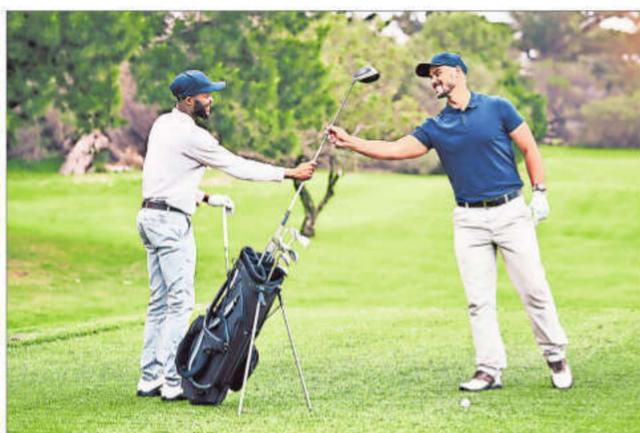


# Opinion

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2026



The real superpower of a caddie isn't eyesight, it's memory. One might forget the snap-hook hit on the 8th hole three tournaments ago but the caddie doesn't

## Golfing GPS: The caddie version

**FAIRWAY FILES**
**Rahul Gangjee**

**THERE ARE ONLY** three things in golf that are absolutely guaranteed: you will miss a short putt at the worst possible time, someone in the group ahead will take forever, and your caddie will know exactly where your golf ball went. Even when you don't. Especially when you don't!

I am convinced that somewhere at birth, caddies are fitted with a tracking device behind their left ear. It activates the moment a golf ball leaves a clubhouse. No subscription required. No buffering. No "Searching for signal." Just instant clarity.

Meanwhile, the golfer — a supposedly trained professional — is still holding his finish, squinting into the horizon like a Victorian explorer trying to discover new land.

There's a special kind of denial that exists only in golf. You hit one slightly thin, slightly right, slightly alarming... but you freeze in your pose as if the follow-through alone might straighten the flight.

In your head, you're whispering, Cut back... cut back...

Your caddie says nothing. He watches. Calm. Emotionless. Like a surgeon who has seen this injury before.

Then comes the quiet verdict. "Little right, sir." Little right.

In golfer language, "little right" could mean the fairway bunker. In caddie language, it means we are about to explore vegetation not listed on the scorecard.

The amazing thing is they never lose it. I've hit shots at dusk. I've hit shots into glare. I've hit shots that left the clubface with so much side-spin they required diplomatic clearance to enter the next fairway. My caddie? Locked in.

He'll casually say, "162 front. Wind helping. Just short of the cart path."

I'm still wondering whether that was even my ball. Sometimes I want them to pretend. Just once.

Me: "That's good, right?" Caddie (ideal world): "Perfect. Middle of the fairway."

(Reality: We arrive to find my ball under a bush negotiating long-term rental terms.)

But they don't lie. That's the beauty and the curse.

The real superpower of a caddie isn't eyesight. It's memory.

You might forget the snap-hook you hit on the 8th hole three tournaments ago. Your caddie doesn't. He archives it. With weather conditions. And emotional state. The next time you stand on that tee with water left and ambition in your eyes, he gently clears his throat.

"Same line as last time, sir?"

"That sentence contains history, warning, and mild trauma."

We golfers have an incredible ability to rewrite reality. We'll hit a ball 30 yards offline and immediately say, "That should be okay." Should be. Based on what? Hope? Wind sympathy?

Your caddie knows. He saw the clubface. He saw the start line. He probably knew the outcome before impact.

There's also that priceless moment when you turn to him and ask the most pointless question in sport: "Did you see it?" Of course he saw it. He saw it leave the club like a man escaping responsibility. He saw it start left, flirt with disaster, then commit fully. Caddies don't even flinch when you ask that question. They just answer with coordinates. "Left rough. Past the 150 marker. We'll have a gap."

We'll have a gap. That's caddie optimism. Not "You've hit it into oblivion." Not "Why do you aim there?" Just — we'll

have a gap.

Over the years, I've realised that a caddie's GPS isn't just about ball-tracking. It's about emotional tracking. They know when you're rushing. They know when you're protecting a score.

They know when you're about to try something heroic and unnecessary. Sometimes they intervene gently.

"Maybe middle of the green, sir."

That sentence has saved more tournaments than aggressive flag-hunting ever has. The relationship between golfer and caddie is a fascinating one. It's part partnership, part marriage, part therapy session conducted over 18 holes in varying humidity. They carry the bag. They do the math. They absorb the frustration. They celebrate the rare, glorious moments when you absolutely stripe one.

And when that perfect shot happens — the compressed, rising, majestic beauty that lands softly near the flag — the caddie doesn't say, "Finally!"

He just smiles. Maybe a small nod. As if to say, Yes, that's the one we've been looking for. But for every one of those, there are ten others.

The high block that refuses to draw. The wedge you "just misjudged." The drive that starts down the middle and then remembers it has other plans.

Through it all, the internal satellite keeps recalibrating. "Right bunker."

"Back fringe." "Tree number three from the right." "Drop zone."

Sometimes I think if golfers had to track their own shots without caddies, we'd lose half the field by the 5th hole. Players wandering into forests like confused hikers.

There's also something deeply humbling about having someone witness every shot. Every doubt. Every muttered self-critique. A caddie sees the real version of you — the confident one and the fragile one — often within the same hole.

They know the patterns before you do. "Tempo, sir." "Trust it." "Same swing." Three simple words that can steady a tournament. And then there's the walking. Miles and miles of walking. Under heat that could cook an omelette on a wedge. Through wind, dust, silence. Sharing small talk. Sharing silence. Sharing that peculiar rhythm that only golfers understand. People often think the caddie's job is about yardages and clubs. It's far more nuanced than that. It's about timing. When to speak. When not to. When to lighten the mood. When to step back. And yes — when to confirm that your ball has, in fact, entered water. They never dramatise it. "Water, sir." That's it. No lecture. No sigh. Just fact. And then immediately: "Drop area is 90 yards."

Always forward-looking. In many ways, the caddie's GPS reflects life itself. You may not always know where your last decision has landed you. You might still be holding the pose, hoping things turn out fine. But somewhere beside you, if you're lucky, is someone who sees clearly. Someone who says, "Little left... but manageable." Someone who remembers your tendencies but still believes in your next swing. Golf can be lonely out there. Thousands watching, yet it's just you and your thoughts over the ball. The caddie becomes the steady presence in that quiet storm. They know where the ball went. They know where your head is. And most importantly, they help you focus on where the next one should go.

So the next time I hit one into the trees and instinctively ask, "Did you see it?" I already know the answer. He did. He always does. And as long as he follows it with, "We can still save par," I'll keep believing that maybe — just maybe — this GPS partnership is the most reliable thing in golf.

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

### ACROSS THE AISLE

**P Chidambaram**


The riddle is what will India buy for \$500 billion over five years. This will wipe out the small trade surplus India enjoys with the United States. The US has few goods that will help bolster India's economy

**IT IS A** kite... it is a bird... it is an airplane. 'What is it?' is the apt question for the joint statement issued by the governments of the United States and India on February 6, 2026. The joint statement has triggered endless speculation, and the Indian government's contumacious evasion of the details has not helped to remove the cloud of doubt. Since Mr Trump is dealing the cards, the joint statement may not be of concern for US, but it is for India.

The joint statement issued was based on deception. Indian negotiators claimed repeatedly in 2025 that they were negotiating a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). The minister of commerce said numerous times that a BTA will be concluded in the near future; in fact, he said before the "end of the year." As it turned out, the joint statement is *not* a BTA; it is *not* even an Interim Agreement; it is a *framework* for an Interim Agreement. We moved a mountain and we got a mouse.

**Whither reciprocity?**

After the joint statement was issued, both sides claimed that the deal was reciprocal. The claim is an insult to the reader's intelligence.

Even a cursory reading of the joint statement will reveal that it is *not* based on reciprocity. Take a close look at the *text* of the joint statement (which I have largely copied below):

■ While India will eliminate or reduce tariffs on all US industrial goods and a wide range of US food and agricultural products, the United States will apply a *reciprocal* tariff of 18% (reduced from 25% imposed on April 2, 2025) on originating goods of India, including textile and apparel, leather and footwear, plastic and rubber, organic chemicals, home decor, arti-



The MEA states that the India-US joint statement remains the framework for the proposed interim agreement on reciprocal and mutually beneficial trade, and both sides will work toward finalising the agreement

## US audacity, not reciprocity

sanal products, and certain machinery. The US will remove the reciprocal tariff on a wide range of goods including generic pharmaceuticals, gems and diamonds, and aircraft parts *only* on the 'successful conclusion of the Interim Agreement'. Where is the reciprocity in *0%* vs *18%*?

■ India agrees to address long-standing barriers to trade in US medical devices and eliminate restrictive import licensing procedures that delay market access for US ICT goods.... India also agrees to address long-standing non-tariff barriers to trade in US food and agricultural products. There is no corresponding obligation on the United States. In respect of non-tariff barriers, where is the reciprocity between *obligation* and *no obligation*?

■ India intends to purchase \$500 billion of US energy products, aircraft and aircraft parts, precious metals, technology products, and coking coal over the next five years. Both governments will significantly increase trade in technology products — including Graphics Processing Units (GPUs) and other goods used in data centres. *All* the products mentioned in this paragraph are American export goods and not Indian goods that the US intends to buy. Where is the reciprocity?

■ In an Executive Order accompanying the joint statement, Mr Trump referred to 'significant steps' taken by India — India's commitment to stop

directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil, India's representation that it will purchase United States energy products, and India's framework agreement with the United States to expand defence cooperation.

Hence, Mr Trump decided to eliminate the additional ad valorem rate of duty imposed on August 6, 2025 (the *penal* tariff of 25%). Where is the reciprocity in extracting *three promises* from India in return for *none* from the US.

**The open threat**

■ If India resumes directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil, the US government will consider taking additional action including potentially reimposing the *penal* tariff of 25% on Indian goods.

The entire Framework agreed on February 6, 2026 hinges on one issue — Russian oil. Where is the reciprocity between the *threat* of America and the *submissiveness* of India?

Before April 2, 2025, U.S. tariffs on Indian goods was at the MFN rate of 3%. Since India enjoyed a bilateral trade surplus, Mr Trump invoked his questionable Emergency Powers and imposed the *reciprocal* tariff of 25%, now reduced to 18%.

The legality of the 'reciprocal' tariff on several countries is reserved for judgement in the US Supreme Court, and may be struck down as unconstitu-

tional. If that happened, India has to thank the US Supreme Court and not President Trump.

The result will be the two countries will revert to the *status quo ante* but the US would have extracted several concessions from India without conceding any. So much for reciprocity!

**The hidden burdens**

Mr Ajay Srivastava, a trade expert, has pointed out that tariffs on steel and aluminium will stay at 50% and on auto components will remain at 25%, but "India is offering much deeper concessions" on US industrial goods, many agricultural products, red *jowar*, soybean oil, wine and spirits, automobiles and high-end motorcycles.

The riddle is what will India buy for \$500 billion over 5 years. This will wipe out the small trade surplus India enjoys with the United States.

The US has few goods that will help bolster India's economy. We may be left with no choice but to buy large quantities of expensive aircraft/military equipment and American oil at higher landed cost, and not knowing what to do with them.

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### FIFTH COLUMN

**TAVLEEN SINGH**

**WHEN I READ** in this newspaper last week that the dictator of North Korea has decided to make his teenage daughter his official heir, it made me laugh. And cry a little for our beloved Bharat Mata. As someone who has campaigned relentlessly and aggressively against dynastic succession, I wondered if Indian politicians who have turned their constituencies and their parties into private estates were embarrassed when they read this news. Some of the shenanigans we have seen from Rahul Gandhi is a consequence of his having been brought up to believe ruling India was his birthright. Fear not, I have no wish to repeat what I said last week.

North Korea is widely considered the worst country in the world. It has been led by the Kim dynasty since it was created, and this family has presided over an evil empire. While the ill-fated citizens of North Korea are often starved of food to the point of living in famine conditions from time to time, the Kim dynasty has squandered what they believe to be their personal wealth on modern weapons, including the nuclear kind. If Kim Jong Un goes ahead with his succession plan and some courageous North Korean citizen tries to challenge him, he will die a terrible death in some

## Democracy, North Korea style

unseen dungeon. Foreigners spend years in jail simply for travelling to the wrong country.

Remember the story of that 21-year-old American student Otto Warmbier? He was sentenced to fifteen years hard labour for removing a propaganda banner from a hotel wall. He hoped to take this home as a souvenir. A year after sentencing, when pressure from the United States government and public opinion caused his release, he was found in a coma caused by brain damage and died when he got home.

We should be happy that this sort of thing would never happen in our shining 'mother of democracy' but this does not mean that 'aal is well'. We are led by a powerful prime minister who is seen by millions of Indians as a gift from God and someone who has made them 'proud to be Hindu'. So, they forgive him when he takes his own tips from the Kim dynasty and pastes his face on lamp-posts, bus stops, petrol pumps and newspapers. Often because they do not know that this exaltation of the 'dear leader' is a North Korean import. This imitation of the Kim family does Modi no good. But who dare tell him in his own party and the opposition leaders he faces are products of dynastic succession.

They might not have been teenagers when they were handed charge of a

country as is happening now to Kim Jong Un's daughter but mostly they remained jobless and waiting in the shadows till Daddy or Mummy decided it was time for them to enter politics. The damage this has done to Indian democracy is incalculable no matter what these princelings may say in their defence. Their main defence is that it is an Indian custom to take up your parents' trade. True. But what is right for commerce is very wrong for public life.

A passion for public service is not something that comes down in the genes so, except for a handful, these heirs are unable to do more than manage the constituencies and political parties they inherit. Sometimes political inheritance comes from marriage as happened in Maharashtra some weeks ago when Ajit Pawar's wife took his job as Deputy Chief Minister within forty-eight hours of her husband's death in an air crash. We of the media are accustomed to this kind of thing and reported this succession as if it were normal. But when I listened to whispers on the ground, I discovered that ordinary Marathi voters did not approve. In the words of one man I spoke to, "They didn't even wait for the thirteen days of mourning to end."

What troubles me about electoral feudalism or feudal socialism as it was when the Gandhi dynasty reigned

supreme under the guise of socialism is that it weakens the roots of democracy almost irreparably. This could be one reason why the Congress Party has proved so incapable of taking on Narendra Modi despite the many mistakes he has made. We are coming up for an election in West Bengal, and this brings back horrific memories for me of the last election in that state when the worst chapter of Covid unfolded while the Prime Minister and most of his senior ministers were trying to win Bengal.

When Modi came back and saw that hospitals had run out of oxygen, ventilators and medicine and there were long queues outside cremation grounds, he had the grace to apologise. And, then changed the subject by carrying out what he called the largest vaccination drive in history. The Congress Party complained that he had put his picture on vaccination certificates and on the boxes of vaccine that we donated to poorer countries but seemed unable to do more than complain. Last week when there were attempts to throw Rahul Gandhi out of the Lok Sabha, I came upon more than one comment on 'X' that warned the BJP that this would go against them because he would be replaced by his sister who is a better parliamentarian. She is also cleverer. She defends dynastic succession by calling it 'service'. Self-service is more appropriate.

# Tale of Two Lit Fests



**Fainting delegates, missing-child announcements, an astronaut in massage robes beseeched for a testimonial video. The hyper-competitive world of Kerala's literature festivals sees much drama between sessions delivering literary and celebrity bliss**

**Nidheesh MK |**  
Thiruvananthapuram

**A**stronaut Sunita Williams touched down on Earth last March after orbiting the planet for nine long months. Ten days hadn't passed before she received a message from a publishing house in Kerala. Soon after, they came to the point—would she finally consider attending the large literature festival they organise? DC Books, a Malayalam publishing house, had been courting her since 2019. On December 18, Williams retired from NASA. Within a day, her visa application to India was apparently underway. By December 30, DC announced that she would headline its Kerala Literature Festival (KLF) in Kozhikode on January 22. And just like that, the storied astronaut landed up on the beaches of Kozhikode even before she got the chance to meet President Trump.

The announcement sent shock waves through Kerala's literary establishment, where competing festivals take the war for celebrity guests rather seriously. The Mathrubhumi Group, a prominent media house that runs its own competing festival, says they had also been pursuing Williams. Now they watched helplessly as their rival locked down the uniquely high-profile guest. What followed was a campaign of unsparring hustle.

Rival festival managers clutched oversized bouquets and Malayalam posters in hotel lobbies, hoping to intercept the astronaut for their own event, unmindful of the spacefarer's inability to comprehend the local script. When Williams, who was about to board a boat, spotted Mathrubhumi journalists already seated inside, she refused to get on until every reporter was ejected. Backroom parleys were in full swing. An IAS officer attempted to set up a meeting with the chief minister, while a Congress leader pressured KLF organisers for a session at the fest,

star status and families now plan annual vacations around lit-fest schedules, securing the right celebrity author means the difference between triumph and public humiliation. (Full disclosure: this journalist has worked with both KLF and Mathrubhumi's festival in various capacities over the years, from guest coordination to session planning, witnessing this rivalry from inside the tent.)

The Williams saga reveals how the literary arms race works. For Williams, who hadn't visited India since 2016, the timing with KLF aligned perfectly, both personally and professionally. While Mathrubhumi sources claim they had reached out to Williams even before DC had, chances are her participation at a 2023 event in Sharjah, through DC, tipped the scales in its favour. DC's publisher Ravi Deecce, who leads the charge, dispatches his two sons after every festival to secure international authors and lock down sponsors for the next.

DC had been seeking Williams' presence at their events since 2019, but she said she could only visit during personal holidays or after retirement. Routing invitations through NASA's bureaucracy and arranging official security would have been cumbersome. When her retirement eventually came, DC quickly moved to

**Japanese author Satoshi Yagisawa, celebrated for his Morisaki Bookshop series, watched in amazement as hundreds queued up for his autograph at KLF. More than 1,000 copies of his novel flew off the shelves in four days**



PHOTOS: NIDHEESH MK, MBIFL



all presumably seeking a photo opportunity ahead of the upcoming state elections. All were politely declined. Finally, in a last-ditch effort, a senior Mathrubhumi editor called DC Books, requesting Williams' appearance at their festival as a personal favour. The answer was a swift and unequivocal "No". According to festival gossip that rippled through Kerala's literary circles, the editor was inconsolable.

**BATTLE IS LIT**

Welcome to India's most competitive literary battleground. While the Jaipur Literature Festival draws global attention as India's foremost literary gathering, Kerala has quietly become the country's lit-fest capital by sheer volume and fervour. The state, which boasts universal literacy, hosts four major literary festivals, with smaller ones sprouting in every district. DC's festival drew 700,000 visitors this year, the organisers say. Mathrubhumi's competing event, the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters (MBIFL) or Ka Festival, pulls massive crowds in the state capital Thiruvananthapuram. The newspaper *Malayala Manorama* runs a festival in Kochi, named Hortus. Then there is the Kerala Legislature International Book Festival, held by the state legislative assembly, also in the state capital. In a state where writers command rock-

lock her in, catching rivals off guard. When confirmation of Williams' Kerala visit leaked, apparently through a sponsor common to both festivals, everyone wanted her.

**KERALA ODYSSEY**

Bringing Williams to Kerala required elaborate logistics. DC, concerned about the Iran airspace and cancellation of Indigo flights, cancelled her Etihad trip via Abu Dhabi, and rerouted her

**Poaching attempts extended to Ben Johnson. The former Canadian sprinter, who was once the world's fastest man, received in his hotel room a call claiming to be from DD Malayalam, the public broadcaster. The DC staff checked their credentials and discovered they were from a private competitor**



PHOTO IMAGING: ZAHID

**Given Sunita Williams' popularity and social media hype, hilarious scenes erupted everywhere. CISF personnel at the airport thought she'd be perfect to inaugurate their local cycling event**

through other cities to Delhi, Bengaluru and finally Kozhikode. From Delhi, DC's staff accompanied her throughout the trip.

For privacy, Williams asked for a secondary phone. The number was mostly known only to the DC staff.

KLF happens on a narrow seaside strip in Kozhikode, with stages lining the seafloor. Usually, authors walk between venues or take auto-rickshaws for the kilometre-long stretch. For Williams, the crowd swelled beyond control. Panicked parents, unable to spot a child in the crush, requested an announcement from the stage. The child was found safe nearby. One person fainted and people quickly made way for him to be taken care of. The usual transport for authors proved impossible for Williams. Finally, organisers hired a speedboat that drew a dramatic semi-circle through the gentle waves to reach the venue just a few hundred metres away.

Given Williams' popularity and social media hype, hilarious scenes erupted everywhere. CISF personnel at the airport thought she'd be perfect to inaugurate their local cycling event. Hotel staff surprised her after a massage, requesting a feedback video while she was still in her robes.

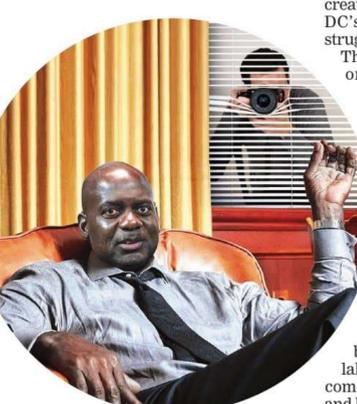
The poaching attempts weren't limited to Williams. Ben Johnson, a former Canadian sprinter who was once the world's fastest man, received in his hotel room a call claiming to be from DD Malayalam, the public broadcaster. The DC staff checked the credentials and discovered they were from a private competitor.

**WHOSE PEN IS MIGHTIER?**

The rivalry between DC Books and Mathrubhumi in publishing is fierce and long-running. DC started its literature festival in Kozhikode in 2016, encroaching on the home turf of *Mathrubhumi*, the venerable old lady of Malayalam print media. DC had done everything from clearing truckloads of garbage to convincing speakers and a sceptical local population unfamiliar with the concept of a literary festival.

Ironically, V Venu, the former state chief secretary who helped DC navigate government machinery in those early days, now curates Mathrubhumi's festival. In December, he called Ravi, suggesting collaboration. That moment of conciliation didn't last.

The competition soon descended into a ruthless one-upmanship. DC announced a 5 km run in Thiruvananthapuram on January 11. Mathrubhumi responded with a similar one in Kozhikode on the same date. When DC held a curtain-raiser at Congress MP Shashi Tharoor's Delhi residence, the



newspaper took it as an encroachment of territory as Tharoor was a patron of the Mathrubhumi festival. In what felt to Mathrubhumi like adding insult to injury, DC took Williams to Thiruvananthapuram, Mathrubhumi's festival city, for an ISRO-related lecture just two days before the newspaper's festival was to begin. A top Mathrubhumi executive tried calling her hotel room directly, only to discover this move had been preempted and Do Not Disturb activated.

The Williams experience was unusual in its intensity although the festival circuit has evolved into a strategic game where literary credibility and star power intersect. While Malayalam authors command deep respect and draw loyal audiences across all festivals, once-in-a-lifetime international guests like Williams or Nobel laureates create the kind of buzz that elevates a festival's profile for years.

KLF usually secures more international faces, including Nobel laureates and Booker Prize winners. This year featured Wikipedia cofounder Jimmy Wales, Nobel laureates Abhijit Banerjee and Abdulrazak Gurnah, as well as Booker winners Kiran Desai, Daisy Rockwell, Banu Mushtaq and Deepa Bhasini. In a rarity, Salman Rushdie also appeared on a giant screen, joining the event virtually.

**STAR-STRUCK**

The competition has intensified as festivals chase film personalities. KLF had filmmaker Mani Ratnam last year and

**The economics underlying this warfare is precarious. DC's festival, with an estimated budget of nearly ₹4 crore, barely breaks even despite drawing 7 lakh visitors. The money comes from sponsors and book sales. Mathrubhumi charges delegates ₹1,049 for a four-day pass with early bird discounts, generating direct revenue that DC's free model cannot match**

**KLF Attendees**  
2026: 700,000  
2016: 50,000



Source: KLF

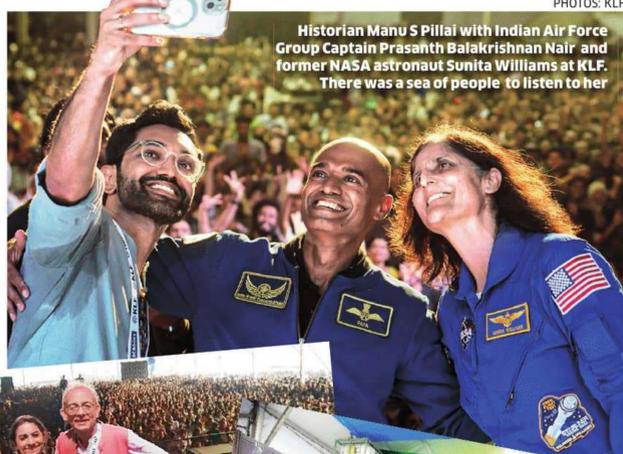
director Pa Ranjith this year. But the Mathrubhumi Group and the Malayala Manorama Group, with their deep entertainment industry roots through their magazine titles such as *Grihalakshmi* and *Vaniitha*, leverage their media clout more effectively for celebrity booking. Manorama's coup was securing the triumvirate of Mohanlal, Mammooty and Kamal Haasan for their Hortus festival. Mathrubhumi regularly outshines KLF in star power, featuring Shabana Azmi, directors Priyadarshan and Sathyan Anthikad along with the latter's son Akhil Sathyan (fresh off delivering a box-office hit), actors Jayaram and his son Kalidasan, social media influencers, singers and live performances that turn their festival into a cultural spectacle. The strategy works. Mathrubhumi's festival consistently draws large crowds for its marquee sessions, with their entertainment-heavy programming creating viral social media moments that DC's more literary-focused approach struggles to match.

