'A House of Dynamite.'

There's no nice way of saying it: The new *auteur* fashion of encouraging unreasonable nuclear dread only benefits Vladimir Putin and others who want to use implausible nuclear threats to make the world safe for their conventional smash-and-grab operations, increasing the risk of nuclear confrontation.

Which of the World War II antagonists would not have resorted to atomic bombs to secure victory or stave off defeat? None.

World War II followed World War I by 21 years, and World War III hasn't followed at all. Maybe think about why.

Earlier films like "Fail Safe" and "Dr. Strangelove" (both from 1964) faced the complexities of the nuclear dilemma squarely. The Netflix movie doesn't. It just bails on making sense of its own story, which involves a foreign power presumably targeting the

U.S. with a single, politically disruptive, anonymous attack for some specific purpose. In fact, the U.S. maintains a "nuclear forensics" capability for exactly this reason—to let an adversary know that an anonymous attack wouldn't remain anonymous for long.

Last year, a visiting U.S. Air Force contingent kindly indulged a question about North Korea's mobile missile crews. Are they authorized to launch on their authority after a hypothetical U.S. "decapitation" strike on Pyongyang? Do we know where those missiles are located? The answers were off the record and not especially clarifying. But the point is, plenty of intelligent, coherent movies could be made to do justice to the high-stakes quandaries nuclear weapons bring into the world.

Consider a question about which no movie will be made. Viewers would turn away. Hollywood would treat the script like a piece of hazmat. It concerns a variant on the question Dean Acheson once advised President John F. Kennedy to think about but never tell anyone his conclusions: when actually to use a nuke. Suppose a massive attack is headed toward the U.S. Nothing can stop it. Should the U.S. fire off its full arsenal and add to the global carnage and devastation of a planetary ecosystem on which all life depends?

A presidentialist would have to convey his decision in the minutes before U.S. civilization was incinerated. Ethically, it would arguably be the wrong choice to fire off America's nukes. Ethically, it remains supremely important that our enemies believe a U.S. president nevertheless would.

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