The problem with this celebrity chase, organisers admit, is sustainability. There's no guarantee the stars will return next year, and crowds who come for celebrity sightings rather than literary engagement may not develop a loyal following that sustains festivals in the long run. "Celebrity appearances create fleeting crowds. You bring Mohanlal once, the crowd expects him every year," explains a festival insider.

**CASH OF THE TITANS**

The economics underlying this warfare is precarious. DC's festival barely breaks even despite drawing 7 lakh visitors. For these lit fests, money comes from two main sources: sponsors and book sales. Corporate biggies, banks,

PHOTOS: KLF



Historian Manu S Pillai with Indian Air Force Group Captain Prasanth Balakrishnan Nair and former NASA astronaut Sunita Williams at KLF. There was a sea of people to listen to her



Economist Abhijit Banerjee with journalist Anjana Sankar

PSUs and local businesses compete to back the major festivals, viewing them as brand-positioning opportunities.

Mathrubhumi charges delegates ₹1,049 for a four-day pass with early bird discounts, generating direct revenue that DC's free model doesn't. DC benefits significantly from their extensive publishing catalogue, while Manorama, with a smaller book list, sells competitors' titles at their festival.

Legacy media houses have turned sponsorship into a complex game, offering sweeteners that provide additional publicity at discounted rates. Mathrubhumi's festival sponsors get year-round visibility across their newspaper, magazines and digital platforms, a package DC's standalone festival model cannot replicate.

The pressure intensifies as celebrity demands escalate. Film and television personalities expect five-star accommodation and elaborate arrangements for their entourages. This year, three major events happening simultaneously in Thiruvananthapuram created room shortages in a city with around a dozen five-star hotels, forcing organisers to book in satellite towns. The accommodation crunch reveals how the festivals have grown beyond Kerala's infrastructure capacity, yet nobody is looking to scale back.

**PAGE RAGE**

Writers, who signed up for a solitary pursuit, are mostly delighted by the star treatment, with book signings that draw crowds worthy of film premieres. Japanese author Satoshi Yagisawa, celebrated for his *Morisaki Bookshop* series, watched in amazement as hundreds queued up for his autographs at KLF. More than 1,000 copies of his novel, priced at ₹899, flew off the shelves in four days.

Malayalam literature is, meanwhile, experiencing its own renaissance. The latest books by literary heavyweights KR Meera and TD Ramakrishnan, both featured at KLF, generated pre-order numbers that rivalled those for Arundhati Roy's internationally acclaimed memoir *Mother Mary Comes to Me* in Kerala, a stunning achievement for regional novels. The success story that refuses to end belongs to Akhil P Dharmajan, whose novel *Ram C/o Anandhi* continues its victory lap three years after publication. The book sold over 4 lakh copies, transforming the 30-year-old workshop mechanic into a crorepati.

These numbers offer a pointed response to *The Guardian's* February 9 article questioning why India hosts 100+ literature festivals when it has allegedly low rates of reading-for-pleasure. While the piece sparked heated debate, with Jaipur Literature Festival's William Dalrymple calling it "ignorant and irritating", Kerala provides its own answer: On the other end of DC's success with Dharmajan's coming-of-age novel is Mathrubhumi, which just sold over 1,000 copies of literary critic M Krishnan Nair's six-volume works at ₹7,000 per set. That is ₹70 lakh sales for a writer who died in 2006.

The readers flocking to these festivals seem as oblivious to international scepticism as they are to backstage drama, focused instead on unprecedented literary access. They travel from across Kerala and beyond, notebooks in hand,

treating these festivals like intellectual pilgrimages to cleanse the mind of the rot from doomscrolling. Even the least attended sessions buzz with energy.

The conversations are serious, sometimes heated. People challenging speakers with provocative questions during sessions, then continuing the debate over chai on the sidelines. "This isn't in our literature," you'll overhear

**The latest books by literary heavyweights KR Meera (below) and TD Ramakrishnan generated pre-order numbers that rivalled those for Arundhati Roy's internationally acclaimed memoir Mother Mary Comes to Me in Kerala, a stunning achievement for regional novels**



someone declare passionately, defending or dismissing a particular work or perspective. What emerges is a form of engaged civil society where citizens read deeply, think critically and aren't afraid to debate ideas in public spaces.

Years ago, as this literary festival boom began, Malayalam poet S Kalesh observed that these events were becoming spaces where literature and social responsibility intertwined, where audiences "collect ideas as a farmer would collect seeds". Historian Manu S Pillai once noted the striking involvement of people, especially youngsters, and recalled his own conversations with a Chennai nurse who read between work shifts and travelled to attend every possible literary gathering in Kerala.

Perhaps this is the unexpected result of the literary wars: thousands who show up, notebook in hand, hungry for ideas in a world increasingly short of them.

The writer is a Kerala-based journalist

Invisible to most, rural India has joined the AI revolution. Some are helping build AI with data labelling. Others are using AI in farms, classrooms, content creation, even weather forecasts

Team TOI

**W**hen 27-year-old Chandmani Kerketta finishes tending tomatoes and peas on her family farm in Jharkhand, she doesn't stop working. She switches on a computer and begins the kind of labour most people never see: tagging, annotating and checking data that trains artificial intelligence systems.

The work can be tedious, often boring, but someone needs to do it. There would be no driverless cars if someone didn't do this. Every 'smart' system — whether it is meant to recognise road markings, detect a disease in a crop, or interpret speech — needs loads of labelled examples. Kerketta is doing precisely that, data labelling.

Kerketta had earlier worked as an office assistant at a data processing firm in Ranchi. But now she can work from home and supplement her farm income. All she needs is a computer and an internet connection. Plus, she has taken a step on the digital ladder.

Kerketta joined an estimated workforce of at least 200,000 annotators in India's villages and small towns — a growing figure, and roughly half of the world's data-labelling workforce, according to US-based Sory AI.

India is no stranger to back-end work for global technology firms. Cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Chennai are home to major international players. But the new story that's emerging is of a quiet transformation taking place in the country's remote areas.

AI is no longer something developed in the metros and consumed everywhere else. It is beginning to be made, used and adapted in rural India — on farms, in schools, on social media feeds, and in small-town offices.

### Machine Learning

Data labelling sits at the bottom of the AI value chain, but it is what makes machine learning possible. Workers tag images, mark objects, transcribe audio, verify text, and perform quality checks so that AI models can 'learn' what to recognise.

In Jharkhand, rural annotators like Kerketta describe it as a practical step up: an income that helped her to complete her studies and also contribute at home. Others describe the work's microscopic detail: labelling videos, frame by frame, or teaching a system how to classify behaviour in surveillance footage.

It's the same story in Tamil Nadu's small towns. Indu Nadarajan travels along a rural road to a small-town office where she labels images for autonomous vehicles — road markings, headlights, animals — building datasets for clients sitting thousands of miles away. The work is technical in its precision, even if the job title sounds basic.

For firms, too, this model works. They have their headquarters in a major tech hub, delivery centres in small towns, and clients in the US or Europe. "Anybody can be anywhere," argues the founder of one such firm, Sridhar Mitta, who sees the internet as the real workplace, and small towns as the next frontier for micro-en-

# THE VILLAGE LOGS IN AI's quiet spread beyond metros

**CHANGING FIELDS:** Chandmani Kerketta from Jharkhand does data labelling work after finishing her farm duties

**AI FOR PEST CONTROL:** Farmers of Kothiya village in Samastipur with agricultural scientists

**FIGURING IT OUT:** Azahar Ahmed of Bengal's Kadobari upgraded himself from farming to a data entry job

**AIMING FOR THE SKY:** Baljinder Singh Mann has set up an AI-based automatic weather station in Punjab's Bhaloke village

**SMART AGRICULTURE:** Farmer Sudhanshu in his IoT-based farm lab at Nayanagar village in Bihar's Samastipur

**MORE TIME FOR STUDENTS:** Aditi Chattopadhyay, headmistress at a Malda school, banks on AI to draft hundreds of official mails



trepreneurship and steady digital livelihoods.

For women, the social change can be as significant as the payslip. Amala Dhanapal, a colleague of Nadarajan and the first graduate in her family, describes AI work as both a gateway to learning and financial independence, particularly in conservative settings where education and careers can still be difficult goals.

But as the data-annotation industry grows, so do questions about what this



**While questions are raised about the value that data annotation jobs bring, beyond wages, entrepreneurs like Harshil Naik (left) say that training workers in future-ready skills is one way of broadening their potential and allowing them to explore roles beyond pure labelling**

work really offers, beyond wages. In Bengaluru, Harshil Naik, CEO and co-founder of Contineu, says his firm hires rural civil engineering talent to annotate data for computer vision systems and then trains them in future-ready skills, broadening what they can

do beyond pure labelling. A Bengaluru-based not-for-profit, Karya, has built a parallel approach by creating datasets while expanding rural earning opportunities.

It has engaged more than 30,000 people over time and paid out nearly \$800,000 in wages.

Yet, a 2022 Google Research study based in Bengaluru points to a harsher underside: annotators interviewed described repetitive, tedious work, short job tenures (12-18 months), escalating productivity targets, unpaid overtime to meet deadlines, and heavy pressure to maintain 98-99% accuracy. Many had entered hoping that annotation would be a bridge to AI careers; instead, they found little career progression and limited pathways into AI/ML engineering roles.

### AI In Farms

If data labelling is rural India helping build AI, agriculture is where many farmers are beginning to use it, sometimes through sophisticated systems, sometimes through a simple app.

In Bihar's Samastipur district, Sudhanshu Kumar describes his 200-acre farm in Nayanagar as a high-tech 'agri-lab'. With smart-phone-controlled drip irrigation, IoT (internet of things) sensors and AI-enhanced surveillance, he says he can manage irrigation and fertilisation across 35 acres single-handedly. He claims his annual income has jumped dramatically after adopting AI-based techniques and his farm has turned into a learning site, drawing thousands of visiting farmers.

schedules for workshops — hundreds of pieces of paperwork that can otherwise take up her whole day. What AI buys her is time and structure: smoother administration and more attention for classroom needs.

Students are adopting AI as well. A class 10 student, Aditya Ghosh, says he used AI to prepare project work and to tackle difficult questions, especially when teacher support is limited. He stresses a detail many students learn quickly: output depends on input, better prompts get better results. For peers trying to improve English, AI becomes a constant practice partner in a way a crowded classroom cannot always provide.

Andhra Pradesh has pushed AI into rural education at scale. The state is using an AI tool to assess baseline competencies in Telugu, English and maths for nearly 14 lakh students across 36,000 rural schools. The system automatically scores reading fluency, detects errors, calculates words per minute, and then reassesses after structured training programmes to track improvement and identify learning gaps. In theory, it reduces manual workload and gives teachers and schools sharper data on where

students are struggling. In Bihar, the focus is also on capacity-building: training teachers through programmes like Nishtha to use AI tools and guide students through a more technology-driven curriculum. Alongside this, community initiatives such as i-Saksham have partnered with young women across multiple districts to teach basic AI literacy and everyday applications, broadening who gets to participate in the new toolset.

### Fillip To Content

In Arambagh, West Bengal, Sahid Sheikh represents a new small-town professional identity: a designer and content creator using AI as a primary tool for visual storytelling, brand content and campaigns. With nearly a decade in design and several years using AI tools, he has built workflows that let small teams produce at a speed and scale previously associated with bigger agencies and metro access. His trajectory — talks, panels, workshops, corporate training — signals a shift: small-town creators can now compete nationally and still live where they want.

In Kerala's Parassala, near the state's border with Tamil Nadu, Sarath Thulaseedharan is building a parallel path — freelancing as an AI video editor after hours, on top of contract work as a video editor at C-DIT. He says AI tools have changed the economics of editing: faster delivery, less repetitive labour, and clients reaching out from outside the state. The additional income — about Rs 10,000 a month — matters, but so does the psychological shift: one is no longer hindered by geography.

Even local arts are experimenting. In Malda, theatre enthusiast Somen Sarkar uses AI to adapt stories into short plays for student performances — using the tool not as a replacement for creativity, but as a quick bridge from idea to stage.

### The AI Weatherman

In Bathinda, Baljinder Singh Mann has built an AI-based automatic weather station and linked it to his social media pages. A meteorology dropout and farmer, Mann gives nowcasts in colloquial Punjabi — warnings for heavy rain, hailstorms, thunderstorms and lightning — because timing is everything when the weather turns. He says his system can provide hyperlocal forecasts from a three-hour window to two-week extended predictions, and he has added a lightning detector radar to study and predict lightning across a wide area.

His following — over four lakh on Facebook and Instagram, plus thousands on YouTube — shows the appetite for information that feels local, trusted and actionable.

### Conclusion

Delhi will host the global AI summit this week. From OpenAI's Sam Altman to Google's Sundar Pichai to Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei, all will be here. On overall AI vibrancy, Stanford has ranked India at No. 3, after the US and China, but ahead of Japan and South Korea. UK-based media group Tortoise's Global AI Index 2024 notes that India entered the overall top 10 for the first time and ranks No.2 on talent. Yet, according to the IMF's AI preparedness index, India came in somewhere at the middle — No.72, out of 174 countries surveyed. But as AI sweeps through the vast hinterlands, India might now be rapidly getting prepared for an AI-driven world. True, AI is not arriving as one single revolution. It is arriving as many small, uneven changes.

Reporting by Pinak Priya Bhattacharya, Falguni Banerjee, Subhro Maitra, BK Mishra, Krishnachand KK, PS Sreerag, Animesh Jain, Meenakshi Sharma, Chethan Kumar, Umamaheshwara Rao & Neel Kamal  
With inputs from: AFP

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**A**s Melbourne forges its identity as one of the world's most multicultural cities, Roshena Campbell sits at the intersection of civic power and migrant history. A barrister and the deputy lord mayor — the first Indian-Australian to hold the office — her rise mirrors the city's changing face and growing influence of its Indian diaspora.

Seated in her Town Hall chambers, she wears the achievement lightly, much like the pale pink blazer she sports on one of Melbourne's warmest Jan days in years. Campbell wastes no time in addressing the day's burning issue — jobs and opportunity, stressing that prospects for Indians in Melbourne remain strong, even as hiring slows and new openings thin across much of the Western world.

Indian student enrolments in Australia have grown exponentially over the past 15 years, reported to be at 1,59,530 in 2025, an increase of 31,000 from the pre-pandemic peak and close to 7 times higher than in 2005.

She points to the number of major Indian IT companies with their country headquarters in Melbourne — including Infosys, which has been present for more than 25 years and is the digital partner of Australian Open, as well as Tech Mahindra, HCL Tech and Firstsource — as evidence of expanding opportunities for students.

In Campbell's most recent visit to India — which was late last year — she criss-crossed the country with lord mayor Nicholas Reece, engaging with stakeholders. "There will be around a thousand new jobs in total across these companies in Melbourne, they all made commitments to grow their head offices," she says.

"There will be multiple opportunities for Indian students studying here to find a career in an Indian tech company based in Melbourne," she adds. "They can see where that takes them — whether

## How this Bengali became the face of new Melbourne

Roshena Campbell, the first Indian-Australian to become deputy lord mayor of Melbourne, says it will always welcome Indian students — not just to study, but to make a life for themselves in the city

**“We have a stable govt here in Australia, and from a Melbourne perspective, we have the back of international students... (The city) has the largest and fastest-growing diaspora. Indian culture is now embedded in the DNA of Melbourne”**  
— ROSHENA CAMPBELL



that means they create a life for themselves here in Melbourne, or they decide to move back to India."

The only child of immigrant parents Swarup and Sumatra Dutta, Campbell is personally invested in that journey. "My father came here as an international student in the 70s; he was studying architecture. He met my mother here — she was down from Kolkata on a holiday, visiting her sister. They married and went on to raise their family here. I'm now raising my four children here," she said.

Roshena moved from Sydney to Melbourne at 17 to pursue her education. Married to political editor James Campbell, the couple have four children, aged between two and 12.

While listing Melbourne's many credentials, including its status as a leading international student destination, she points to growing instability elsewhere — "Whether that is the UK, where some pretty fierce debates on immigration are happening, or the United States, where there is a real lack of certainty."

"We have a stable govt here in Australia, and from a Melbourne perspective, we have the back of international students. We will always be making the case for them to not only study in this country, but also to be able to make a life here for themselves."

Melbourne, home to the oldest continuous Chinatown in the Western world, dating back to the Victorian gold rush of the 1850s,

also boasts a Little Italy, the Greek Precinct and Koreatown. To that mix, the City of Melbourne is committed to adding a Little India Precinct during this four-year council term.

"I'm excited for the opportunity to celebrate Diwali and Holi there. The idea that if you want to buy a sari or a piece of jewellery, it can be done," she says. "That will not just be for our Indian community, it will be for every Melburnian to celebrate Indian culture."

No conversation with a person of Indian descent is complete without touching on the country's culinary breadth.

For much of the Western world, Indian food was once reduced to a narrow distinction between masala — butter or tikka. Campbell says Melbourne has long moved beyond that. She pointed to the rapid expansion of the Australian Indian restaurant chain Dosa Hut, a pioneer of authentic South Indian cuisine in the region.

"Dosa Hut is in people's minds now in the way that McDonald's was in the 90s," she says. "The fact that you not only have outlets in cities like Melbourne, but also in regional areas of Victoria, like Bendigo, that's unsurprising because Melbourne has the largest and fastest-growing diaspora. Indian culture is now embedded in the DNA of this city."

Asked to choose between dosa and butter chicken, she says there is far more to the menu. "As a Bengali, I do have a par-

ticular love of fish and prawn curries," she says, before adding, "But my father studied in Chennai, so we've always been a dosa and idli household as well. It used to be the case that when you asked people about Indian food, they'd say butter chicken. Now, people here say masala dosa!"

Campbell visits India as often as possible and has family — aunts and cousins spread across the country, but Kolkata will always be home.

She understands Bengali fully, though she is not a fluent speaker, and has ensured the language remains a constant in her household. Her children also understand it well, having spent much of their time with her parents. Campbell believes cultural identity must be consciously maintained, particularly among Indians living abroad.

She points to the role her parents continue to play, having made significant sacrifices while raising her and now doing the same as they help raise her children. Their involvement spans everyday routines, from cooking and reading to transporting the children to sporting commitments. Campbell sees this intergenerational support as emblematic of the enduring strength of the Indian family, a model that continues to thrive far beyond India's borders.

This correspondent met the deputy lord mayor on a blistering day, when temperatures topped 45 degrees, and asked her how she gets around the city.

Campbell likes to walk, and tosses away her formal, pointed shoes (like the ones she was wearing for the interview), for feet-friendly footwear whenever she can.

"I use all modes of transport, so it depends on what my day looks like. I hop on a tram, or if I've got lots of commitments around the city, I drive myself. Sometimes, I do that because I've got to drop my kids to school on the way," she says. "But most days I try and walk. That is the best way to know what is going well and what needs to be improved."

## INQUIZITIVE

JOY BHATTACHARIYA

**1** If you planned to cruise the Bosphorus Straits, visit the Grand and Spice Bazaars, check out the Blue Mosque and Taksim Square, before returning for a refreshing hammam at your hotel, which city would you be visiting?



**2** Which mountain was first ascended by Joe Brown and George Band in 1955, but they did not go all the way to the actual summit, keeping a promise made to Chogyal Tashi Namgyal that the top of the mountain would remain inviolate?

**3** In T20 World Cup games, what has only happened four times — in a NZ vs SL match in 2012, NZ vs WI in 2012, Namibia vs Oman in 2024 and, most recently, Afghanistan vs SA in 2026?

**4** Four firms are regarded as the 'Big 4' of global accounting. Three of them are PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), EY, and KPMG. Which firm, originating in the UK, is the fourth?

**5** Mexico is the world's largest producer of which fruit, sometimes also known as an alligator pear, which gets its more popular name from an Aztec word meaning 'testicle'?

**6** Warli painting, with simplistic geometric shapes depicting daily life, animals and rituals, was originally done on mud walls, but is now popular around the world thanks to practitioners like Jivya Soma Mashe. From which Indian state does Warli originate?

**7** With which specific instrument would you associate Dr L Subramaniam, T N Krishnan, Joshua Bell and Niccolò Paganini?

**8** Which Pulitzer Prize-winning author, originally known for her English works, has also written extensively in Italian, 'In altre parole', and 'Dove mi trovo', being two of her better-known works in the language?

**9** Which animal, originally from South America, with the scientific name *Cavia porcellus*, also shares its two-word name with a phrase that means a person or thing used as a subject for experiments?

**10** Ajay Singh, Vijay Singh, Ajeta and Vijeta are the names of four of the six children of which Indian film legend?

### ANSWERS

- 1 | Istanbul
- 2 | Dhaulagiri
- 3 | A Super Over, the last match actually saw two Super Overs
- 4 | KPMG
- 5 | Avocado
- 6 | Maharashtra
- 7 | Violin
- 8 | Dharmendra (Ajay Singh and Vijay Singh are the actual names)
- 9 | Harriet Beecher Stowe
- 10 | Mahatma Gandhi

# AI will help define India's future, and India will help define AI's future

TOI EXCLUSIVE

SAM ALTMAN



I'll be in India this week for the Global AI Impact Summit, where conversations will focus on expanding access to AI and putting it to work for more people, in more parts of the country, as quickly as possible.

The momentum is clear: As of this month, India has 100 million weekly active users, giving it the second largest user base of any country in the world besides the US. It has the largest number of students on ChatGPT worldwide, a sign of how many young people here are treating AI as a way to learn faster and get ahead. And it ranks fourth globally in the use of Prism, our free new tool for scientific research and collaboration.

But bringing AI's benefits to more people means broadening access, adoption, and agency. Access is the admission ticket; without it, people and institutions cannot participate fully in the AI era. Adoption is putting AI to work in classrooms, workplaces, and public services. Agency is what turns access and adoption into impact by giving people the ability and confidence to use AI to learn faster, build more, and make

better decisions. When the three align, more people can participate not just as users of AI, but as builders and beneficiaries of the growth it enables.

India, the world's largest democracy, has all the ingredients to be a full-stack AI leader: optimism about what AI can do for the country, homegrown tech talent, and a national strategy for how to incorporate the technology more widely. India gets that we need to use AI to just build things to drive human progress. To that end, the govt's IndiaAI Mission is designed to expand the country's compute capacity, support startups, and accelerate multilingual applications that improve public service delivery, including in healthcare and agriculture. It is an effort to make sure AI is not confined to a small slice of early adopters but becomes an essential tool for hundreds of millions of people across India.

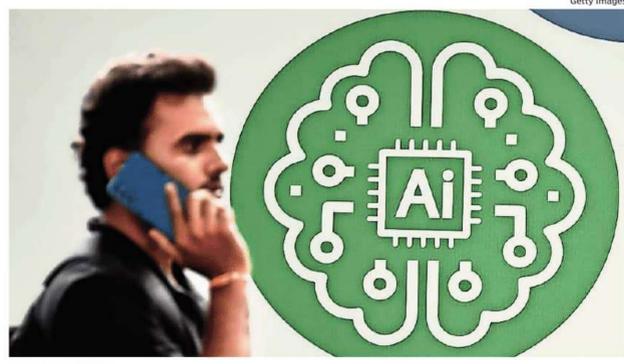
It's critical to get that balance right. If AI access and adoption are uneven, AI's upside will be uneven, too. Many people may have access to the tools, but far fewer will know how to use them well enough to translate that access into real gains. We call that the capability overhang and left unaddressed, it risks concentrating productivity and economic gains in a few hands rather than ensuring that people everywhere benefit from the technology. Given India's size, it also risks forfeiting a vital opportunity to advance democratic AI in emerging markets around the world.

**It's critical to get the balance right. If AI access and adoption are uneven, AI's upside will be uneven, too. Many people may have access to the tools, but far fewer will know how to use them well enough to translate that access into real gains**

OpenAI is committed to doing its part to help build AI in India, with India, and for India. We've made our tools available for free so they're accessible to Indians regardless of their income, education, or familiarity with technology.

We're also focused on practical, near-term steps that can be taken now to help Indians unlock AI's transformative power. Three things make the difference: equipping more people with AI literacy, building the computing and energy infrastructure that powers advanced AI systems, and integrating AI more fully into real workflows.

First, AI literacy at scale. Not abstract familiarity, but practical fluency in coding, knowledge work, and other real-world uses of AI to write, analyse, plan, learn, and solve problems in ways that match the work in front of you. That means helping students and workers develop both AI skills and confidence in their ability to use them. This is how access turns into adop-



**EYE ON UPSIDE:** Countries that build the infrastructure will be in a stronger position to shape the future of this technology

tion, and how adoption turns into agency.

Second, the infrastructure that makes adoption possible at national scale. AI runs on computing capacity and the energy to power it. Infrastructure is destiny, and countries that build those foundations will be in a stronger position to shape the future of this technology and realise more of its upside.

Third, integration into real workflows. People adopt AI fastest when it helps with the work in front of them, not when it adds

a new system to learn. Put AI to work in classrooms, clinics, small businesses, and public services, and it can increase productivity, expand the frontiers of what is possible, and deliver tangible value quickly.

This agenda is urgent for another reason: AI itself is moving from systems that primarily answer questions to systems that can accelerate cutting-edge scientific research and take action in the physical world, including robotics.

None of this works without trust. In-

dividuals need confidence in the tools they are using, and institutions need clear ways to deploy them responsibly. Different users also need different protections, especially younger users, who deserve stronger safeguards as they learn how to use these tools. If we want AI to expand opportunity, safety and reliability have to keep pace with capability.

India brings something important to this moment: optimism about what AI can do, matched with a serious national effort to make it real. With its focus on access, practical AI literacy, and the infrastructure that supports widespread adoption, India is well positioned to broaden who benefits from the technology and to help shape how democratic AI is adopted at scale.

That's exactly why I am here, and why we're leaning in for the long term. We recently brought more than 200 nonprofit leaders together across four cities in India to learn how to use ChatGPT to extend their teams' capacity and deepen their impact. We opened our first office in Delhi last August and plan to expand our footprint this year. We will soon be announcing new ways of partnering with the Indian govt to put access to AI and its benefits within reach for more people across the country.

What happens next even more. AI will help define India's future, and India will help define AI's future. And it will do so in a way only a democracy can. ■

Altman is CEO of OpenAI

## For Bangladesh, this is a moment of both peril and possibility

BY INVITATION

HARSH V PANT



The 2026 general election in Bangladesh—the first electoral exercise after the 2024 student-led uprising that brought an abrupt end to Sheikh Hasina's long and increasingly authoritarian tenure—marks a decisive inflection point in the country's political evolution. What has emerged is not simply an alternation of power, but a reconfiguration of political legitimacy.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Tarique Rahman, has won a commanding two-thirds majority in the 299-member Jatiya Sangsad, winning 209 seats. Rahman, son of former president Ziaur Rahman and former PM Khaleda Zia, now stands poised to be PM. For a party that spent nearly two decades in exile, marginalisation, and suppression under Awami League dominance, this is an extraordinary resurrection.

Equally significant is the structural vacuum left by the disbanding and electoral exclusion of the Awami League. The electorate's verdict is less an endorsement of the BNP in ideological terms and more an emphatic rejection of centralised, personality-driven rule. The 2024 'Gen Z uprising', animated by economic anxieties—rising inflation, unemployment, and stagnating mobility—has reshaped the political grammar of the republic. The simultaneous approval of the July Charter referendum, introducing term limits for the PM, strengthened judicial independence, gender quotas and safeguards against authoritarian relapse, underscores the popular appetite for institutional renewal.

Yet the verdict is layered. Jamaat-e-Islami's strong performance—securing 68 seats—signals the persistence, if not resurgence, of Islamist mobilisation in a society constitutionally committed to secular principles. The National Citizen Party (NCP), the political offspring of the uprising, managed only six seats, a reminder that street legitimacy does not automatically translate into electoral viability. Voter turnout hovering around 59-60% reflected cautious engagement in a transitional moment.

BNP campaigned under the slogan 'Bangladesh before all', which blends nationalism, democratic restoration, and economic revival. Its ambitious manifesto promises implementation of the July Charter's reforms. But there is an inherent tension here. A two-thirds parliamentary majority enables swift reform but may also reduce incentives to institutionalise constraints—particularly those, such as proportional representation, that could dilute concentrated power.

On governance, the BNP has pledged a zero-tolerance anti-corruption regime, featuring transparent procurement, performance audits, repatriation of illicit financial flows, and the appointment of an ombudsman. Given Tarique Rahman's own history of corruption allegations and prolonged exile in London, credibility will hinge on demonstrable top-down enforcement rather than rhetorical commitments.

Economically, the new govt inherits fragility. The unrest of 2024-2025 disrupted production cycles and investor confidence. Reviving the garments sector, diversifying exports, and generating nearly one million ICT jobs are central to the BNP's recovery blueprint. It also has a broader developmental narrative aimed squarely at a restless



**TIGHTROPE WALK:** Tarique Rahman must navigate a tightening geopolitical contest in the Bay of Bengal

youth constituency. Foreign policy under Rahman is likely to be recalibrated rather than revolutionised. The BNP's articulation of an "economy-based" diplomacy suggests a more transactional posture, anchored in national interest rather than ideological affinity. Delhi-Dhaka ties had already deteriorated after Hasina's 2024 ouster and subsequent exile in India. The BNP's formal call for her extradition introduces an immediate diplomatic sensitivity.

Border management along the 4,000-km frontier, allegations of 'push-ins', and water-sharing disputes over rivers such as the Teesta and Padma are likely to test the resilience of the relationship. India's concerns over the protection of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh will remain salient. At the same time, PM Modi's swift outreach and Rahman's reciprocal signals of engagement suggest that neither side is inclined toward open confrontation. The relationship may become more transactional and less emotive—but not necessarily adversarial.

China has also moved quickly to reaffirm its commitment to a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership." In the post-Hasina interregnum, Beijing accelerated infrastructure financing under the Belt and Road Initiative, expanded energy investments, and deepened defence cooperation. Reports of a drone production facility near the Siliguri Corridor and potential JF-17 fighter arrangements via Pakistan underscore the strategic sensitivity for Delhi. Under a BNP govt, Sino-Bangladesh ties are likely to intensify, particularly in trade, infrastructure, and technology sectors. However, BNP appears intent on multi-alignment rather than overt tilting, maintaining functional ties with China, India, the US, and even Pakistan, while avoiding strategic overdependence.

The central challenge for Tarique Rahman is thus twofold. Domestically, he must convert a sweeping mandate into credible institutional reform without replicating the concentration of power that unseated his predecessor. Externally, he must navigate a tightening geopolitical contest in the Bay of Bengal without compromising Bangladesh's strategic autonomy. Bangladesh stands at a moment of possibility—and peril. The electorate has repudiated authoritarianism, but the durability of democratic restoration will depend not on electoral arithmetic alone, but on institutional restraint, economic delivery, and diplomatic balance. ■

Pant is vice president, Observer Research Foundation

## Talented Indians shouldn't have to go to Europe or US to do top-tier research

**Randy Schekman, who shared the 2013 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for discovering how cells organise the transport of molecules in tiny packages called vesicles, was the chief guest at Infosys Prize 2025 ceremony in Bengaluru. In an interview with Habeeba Salim, he explains why he has made Parkinson's his latest mission and how his discovery helps diabetics**

**■ Your work on vesicle transport won you a Nobel. Can you explain its impact on our lives?**

Diabetics in India and around the world rely on insulin. What most people don't know is that much of it is made by the same yeast used to bake bread and brew beer. That's a very direct way basic cell biology touches everyday life.

Our lives are made possible by about 100,000 different protein molecules—long strings of amino acids that fold into enzymes and structural proteins which build and maintain our bodies. They are made inside our cells, many of which must be exported—like insulin or the molecules that let nerve cells talk to each other. These are carried in tiny vesicles, a system that evolved billions of years ago. I was fortunate to choose yeast as the model to study this protein export. Within the first two years, I was able to isolate the genes that organise this pathway, map how they interact, and identify the proteins they encode. Later, when the human genome was sequenced, we discovered that humans have the same genes (as yeast)—not surprising, since this process evolved 2 billion years ago and evolution reuses what works. This made it possible for the emerging biotech industry in San Francisco to use yeast as a platform to manufacture important human proteins that are normally exported from cells, like insulin. Within a few years, scientists could introduce the human insulin gene into yeast and equip it with the signals needed for yeast to recognise and secrete it.

Today, about one-third of the world's supply of recombinant human insulin is produced in giant fermentation vats of yeast.

**■ You've been a strong advocate of open science. What has made you so upset with elite science journals?**

The so-called elite, high-profile journals fought bitterly against open access for years because they saw it as a threat to their profit margins. The two biggest commercial players have some of the highest profit margins of any company in the world—not in absolute dollars, but in margins. They rely on what is essentially free labour: scientists review the papers for them, and institutions pay very high license fees to access the journals. On top of that, they charge huge fees for open-access publication because young scholars feel their careers depend on publishing in these journals. Publishing a full-length open-access paper can now cost an investigator about \$12,000.

Final decisions are made by 'professional editors'—people who may once have been scientists but no longer practice. In my view, many of these editors lack the judgment to make such critical decisions, especially when complex new technologies are involved. And although they deny it, they are often influenced by the desire to publish "shiny objects"—sensational papers that generate buzz and media coverage. That pressure can drive them to publish work that appears exciting but later turns out to be wrong. The most infamous case is (UK doctor) Andrew Wakefield's paper suggesting a link between childhood vaccination and autism. Even after the paper was retracted and Wakefield was found to have manipulated data and lost his medical license, he still has a second career promoting anti-vaccine views alongside people like RFK Jr.

**■ Geopolitics is suddenly a factor in scientific research and funding. What should countries like India plan for?**

India has enormous human potential. The tragedy is that much of that potential is realised only when people move abroad. I'm cautious about telling politicians what to do—they have many competing problems—but fundamentally, countries like India need to invest more in the basic infrastructure of scientific research and create environments where their best minds can flourish at home. Talented people shouldn't feel they must move to Western

Europe or the US to do top-tier work.

**■ Tell us an anecdote that captures your journey into science?**

I'll share a story that may end up on my tombstone. As a child growing up in Southern California, I got a toy microscope for my 11th birthday. I went to a local dry riverbed, scooped up a jar of pond scum, took it to my bedroom, put a drop on a slide, and looked through the plastic lens. I was astonished by the profusion of tiny organisms swimming around. One evening at dinner I tried to describe this to my father, who was quite sceptical. He thought I just had a vivid imagination. I was offended by his scepticism and decided I needed a real microscope. I did odd jobs—babysitting, mowing lawns, delivering newspapers—and resolved to save \$100, which was a lot of money in 1962, to buy a proper student microscope. I hid the money in my bedroom closet. But I could never reach \$100 because my mother kept borrowing some of it to buy groceries. One Saturday, I was so upset that I got on my bicycle and rode to the local police station. I told the duty officer I wanted to run away from home because my mother was stealing my money and I couldn't buy my microscope. They called my father in. He met with the captain, and I'm sure he was angry, but the upshot was that he and I went to a local pawn shop. In the front window was a Bausch & Lomb monocular microscope—my dream. We bought it for \$100. That instrument became my pride and joy. All through high school I entered science fairs with projects on microorganisms using that microscope. Then I went off to university, and the microscope went into storage. Fortunately, my parents kept it and later mailed it to me when I was living near Berkeley with my own family. You can now see it on display in Stockholm (at the Nobel museum), with a caption in English and Swedish explaining how I tried to run away from home to pursue my career in science.

**■ What else are you working on?**

There's another area that is very exciting to me, and it's personal. My wife died of Parkinson's disease. I was asked to lead a new effort to bring investigators together to study the basic science of Parkinson's. This initiative is supported by the Sergey Brin Family Foundation. Sergey Brin, the co-founder of Google, and his mother share a mutation in one of about 20 known genes linked to familial forms of the disease. He isn't ill yet, but he's at risk, and he has invested over a billion dollars in Parkinson's research.

## AI is not just killing jobs; it is breaking the way you get them

BY INVITATION

JASPREET BINDRA



HyperWrite CEO Matt Shumer's post 'Something Big is Happening' has generated a viral earthquake. The post was widely shared because it was not just speculation, but a report from the trenches. He has described how he gave a complex coding task to an AI agent, GPT-5.3 Codex. When he returned after four hours, the work was not just finished but was executed with "taste" and "judgment," qualities we previously reserved for humans.

Comparing the present to the February 2020 pre-Covid moment, that brief, eerie calm before a global upheaval, Shumer shot off a blunt warning: AI has crossed a qualitative line: from "helpful tool" to "independent doer." Whether it is coding, legal drafting, or financial analysis, execution that once took days now takes minutes.

This suggests a terrifying reality for the traditional white-collar worker: if your value lies in the 'doing' rather than the thinking/orchestrating/decision-making, you are increasingly redundant. Shumer is not alone. Anthropic.ai founder Dario Amodei predicts that AI could eliminate half of all entry-level, white-collar jobs within five years. Anesh Raman, a senior leader in LinkedIn, sees "the bottom rung of the job ladder breaking".

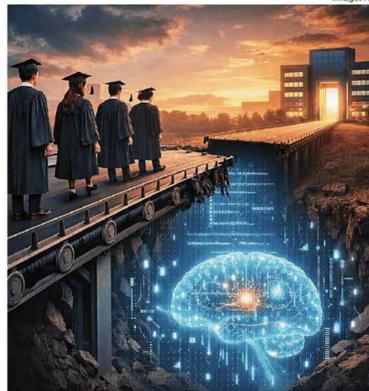
For every prophet of the AI apocalypse, there is a sceptic. AI luminary Gary Marcus argues that we are witnessing a massive "AI bubble" fuelled by statistical trickery. He says the post glosses over the boring but decisive issues: reliability, error rates, security and trust problems,

especially when systems look convincing enough that humans stop checking.

Marcus is right to be sceptical of the 'God-like AI' narrative. However, there is no denying that AI will cause a work and job disruption, the same way that the steam engine, the computer, or the internet did, if not more. Even if Shumer's timelines are too aggressive, the direction of travel is hard to deny. I believe that the disruption is not simply that "jobs will disappear;" it is that the model by which millions used to get jobs is breaking. For instance, in urban India, for decades, we followed a rigid, almost sacred, liturgical path—a conveyor belt model from school to (usually) engineering degree to an MBA/postgrad to a management trainee, and then a long corporate climb. Another route was to skip the MBA, go to a big IT firm after engineering and then do years of project rotations and certifications, thus ensuring a lifetime orbit around IT.

This model is now dying. Debugging code, summarising reports, data entry—the bottom rung—is exactly what AI does best. If that rung disappears, the ladder becomes inaccessible. Because if AI can do the work of ten juniors, companies will no longer pay to train those juniors.

It might be cold comfort, but this is not the first



**DARK DAYS FOR WHITE-COLLAR SECTOR:** If AI can do the work of ten juniors, companies will no longer spend money to train those juniors

time our model of work has shattered. Before the Industrial Revolution, the dominant model was around apprenticeship, where you lived with a master blacksmith or a weaver for years, sometimes paid him to teach you, and learnt the craft through proximity and manual labour. Then came the 'factory model,' where you went in as a child, and rose up the blue-collar ranks. We then shifted to the 'specialisation' model of the 20th century, where you learned a single skill and sold it to a single firm for 40 years. That, too, died with the advent of the PC and the internet. Now, as we enter the Age of AI,

work will remain, but the model of work will break and change again.

If the model is breaking, what should we, especially the young, do?

**Rediscover Humanities.** As answers become a commodity, the value shifts to the questions. Logic, ethics, philosophy, and literature provide the frameworks to understand human motivation and critical judgment—things AI can only mimic.

**Aim for the 'second rung.'** Do not wait for a company to teach you the basics. Use AI as your apprentice to teach yourself to do the work of a mid-level professional while you are still in college. Your goal should be to enter the workforce with a 'portfolio career'—a mix of technical skills and creative outlets. Be a coder who understands the 'why' of a business, or a designer who understands the 'how' of AI agents.

**Become an entrepreneur:** As every process in every company and industry gets disrupted, each of them is an entrepreneurial opportunity to set up a company 'solving' for it. The 'safe' corporate job is a myth now; the new safety lies in the ability to build things yourself.

**Embrace AI literacy:** The definition of literacy has changed from reading, writing to that and how to work with AI in everything you do. AI talent is just not AI and ML engineers, but HR, marketing, and salespeople who use AI to do their jobs better and faster.

Matt Shumer concluded his post by saying that this will be the most important year of your career. He is right, but not because the robots are taking over. It is because the ladder we were promised is gone; it is time to learn a new way to be a professional. ■

Bindra is the founder of AI&Beyond and author of 'Winning With AI: Your Guide to AI Literacy'

WORD DROP

DIP BUYING

After setting new record highs for months, the prices of silver and gold finally crashed recently, their lustre replaced by a deep red. However, as many exited, others bought in, stepping in at a time others were stepping out. This act of swimming against the tide or "buy low, sell high" is what is known in formal trading lingo as



dip buying, referring to the strategy of purchasing an asset after it has fallen in price, with the expectation that the decline is temporary and the long-term trend remains intact. Hence, you buy at lower prices, and then later sell them as prices climb up again, making a profit. However, it is essentially a risky bet: if the downward spiral continues, the losses can balloon.

Email your letters to the editor at [sunday.times@timesofindia.com](mailto:sunday.times@timesofindia.com) with 'Sunday Mailbox' in the subject line. Please mention your name and city

## IIT-Delhi, Germany team makes 'chiral valve' to sort current

Vasudevan Mukunth

In a new study in *Nature*, scientists from IIT-Delhi and Germany have demonstrated a device to separate electrons based on their 'handedness' without powerful magnetic fields, taking a step towards chiral electronics, which could in future enable low-power devices.

The human left hand is a mirror image of the right; the two can't be perfectly superimposed. In certain

complex materials called topological semimetals, electrons possess a similar left or right chirality. (The chirality is a specific quantum state of an electron moving inside the crystal.)

However, these special electrons are usually mixed with 'standard' electrons that lack chirality and detecting them has historically required the use of powerful magnetic fields or precise chemical doping, rendering the technology impractical for

daily use. The researchers addressed this challenge by exploiting the quantum geometry of a palladium gallium (PdGa) crystal.

"The single homochiral crystal made by Claudia's group was crucial for the study," Max Planck Institute of Microstructure Physics managing director and study co-author Stuart Parkin told *The Hindu*, referring to the work of fellow author Claudia Felser.

In this crystal, electrons behave like waves as they

move through the lattice, which in turn restricts how much energy and momentum the wave can have.

The set of constraints is called the band structure. In the copper wiring in your house, the road is flat and straight. If you apply a voltage, it will push the electron in a straight line. In the crystal, the road is twisted, so even if the electron is moving straight, its path will drift to the side. Which side depends on the electron's handedness.

The team fabricated a small device with three arms and passed an electric current through it. Beyond a threshold, PdGa's quantum geometry pushed left-handed electrons into one arm and right-handed electrons into the other.

"Utilising quantum geometry as a new element, rather than an external magnetic field, was pivotal to achieving the valve functionality," Dr. Parkin said. "It led us to fabricate our

unique device geometry to demonstrate that we can control the separation of currents with opposite electronic chirality."

Some roadblocks remain, including the need for ion beams to fabricate the device and ultra-low temperature to operate it, which make practical use infeasible. If these challenges can be overcome, the technology could lead to low-power computing and new forms of magnetic memory.

## SNAPSHOTS



### Haematocytes use sleep to help maintain brain health

A study in fruit flies suggests one purpose of sleep is to remove fats from the brain. When flies stayed up, brain cells called cortex glia built up lipid droplets. Scientists found that during deep sleep, circulating immune cells in the blood called haematocytes got next to the blood-brain barrier, and made contact with glial cells. Flies lacking a haematocyte receptor called *eater* also slept less, had higher metabolic stress, poorer memory, and shorter lives.



### Seabird poop helped Chincha Kingdom expand in desert

By analysing isotopes and using carbon dating, scientists have found that people in Peru's Chincha Valley were using seabird droppings by at least 1250 AD. The droppings' high nitrogen content helped farmers raise yields and support larger populations in what was a very dry coastal desert. According to the team's paper, the droppings thus "played an important role in the sociopolitical and economic expansion of the Chincha Kingdom and its eventual relationship with the Inca Empire".



### Climate change could shrink grazing area by half by 2100

Based on climate projections of temperature, rainfall and humidity until 2100, scientists have projected a 36-50% drop in "climatically suitable" grazing area worldwide, but especially in Africa. They also estimated that 110-140 million pastoralists and 1.4-1.6 billion grazing animals could be affected. "In Asia, grazing suitability is projected to expand inland," the paper stated, clustering in "Kazakhstan and Iran". The losses overlap with countries already facing poverty, hunger, gender inequality, and political fragility.

# Can a hospital gas help fight drug-resistant pneumonia?

Researchers report that high-dose inhaled nitric oxide reduced the levels of drug-resistant bacteria in a large-animal ICU model and proved safe in early human testing; questions remain, however, about the method's benefits and feasibility

Anirban Mukhopadhyay

**D**rug-resistant pneumonia remains a serious complication in intensive care units, where treatment options are limited. *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* in particular causes about one in five hospital pneumonias and often resists multiple drugs.

A research team at the Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, affiliated with Harvard Medical School, has reported that a gas already used in neonatal care may have a role in addressing such infections. In a study published in *Science Translational Medicine*, researchers found that a high dose of inhaled nitric oxide reduced drug-resistant *Pseudomonas* in a large-animal ICU model.

The human body naturally produces nitric oxide; doctors also use it at low doses, typically 20-80 ppm, to widen blood vessels in the lungs of patients with acute respiratory failure.

Lorenzo Berra, associate professor of anaesthesia at Harvard Medical School and a senior author of the study, said the decision to test much higher concentrations was guided by earlier findings. "At the low doses commonly used in clinical practice, nitric oxide mainly acts as a selective pulmonary vasodilator," he said. In 2021, a mouse study by his colleagues "provided the biological rationale for selecting 300 ppm as the threshold likely required for antimicrobial activity."



Doctors already use nitric acid at low doses to widen blood vessels in the lungs of patients with acute respiratory failure. Representative image. MUFID MAJUN/UNSPASH

■ Drug-resistant pneumonia in the ICU, especially from *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, leaves clinicians with few effective options

■ Researchers tested whether nitric oxide at a concentration of 300 ppm can have an antimicrobial effect

■ In a study with ventilated pigs, short bursts of nitric oxide cut bacterial counts by 99% over supportive care

■ Treated animals also had better oxygenation and lung function, suggesting lung signalling had been restored

■ Independent experts have warned about potential toxicity and rapid bacterial rebound after stopping treatment

■ Early human tests suggest the treatment could be feasible, but clinical trials and specialised delivery infrastructure are still necessary

To test the approach in a setting mirroring a human ICU, the researchers studied 16 ventilated pigs with pneumonia caused by multidrug-resistant *P. aeruginosa*. They introduced the bacteria directly into the lungs and afforded the animals intensive care for three days.

One-half received short, repeated bursts of inhaled nitric oxide at 300 ppm and the other half received standard supportive care alone, sans antibiotics. The team continuously tracked oxygen levels, lung stiffness, blood pressure, and infection markers, and compared how the two

groups changed over time.

The study found that treated animals had 99% lower lung bacterial counts along with better oxygenation and lung function. The authors suggested the gas may help restore chemical signalling in the lung disrupted by severe infection.

Prof. Berra said the findings suggest the approach could be relevant to critically ill patients, though further testing is required.

#### Promise and limits

"The animals initially improved, but later their lungs grew stiffer and less able to oxygenate the blood while they were still on the

gas," Paul H. Edelstein, professor of pathology and laboratory medicine at University of Pennsylvania, said, adding that the harm could have resulted from the toxic effects of nitric oxide, either through elevated methemoglobin, which blocks oxygen delivery, or through direct lung injury.

He also questioned the durability of the antimicrobial effects. Although some bacteria remained, the treated animals had far lower levels of the immune chemicals that cause the lungs to swell and fill with fluid, a chain reaction that cuts off oxygen. This effect persisted over the first two

days, when severe pneumonia typically worsens and begins to damage other organs.

To assess whether the doses could be delivered safely, the researchers conducted a small phase 1 study in 10 healthy human volunteers. Participants inhaled nitric oxide at 300 ppm for 30 minutes, thrice a day for five days. Methemoglobin levels rose briefly. The team reported no serious adverse effects.

The group also delivered the high-dose gas to two critically ill ICU patients to test the feasibility. The study showed that the treatment could be administered without immediate serious complications.

Even if future trials confirm clinical benefits, practical barriers remain. Most hospitals are not equipped to deliver nitric oxide at high concentrations and the process requires specialised machinery and trained staff.

"The biggest obstacle would be technical, operational, and monitoring, not biological," he said. Standard systems are capped at 80 ppm and higher doses require continuous monitoring to prevent nitrogen dioxide formation and methemoglobin accumulation.

For Prof. Edelstein, the work represents an important starting point, but "until researchers can show the gas works at non-toxic exposures and delivers lasting benefit, the excitement is premature."

Anirban Mukhopadhyay is a geneticist by training and science communicator from New Delhi

## There are two ways to build skills using AI tools



John Xavier

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence into the professional landscape has created a paradoxical promise: the ability to do more while knowing less. As tools like large language models become ubiquitous in fields ranging from software engineering to data analysis, a fundamental question emerges regarding the long-term cost of our newfound efficiency.

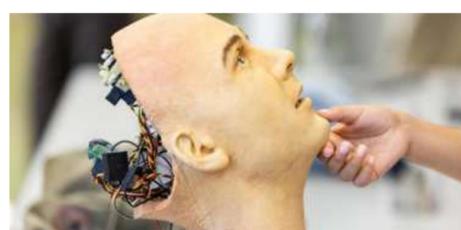
A recent study from researchers at Anthropic, titled 'How AI Impacts Skill Formation,' provides a rigorous look into this dilemma.

The researchers studied a group of coders, dividing them into two groups — one with access to AI tools

and another without — to complete a coding challenge. At the end of a 35-minute-long coding challenge, all participants were asked to take a test to check their Python programming proficiency.

Upon evaluation, the team found that those in the control group scored higher than those in the treatment pool, suggesting a stark divide between high-scoring and low-scoring interaction patterns. It shows that while AI can accelerate the completion of a task, it can simultaneously decelerate the mind if used as a substitute rather than a supplement.

The treatment group path, identified as the low-scoring interaction pattern, is characterised by what researchers call cognitive offloading. In this scenario, the user treats the AI as a primary agent of execution rather than a



The choice between the two ways of building skills rests on how we value our own expertise. REUTERS

collaborator.

They delegate the heavy lifting of code generation and debugging to the AI, moving through the assignment with deceptive speed. This group often finishes tasks fast, yet their comprehension of the underlying mechanics remains remarkably shallow.

By bypassing the iterative, often frustrating process of trial and error, they inadvertently skip the very neurological "struggle" required for deep learning.

For these individuals, the AI tool serves as a high-tech crutch; they reach the finish line, but their internal "muscle memory" for the skill is never built, resulting in quiz scores that plummet when the tool is removed.

This contrasts sharply with the high-scoring group whose philosophical approach to AI was fundamentally different. They didn't see AI as a replacement for their own logic but as a peer or a senior.

Instead of asking the AI to "write the code," they asked conceptual questions. They sought explanations for why a particular function is used or requested that the AI break down a generated snippet into its component parts. This group demonstrated a high level of cognitive engagement.

The study's findings suggest that the primary differentiator between these two paths is not the amount of manual labour performed, but the degree of mental involvement. Interestingly, the research noted that even when participants manually re-typed code instead of copy-pasting it, their learning did not necessarily improve if they weren't mentally processing the "why" behind the syntax.

This highlights a critical trap in the modern workplace: the illusion of com-

petence. It is possible to be highly productive in the short term by following the low-scoring path of delegation, but this leads to a hollowing out of expertise.

The choice between the two ways of building skills rests on how we value our own expertise. The low-scoring path offers the siren song of immediate results and "vibe coding," where one can produce functional work without a deep grasp of the foundations. The high-scoring path requires more discipline, demanding that we slow down to ask "how" and "why" even when a solution is just a prompt away. To thrive in an AI-augmented world, we must resist the urge to offload our thinking. By choosing the path of high engagement, we ensure that as the tools around us get smarter, we are getting smarter alongside them.



## Question Corner

### Toddler trade-off

**Why don't all animals give birth to the same number of babies at a time?**

— N. Ramalakshmi

The answer is a combination of how many eggs are released or ovulated and the species' survival strategy. Many large mammals like elephants, cows, and humans usually release one egg per cycle and commit heavily to that one offspring. Pregnancy is long, the baby is relatively big, and the mother invests a lot of energy in nurturing it. Many dogs, cats, pigs, rodents, rabbits, etc. often release multiple eggs in one cycle, so multiple

embryos can develop at once. Their uterus is also built to carry several foetuses. And their pregnancy is shorter, and the newborns are smaller, the strategy is to produce many because not all will survive.

Tigers occupy a middle ground: they typically have litters of up to four cubs because their survival in the wild is uncertain, yet they still invest a lot in each cub. They don't usually have larger litters like dogs because each cub is still 'costly' to raise and needs a lot of milk and protection.

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

# FAQ

## What has govt. laid down on AI labelling?

What do the new rules specify with respect to AI-generated imagery and social media takedowns?

**Aroon Deep**

**The story so far:**

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) earlier this week notified an amendment to the IT Rules, 2021, that would require users and social media platforms to label AI-generated content, and tighten the takedown timelines for all content – not just AI-generated posts – from 24-36 hours to two to three hours. The rules come into effect on February 20.

**What about AI-generated content?**

The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2026 require social media platforms to “prominently” label “synthetically generated” content, or AI-generated images and videos. The requirement was first proposed in October last year, and was notified this week. Social media platforms with more than five million users are required to obtain a “user declaration [for AI-generated content] and [conduct] technical verification before publishing [AI-generated content]”.

MeitY said in an explanatory document that this requirement was introduced to counter “deepfakes, misinformation, and other unlawful content capable of misleading users, causing users harm, violating privacy, or threatening national integrity,” and that it was important

The timelines for responding to user reports on ‘sensitive’ content has been slashed from 72 hours to 36 hours

that users be aware whether what they are viewing is inauthentic. The October draft definition of “Synthetically Generated

Information” (SGI) was wider, encompassing any audiovisual content that was AI-modified or generated. The final rules carve out some exemptions: for instance, smartphone-clicked photos that are retouched automatically by the camera app will not be considered SGI, and special effects in films will not be considered something that needs to be labelled. The rules also prohibit certain types of SGI: child sexual exploitation and abuse material, forged documents, information on developing explosives, and deepfakes falsely representing a real person.

**How can AI-generated content be detected?**

The government has asked large platforms to “deploy reasonable and appropriate technical measures to prevent unlawful SGI, and to ensure labelling/provenance/identifier requirements for permissible SGI”. A senior official at the IT Ministry argued that large platforms have sophisticated tools to detect SGI, and that this requirement merely requires them to perform detection that they are already doing. Additionally, some AI firms and platforms have participated in the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA), which offers technical standards to invisibly label AI-generated content in a way that can be read by other platforms, in case AI-based detection fails. The rules allude to this effort by requiring “provenance/identifier requirements,” but the official said they don’t want to endorse any single effort, but would like to formalise the aims of such collaborations.

**How have time limits changed?**

The IT Rules enable some government authorities and police officials to issue takedown notices under Rule 3(1)(b), and users to send in grievances for “illegal” categories of content enumerated in the IT Rules. Those categories include misinformation, nudity, and threats to sovereignty. For both government- and court-issued takedown notices, the timelines have been reduced to 2-3 hours, while for all other categories of user complaints (like defamation and misinformation), the response timelines have been reduced from two weeks to one week. The timelines for responding to user reports (under Rule 3(2)(b)) on “sensitive” content has also been slashed from 72 hours to 36 hours. The government reasoned that the previous limits allowed a lot of damage to be done even within those timelines, necessitating a revisit of the time platforms have to act.

**What other changes have been made?**

Users will now have to receive a reminder of platforms’ terms and conditions more often. “The amendments include revisions to Rule 3(1)(c) of the Intermediary Rules, increasing the frequency of user notifications from once every year to at least once every 3 (three) months, and expanding the content of such notifications to clarify potential consequences of non-compliance and reporting obligations,” JSA Advocates and Solicitors said in an analysis.

The rules also require platforms to specifically warn users that harmful deepfakes and other illegal AI-generated content could expose them to legal action, including the disclosure of their identity to law enforcement agencies and “immediate disabling of access or removal of such content, suspension or termination of user accounts”, JSA said in its analysis.

## How is U.S.-India trade deal being tweaked?

What are the areas that have come under scrutiny? Has India stopped buying Russian oil as Donald Trump has claimed? What is happening in the agricultural sector? Has the reference to pulses been removed from the draft? When is the formal agreement expected to be signed?

**T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan**

**The story so far:**

The Interim Agreement between India and the U.S. on trade has buoyed investor sentiment in India, especially because of the prospect of tariffs on Indian exports to the U.S. reducing to 18%. However, since the deal was announced through a joint statement on February 7, the contours of what it could include have been the source of much ambiguity. This is especially true in four broad areas: oil, agriculture, textiles, and the value of overall imports from the U.S.

**What does the joint statement say?**

The joint statement said that the U.S. has agreed to apply a reciprocal tariff of 18% on imports from India. This would entail a reduction from the existing 25%. The statement itself did not mention the additional 25% penal tariff the U.S. had levied on India for its imports of Russian oil. However, U.S. President Donald Trump took to social media saying that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had agreed to stop importing Russian oil. Further, on February 6, Mr. Trump issued an executive order removing the 25% penal tariff saying that “India has committed to stop directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil”. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has said that he expects the executive order reducing the remaining 25% reciprocal tariffs to 18% to be issued this week.

In return for this reduction in reciprocal tariffs, the joint statement said India has agreed to remove tariffs on U.S. exports of “all U.S. industrial goods and a wide range of U.S. food and agricultural products”, which includes Dried Distillers’ Grains (DDGs), red sorghum for

Centre has refused to deny the repeated statements by Trump that India has agreed to stop buying oil from Russia

animal feed, tree nuts, fresh and processed fruit, soybean oil, wine and spirits, and “additional products”. Further, the joint statement said that India “intends to” buy \$500 billion worth of U.S. energy products, aircraft and aircraft parts, precious metals, technology products, and coking coal over the next five years.

**What is the confusion over oil imports?**

The confusion arises from the fact that the Indian government has refused to categorically deny the repeated statements by Mr. Trump and senior officials of his administration that India has agreed to stop buying oil from Russia. A factsheet on the India-U.S. deal issued by the White House also says the same.

While an analysis of government data up to December 2025 shows that India’s imports of Russian oil had fallen to a 38-month low that month, the government has not made clear its position on Russian oil imports since then. When asked about the issue, both Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and Petroleum Minister Hardeep Puri have directed all questions to the Ministry of External Affairs. In repeated press conferences, officials of the Ministry of External Affairs have not answered direct “yes or no” questions on whether India has committed to reducing its Russian oil imports. In a public statement, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri said earlier this week that India’s energy sourcing is guided by pricing, availability, and risks but did not directly address the Russian issue.

**How will agriculture be affected?**

The agriculture sector is another area that has created a lot of controversy. Opposition parties have taken the wording of the joint statement, which said India has agreed to eliminate tariffs on “a wide range of U.S. food and agricultural products”, to attack the government for hurting the interests of India’s farmers. Mr. Goyal, through various press briefings and interviews, including to *The Hindu*, made assurances that Indian farmers had no reason to worry and that all sensitive agricultural items and dairy would be kept out of the deal.

While listing the various agricultural items that were excluded from the deal, Mr. Goyal told *The Hindu* that this would include “pulses in which we are self-sufficient in India, like green peas, kabuli chana, moong”. The question of what happens to other pulses again came to the fore when the White House uploaded its fact sheet. In the original version, the list of items on which India had agreed to eliminate or reduce tariffs included pulses. That version has since been updated, with the reference to pulses being removed.

On Friday, both Mr. Goyal and Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan released separate video messages assuring farmers that their interests would not be compromised in the U.S. deal.

**What about India’s purchase of U.S. goods?**

Mr. Trump’s original post on Truth Social said that Prime Minister Modi had committed to “buy American” in addition to \$500 billion worth of energy, technology, agriculture, coal, and “many other products”.

The joint statement, while clarifying that these purchases were to be spread over five years, also said that it was an intention and did not use the word commitment. However, the White House factsheet again said that India had committed to buying \$500 billion worth of goods from the U.S. The amended version now also says this is an “intention”.

The \$500 billion of imports of goods from the U.S. will not overly concentrate on India’s supply chains towards the U.S., Mr. Goyal said in his interview to *The Hindu*. He said that India currently imports about \$300 billion of electronics, energy, parts for data centres and semiconductors, and airplanes and their parts from across the world. This amount, he said, is expected to grow to \$2 trillion in five years. So, he argued that importing \$500 billion of this from the U.S. would not entail any concentration of India’s supply chains.

**Why is there ambiguity over textile exports?**

Once Mr. Trump signs the executive order lowering India’s reciprocal tariffs to 18% from 25%, the tariff on India’s textile exports too will fall to 18%. The sector welcomed this with great enthusiasm since the U.S. is a major export destination for the sector and the earlier 50% tariffs were hurting the industry.

However, just days after India and the U.S. announced their deal, the U.S. and Bangladesh also announced a trade deal. Under this deal, Bangladesh’s exports to the U.S. would face tariffs of 19%. In addition, the agreement included a clause that specified that if Bangladesh imports cotton from the U.S., then the textiles exported using that cotton would face 0% duties in the U.S.

Opposition parties were quick to point out that this would render Indian textile exporters relatively uncompetitive even before India’s deal with the U.S. has been signed.

Now, however, Mr. Goyal has said that Indian textile exporters will receive the same benefits as Bangladeshi textile exporters. That is, under the Interim Agreement, if Indian textile makers import American cotton, then their exports to the U.S. would attract 0% tariffs. This had not been mentioned by him earlier. Mr. Goyal and other officials of the Commerce Ministry have said that the formal agreement is expected to be signed in mid-March. It is only after that that more details will be made clear.



**In rage:** Members of trade unions hold banners during a nationwide strike to protest an interim trade deal with the U.S. in New Delhi, on February 12. AP

## What’s in store for garment exporters to U.S.?

What has the U.S. promised Bangladesh with respect to textiles? What are the conditions laid down by the U.S. to give Bangladeshi exporters unprecedented access to American markets? What is the assurance that Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal gave Indian textile exporters?

**M. Soundariya Preetha**

**The story so far:**

In the U.S.-Bangladesh Agreement on Reciprocal Trade, signed on February 9, the U.S. has committed to “establish a mechanism that will allow for certain textile and apparel goods from Bangladesh to receive a zero reciprocal tariff rate”. A statement from the White House said this mechanism will provide for a to-be-specified volume of apparel and textile imports from Bangladesh to enter the U.S. at this reduced tariff rate, but that the volume shall be determined based on the use of U.S. produced cotton and MMF (man-made fibre) textile inputs. Following concerns in the Indian textile and garment industry, which is the largest employment generator after agriculture, Indian Minister for Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal said that India is to have the same facility as Bangladesh, and that Indian garment and textile exporters will also benefit.

**What does data of the countries indicate?**

Of the total imports of \$16.1 billion of textile inputs by Bangladesh in 2024, \$3.1 billion went from India. Bangladesh imports approximately 85 lakh bales of cotton annually, mainly from Brazil, India, and African countries for its nearly 500 spinning mills. India exported 12-14 lakh

Bangladesh’s garment industry depends heavily on imported textile inputs, especially yarn and fabric, for making garments

bales of cotton to Bangladesh in 2024-25, of its total production of about 300 lakh bales. It also shipped \$1.47 billion worth of cotton yarn (570 million kg) to Bangladesh, which was the biggest destination for Indian yarn, in 2024-25. Bangladesh buys more yarn and fabric from other countries than the basic raw material – fibre, according to a report by the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI). Bangladesh exported \$50.9 billion in garments globally in 2024, and of it, \$7.4 billion went to the U.S.

Of the annual garment exports of \$16 billion from India, almost one-third goes to the U.S. At present, international cotton prices (landed cost) have a 2% to 8% price difference, depending on the country of origin and the buying country.

**Will trade dynamics tilt towards Bangladesh?**

Indian textile and garment exporters feel things will not change immediately or much because of the U.S.-Bangladesh deal. A GTRI report notes that over 63%, or \$32.3 billion, of Bangladesh’s garment exports went to the European Union, duty-free. Since the EU is Bangladesh’s main market, its garment supply chains are built to serve European buyers.

Bangladesh’s garment industry depends heavily on imported textile inputs, especially yarn and fabric, for making garments. To qualify for zero tariffs of the U.S., Bangladesh should replace long-established suppliers and invest heavily in new spinning and fabric-processing capacity, which it currently lacks. According to the Cotton Textiles Export Promotion Council, the Bangladesh textile industry should change its product mix and realign its raw material supply chains to benefit from the use of American cotton. Its textile mills are already in a crisis, say Indian yarn exporters.

**What is the extent of India-U.S. cotton trade?**

India imports close to five lakh bales of U.S. cotton annually, of which 2.5 lakh bales are of extra long staple (ELS) cotton and the other 2.5 lakh bales are non-ELS cotton. India is one of the leading users of American PIMA cotton, which is a premium ELS variety. Several Indian textile mills are already nominated by American brands

to supply yarn made of American cotton for garments. India currently levies 11% import duty on cotton, except for ELS cotton. Indian garment exporters will get similar access to the U.S. market as Bangladesh exporters, Mr. Goyal has said.

**What are the concerns?**

While Indian goods will attract 18% reciprocal tariff in the U.S., goods from Bangladesh will attract 19% from the earlier 20%. Thus, the U.S. tariff difference between India and Bangladesh has halved with the U.S.-Bangladesh agreement. Bangladesh is already among the leading exporters of textiles and apparel to the U.S., alongside China, Vietnam, and India. Both, India and Bangladesh make predominantly cotton-based apparel.

Shafiqul Alam, information adviser to Chief Adviser Mohammed Yunus, told *The Hindu* that Bangladesh has traditionally imported cotton from India and Central Asia as it does not produce the cotton or yarns necessary for its textile sector. It will replace Indian cotton with U.S.-produced cotton as a result of the U.S.-Bangladesh trade deal, he said. The immediate impact is likely to be on Indian cotton and yarn exporters. However, Indian exporters still have a lot of unanswered questions, such as if the U.S.-India agreement does give Indian garment exporters a similar facility to the U.S. market, will the Indian government waive the import duty on U.S. cotton? Will it allow specific quantities to be imported by India duty-free?

**Will there be benefits for garment exporters buying American cotton?**

There is every possibility of U.S. cotton prices firming up when demand increases. If cotton is available from any other country at a lower cost, will U.S. customers find it cost competitive to buy garments made from U.S. cotton? There is also no clarity on how the U.S. will determine the quantity of U.S. cotton in a garment or textile product. Both India and Bangladesh garment exporters will get relief only from the reciprocal tariff if they use U.S. cotton and not the basic duty. While waiving of tariff by the U.S. for products made from U.S. cotton or MMF will certainly benefit Indian garment exporters, they are hoping the Indian government will evolve a system that will take into consideration all the practical implications and necessities for the effective operation of such a facility.



**Uncertain future:** A garment factory in Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu, in 2025. REUTERS

# PROFILES

## Return of the old guard

### Bangladesh Nationalist Party

The party founded by General Ziaur Rahman, which champions Bangladeshi nationalism, has returned to power with a huge mandate to steer the country through a tumultuous period

Kallol Bhattacharjee

“This is Major Zia speaking.” That is how Major Ziaur Rahman debuted in the public life of his country on March 27, 1971. Minutes earlier, Zia had driven to the Kalurghata radio transmitter centre of Chittagong. In his firm voice, he announced the independence of East Pakistan and the beginning of Bangladesh. The condition of Bangladesh was tragic at that time. Two days earlier, the Pakistani forces had started Operation Searchlight with the killing of hundreds of thousands of people across Dhaka and elsewhere, triggering a massive exodus of people to neighbouring Indian States.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the movement for freedom, had been arrested and flown to Pakistan. Other top leaders like Tajuddin Ahmed and Syed Nazrul Islam had begun their perilous journey to the border with India where weeks later they would launch a guerrilla movement. A disciplined officer in the Pakistani Army, Zia had fought in the western sector in the 1965 war with India and had been decorated for his valour. But Zia had been seething because of the lack of respect that Bengali officers were shown in Pakistan’s military.

Soon after the massacre began on March 25, Zia rebelled and arrested and killed the commanding officer of his unit, Lt. Col. Abdur Rashid Janjua, and other non-Bengali officers. He asked the radio operator to convey to the guerrilla fighters that, “Eighth battalion of the East Bengal Regiment has rebelled. They will now fight for the independence of Bangladesh.” Thus began a new journey that would lead Zia to launch his own guerrilla group Z-force that fought in Sylhet, Dhaka and the eastern part of Bangladesh while basing out of Tura in Meghalaya and Tripura.

The guerrilla war by the Mukti Bahini and Z-force and other smaller groups finally culminated in the India-Pakistan war of 1971 and liberation of Bangladesh. Liberation, however, started a new warfare – an internal power struggle of Bangladesh. In January 1975, Sheikh Mujibur,



**Decisive win:** Tarique Rahman is credited with leading the BNP to victory in the election, and is set to become the next Prime Minister. REUTERS

unable to contain public disturbances following the disastrous famine of 1974 and poor economic conditions, launched a single-party system called BAKSAL (Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League). Mujib was assassinated in a coup.

After his killing, Khondokar Mushtaq, a close associate-turned-betrayer, formed a government consisting of Awami League and BAKSAL leaders. On October 3, he announced that the situation would start normalising from next year and that from August 15, 1976, the ban on political activities would be lifted and a general election would be held on February 28, 1977. A powerful section of the military that extended support to Mushtaq felt that in case of elections, other four top leaders of Awami League who were imprisoned could win.

#### Rise to power

That powerful wing of the military that wanted prolonged control over civilian administration killed four other national leaders (Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam, Mansur Ali and A.H.M. Quamruzzaman) who had formed the Bangladesh government in

exile in 1971. Four days after the jail killings, Dhaka witnessed the “military mutiny” that brought in Ziaur Rahman to the forefront. On paper, Zia was the Deputy Martial Law Administrator but actual control of the government slipped to his hands in the absence of effective political leadership.

The history of 1971 Liberation War is written from multiple angles. In one version, Mujib gave the call for liberation with his rousing speech of March 7, 1971 that was followed by the April 10 declaration by Tajuddin Ahmed as the leader of the government in exile. In another version, the story is narrated from the point of view of Zia, who declared independence after killing his Pakistani commanding officer in Chittagong. In the second story, Zia is the symbol of freedom of Bangladesh and that is where the mythical origin of the BNP’s politics lay.

Since taking charge effectively in November 1975, Zia experimented with politics and ideology. He introduced himself in public speeches as a soldier first and then as a farmer. He wanted to take full control of the armed forces and bring a semblance of normalcy in civil bureaucracy. In a speech

broadcast on radio and TV on November 11, 1975, Zia said: “I am not a politician. I am a soldier. I have no relation with politics and our government is totally nonpartisan and apolitical.” On April 21, 1977, Gen. Zia declared himself the President and in a subsequent national referendum, he secured 98.8% vote to stay in power.

On May 22, 1977, Zia launched the 19-point agenda that expressed his faith in “Almighty Allah” and said his government would ensure justice for all citizens irrespective of religion, caste, and other differences.

His political philosophy first came out as the public announcement from the brief experimental ‘Nationalist Front’. On June 3, 1978, Bangladesh witnessed a presidential election in which Zia contested as the leader of the Nationalist Front and received a majority vote even as his opponents criticised the election as controversial. On June 12, 1978, Zia took the oath of office as the President of Bangladesh. As President, he needed a political vehicle. According to veteran author Mohiuddin Ahmed, it was President Zia who came up with the name of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). On August 30, 1978, the BNP was

registered.

On September 1, 1978, in a press conference on Dhaka’s Romna Restaurant premises, Zia formally announced the launch of the party.

Out of the seven years between the Liberation War and the launch of the BNP, Zia spent four in the shadow of Mujib. The BNP emerged at a time when a weakened Awami League was led by Zohra Tajuddin, widow of Tajuddin Ahmed, and Abdel Malek Ukil. The BNP based itself on “Bangladeshi nationalism”, not Bengali nationalism. Humayun Kobir, the foreign policy adviser of the current BNP chairman Tarique Rahman, said: “Bangladeshi nationalism is territorially defined. It means nationalism of the citizens who live on the land of Bangladesh.”

#### Period of agitation

Zia’s nationalistic outlook was meant for his domestic audience. Abroad he advocated multilateralism and dialogue and reached out to world leaders, including Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai and U.S. President Jimmy Carter. After the assassination of President Zia on May 30, 1981 in the Chittagong Circuit House, the BNP’s political journey was paused. Gen. Hossein Mohammed Ershad took charge of the country.

During the interregnum, Khaleda Zia, widow of Gen. Zia, took charge of the party in 1984. During the Ershad years, the BNP agitated for restoration of parliamentary democracy alongside the Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina. Khaleda Zia brought the BNP back to power in 1991. Tarique Rahman entered the centre stage after the BNP came to power in 2001. Tarique is now credited with leading the party to a historic victory in the February 12 election, and is set to become the next Prime Minister.

The BNP’s origin lies in the psychology of the proud armed forces and bureaucratic elite of East Pakistan who were caught between the freedom movement for Bangladesh and the instability of the mid-1970s, says Mohiuddin Ahmed, an expert on the BNP’s history. Today, the party has emerged as the most powerful political vehicle in a restless nation.

#### THE GIST

On September 1, 1978, in a press conference on Dhaka’s Romna Restaurant premises, President Ziaur Rahman formally announced the launch of the BNP

The BNP emerged at a time when a weakened Awami League was led by Zohra Tajuddin, widow of Tajuddin Ahmed, and Abdel Malek Ukil

The BNP based itself on ‘Bangladeshi nationalism’, not Bengali nationalism. Bangladeshi nationalism is territorially defined. It means nationalism of the citizens who live on the land of Bangladesh, says the party

## Crisis manager

### Piyush Goyal

The Commerce Minister finds himself on the frontline when the government is busy defending the U.S. trade deal which critics say is one-sided

Saptaparno Ghosh

On a moderately hot afternoon at Delhi’s Vanija Bhanu in 2025, journalists were eager to ask questions to the Commerce Minister about the fallout from the U.S.’s unilateral imposition of 50% tariffs on India. Piyush Goyal is no stranger to such questions. Reading the room with care, Mr. Goyal underlined that any trade deal India might secure would be anchored in principles of “mutually beneficial, reciprocal and equitable”.

But with the U.S. tariffs, the mood was different in the country. For the government, the move coincided with the Monsoon Session of Parliament, with the Opposition pressing for an immediate statement in a session already marred by repeated disruptions. Greeted with loud protests within hours of the tariffs announcement, Mr. Goyal assured the House that the government was examining the situation, and would safeguard national interests, before leaving amid continued uproar.

This was not the first time Mr. Goyal was caught in a storm.

In 2018, during his tenure as the Railway Minister, Mr. Goyal faced protests from candidates who had concluded their apprenticeship training over



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

the removal of their 20% quota. His convoy was targeted during demonstrations in Uttar Pradesh. Protests later subsided after he appealed to the protesters to apply for the ongoing recruitment drive, whose deadline was nearing.

Son of Vedprakash Goyal, a senior BJP leader and former Minister for shipping and waterways, and Chandrakanta Goyal, Piyush, a chartered accountant by profession, commands significant confidence within the party.

#### Multiple portfolios

Since 2017, Mr. Goyal has handled a range of portfolios, including Finance, Corporate Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, and Coal. Beyond his administrative roles, he has been one of the ruling party’s principal political negotiators.

Perhaps, his long tenure in the party and the government, along with his commerce background,

was among the factors that prompted the BJP to appoint Mr. Goyal Finance Minister in January 2019, days ahead of the interim Budget.

The decision followed then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley travelling to the U.S. for medical treatment. “The orders issued by Prime Minister Modi made it clear that Piyush Goyal would work under the guidance of Arun Jaitley and all important files would be disposed of and decisions taken only after consulting Arun Jaitley,” former Finance Secretary Subhash Chandra Garg wrote in his book, *We Also Make Policy*.

Conventionally, no grand announcements are made during interim Budgets in an election year. Breaking the convention, Mr. Goyal announced income support for farmers with the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN), and an exemption on paying IT tax for incomes up to ₹5 lakh.

Since the announcement of the U.S. trade deal, the government’s crisis manager has the task of addressing farmers’ concerns over the opening up of agriculture to the U.S.

For the second time this decade, he has been entrusted with reassuring farmers that their interests have been adequately protected. For context, Mr. Goyal was also part of the delegation that negotiated with protesting farmers seeking the repeal of the farm laws in 2020-21. (In November 2021, Prime Minister Modi announced that he would repeal the farm laws.)

This time, the trade deal is being slammed by its critics as one-sided. U.S. President Trump has said India would end buying oil from Russia, start “buying American” and open up sectors.

Mr. Goyal finds himself on the frontline as the government seeks to defend the deal and calm nerves. “Not a single farmer has anything to worry about” in the trade deal, Mr. Goyal told *The Hindu* in a recent interview.

But he also added he can’t comment on Mr. Trump’s remark that India would stop purchasing Russian oil. “I don’t deal with that subject. It is not part of my joint statement or the trade deal,” he said in the interview.

## Mayor rising

### Ritu Tawde

The new BMC chief has to navigate a strong and experienced opposition and a small but assertive ally while steering the city’s administration

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit

The 133-year-old heritage hall in the iconic Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) headquarters was readied this week to welcome its elected representatives. After a gap of over four years, the opulent chamber, featuring Burma Teak wood, gold-leaf motifs, and colonial-era chandeliers, once again hosted corporators. Among them was Mumbai’s 78th Mayor, Ritu Tawde, who walked in with a saffron turban, draped in a saffron sari. She took charge from the administrator and BMC Commissioner, Bhushan Gagrani.

Ms. Tawde, 53, became the second BJP mayor and the eighth woman mayor of South Asia’s richest civic body. She is an assertive, young, Marathi, Maratha, Konkani woman face of the BJP from the Gujarati-dominated Ghatkopar area, which has traditionally voted for the party. The two-term corporator takes charge as Mumbai’s mayor, a largely titular yet socially significant position, amid challenging times.

Though this is the first time the BJP has emerged as the largest party in the BMC, it does not command a majority on its own. In the 227-member House, it holds 89 corporators. Its ally, Eknath Shinde’s Shiv



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Sena, has secured 29 seats. This is significantly lower than the tally of the Shiv Sena group led by Uddhav Thackeray, which contested the BMC for the first time since the 2022 split. Uddhav Thackeray fought against the collective might of the BJP and Shiv Sena and won 65 seats. With this, his party has become the principal Opposition, comprising several experienced faces. Notably, four former mayors of Mumbai are part of the Shiv Sena UBT’s ranks in the BMC. In contrast, the BJP has one of the highest numbers of newcomers.

Senior BJP leaders said her name emerged as a leading contender soon after the mayor’s post was declared reserved for women in the open category. “The party wanted someone who is dashing, energetic, articulate, and who can respond to situations quickly. We wanted someone who can take up Hindutva aggressively, who understands the city’s dy-

namics well, and who has some experience. Someone who is educated and who can take the BMC’s internal system head-on,” a senior BJP leader said. “She fit the bill well. She will have to take up challenges. The party is acutely aware that it will have to struggle with an administrative system which had been controlled by another party (Shiv Sena UBT) for decades. As the mayor, Ritu Tawde will have to weed out corruption in the corporation and expose nexuses in development projects.”

#### From Congress to BJP

For Ms. Tawde, who began her public journey over 22 years ago through social work in Ghatkopar and was later chosen by Congress leader Gurudas Kamat to contest the 2007 BMC elections on party ticket, challenges are nothing new. She left the Congress in 2012 after being abruptly denied ticket, and subsequently contested on

BJP ticket and won. She credits her husband and her mother-in-law, a schoolteacher, with nurturing her social aspirations. “My children were very young then, but my mother-in-law used to insist that I must make time for myself, do something with my life. I started with social work for women, helping them fight domestic abuse and start small economic ventures,” she said. Ms. Tawde headed the Education Committee during her last term. But her claim to fame was her fight against the roadside display of mannequins with scanty clothes.

For the senior BJP leadership, what stood out was her drive to work without expecting any rewards, leaders said. BJP MLC Prasad Lad, who has known Ms. Tawde for over a decade, praised her for her work during COVID. Pravin Darekar, another BJP leader, said he was impressed by her efforts to help women in need. “She would often get them to the bank to help them get small loans. She never asked for anything for herself.”

As Ms. Tawde trains her guns on “illegal Bangladeshi hawkers”, the city will expect her to deliver on basic priorities like clean air, better travel, a better public transport system, safe infrastructure work, among other things.

US audacity, not reciprocity



ACROSS THE AISLE BY P CHIDAMBARAM

IT IS a kite... it is a bird... it is an airplane. 'What is it?' is the apt question for the joint statement issued by the governments of the United States and India on February 6, 2026. The joint statement has triggered endless speculation, and the Indian government's stubborn evasion of the details has not helped to remove the cloud of doubt. Since Mr Trump is dealing the cards, the joint statement may not be of concern for the US, but it is for India.

The joint statement was based on deception. Indian negotiators claimed repeatedly in 2025 that they were negotiating a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). The minister of commerce said numerous times that a BTA will be concluded in the near future; in fact, he said before the "end of the year." As it turned out, the joint statement is not a BTA; it is not even an Interim Agreement; it is a framework for an Interim Agreement. We moved a mountain and we got a mouse.

Whither reciprocity?

After the joint statement was issued,

both sides claimed that the deal was reciprocal. The claim is an insult to the reader's intelligence. Even a cursory reading of the joint statement will reveal that it is not based on reciprocity. Take a close look at the text of the joint statement (which I have largely copied below):

While India will eliminate or reduce tariffs on all US industrial goods and a wide range of US food and agricultural products, the United States will apply a reciprocal tariff of 18 per cent (reduced from 25 per cent imposed on April 2, 2025) on originating goods of India, including textile and apparel, leather and footwear, plastic and rubber, organic chemicals, home decor, artisanal products, and certain machinery. The US will remove the reciprocal tariff on a wide range of goods including generic pharmaceuticals, gems and diamonds, and aircraft parts only on the 'successful conclusion of the Interim Agreement'. Where is the reciprocity in 0 per cent vs 18 per cent?

India agrees to address long-standing barriers to trade in US medical devices and eliminate restrictive import licencing procedures that delay market access for US ICT goods. ....India also agrees to address long-standing non-tariff barriers to trade in US food and agricultural products. There is no corresponding obligation on the United States. In respect of non-tariff barriers, where is the reciprocity between obligation and no obligation?

India intends to purchase USD 500 billion of US energy products, aircraft and

The riddle is what will India buy for USD 500 billion over 5 years. This will wipe out the small trade surplus India enjoys with the United States. The US has few goods that will help bolster India's economy

aircraft parts, precious metals, technology products, and coking coal over the next five years. Both governments will significantly increase trade in technology products — including Graphics Processing Units (GPUs) and other goods used in data centres. All the products mentioned in this paragraph are American export goods and not Indian goods that the US intends to buy. Where is the reciprocity?

In an Executive Order accompanying the joint statement, Mr Trump referred to 'significant steps' taken by India — India's commitment to stop directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil, India's representation that it will purchase United States energy products, and India's framework agreement with the United States to expand defence cooperation. Hence, Mr Trump decided to eliminate the additional ad valorem rate of duty imposed on August 6, 2025 (the penal tariff of 25 per cent). Where is the reciprocity in extracting three promises from India in return for none from the US?

The open threat

If India resumes directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil, the US government will consider taking additional action including potentially reimposing the penal tariff of 25 per cent on Indian goods. The entire Framework agreed on February 6, 2026 hinges on one issue — Russian oil. Where is the reciprocity between the threat of America and the submissiveness of India?

Democracy, North Korea style



FIFTH COLUMN BY TAVLEEN SINGH

WHEN I read in this newspaper last week that the dictator of North Korea has decided to make his teenage daughter his official heir, it made me laugh. And cry a little for our beloved Bharat Mata. As someone who has campaigned relentlessly and aggressively against dynastic succession, I wondered if Indian politicians who have turned their constituencies and their parties into private estates were embarrassed when they read this news. Some of the shenanigans we have seen from Rahul Gandhi is a consequence of his having been brought up to believe ruling India was his birthright. Fear not, I have no wish to repeat what I said last week.

North Korea is widely considered the worst country in the world. It has been led by the Kim dynasty since it was created, and this family has presided over an evil empire. While the ill-fated citizens of North Korea are often starved of food to the point of living in famine conditions from time to time, the Kim dynasty has squandered what they believe to be their personal wealth on modern weapons, including the nuclear kind. If Kim Jong Un goes ahead with his succession plan and some courageous North Korean citizen tries to challenge him, he will die a terrible death in some unseen dungeon. Foreigners spend years in jail simply for travelling to the wrong country.

Remember the story of that 21-year-old American student Otto Warmbier? He was sentenced to fifteen years hard labour for removing a propaganda banner from a hotel wall. He hoped to take this home as a souvenir. A year after sentencing, when pressure from the United States government and public opinion caused his release, he was found in a coma caused by brain damage and died when he got home.

We should be happy that this sort of thing would never happen in our shining 'mother of democracy' but this does not mean that 'aal is well'. We are led by a powerful prime minister who is seen by millions of Indians as a gift from God and someone who has made them 'proud to be Hindu.' So, they forgive him when he takes his own tips from the Kim dynasty and pastes his face on lampposts, bus stops, petrol pumps and newspapers. Often because they do not know that this exaltation of the 'dear leader' is a North Korean import. This imitation of the Kim family does Modi no good. But who dare tell him in his own party and the opposition leaders he faces are products of dynastic succession.

They might not have been teenagers when they were handed charge of a country as is happening now to Kim Jong Un's daughter but mostly they remained jobless and waiting in the shadows till Daddy or Mummy decided it was time for them to enter politics. The damage this has done to Indian democracy is incalculable no matter what these princelings may say in their defence. Their main defence is that it is an Indian custom to take up your parents' trade. True. But what is right for commerce is very wrong for public life.

A passion for public service is not something that comes down in the genes so, except for a handful, these heirs are unable to do more than manage the constituencies and political parties they inherit. Sometimes political inheritance comes from marriage as happened in Maharashtra some weeks ago when Ajit Pawar's wife took his job as Deputy Chief Minister within forty-eight hours of her husband's death in an air crash. We of the media are accustomed to this kind of thing and reported this succession as if it were normal. But when I listened to whispers on the ground, I discovered that ordinary Marathi voters did not approve. In the words of one man I spoke to, 'They didn't even wait for the thirteen days of mourning to end.'

What troubles me about electoral feudalism or feudal socialism as it was when the Gandhi dynasty reigned supreme under the guise of socialism is that it weakens the roots of democracy almost irreparably. This could be one reason why the Congress Party has proved so incapable of taking on Narendra Modi despite the many mistakes he has made. We are coming up for an election in West Bengal, and this brings back horrific memories for me of the last election in that state when the worst chapter of Covid unfolded while the Prime Minister and most of his senior ministers were trying to win Bengal.

When Modi came back and saw that hospitals had run out of oxygen, ventilators and medicine and there were long queues outside cremation grounds, he had the grace to apologise. And, then changed the subject by carrying out what he called the largest vaccination drive in history. The Congress Party complained that he had put his picture on vaccination certificates and on the boxes of vaccine that we donated to poorer countries but seemed unable to do more than complain.

Last week when there were attempts to throw Rahul Gandhi out of the Lok Sabha, I came upon more than one comment on 'X' that warned the BJP that this would go against them because he would be replaced by his sister who is a better parliamentarian. She is also cleverer. She defends dynastic succession by calling it 'service.' Self-service is more appropriate.

6 stanzas vs 2: The contested legacy of Vande Mataram



HISTORY HEADLINE BY VIKAS PATHAK

THE MINISTRY of Home Affairs on January 28 notified the first set of protocols for singing Vande Mataram, the national song, directing that all six stanzas of the composition shall be sung during official functions.

With this directive, the Centre has broken with the position taken by the leadership of the Congress from 1937 onwards, when objections to the song came up among sections of the Muslim community on the ground that it was an invocation to Hindu goddesses.

Six years after Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote the song in 1875, its verses appeared in Anandamath, his novel set in the backdrop of a 18th Century rebellion of Sanyasis (monks) and the Great Bengal famine of 1770. The plot frames the Muslim rulers as oppressive and allied with the British.

Rabindranath Tagore set it to tune and sang it for the first time at the Congress session of 1896. While it was repeatedly deployed in the movement against the Partition of Bengal in 1905, it soon spread across the country and became a rallying cry of the freedom struggle.

The first two stanzas of Vande Mataram describe the beauty of the motherland, the third and fourth say that crores of arms with sharp swords are ready to fight for it, the fifth says that its image is carved out in every temple and shrine, and the sixth likens the motherland to goddesses Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati.

According to R K Prabhu's book Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and the Vande Mataram Song, the Congress Working Committee (CWC), the party's highest decision-making body, had adopted a lengthy resolution on the song in October 1937.

The CWC resolution said that since the song was composed before Chatterjee wrote Anandamath, it should be considered separate from it. "The song and the words



Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (right) the title page of Chatterjee's Anandamath, which published the song. WIKIPEDIA

'Vande Mataram' were considered seditious by the British government and were sought to be suppressed by violence and intimidation. At a famous session of the Bengal Provincial Conference held in Barisal in April 1906, under the presidency of A Rasul, a brutal lathi charge was made by the police on the delegates and volunteers... Delegates were beaten so severely as they cried 'Vande Mataram' that they fell down senseless," the resolution said. "Since then, ...innumerable instances of sacrifice and suffering all over the country have been associated with Vande Mataram..."

The resolution went on to argue why only the first two stanzas of the song should be sung. "Gradually the use of the first two stanzas of the song spread to other provinces and a certain national significance began to attach to them... These two stanzas described in tender language the beauty of the motherland and the abundance of her gifts. There was absolutely nothing in them to which objection could be taken from the religious or any other point of view.... Indeed the reference in it to thirty crores of Indians makes it clear that it was meant to apply to all the people of India," it said.

"There is nothing in these stanzas to which any one can take exception. The other stanzas of the song are little known and hardly ever sung. They contain certain allusions and a religious ideology which may not be in keeping with the ideology of other religious groups in India," it went on to say.

"The Committee recommend that wherever the Vande Mataram is sung at

national gatherings only the first two stanzas should be sung, with perfect freedom to the organisers to sing any other song of an unobjectionable character, in addition to, or in the place of, the Vande Mataram song," the resolution added.

Historian Tanika Sarkar told The Indian Express that the objections raised against the song, leading to its truncation to two stanzas, were two-fold: "the later stanzas became a call to war where Muslims are the adversary in the Anandamath, and the motherland here acquires the form of a Hindu goddess that alienates Muslims."

Former Rajya Sabha MP Swapna Dasgupta says in his book Awakening Bharat Mata, "In the annals of Hindu nationalism, the story of Vande Mataram from being the icon of the national movement to becoming an extra... epitomised betrayal and a distortion of nationhood. For all those associated with the RSS parivar and the BJP, continuing attachment to Vande Mataram — without, at the same time, undermining the importance of the national anthem — has become an article of faith."

Dasgupta says that the Muslim opposition to it put the Congress in a quandary, as the party under Nehru, and even later, was increasingly trying to be seen as "secular" and shed all Hindu imagery. "In the process, it vacated a space that was gleefully appropriated by Hindu nationalism as its very own," Dasgupta argues.

Vikas Pathak is Deputy Associate Editor, The Indian Express and writes on national politics

Yes, I am Aiden's mum: How my son shaped me

FOR YEARS now, no matter where I go or what I do, I am introduced the same way: Aiden's mama. It slips into conversations casually, at work, among friends, sometimes even in spaces where my professional identity should lead. At first, it unsettled me. After all, many parents, especially mothers, work hard to protect their identities beyond parenthood. We want to be seen as whole people, professionals, thinkers, individuals rather than just someone's parent.

But parenting a neurodivergent child quietly dismantles the illusion that identity can be neatly compartmentalised. I am Janice, and I am raising a 13-year-old boy on the autism spectrum. Aiden is intelligent, curious, funny and very much his own person, and I identify as an ADHD adult — thanks to one of the evaluations I did for myself when getting him tested. These two realities intersect daily, sometimes chaotically, sometimes beautifully, but always in ways that have encouraged me to look at things from a new light, unlearn everything that society tells you parenting, success, and even motherhood should look like.

Parenting a neurodivergent child didn't follow a template — and I learned that very early in our journey. There were no predictable milestones to celebrate, no universal benchmarks to chase. This was coupled with emotional labour that rarely pauses, decision-making without clear answers, and an unrelenting awareness that what works today may not work tomorrow.

For many parents, school calendars dictate life. Terms, exams, holidays, comparisons. For us, those markers aren't applicable. Aiden is homeschooled, which means he is perpetually "on vacation" by conventional standards. But what that really means is that learning happens continuously, through music, reading, travel, exploration, motivated by hyperfocus, and lived experiences. Homeschooling gave Aiden the space to grow at his own pace, without the daily friction of environments not built for how his brain works. Most importantly, it helped him find his voice, quite literally. It was during Covid, while most neurotypical kids were isolated from their friends and peers, when Aiden got his freedom; he began speaking more consistently, a milestone that no report card could have captured.

You stop measuring progress through grades and trophies and start paying attention to quieter victories: A new word spoken, a piece of music mastered, a journey completed without overwhelm, a new friendship.

Adolescence brings heightened emotions, sensory sensitivities, and social misunderstandings that are often misread as behavioural problems. The expectation that boys must "toughen up" or "fit in" is particularly unforgiving when your child processes the world differently. Advocacy became second nature to me — explaining, negotiating, and protecting, while also teaching him how to exist confidently in a world that is not always gentle.

Single parenting, unexpectedly, became a source of clarity for me. With fewer external expectations to manage, I was able to accept Aiden's diagnosis faster and make decisions centred entirely on his needs. Nature replaced regular schools, and the absence of forced modifications allowed him to thrive.

This experience also changed my professional perspective. Parenting Aiden deepened my understanding of inclusion, going beyond the usual corporate language. It guided me to start conversations about neurodiversity at my workplace, to support other caregivers quietly navigating similar paths at work and outside it. What often goes missing in inclusion dialogues is the caregiver, the invisible labour, the emotional toll, the resilience required just to keep showing up.

Schools, too, remain largely designed for one kind of child. Although there have been conversations about inclusivity, empathy is often assumed rather than explicitly promoted. In a world that is still adapting to neurodiverse individuals, homeschooling offers a path by demonstrating that intellectual rigour does not have to be restricted to a set framework. Aiden's deep interests, which included math, geography, music and aviation, acted as stimuli for his academic growth.

Some days, I still resist the label of Aiden's mama. It feels reductive. But I'm realising that it's not a loss of identity, but a moulding of it. It has taught me that success is not about fitting into the world as it is, but about making space for who your child already is. Maybe it's also something we as adults might learn too.

So yes, I am Aiden's mama. Not as a title that eclipses me, but as a reality that has transformed me.

The writer is head, Communications, for Merck India

When empowerment stops at the dining table

AT 5 AM, Richa is wide awake. By 6, the house is clean, the floors are mopped, and tea is brewed for everyone. By 8, lunch is slow-cooked on a wood fire, three or four dishes, the gas cylinder saved for when guests arrive. By 9.30, after bathing and praying and feeding everyone in the family, she finally eats. Last, just like clockwork. Richa doesn't complain about this order. She calls it a rule that needs to be followed.

Richa is not the woman we are usually taught to pity. She is, by every contemporary policy metric, an empowered woman. For the past 10 years, she has been part of a self-help group that gives her access to a revolving fund: small loans, low interest, no moneylender. Three years ago, she also became a beneficiary of the Jal Jeevan Haryana project, under which the Bihar government granted her and six other women legal rights over a pond for five years without any rent. They cultivate fish, sell them in the market, deposit earnings within their fish producer group account called 'Shakti

Jeevika Mahila Fish Producer Group', and receive their share. Richa says with immense pride, as she should, that there is more dignity in her household now. She takes the names of different cities she has traveled to as part of her official work outside of her village. She talks highly of her connections and networks she has built with women and how she is on top of all the information. She is paying for her children's education and coaching and shares how she is consulted in family decisions now. And yet, she eats last.

This is a story of what empowerment in India quietly stops. In a recent column in The Indian Express, Pratap Bhanu Mehta argues that equality is not merely a moral aspiration but a structural necessity. High inequality, he writes, corrodes social trust, weakens growth, entrenches privilege, and reproduces deprivation. Capital does not simply reward talent; it also reflects historical exclusion.

Richa's life experience, at first glance, tended to vindicate this argument. Once



SHE SAID BY AARUSHEE SHUKLA & ANSHU KUMARI

LONGER VERSION ON www.indianexpress.com

she gets access to capital, her life circumstances change drastically. With a steady income, her household began to take her seriously. But being consulted for decisions is not the same as having the power to make decisions, and bringing money to the table is not the same as having the free will and capacity to spend it. Because when Richa finishes all the household and cooking for the entire family, all by herself, she still waits and eats last.

What her story reveals is not a contradiction to Mehta's argument but an exposure of its limitations. Redistribution of capital can undeniably alter women's relations to the market and the state, but it does not automatically alter their relationship to the home.

Food is not incidental here. Feminist scholars have long argued that food allocation is one of the most significant expressions of hierarchy inside households. When asked if it bothers her that she eats after everyone else, Richa responds with confusion in her voice — "It's a rule."

A rule so naturalised that it is no longer questioned or considered negotiable. This is where the language of empowerment begins to falter.

For policymakers, Richa's life is a success story; for economists, it demonstrates the returns to asset ownership. For feminists, however, it poses an uncomfortable question: What kind of empowerment leaves household hierarchies untouched? The answer is not to dismiss schemes. Richa herself says life is better. Our ask is that we should refuse to romanticise this improvement as ultimate liberation. Because empowerment that does not problematise who eats first is empowerment with strings attached. If equality is social trust, as Mehta suggests, then trust must begin where labour is most taken for granted, not in the pond, but at the dining table.

Aarushee is a PhD scholar at JNU and Anshu is a gender consultant. National Editor Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column

‘UNIFORM FDI DEFINITION FOR LISTED, UNLISTED COMPANIES UNDER CONSIDERATION’

# FDI: Graded investment limits within sectoral caps on anvil

‘Investment scenario seen getting a fillip, but strategic and control-related concerns from Indian firms competing with the overseas companies remain’

Aanchal Magazine  
New Delhi, February 14

THE GOVERNMENT is considering allowing graded limits for companies within the overall prescribed sectoral caps for foreign direct investment (FDI) as part of its proposed rationalisation of the foreign investment framework.

Internal deliberations within the government are also learnt to have focused on the need to align the FDI definition for both listed and unlisted companies apart from detailed clarifications for downstream investments and pricing-related guidelines for share transfers between residents and non-residents, officials said.

“Under the present framework, foreign investment limits are aligned strictly with the prescribed sectoral caps. However, there have been requests to allow companies to set different limits within the sectoral cap to meet certain business requirements,” a senior government of-

ficial told *The Indian Express*.

While the overall investment scenario is seen getting a fillip on the back of the easing of restrictions for foreign investment flows for various sectors including the recent hike in FDI limit in insurance to 100%, some strategic and control-related concerns from Indian companies when competing with the overseas companies remain, industry experts said. A graded FDI limit approach, they said, will help companies to protect their strategic authority as well as the market share, especially in sensitive sectors such as telecom, defence, pharmaceuticals and banking.

“Different limits within the sectoral caps may help Indian companies to compete effectively. Majority control through the FDI route may have different implications for different companies, especially those in sensitive sectors. For instance, other companies may choose it as a route for dumping into India. So, different limits can

## ● CLARITY SOUGHT

● As of now, any foreign investment in an unlisted Indian company through equity instruments by a person resident outside India is defined as FDI

● In listed companies, foreign investments of 10% or more of the post issue paid-up equity capital on a fully diluted basis is considered as FDI

help protect the market share of certain Indian companies,” Raja Lahiri, Partner, Grant Thornton Bharat, said.

Aimed at providing more regulatory clarity for foreign investments, the measures are proposed to come after the Budget announcement for a review of foreign investment rules. In her Budget speech on February 1, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had announced a comprehensive review of the Foreign Exchange Management (Non-debt Instruments) Rules in the upcoming financial year 2026-27 to create a “more contemporary, user-friendly framework for foreign investments, consistent with India’s evolving economic priorities”.

The government is also con-

sidering ironing out the differences in FDI definition for both listed and unlisted Indian companies. “At present, there are some differences. The idea is to bring in an alignment in the definition for both types of companies,” the official said.

As of now, any foreign investment in an unlisted Indian company through equity instruments by a person resident outside India is defined as FDI. In listed companies, foreign investments of 10% or more of the post issue paid-up equity capital on a fully diluted basis is considered as FDI.

If an existing investment by a person resident outside India in equity instruments of a listed Indian company falls to a level below 10%, then the investment continues to be treated as FDI. Foreign investments less than 10% in listed companies are classified as foreign portfolio investments (FPIs).

Certain provisions related to downstream investments have also been identified which need clarifications, and work is ongoing to streamline such norms, the official said. The foreign investment framework is also likely to provide clarity on certain issues regarding pricing guidelines for share transfers between residents and non-residents.

Downstream investments are investments made by an Indian entity which has received foreign investment. Experts said there are situations where foreign owned or controlled companies are finding difficulties in downstream investments rather than the direct FDI route and more clarifications would be helpful. A government official said that foreign investors have shown interest on the non-debt side in various companies, including medium-sized companies, and more clarity will be there once the consultations are over.

The government intends to undertake public consultations on these issues as part of the process for rationalisation of the NDI (non-debt instruments) rules. “We intend to undertake public consultations. All the proposals and representations will be examined in a comprehensive manner with a view to rationalise the NDI Rules, enhancing regulatory clarity, promoting ease of doing business, and safeguarding the objectives of India’s foreign investment framework,” the official said, adding that wider consultations with Indian companies will help in fine-tuning the norms without making the consultations too prolonged.

‘100% COLLATERAL FOR BORROWINGS FROM LENDERS’

# RBI tightens bank lending norms for stock brokers

ENS Economic Bureau  
New Delhi, February 14

THE RESERVE Bank of India (RBI) has tightened guidelines that govern lending activities of banks to capital market intermediaries (CMIIs) such as brokers, mandating that “all credit facilities to CMIIs shall be provided on a fully secured basis”. This means that for a bank to provide a Rs 100 loan to a broker, the broker must provide collateral equaling that amount to the bank.

The collateral, the RBI said in a notification Friday, can be in the form of eligible securities or other cash, permissible financial assets, immovable properties, receivables, bank guarantees, and standby letter of credit. However, Commercial Papers and Non-Convertible Debentures (NCDs) of original or initial maturity up to one year are not acceptable.

“The collateral cover, as applicable, shall be maintained on an ongoing basis and the facility agreements shall have explicit provisions for margin calls in the event of shortfalls,” the RBI’s guidelines, which come into effect from April 1, said.

Previously, it was not mandated that the entire loan amount has to be fully secured.

Meanwhile, banks can lend to brokers and other capital market intermediaries to fund their

day-to-day operations, including financing of margin trading undertaken by stockbrokers, and market making for equity and debt securities. Market making is an important part of financial markets that involves the provision of quotes to buy or sell securities and assets. This ensures liquidity in the market for these securities and assets, and they are not stuck in inventory.

Banks can also issue guarantees on behalf of brokers or professional clearing members and in favour of exchanges or clearing houses in lieu of an acceptable security deposit and margin requirements. Any such guarantees must have a minimum collateral of 50%, of which 25% must be in the form of cash, the RBI said.

While listing the permissible lending categories by banks to CMIIs, the RBI said lenders cannot provide money to these intermediaries for buying securities on their account, including for proprietary trading or investments — except in certain cases, such as market making in debt and equity as well as warehousing of debt securities. Further, a bank can provide a guarantee for proprietary trading as long as it is fully secured by cash, cash equivalents, and government securities. However, at least 50% of the collateral must be in the form of cash.

As part of the amended guidelines issued Friday for banks’ credit facilities, the RBI also fixed a higher-than-initially-proposed limit for banks to fund takeovers and acquisitions. In October 2025, the central bank’s draft rules had placed a cap of 10% on a bank’s tier-1 capital for acquisition financing. However, the final norms announced Friday, which will come into effect from April 1, have seen this limit set at 20%.

“Many entities have sought an increase in acquisition finance cap of 10% of tier-1 limit,” the RBI said in a statement Friday on the feedback it received on the draft directions, adding that it had accepted the recommendation.

The draft proposal announced in October was a big plus for Indian lenders as it finally opened the acquisition segment for them to lend to. It came at a time when credit growth, while on the up, is well below levels from a decade ago, with non-bank sources of funds as well as the capital markets increasingly becoming more important routes for companies to raise funds. As such, funding acquisitions provides new business for banks.

As per the final guidelines released by the RBI Friday, banks can lend up to 75% of the acquisition value, up from 70% proposed in the draft norms.

# RE to dominate India’s grid by 2070, but ‘structural challenges’ pose hurdles

Pratyush Deep  
New Delhi, February 14

INDIA’S ELECTRICITY mix could shift decisively from coal-heavy to renewable-led by 2070, the government’s policy think tank NITI Aayog said in a study, even as it highlighted “structural challenges” due to which actual power generation by renewables has been modest so far. Coal remains the backbone of India’s electricity landscape, accounting for nearly 74% of generation and providing dependable, low-cost base-load power.

But, the NITI study titled ‘Scenarios Towards Viksit Bharat and Net Zero’, said this dominance could erode as India steps up clean energy transition. Under the Current Policy Scenario (CPS) — assuming continuation of existing policies and realistic deployment trends — renewable energy’s (RE) share in power generation could rise from around 20% in 2024-25 to over 80% by 2070. In the same scenario, coal’s share in power generation could decline sharply to 6-10% by 2070.

Under the more ambitious Net Zero Scenario (NZS) — an accelerated pathway aligned with India’s 2070 net-zero emissions target — coal-based generation could drop to zero.

As coal’s role shrinks, nuclear power is expected to expand gradually, increasing its share from about 3% at present to 5-8% by 2070 under CPS, reflecting its growing role in providing carbon-free base-load power.

India’s RE capacity increased over 3x from 76.38 GW in March 2014 to 258 GW by December 2025. Out of India’s total installed capacity of 513 GW, fossil-based capacity accounts for 48%, RE sources account for 50%, and the balance 1.7% from nuclear. Renewables have registered strong growth with the overall share increasing from 29% in 2014-15 to 50% by December 2025. Despite this impressive growth, the contribution of RE to actual power generation has remained modest, increasing from 19.6% in 2013-14 to 22% in 2024-25.

According to the study, this gap is largely attributed to structural challenges with RE sources like solar and wind power. These sources typically operate at lower Capacity Utilisation Factors (CUF) — the ratio of actual generation to maximum possible output — and are affected by intermittency, variability-driven generation, as well as grid constraints, limited system flexibility and dispatch challenges. This intermittency of RE often poses challenges for round-the-clock power supply. So, coal-fired generation remains essential to ensure grid stability and meet rapidly growing demand. An RE-heavy grid also means a massive expansion in storage.

The study projects Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) to scale up from less than 50 GW in 2030 to about 1,300-1,400 GW under CPS and up to 2,500-3,000 GW under NZS by 2070. Pumped Storage Plants are also expected to play a crucial role in

providing long-duration storage and grid stability, growing from 13-19 GW in 2030 to about 110 GW in CPS and 150-165 GW in NZS. N-power crucial in RE-dominated grid with renewable energy forming the backbone of India’s future electricity system, the study sees nuclear power emerging as a strategic pillar of India’s long-term power transition and essential for maintaining system reliability in a renewables-dominated grid.

It projects n-power capacity to grow from the current 8.18 GW in 2025 to 90-135 GW by 2070 under CPS — up 10-15 times. Under the NZS, nuclear capacity could touch 295-320 GW. “Nuclear power is crucial to achieving long-term goals of power sector decarbonisation,” it said, adding that nuclear energy can provide firm low-carbon electricity, high-temperature industrial heat and a reliable power supply for electrolyzers supporting green hydrogen production.

The study noted that expanding clean and flexible resources will require effective grid management, as the rising share of variable renewable energy is increasing intermittency risks while long-duration energy storage and nuclear capacity are yet to scale sufficiently to provide balancing support. To address these challenges, the study suggested scaling nuclear capacity to 100 GW by 2047 and 200-300 GW by 2070, including the advanced reactors and Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) to deliver reliable 24\*7 clean power.

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INDIAN RAILWAYS’ REFORM PUSH

# Focus on cleaner coaches, higher freight loading

Dheeraj Mishra  
New Delhi, February 14

WITH A focus on ensuring cleanliness in trains and ensuring higher freight loading, Minister for Railways Ashwini Vaishnav Saturday announced two major reforms. He said a total of 80 trains have been identified to implement the on-board service reforms in the first phase. “This year 52 reforms will be announced in the Indian Railways. The on-board service reforms will be implemented in the next six months in the 80 trains across the Railways zones,” he said. “After that the reforms will be implemented in another 80 trains on long routes,” he added.

“In the next three years, all the trains will be equipped with the new clean train reforms. The objective is to prioritise a clean and hygienic travel experience.

It is necessary to establish clear responsibility and accountability for deployed service providers. A long-term contract will be given (for this purpose),” said Vaishnav while announcing the policy.

The Railways aims to engage professional service provider with a proven track record as well as 12th and IIT pass supervisors to leverage technology for real-time monitoring, feedback and performance management. It will also integrate the linen and on-board cleaning, which is currently carried out by different parties.

This entails the cleaning of all coaches including general class, toilets, basin as well as garbage collection at 1-2 hour intervals. This will also require the staff to attend to minor repairs and ensure water supply in coaches. “The new reform will



Ashwini Vaishnav, Minister for Railways.

require additional expenditure from the Railways. The assessment is underway. However, passengers will not have to pay any additional amount for the cleanliness services,” said Vaishnav.

An AI-based analysis of the

on-board cleaning pictures will be carried out at the Railway Board control room.

The Railway Minister also announced extension of the Gati Shakti Cargo Terminal (GCT) Policy 2022, which entails the establishment of freight terminals to increase train loadings and diversify the freight basket. As part of the reform push, apart from loading and unloading, material processing will also be carried out at the Gati Shakti Multi-Modal Cargo Terminal (GCT), Vaishnav said.

“They can be called cargo plus semi-processing terminals. For instance, cement clinker will now be grinded at the GCT and transported in bagged or bulk loaded to the respective destination. Similarly, some foodgrains will be processed at the GCT and supplied further. Our target is to develop 500

more terminals in the next 5 years, in addition to the 124 terminals built under 2022 policy,” said Vaishnav. The Railway Minister said this will increase train freight loadings by 300 million tonnes in three years. In FY25, the railways transported over 1,600 mt freight — the highest ever.

The policy allows cargo-related facilities such as warehouses, processing units and aggregation centres to be developed on spare railway land. It also states that underutilised goods sheds can now be converted into GCTs, expanding freight-handling capacity with minimal fresh investment. The reform will enable the migration of existing private freight terminals and sidings into the GCT regime.

FULL REPORT ON  
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# ‘India has raised its commitment to climate action to 5.6% of GDP’

Press Trust of India  
New Delhi, February 14

FINANCE MINISTER Nirmala Sitharaman Saturday said India has hiked spending on climate action in the last six years to 5.6% of GDP, demonstrating the country’s pursuit of meeting nationally determined goals on curbing carbon emission.

Participating in a panel discussion at the Munich Security Conference, she said India has increased its commitment to climate action. “Six years ago, we were spending approximately 3.7% of our GDP on climate ac-

tion. Today, that figure is close to 5.6%. We have invested the funds. We are not waiting for financing and technology to come from elsewhere but they must come,” she said.

She further said that India will continue to invest in renewable energy, and we have been steadily building on that commitment. Carbon capture strategies have been funded in Budget 2026-27 so that they can be implemented across the country, she said, adding that they are being incentivised. She added that India has achieved two-thirds of its nationally determined com-

mitments in the renewable sector and that too four years ahead of the target date.

Making a case for differentiated cost of climate action, Sitharaman said, country which are less polluting should contribute less towards climate action. “As much attention as we give to emission control, we need to look at resilience and adaptation. Otherwise, you’re going to sacrifice a lot. Technologies will have to talk to each other. No one can say they’ve created a perfect system to counter climate concerns,” she said.

DUE TO ‘UNFORESEEN CIRCUMSTANCES’

# Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang cancels visit to India AI summit

ENS Economic Bureau  
New Delhi, February 14

NVIDIA’S CEO Jensen Huang has cancelled his much anticipated visit to India to attend the AI Impact Summit next week citing “unforeseen circumstances”. Huang was among the most influential people on the summit’s guest list, since his company is one of the key players that dominate the AI ecosystem due to its stronghold over computing devices.

“Due to unforeseen circumstances, Jensen Huang is unable to travel to India at this time. Nvidia remains deeply committed to the AI Impact Summit and to India’s rapidly advancing AI ecosystem,” the chipmaking company said in a statement.

Following Huang’s last-minute cancellation, the company is now expected to be represented by its executive vice president, Jay Puri. Huang was expected to deliver a keynote address on Thursday, when the summit will be formally inaugurated. The AI Impact Summit 2026, which India will host between February 16 and 20, is intended to generate actionable recommendations that contribute to long-term artificial AI governance objectives rather than framing immediate binding regulations.

Coming to the Global South for the first time, the AI Impact Summit 2026 represents the latest chapter in an evolving international conversation on AI governance. FULL REPORT ON  
[WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](http://WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM)

● BYTEDANCE’S RELEASE ANTICIPATES DEEPSEEK’S UNVEILING OF NEW PRODUCT

# China’s ByteDance releases Doubao 2.0 AI model for ‘agent era’

Reuters  
Beijing, February 14

CHINA’S BYTEDANCE has rolled out its Doubao 2.0 model, an upgrade of the country’s most widely used artificial-intelligence (AI) app, the company said Saturday.

ByteDance is one of several Chinese firms hoping to generate overseas and domestic buzz around its new AI models during the Lunar New Year holiday, which starts Sunday, when hundreds of millions of Chinese partake in family gatherings in their hometowns.

The company, like rival Alibaba, was caught off-guard by DeepSeek’s meteoric rise to glo-

bal fame during last year’s Spring Festival, when Silicon Valley and investors worldwide were shocked by how a Chinese firm had come up with a model comparable to OpenAI’s best but seemingly developed at a fraction of the cost.

The release of Doubao 2.0, ahead of a highly anticipated new DeepSeek model, is likely aimed at preventing such a scenario from repeating itself. A video-generation AI model that ByteDance released Thursday, Seedance 2.0, has already drawn comparisons with DeepSeek’s success last year after going viral on Chinese social media and drawing praise overseas on platforms like X, includ-



Seedance 2.0, a video-generation AI model released by ByteDance has already drawn comparisons with DeepSeek’s success last year after going viral on Chinese social media.

ing from its owner Elon Musk.

Doubao 2.0 is positioned for the “agent era”, where AI models are expected to execute

complex real-world tasks rather than only answer questions, ByteDance said in a statement.

The model’s pro version in-

cludes complex reasoning and multi-step task execution capabilities that match OpenAI’s GPT 5.2 and Google’s Gemini 3 Pro, while reducing usage costs by roughly an order of magnitude, according to the company.

“This cost advantage will become even more crucial as real-world, complex tasks involve large-scale inference and multi-step generation that will expend a huge amount of tokens,” ByteDance said, referring to the unit of data processed by an AI model.

Doubao leads all AI chatbot apps in China with 155 million weekly active users, with DeepSeek second at 81.6 million, ac-

ording to information provider QuestMobile’s most recent data, published in late December.

But Doubao 2.0’s release could help ByteDance fend off recent pressure from domestic competitors. Alibaba on February 6 announced it was spending 3 billion yuan (\$400 million) on a coupon giveaway campaign to attract more users to its Qwen AI app, allowing them to use the incentives to purchase food and drink directly in the chatbot. This led daily active users on Qwen to skyrocket from 7 million to 58 million, just 23 million shy of Doubao’s figures on the same day, according to QuestMobile.

## ● BRIEFLY

### Jio, 14 others, launch Trusted Tech Alliance’

New Delhi: A set of like-minded global firms including Jio Platforms and Anthropic, have joined hands to form a Trusted Tech Alliance at the Munich Security Conference, according to a statement. PTI

### RBI nod to Bain for Manappuram Finance stake

New Delhi: Gold loan financier Manappuram Finance Saturday said it has received final approval from RBI for the proposed acquisition up to 41.66% by affiliates of Bain Capital. PTI

# Not All Zen

In *The Robe and the Sword*, Sonia Faleiro shows how religious Buddhist revivalism and majoritarianism have been historically intertwined

Rohan Manoj

PHILIP C Almond's 1988 book, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, could just as well have been called *The British Creation, or Reification, of Buddhism* — terms he uses in the text. It is about how the colonial encounter with disparate Buddhist traditions in Asia led to the realisation of their common origins. Subsequently, "(Buddhism) becomes an object, is constituted as such; it takes the form of an entity that 'exists' over against (sic) the various cultures which can now be perceived as instancing it." It was reified as a textual object, and ancient Pali and Sanskrit texts, as interpreted by Victorian minds, became the standard against which contemporary Buddhist practices were judged and often found wanting. Debates raged about what Buddhism "essentially" was — religion or philosophy, atheistic or theistic, Mahayana or Theravada — much as Indian courts today discuss what is an "essential" religious practice and what is not. All this begs the question: Beyond such external constructs, what is Buddhism, or any such diffuse and diverse 'ism'?

A similar question can be asked of Sonia Faleiro's *The Robe and the Sword: How Buddhist Extremism Is Shaping Modern Asia*. Is it really about Buddhism per se? The book is divided into three parts, with the first two being accounts — informed by the author's travels and interviews with relevant figures — of the rise of violent ethnonationalism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar and the involvement of Buddhist monks in these movements. The third part, about Thailand, poses a conceptual difficulty: it does not discuss extremism at all but the patriarchal nature, corruption and commercialisation of Buddhism in the country.

This is how Faleiro brings these strands together in the epilogue: "The ego and power — its lure, its ability to corrupt. Monks who had renounced the world now sought to control it. In Thailand, Phra Dhammachayo promised

wealth to those who gave generously, turning merit into a commodity. In Sri Lanka, Galagoda Aththe Gnana-sara incited violence to win political influence. In Myanmar, Ashin Wirathu's friendship with the military had saved his life — and cost many others." Thus, it becomes a matter of the worldliness of monks, which is an eternal question; British writers were railing against the dissipation and profligacy of Siamese (Thai) and Chinese monks in the 19th century, too. Arguably, it would have been more cohesive to leave Thailand out of this book and focus only on the more specific issue of Buddhist monks' links to ethnonationalist violence in the other two countries.

It is as a journalistic account of these developments, including the human stories of those at their heart — such as the Muslim victims of the violence in Sri Lanka or a Myanmar monk who dared to stand against the rising chauvinist tide and is now living in exile, or even the Sri Lankan rabble-rouser, Gnanasara himself — that the book shines. It succinctly places each country's crisis in historical context, and shows how religious revivalism and majoritarianism have been intertwined.

Only a chicken-and-egg question remains: when one is so inextricable from the other, is this really about Buddhist extremism or ethnonationalism? When a religion is identified with a dominant ethnic group, and its leadership has a nexus with the political or military establishment, is it surprising that the majoritarian impulse should manifest through that religion?

Morally and intellectually, it may be said that this is a challenge for Buddhism in particular due to the centrality of *ahimsa*. Faleiro engages with this, recounting her conversation with a scholar in Dharamshala who rues the clergy's helplessness in dealing with violent monks. The author points to "a growing realisation within Buddhist communities... merely refraining from harm is no longer enough. The crises we face demand a more engaged Buddhism — one that responds to violence not only with contemplation but with action." The instances of resistance narrated in the book, from the dissident Abbot Zero of Myanmar to the rebel temples of Thailand — non-commercial, female-led — may be the forms that action takes.

And yet, is there anything new under the sun? Buddhism does not necessarily entail absolute pacifism, and justifications have been offered for war. The book talks about Duththagamani, a Sinhalese prince who was consumed with regret after massacring the forces of his Tamil foe. Monks were there to absolve him: only Buddhists were human beings, and most of the Tamil troops were not.

Is it possible to salvage a pure Buddhism, shorn of these inconvenient specificities? Or, can a religion have a textual existence unswayed by its practice? The Victorians might have said 'yes'.



# In the Shadow of the Beast

In *Sad Tiger*, her poignant memoir about surviving child sexual abuse, award-winning French writer Neige Sinno asks what it takes to look the monster in the eye — and not turn away

Paromita Chakrabarti

HOW many ways can a child be let down? Neige Sinno cannot count them all. Abused by her stepfather from the time she was about seven till she turned 14, what the 48-year-old French writer and translator can remember instead is the slow burn of shame and the fine grit of unease that worked its way under the skin and hardened into a sense of never being entirely safe in the world.

And yet, when she decided to write her story, she did not begin with herself. "With victims it's easy, we can all put ourselves in their shoes," Sinno writes in *Sad Tiger*, her electrifying memoir, translated into English by Natasha Lehrer, and published last December: "The perpetrator, on the other hand, is a different story." It is there, she suggests, that every narrative eventually comes to rest — in the troubling question of motive, in the near certainty of denial. "Because for me too, when it comes down to it, the thing that's most interesting is what's going on in the perpetrator's head," she writes.

This preoccupation with the figure of the perpetrator feels newly urgent in a world still parsing the implications of the Epstein files, with their catalogues of association and influence and their suggestion that abuse does not flourish in isolation. Impunity is absorbed into systems that protect and deflect, into procedures that extend a disproportionate benefit of doubt to perpetrators.

In Sinno's telling, however, it does not

lend the abuser primacy. Her stepfather — a handsome, charming mountaineering guide in the Alps, whose authority structured their hardscrabble life and whose moods set its atmosphere, remains unnamed — a deliberate refusal to grant him the solidity of identity. What the reader knows of him is through a child's disorienting, distressing observations of him. Alongside this, Sinno offers an unnerving literary parallel with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, in which coercion is recast as grand passion and the victim as temptress. The ease with which violence is aestheticised, Sinno says, serves a warning about the stories society chooses to believe.

Sinno's own story did, eventually, reach a courtroom after she told her mother of her ordeal when she was 21. By then, she had left home. After the revelation, her mother would, too. Her stepfather, who rationalised his assaults with grotesque inversions — "You don't love me, so I rape you; you're a good girl, so I rape you; you've been naughty, you've annoyed me, so I rape you as a punishment; I love you, so I rape you" — was tried and convicted in 2000. But he was released after five years of his nine-year sentence on account of good behaviour, remarrying and settling down to family life soon afterwards.

In the questions it poses about power asymmetry and the social mechanisms that sustain it, Sinno's account is very much a product of the MeToo movement. "As you may have noticed, the text begins with a sen-



**SAD TIGER**  
NEIGE SINNO  
(TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY NATASHA LEHRER)  
Seven Stories Press  
224 pages  
₹599

tence that includes the phrase 'me too', but this is not to say that I too have been a victim. It is to affirm that I too am fascinated by violence, by the monster," she says. When the French memoir came out in 2023, it became an instant sensation, winning France's highest literary award, the Prix Goncourt, and a slew of other European prizes, and selling in record numbers. Non-linear and formally restless, *Sad Tiger* moves between testimony, literary criticism and philosophical inquiry. "This is how I would like MeToo to be understood first and foremost: as an opportunity to think about sexual violence, not just to denounce it, but to discuss and reflect on the phenomenon, placing it at the centre of our analysis of society... I would like MeToo to be an exploration of our ambivalence, of the complexity of everything related to rape and abuse," she says.

This call to examine not only the violence but the cultural atmospheres that normalise or disavow it has taken on renewed urgency in the light of the ordeal of another French woman, Gisèle Pelicot. For nearly a decade, her husband Dominique had drugged her and orchestrated her rape and abuse by scores of men. At the 2024 trial, Pelicot's decision to waive anonymity and her insistence that the moral burden be placed on the perpetrators and the enablers in place of the victim — "Shame must change sides," as she put it — echoed the deeper current running through *Sad Tiger*: The insinuations about character, the invariable scrutiny directed at the violated, but

most of all, the dogged refusal to let stigma shutter survivors down.

It is from this pivot — from private shame to anger to public reckoning — that the book's title, a hat tip to William Blake's poem, *The Tyger*, draws fuller resonance. It animates Sinno's inquiry about the nature of evil and the terrifying possibility that predator and prey are forged in the same moral universe. "It is an ontological bewilderment. When we discover the world, as children, we ask ourselves those philosophical questions and we never find easy answers. Why do the strong abuse the frail? Why does oppression exist? In the context of child abuse, those questions manifest themselves as an intellectual and emotional rebellion against injustice. Are the tiger and the lamb created by the same energy? What do I have in common with my rapist? Can I understand him? It is a matter of going to the precipice and looking down: if the tiger is my fellow man, how can I not become a tiger myself?" asks Sinno.

These are questions that resist neat resolutions. If there is any solace in *Sad Tiger*, it lies in the reclamation of voice. "What is strange about the experience of abuse is that it is deeply personal and a very common experience. Child abuse, sexual abuse, happens everywhere all the time. But it is silenced everywhere. The fact that a door seems to be opening now, that many sectors of society show signs that we are ready to hear about that reality and want to do something about it is giving me hope," she says.

## SHELF LIFE

### Going by Experience

BR AMBEDKAR, while writing his autobiographical account *Waiting for a Visa*, chose to narrate "lived experience" well before it became a sociological concept. As if to set the methodological tone, Ambedkar wrote, "A general description or a record of cases of the treatment accorded to them (*Dalits*) are the two methods by which this purpose could be achieved. I have felt that the latter would be more effective

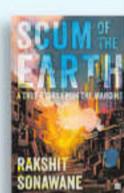
than the former... I have drawn partly upon my experience and partly upon the experience of others." This book is a template, like Baby Kamble's *Prisons We Broke* or Omprakash Valmiki's *Jhootan*, to question the Western privileging of "knowledge" over "experience." Rakshit Sonawane's debut book, *Scum of the Earth*, that draws inference from his own life, but told from a distance, through a character named Avinash, is another significant contribution to this end. The first-generation learner Sonawane belongs to the earlier 'untouchable' caste, Dalits — later his family converted to Buddhism. His father, an ardent follower of Ambedkar, both in principle and practice, used to work as a security guard and his mother as a house help. Having grown up in a Mumbai slum facing the multi-storeyed buildings

that marked the dreams of a developing country and an aspiring middle class, Sonawane, as well as Avinash, dreamt of a dignified future. But the road was not easy. Apart from the open drain that ran past their one-room settlement, coupled with a poor sewage system that leads to flooding even in a spatter of rain, there were caste prejudices, everyday discrimination and moral contradictions.

Divided into four parts — Slum, Dock, Factory and Newspaper — marking Avinash's life trajectory, this novel stands out for three reasons. First, it captures the socio-political transition in independent India. His experience as an informal factory worker opens up the faultlines of unionism. It also reveals the opportunism of partisan labour unions, besides their embedded casteism. It reminds the readers of the

caste-class fractures in the Mumbai cotton mills during the 1930s. Second, Avinash's tenure in the docks works as a historical documentation of licence-Raj and the entailing corruptions. His efforts to uphold ethical standards faced stumbling blocks. Third, from the Mumbai slum to the newsroom, Avinash witnessed the symbolic use of Ambedkar, mostly manifested in sloganeering, not in the celebration of his values. Sometimes, Avinash's self-righteousness may push the readers to think: Is it the sole responsibility of Dalits to live by virtues, while the Savarnas continue engaging in corruption and come unscathed due to their caste networks? These questions make "lived experience" a crucial fulcrum of knowledge. Sonawane's writing is placed in that epistemic framework.

ABHIK BHATTACHARYA



**SCUM OF THE EARTH: A TRUE STORY FROM THE MARGINS**  
RAKSHIT SONAWANE  
HarperCollins  
328 pages  
₹499

# The Truth Between the Cracks

The *Dig* by Sowmiya Ashok goes beyond the recent excavations at Keeladi to show how archaeology has been practised and politicised in independent India

Adrija Roychowdhury

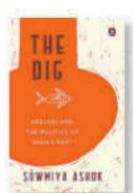
THE DISCIPLINE of history has always sat uncomfortably between the social sciences and the arts. Methodologically, it is closer to the social sciences, using hard evidence, archives and data to answer complex questions. At the same time, the writing of history is an art, its shape and framing often dependent on the personal and political inclinations of the one holding the pen. Among the many tools used in the writing of history, the most crucial one is archaeology — the deciphering of human past through material traces.

This material evidence is frequently dug out from several feet under the earth or even the ocean. Even when unearthed and placed carefully to solve the puzzle of human history, they continue to carry the weight of not just centuries of settlement but also of contemporary politics and identity. Journalist Sowmiya Ashok's debut book, *The Dig: Keeladi and the Politics of India's Past*, revolves around one of the most controversial archaeological excavations in India's recent past. It

offers a wider account of how archaeology has been practised, debated and politicised in independent India.

Ashok begins in the vibrant temple town of Madurai, where archaeologist K Amarnath Ramakrishna arrived in November 2013 to begin an expedition to uncover evidence of an early urban settlement in south India. He was keen to excavate Madurai itself to decipher its true age. Although historians have speculated Madurai's birth to be around the 3rd century BCE, this ancient town's actual age remains uncertain. The city, however, was ill-suited to archaeological inquiry: its densely inhabited landscape left little undisturbed earth to examine.

Consequently, Ramakrishna decided to follow the course of the Vaigai river that cut through Madurai. Six months into the expedition, a serendipitous meeting with a lorry driver at a small hamlet called Keeladi, turned out to be the game changer. A coconut grove littered with all kinds of potsherds ranging from coarse black-and-red ware, black ware, red-slipped ware and coarse red



**THE DIG: KEELADI AND THE POLITICS OF INDIA'S PAST**  
SOWMIYA ASHOK  
Hachette India  
307 pages  
₹799

ware with decorative and incised patterns, convinced Ramakrishna and his team that Keeladi was "one in a hundred".

Over the following decade, it emerged as the site of intense public and political interest. Excavation sites anywhere in the world rarely capture the imagination of the general public. Keeladi was an exception. It was first covered extensively by Tamil dailies and, since 2016, began featuring prominently in national English-language newspapers as well. Over time, the site and the nearby museum housing its findings started drawing hundreds of visitors each day.

The unprecedented public interest soon became a topic of political contestation. Early claims of the findings being akin to those from Harappa and Mohenjo-daro unsettled many in Delhi. The excavations giving credence to Sangam literature fed a renewed sense of Tamil pride. Ramakrishna's subsequent transfers over the next few years fuelled suspicions that the findings were being drawn into a wider North-South political and cultural debate.

Part journalistic investigation and part travelogue, *The Dig* traces these developments from 2013 onwards. Ashok joins the dots with archaeological enquiries that preceded and followed Keeladi both in south India, and elsewhere. For instance, she travels to the Harappan site Rakhigarhi in Haryana, to understand the connections between Keeladi and the Indus Valley Civilisation. These linkages might well be overstated or even spurious. Through her reporting, she poses a pointed question: is it necessary to view every phase of Indian history after Harappa as either its outcome or continuation?

Elsewhere, Ashok ventures into examining the idea of cultural pride that Keeladi has come to symbolise. She begins the chapter with a description of her experience of Jallikattu — a traditional Tamil harvest festival in which participants attempt to control a charging bull — which was banned by the Supreme Court in 2014, citing animal cruelty. Ashok writes with sensitivity about both the allure and the violence of Jallikattu before drawing parallels with the emotions invested

in Keeladi. From a conversation with Tamil scholar Stalin Rajangam, she cites, "The people of Keeladi may not even have identified themselves as Tamil." "Archaeological findings were being retrofitted to modern concepts of nation-states," observes Ashok.

Her clear-eyed journalistic objectivity ultimately strengthens *The Dig*, offering a panoramic view of archaeology in India without losing sight of its human and political stakes. Despite engaging with a technically dense field, the book remains accessible, its arguments carried by lucid prose, interviews and reportage.

Keeladi's most consequential finding is revealing the antiquity of Tamil civilisation to be far older than previously believed. Ashok closes *The Dig* by reflecting on how the process of writing the book deepened her pride in her Tamil roots. At the same time, she turns outward, urging readers to look closely at their own ancestries and to recognise that all identities are shaped by centuries of migration, linguistic exchange and intertwined genetic lineages.

EVERY time 49-year-old Hari Chand, a concrete pump operator, takes a small break inside the under-construction Zojila tunnel, he makes a beeline for the heater, soaking in a few precious moments of warmth. Outside, the temperature has plunged to minus 18°C. Yet Chand, a native of Haryana, carries on.

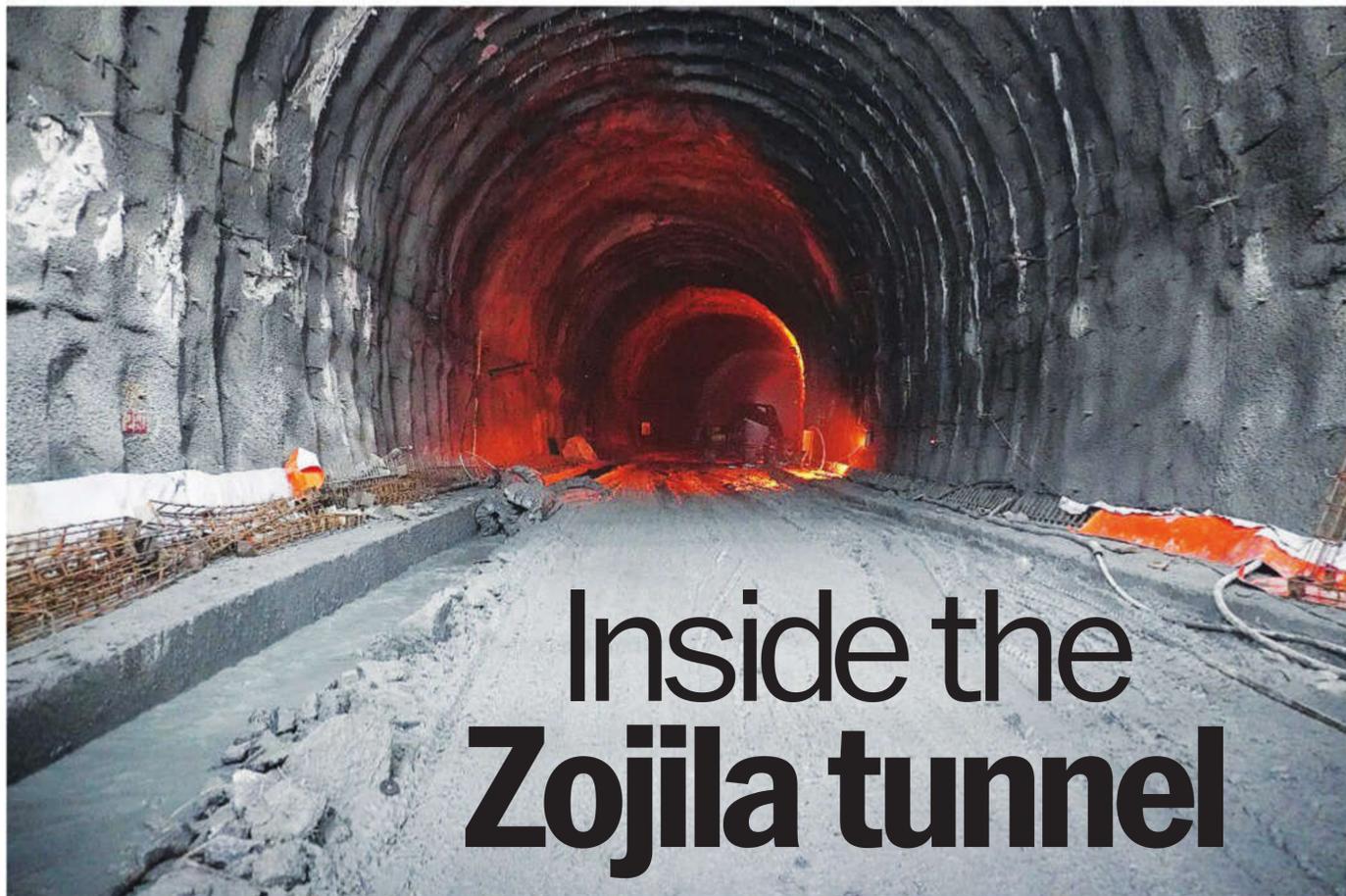
"When I came here last year, winter had already set in and snowfall had begun. Over these months, I have experienced the harshest cold, but nothing has stopped us. In my mind, there is only one thing — to finish the work sooner," he says. "I have to keep my fingers warm, otherwise I cannot continue."

Chand is among the dozens of workers labouring round the clock, racing towards the much-anticipated "breakthrough" — the moment when excavation from both ends meets — that will bring all-weather connectivity between Kashmir and Ladakh through the strategically vital Zojila tunnel. The project is being built at a cost of ₹6,809 crore.

Work on the ground began in April 2021, three years after Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone in 2018. Hyderabad-based Megha Engineering and Infrastructure Ltd (MEIL) took over after re-tendering. For five years, teams have braved temperatures dipping to sometimes even minus 30°C and navigated the fragile Himalayan geology. Now, less than 700 metres remain.

Last year, the Lok Sabha was informed that although the project was initially scheduled for completion in September 2026, delays caused by Covid-19, extreme weather, and the 2024 militant attack on the nearby Z-Morh (Sonamarg) tunnel project have pushed the target to February 2028. Inside the tunnel, where only the shift change marks time, and mud and slush define the terrain, work continues relentlessly.

Rajendra Kumar from Himachal Pradesh, part of the core workforce, recalls how distant the goal once seemed. "When I first came here in 2021, everyone thought it might take years to see the breakthrough. But we haven't let any difficulty



# Inside the Zojila tunnel

For five years, teams have braved temperatures dipping to minus 30°C and navigated the fragile Himalayan geology. PHOTO AND MAP COURTESY: MEIL

Adil Akhzer reports from the project site as the 13.1-km main tunnel — that will ensure all-weather connectivity between Kashmir and Ladakh — nears breakthrough

## ONTARGET

EXPECTED BREAKTHROUGH:  
April-May 2026  
(less than 700 metres remaining)

PROJECT COMPLETION: February 2028

CEMENT USED: 50 lakh bags

STEEL: 3,000 MT

TOTAL COST: ₹6,809 crore

stop us," he says. Officials say the project has two components: the approach road connecting the Z-Morh tunnel to the Zojila tunnel — including bridges, tunnels, and cut-and-cover structures — which has been completed, and the main 13.153-km tunnel, now nearing its breakthrough.

Being constructed at an altitude of 11,578 feet at Zojila Pass, it will, once complete, be India's longest road tunnel and Asia's longest bi-directional tunnel at this altitude.

Work is currently underway from both ends — the western portal on the Kashmir side and the eastern portal at

Minamarg-Drass on the Ladakh side.

Mehraj-u-Din Lone, manager of the eastern portal, has been associated with the project since its inception. He recalls winters here — when temperatures fall drastically and the pass shuts under heavy snow.

"The weather remains the biggest challenge," he says. "The first task is to stock everything — food items, construction material, everything required for tunnelling." Even water used for concrete has to be heated above 50°C to prevent freezing. "Everything is planned and executed keeping in view the freezing conditions," Lone adds.

HL Pandita, who oversees administrative affairs, says extensive arrangements are made to support workers. "From hot water to every kind of facility, we ensure that workers feel comfortable after their shifts," he adds. For many, the project represents more than engineering. "Zojila is a prestigious project for the country. It will be a lifetime achievement for everyone associated with it," says Lone. "Inside, it is only mud and slush. The motivation comes from knowing what this tunnel will mean."

Senior officials have led from the front. "When we began the concrete lining work, I remained at the site for 24 hours. That was a big motivation for everybody," Lone says. Milestones are celebrated. "Recently,

when we completed 6 km, we cut a cake inside the tunnel. Everyone put it up as their status on social media platforms," he adds.

For MEIL, a South Indian company undertaking its first major project in North India, the conditions were unprecedented. Joint Chief Operating Officer Harpal Singh recalls that the project was awarded a day after tender opening. "When we reached Sonamarg, there was already more than 2 feet of snow," he says.

The project lies at elevations between 2,900 metres and 3,500 metres.

Local support proved crucial. "More than 80 per cent of employees are from Jammu and Kashmir. In five years, the project did not stop for even an hour due to any local issue," Singh says.

Two major setbacks tested morale: the 2024 militant attack and altitude-related health issues. The October 2024 attack on the Z-Morh tunnel project killed seven people, including a local doctor. "Around 550 people left after the attack. It took time to stabilise," Singh says.

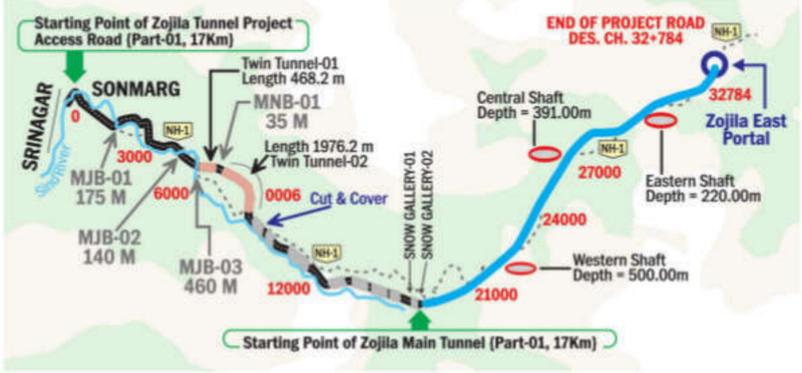
High-altitude pulmonary edema and other health concerns also forced nearly 300 workers to leave over five years. "We had to constantly monitor health. Haemoglobin levels sometimes rise to 19 or 20. We replace people and keep the work going," Pandita explains.

Project manager Col AK Shivkumar (retd) calls it India's toughest tunnel project due to the complex geology and high-altitude terrain. A breakthrough — "the handshake of two sides" — is expected in April-May.

The tunnel is being excavated using the New Austrian Tunnelling Method (NATM). "The rock conditions keep changing. We deal with challenges daily and tackle them on the spot," Col Shivkumar says. He recalls multiple avalanches, including one that buried a workshop and another that claimed two lives.

Once operational, the tunnel will drastically reduce travel disruptions caused by snowbound passes. Strategically, it is vital — Ladakh shares borders with Pakistan and China. "For the military, the project holds immense significance," Col Shivkumar adds. Though public opening is expected in 2028, officials note that once the breakthrough is achieved, the tunnel could be used in emergencies if required by the government.

Beyond its strategic value, the tunnel promises economic transformation. At Matiyani village in Drass, the first settlement in Kargil after crossing Zojila, locals are already planning guest houses and restaurants along the highway, anticipating increased traffic and tourism.



# THE ANTHROPIC EFFECT

AI has triggered humanity's biggest transformation by powering machines that outthink us. Claude Opus 4.6 ignites this fire, threatening India's jobs and SaaS tech giants

GAGANDEEP ARORA

ARTIFICIAL intelligence is widely expected to mark the biggest turning point in human history, influencing employment, technology, governance and the future of global economies. At the centre of this fast-evolving landscape are companies like Anthropic, an AI research firm that has swiftly positioned itself among the key players in the global AI race.

With the release of its latest model, Claude Opus 4.6, along with enterprise tools such as Claude Cwork, the company has accelerated AI adoption while triggering debates around job losses, online safety and governance, especially in emerging digital economies like India.

Claude Cwork, which automates work traditionally handled by niche SaaS (Software as a Service) platforms, has intensified disruption fears. Industry observers have dubbed the impact a "SaaSocalypse", as AI-driven automation wiped billions off global SaaS valuations, with rip-

ple effects visible in Indian tech stocks.

## FAST-MOVING SYSTEMS

Anthropic is an artificial intelligence company founded by former researchers from OpenAI. It develops AI systems designed to perform tasks such as writing, coding, research and data analysis. The company also studies how AI should behave. If AI is a fast-moving vehicle, Anthropic says its work examines the guardrails, traffic rules and risk management around it, not just the engine.

Its research emphasises safety, system reliability and responsible deployment. Yet, critics question if this focus masks aggressive expansion. As Anthropic races ahead, its safety claims face real-world tests.

Anthropic's AI assistants are called Claude models. Each version has grown more capable. It is able to write reports, generate code, analyse long documents and assist customer workflows.

Claude Opus 4.6 advances in three areas: stronger reasoning, the ability to process very large documents and more natural responses. Tasks that once required teams of analysts, writers or coders can now be

handled by one AI system in minutes.

## SAAS COMPANIES TAKE A HIT

SaaS companies deliver software online through subscriptions similar to renting an app instead of buying it. Businesses access tools via browsers while providers manage updates, storage and maintenance.

Claude and similar AI systems are shaking up this model in multiple ways.

**One AI replacing many tools:** Earlier, firms used separate apps for marketing emails, customer chats and analytics dashboards. Now one artificial intelligence interface can handle all three. Fewer tools, fewer subscriptions.

**Custom software without coding:** Claude Opus 4.6 threatens them by letting users build custom tools fast. Why pay monthly for rigid software when AI codes your own in hours? It's a major shift in cost-sensitive markets like India.

**Customer support automation:** AI assistants can manage chats, emails, refunds and complaints. For SaaS firms selling support platforms, this creates direct competition as companies consider replacing software suites with AI agents.

## EXPANDING AI BOUNDARIES

The disruption story, however, goes beyond SaaS or any single AI model. AI is expanding into a foundational layer across industries. It is evolving from tool to co-worker, drafting reports, writing code and assisting decisions. Productivity rises, but routine roles face pressure.

Demand is shifting toward creativity, critical thinking and AI supervision, while task-based roles erode.

Research, financial summaries and legal drafts that took days can now be produced in minutes. Small businesses can access enterprise-grade marketing, accounting and design capabilities.

There are misinformation risks too. AI-generated deepfakes, fake news and synthetic voices complicate digital trust. Large datasets also raise questions around consent and misuse.

Governments are racing to frame AI laws on liability, bias and copyright. Healthcare, law, education and finance are all seeing early structural shifts.

## THE BIG WORRY — JOBS

In India, AI tools like Claude Opus 4.6 are speeding up work while threatening routine roles. Estimates suggest 25-35 lakh IT and BPO jobs could face disruption from coding bots and automation. TCS cut 30,000 positions in 2025, with net IT hiring nearing zero.

Employability drops to 56 per cent without AI skills, even as India holds 16 per cent of global AI talent. The shift toward high-skill roles is urgent, making reskilling critical for workforce survival.

Industry voices reflect both optimism and caution. Mansher Singh Growar, founder and CEO of Bhejo Logistics, believes consolidation is inevitable. "Clients earlier paid for five tools. Now they ask if one AI layer can do everything. Pricing pressure on SaaS is real."

Lovejot Singh Chhabra, director at Cyber Defence Intelligence, says Big Tech holds the edge because "AI is ultimately a data game; companies running search, social media and cloud platforms sit on massive datasets". He adds that AI growth is happening at an insane pace, with 60-70 tools being launched daily, warning that 40-50 per cent of task-based roles could face near-term pressure.

Software engineer Kunal Verma echoes workforce anxiety. "AI tools now write code, debug errors and build features faster than us. Entry-level roles are shrinking sharply," he says.



## WHAT LIES AHEAD

The next phase of AI expansion will unfold across three fronts:

**Integration, not isolation:** AI will embed into finance, HR, supply chains and governance systems.

**Regulation will tighten:** Countries, including India, are expected to frame AI accountability laws.

**Reskilling becomes urgent:** Workers must adapt to AI-assisted workflows rather than compete with them.

For SaaS firms, survival may depend on becoming AI-first platforms. For employees, relevance may depend on learning to manage and audit AI systems. Artificial intelligence is no longer a distant wave, it is active infrastructure reshaping software, businesses and economies. Companies like Anthropic illustrate the speed of this transition, but the implications extend far beyond any single firm or model.

The disruption is real and how quickly businesses, workers and policymakers adapt will determine who leads and who lags in the AI decade.

# Once women take over



**TOUCHSTONES**  
IRA PANDE

HERE has been a flurry of book launches and book-related events recently in Delhi. My mailbox is flooded with invitations and announcements, some related to the Delhi Book Fair, others to the regular book discussions organised by the India International Centre, Habitat Centre or Sahitya Akademi. Each one of them is scheduled for a time that is the worst to go from Noida, where I live, to Delhi. Honking cars and taxis, lurching buses, dare-devils on two-wheelers and slow-moving delivery vans — they are all out to clog the roads. I decide to stay home and read a book instead.

However, there are some that do rouse me from my self-imposed solitude to make that perilous journey to town during rush hour. Some days ago, Poonam Saxena (who readers may remember as a columnist who writes on Hindi writing) launched two very engaging books translated by her from Hindi into English. Not only were the books an account of the life and times of a well-known writer couple (Mannu Bhandari and Rajendra Yadav), respected across the world of Hindi writing, but a chronicle of that period. Mannu was known for her fiction (her novels were made into films too), while Rajendra Yadav was the legendary editor of *Hans*, the magazine that mainstreamed new writing in Hindi. He was a familiar figure with his trademark dark glasses and pronounced limp in the IIC library, and slightly intimidating to those of us who were 'English' writers or readers.

Theirs was not a perfect marriage and yet, they were bonded in a way that was a mystery to many. After the lively discussion on these two

books, I came away with many questions that have always engaged me. Why is it that when a woman writer pens a memoir or autobiography, she is more open, frank and honest, while a male writer is often unable to rise above a certain self-absorption and navel-gazing and tries to cover up his lapses as a father, son or husband?

Readers familiar with Rajendra Yadav's life are aware of the many extra-marital affairs he had (he seldom hid them) and his lofty patriarchal attitude towards those whom he dismissed as middle-brow. It was almost as if he gave his seal of approval as the final arbiter of what con-

**It may take many years to wrest power from men who fear their rise, but that day will come for sure**

stituted good, modern writing, ignoring many (mostly women) writers — Mannuji and my own mother among them — as homely, middle-class writers who lived in small towns and so had small horizons. He was not alone in this — the Big Boys' Club of important writers in the '70s and '80s was mostly composed of left-leaning 'intellectuals' who did not allow the smells of the kitchens from popular women writers to enter this sanitised space, cleared for high-minded discourses and comments.

Today, when many courses in universities are constructed around gender and feminist or Dalit writing, these early biases seem as if popularity and real-life stories about actual characters were beneath academic notice. The travails that women writers went through as they played multiple roles as wives, mothers, daughters-in-law were not important social contexts, while the men were allowed to shut themselves in their rooms to write, is a story that needs to be told. Interestingly, Yadav's book was called '*Mud*

*Mud Ke Na Dekh*' (translated as *Echoes of My Past*), Mannuji's is called '*Ek Kahani Yeh Bhi*' (translated as '*This Too is a Story*').

I can think of several women writers who wrote not because they wanted to break some glass ceiling, but because these were stories that were boiling inside them like milk on their stoves. I can confidently say that many such writers have outlived those male writers who received Sahitya Akademi and Padma awards, decided by those who pronounced their verdict on what 'they' considered high-minded literature.

When I look to other areas where women were cast in secondary roles, politics comes readily to mind. The grudging respect that women like Jayalalitha, Mayawati and the redoubtable Mamata Banerjee evoke despite their foibles is for the place they fought to carve out from the men. Their relentless fight for recognition on their own terms is what one day we will assess with greater respect. These were no *baby-log* or *madamjis* who were handed power by husbands and fathers and their connect with the women voters was a bond that political parties can only imagine. Sadly, some of them succumbing later to the very political style they fought so vehemently is another story, but give me a feisty and honest woman politician any day. It may take many years for women to wrest power from those men who fear their rise, but there is no doubt that it will happen one day.

It is not easy being a woman, no matter which field you wish to enter. Yet, their talent and their resilience is a gift from nature that men were denied at birth. Fond and adoring mothers, dutiful wives and the network of social support that was unquestioningly provided to earlier generations of men is now waning. The patriarchal world that denied women an equal place and rights is receding and the world is becoming more open and just even if the old order will take many more decades to change.

And once women take over, there will be many more stories to read. What a pity, I won't be there!

— *The writer is a social commentator*

# Climate that doesn't change in Budgets



AVAY SHUKLA

RESERVATION and protection of the natural environment has never been a priority in our annual Budgets; all Finance Ministers have taken it for granted and treated it as a resource rather than a living entity to be nurtured and carefully harvested on a sustainable basis.

In July 2014, I had written a blog about precisely this: '*Budget 2014 — Short-changing the Environment*'. Eleven years down the line, this deficiency in planning persists, even though a new, and compelling, dimension has been added with the acceleration of climate change (CC). The need now is not only to provide public funding for measures to counter CC (adaptation, mitigation), but also for rehabilitation of those directly affected by it — poor farmers, landless labourers, fishermen, nomadic tribes.

Unfortunately (and predictably), this Budget, like its predecessors, does none of this.

We should perhaps have expected this from the tone of the Economic Survey 2026. In it, the Chief Economic Adviser blatantly bats for growth and neoliberalism at the cost of the environment. Defying all science, it states that cutting carbon emissions should not be our top priority, and that "a 3° Celsius world would be a liveable one".

Confounding all evidence and scientific global consensus, it goes on to maintain that "growth and prosperity strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability". Yes, sir, they do, but only if done in a sustainable and ecologically-friendly manner, which is not how it is happening in India. Maybe, if the Economic Adviser had paid more attention to what a fellow economist (without any political bias), Gita Gopinath, had said in Davos, he would have better understood the problem, and how wrong he is.

This government suffers from a severe case of CID (Compulsive Infrastructure Disorder); capex is fine and needed for growth, but so is the environment. There are huge environmental costs to rapid infrastructural expansion — both the World Bank and the IMF estimate this at between 3.5 and 5 per cent of our GDP, which comes to about \$200 billion.

The 2026-27 Budget proudly mentions the creation of a mineral corridor (for rare earths) in four southern states, three more high-speed rail corridors, zero duties for maritime catches in India's EEZ or the high seas, but there is no mention of how the environmental consequences of these initiatives shall be addressed or mitigation funded.

Are these corridors necessary at all, given the large number of expressways being built? The corridors shall lead to large-scale land acquisition and displacement, adding to the 60 million project refugees created since Independence. Hundreds of thousands of trees (and mangroves, since rare earths are found in coastal areas) shall be felled. The boost to maritime fisheries is welcome, but where are the guardrails to

ensure that the livelihoods of fishermen will be protected, or overfishing curbed?

The damage to the environment by the various corridors will be enormous. The regulations that could have checked this, or compensated for it, such as the Forest Conservation Act, the Environmental Protection Act, or the Wildlife Protection Act, have been so weakened, if not castrated, by this government over the years that we can expect minimum oversight or safeguards in the execution of these projects.

Thousands of crores shall be needed to mitigate, and compensate for, the adverse impacts of these projects, but the Finance Minister has not said a word about this. This silence and ambiguity appear to be a deliberate decentralisation of costs: the political credit and financial gains will accrue to the Centre, but the social and budgetary costs will be borne by the states — an innovative (mis)interpretation of federalism!

**The mountain states shall now have no option but to continue to ravage the fragile Himalayan environment to fund development**

Finally, it appears that the 16th Finance Commission (FC) is also in lockstep with the Centre, like all so-called autonomous institutions. It has chosen to completely ignore the right of the Himalayan states to fair compensation for the ecological services they provide to the country (water, clean air, carbon sequestration, climate moderation).

These states, supported by a large number of advocacy groups, had demanded a Green Bonus of ₹50,000 crore from 2026-2031. Not only would this have been fair compensation, these funds would have met developmental needs without having to resort to unsustainable exploitation of forests, rivers, minerals and tourism potential.

Any idiot can see that excessive and unsustainable "development" of the Himalaya (and other ranges like the Aravallis and Western Ghats) is not in the interest of the country as a whole, and therefore these mountain states should be incentivised not to do so.

But the 16th FC failed to see this simple truth. Reports indicate that it has not provided any Green Bonus; nor has it provided any special grants (outside the Centre's discretion, which has now become totally politicised) for climate mitigation or disaster relief. All it has done is tinker with the definition of forests which, in pure financial terms, is meaningless. Even worse, the 16th FC has now discontinued the RDG (Revenue Deficit Grant) which these states had been receiving since 1974, making a huge dent in their finances. They shall now have no option but to continue to ravage the fragile Himalayan environment to fund development activities.

The criminal neglect of the environment continues in our planning and funding. Ms Sitharaman and her copilot in the FC have just nudged us a bit closer to environmental collapse, and the financial collapse of some states.

— *The writer is a retired IAS officer*

# UK colonised by immigrants? What?

SHYAM BHATIA

WHEN one of Britain's richest industrialists says the United Kingdom has been "colonised by immigrants", Indians are entitled to raise an eyebrow.

The remark was made last week by Jim Ratcliffe — founder and chairman of Ineos and co-owner of Manchester United — during an interview on immigration, welfare dependency and economic growth. The comments drew a rebuke from British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who described them as "offensive and wrong".

Ratcliffe clarified that he was speaking about immigration levels and economic pressures. Even so, his choice of the word colonised — in a country whose global power was built through colonisation — is difficult to ignore. Ratcliffe is not a fringe agitator. He represents mainstream British corporate power; a beneficiary of global markets and international labour flows. That makes the vocabulary all the more striking.

Britain did not merely trade with India; it ruled it. By 1900, nearly 300 million Indians lived under British imperial administration. Railways were built, yes. So were famines. English was institutionalised; so were laws, taxes and governors. Delhi was ruled from London.

Jim's other comments are also on record. He said: "You can't have an economy with nine million people on benefits and huge levels of immigrants coming in." He suggested Britain needed "somebody who's prepared to be unpopular for a period of time to get the big issues sorted out". He also claimed the UK population had risen by 12 million in five years, a figure contradicted by

the Office for National Statistics, which estimates the UK population at 69.3 million in mid-2024, up from about 67 million in 2020.

In 1947, Britain left India not because Indians colonised Britain, but because India insisted on independence. The Raj ended. The flags changed. But something else endured: administrative systems, legal codes, commercial routes, educational linkages and migration pathways. Empire does not evaporate. It reorganises.

Post-war Britain rebuilt itself partly through Commonwealth labour: Caribbean nurses staffed the NHS. South Asian foundry workers powered the Midlands. East African Asians revitalised retail and small business. Migration was not accidental; it followed imperial lines of familiarity: language, law, documentation, mutual recognition of qualifications. The routes were mapped long before the passengers boarded.

Today, India is one of the largest source countries for migrants to the UK under skilled worker and student visa categories. Indian-trained doctors play a significant role in the UK's National Health Service. British universities host tens of thousands of Indian students. Indian companies employ tens of thousands in Britain. London's financial sector recruits from Mumbai and Bengaluru as routinely as it once

**The remark by Manchester United co-owner has drawn rebuke from the British PM**

did from Manchester and Glasgow.

That is not colonisation. It is reciprocity shaped by history. When Indian professionals move to Britain under skilled worker visas, they are not planting flags. They are filling labour shortages in healthcare, technology and finance. They pass English language tests, the same English Imperial Britain once insisted they learn. They navigate biometric systems, Home Office interviews and salary thresholds. They arrive with documentation, not gunboats.

If this is colonisation, it is oddly compliant. Jim is co-owner of the Man Utd Football Club. The club's commercial success depends on precisely the global networks that migration critics question in other contexts. Manchester United's dressing room is multinational by design. Globalisation is celebrated when it sells jerseys. It becomes suspect when it fills hospital wards.

Colonisation implies conquest, displacement, subjugation. To apply it to regulated migration stretches the metaphor past recognition.

Jim is not an imperial aristocrat. He is the son of a carpenter, a self-made petrochemicals magnate. The beneficiaries of global Britain sometimes forget how global Britain was built.

India did not colonise Britain. Britain constructed an imperial network that evolved into a migration network. If anything, what we are witnessing is not colonisation but continuity, the long after-life of empire in visa form. The empire once sent civil servants to Delhi. Today, Delhi sends consultants to Canary Wharf. Ships sail both ways. And history, unlike rhetoric, keeps receipts.

— *The writer is the London correspondent of The Tribune*

# How Valentine's Day could be Basavanna's Day



DIPANKAR GUPTA

WHILE Valentine's Day is celebrated worldwide to honour a saint who went against the edict of the Roman king Claudius, we must not forget that our 12th century saint, Basavanna, did an equally daring act for which he too suffered royal persecution.

Valentine was incarcerated, tortured and finally killed for he solemnised the weddings of fresh recruits when a royal edict expressly prohibited this. King Claudius II, a 3rd century Roman king, forbade soldiers to marry, as he believed that a wife at home would dull a warrior's edge. As couples will be couples, the urge to marry was probably equal to, if not stronger than, the lust for war.

That is why the young who wanted to marry under God could only turn to Valen-

tine. He stood up against Claudius II and united young soldiers with their loved ones in holy matrimony.

Basavanna, who is remembered and venerated as a Shaivite Bhakti saint and as a leading Lingayat social reformer, was also attacked by the king — whom he once served loyally — for officiating, indeed encouraging, inter-caste marriages.

Bijjala II of the Kalachuri dynasty was incensed when he heard that Basavanna was actually putting words into action and defying the established order by presiding over inter-caste marriages, which destabilised the ritual hierarchy at its very root.

As long as Basavanna did not put his beliefs into practice, he was a favoured subject of his king. However, once he decided to walk the talk, every one of his patrons walked far away from him. Almost instantly, from a royal minister, Basavanna became an outcast.

Valentine was imprisoned and later executed, but he stayed true to his convictions till the very end. The Feast of St Valentine was established by Pope Gelasius I in 496, a full two centuries and more after Valentine's death. Basavanna, too, was not imme-

diately hailed as a saint and reformer as the orthodoxy that influenced the king chased him away to make sure he received no attention. Basavanna's poetic verses, or *vachanas*, that expound his teachings, came to prominence much later.

The impressive consolidation of Basavanna's powerful *vachanas* happened over a period of 200-300 years after his death. These were gathered by generations of his disciples and that is how his message received historical and popular recognition.

**Organised religion may end up in sectarian bigotry, but both the saints remind us to not forget the basis of what it is to be human**

Just as Basavanna advocated the unity of humankind and critiqued social barriers between people, Valentine's adoration goes well beyond the Catholic Church today. From Western Catholicism and Protestantism to Pietists and Lutherans, as well as Eastern Orthodoxy and the Melkite Greek community, Valentine is commemorated in the entire Christian world, regardless of the various schisms that exist within it.

Basavanna is not just revered as a leading Lingayat preacher today, but his statue stands in the Parliament House in Delhi as well as in London by the Thames river. There are numerous places of worship where Basavanna is hailed as the principal purveyor of Shaivite Bhakti. This persuasion advances immersion in God and is contrary to Shankaracharya's quest for unified knowledge.

Valentine's relics, too, are to be found in Santa Prassede in Rome and his flower-decked skull is in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, also in Rome. He too symbolises love above all else.

It is hardly surprising then that these two saints should be preaching identical lessons where spiritual bonding among peoples is

the principal vehicle of religion. Bhakti centralises devotion, which falls in line with a disregard for primordial and religious differences. Likewise, with Valentine too.

It is just an extension of Valentine's outreach to the entire Christian community that has spontaneously projected him as a symbol of romance and affection, not just among dotting couples, but between people in general.

Even as religions go to war to show which among them is the most peaceful, it is those like Basavanna and Valentine who strive to breach religious boundaries and sing about the ties of affection that should unify us. Organised religion may take another route and end up in sectarian bigotry, but Valentine and Basavanna remind us to not forget the basis of what it is to be human.

Valentine's Day could equally be Basavanna's Day. They both lived to fight for the same cause. Both suffered at the hands of the powers of the day, but both live with greater vigour in our times. To honour them, we must accept their message in its true and enlarged form and not restrict ourselves to just romantic love.

— *The writer taught sociology at JNU*

# BOOKS

## Centring India in the Asian calculus

MANOJ JOSHI

**I**N this 2025 Adelphi book, C Raja Mohan provides a sophisticated analysis of New Delhi's transition from a hesitant regional player to a proactive strategic balancer. As one of India's most influential strategic thinkers, Raja Mohan argues that the "Asian Century" is being reshaped by the structural rift between a rising, assertive China and the United States seeking to maintain a regional balance of power.

Raja Mohan's thesis rests on several pivotal shifts in the Indian grand strategy. The principal one arises from the Chinese assertiveness, especially the border crises between 2013-2020, that has pushed India beyond its non-aligned caution to a power that increasingly reached out to the United States and the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US and Japan.

These have been argued in a more fuller way in his past writings, such as 'Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India's Foreign Policy' (New York, Palgrave, 2004); 'Impossible Allies: Nuclear India, United States and the Global Order' (New Delhi, India Research Press); and 'Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific' (Washington, Carnegie Endowment, 2012). Raja Mohan has played a significant role in shifting the Indian strategic discourse from its third world/non-aligned orientation towards its current realpolitik.



**INDIA AND THE REBALANCING OF ASIA**  
by C Raja Mohan.  
International Institute of Strategic Studies.  
Pages 216.

If some Chinese thinkers put across the notion of China at the middle, Raja Mohan argues for an "India at the centre" thesis, going back to the policies of British India, which makes for India emerging as the centre of gravity of Asian security, straddling the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The book positions the US-India relationship as the most consequential partnership for the 21st century, framing India as a "net security provider" that helps Washington maintain an offshore balance against Chinese hegemony.

A special strength of Raja Mohan's book is that he grounds his work in the long-term evolution of Indian policy going back to the colonial era. In that sense, he sees India "reclaiming" its role, rather than inventing it.

A critique of Raja Mohan's optimism is the disparity between India's strategic intent and its material capability. While India wants to be a balancer, its economic and defence capacity still lags significantly behind China's. Raja Mohan has argued for a closer military alignment between the United States and India.

His point about India's "rebalancing" is largely in the military and political plane. Having stayed out of major trade blocs like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), India risks being marginalised in the economic architecture of Asia — a point that he readily acknowledges but which remains a major structural weakness. However, recent shifts, such as the spate of trade deals that India has arrived at with the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Oman, EU, EFTA and the US, suggest that things are changing.

India could move away from its protectionist strategies and be willing to be involved in alternatives to the China-centric supply chains through, say, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

While Raja Mohan discusses expanding ties with Europe and Japan, there is the challenge of reconciling India's deepening US ties with its enduring relationship with Russia. India's current "multi-alignment" posture can accommodate a stretch, but it would not be able to sustain the strain beyond a point where India becomes entan-

gled in its own logic. Actually, in reality, the biggest challenge is not multi-alignment, which is something of a fiction in a world of two superpowers — China and the US.

A big problem is that Raja Mohan's book, which probably went to press in mid-2025, has been somewhat overtaken by the events of the last six months that saw a near collapse of the US-India relationship. In his recent writings, Raja Mohan has been urging for an Indian policy of not publicly arguing with the US, but keeping systemic engagement alive through interaction with the US security establishment. He was always optimistic that with the passage of the Indo-US trade deal, the path towards normality will again open up. But this will not account for the lost momentum and trust in India-US ties.

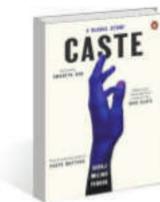
The reality, and Raja Mohan understands this well, is that Trump's behaviour has been a catalyst of sorts in the India-China reconciliation. India now looks less like a central swing state in the Indo-Pacific, and more like a reticent player in Trump's confusing global theatre.

In his recent writings, Raja Mohan has been arguing for a strategy for India that is defined by pragmatic patience and tactical hedging. But his primary thesis continues to be that there are structural factors that bring the US and India closer and they are likely to continue to obtain in the future.

— *The reviewer is a Distinguished Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi*



### BACKFLAP



**CASTE: A GLOBAL STORY**  
by Suraj Milind Yengde.  
Penguin Random House.  
Pages 374. ₹899

From indentured labourers in the 19th-century Caribbean to present-day migrant workers in the Middle East, author Suraj Milind Yengde shines a light on the Dalit experience internationally. Combining history, ethnography and archival research, he offers a compelling, comparative approach to caste and race from ancient times to today. Exploring the global footprint of the anti-caste struggle, this is an analysis of world politics from the perspective of one of the most oppressed communities on Earth.



**ABSOLUTE JAFAR**  
by Samath Banerjee.  
HarperCollins.  
Pages 272. ₹799

Set against a world where bureaucracies and borders quietly dictate human relationships, 'Absolute Jafar' follows a restless Brighu, and his son Jafar, born of an Indo-Pak love story that survives nationalism only to fracture in Europe. As father and son navigate Berlin, stories become inheritance: bedtime tales of sultans and *jims*, of Delhi, Calcutta and Karachi, of street food and eccentric relatives, of a subcontinent carried across continents.



**SACRED DEPARTURES**  
by Veenat.  
The Browser.  
Pages 284. ₹599

This book is an exploration of how different religions understand death and how modern life is quietly transforming age-old rituals. It invites readers to reflect on what it means to live in the shadow of death. Drawing on fieldwork in Chandigarh and conversations with families, priests, and spiritual leaders across religions, the work reveals death not as a single moment, but as a journey shaped by belief, emotion, and choice.

## Wounds & revelations

AMIT SENGUPTA

**W**HAT is it about loneliness and solitude — are they separate, or do they share an intrinsic bond? Is being solitary the same as being stalked by abject loneliness? Is a compulsive loner also solitary?

This anthology enters an intimate, off-beat terrain of the unconscious. The writers, from various languages and cultures, weave the inner life of the mind with nuance and sensitivity, so that their complex assembly of emotions rediscovers a warm and cosy home in their short stories.

Life is hard, but you can also encounter optimism in a dark corner of the next bylane, where a streak of sunshine has made a quiet nest — for instance, a back door that opens into a park where there is a wedding.

In 'The Mysterious Gifts of the Fake Snake', perhaps one of the finest pieces in the collection, Bhaswati Ghosh rediscovers her childhood, trapped in an uncanny and cruel sense of self-exile that she can neither understand nor explain. The nightmares — or the slow resurrection — never fully manifest, yet it is all so cinematic that every sentence becomes a still from a film.

She does not step out through the back door — her basic instinct tells her not to. It is the same instinct that stops her from taking the bus after school. She is tired and scared. She is only five years old, sitting alone on a bench outside her classroom in an empty school building, her tears dried up. The stark loneliness of a child haunts. When she sees a figure — her grandmother Titti — approaching, she knows she is safe.

Her Dadubhai and Titti leave this world, one after another. She is left with her mysterious snake of condemnation, unable to make sense of it all. The slow, simmering, solitary torment of this little girl is so heart-wrenching that you want to reach out to her and to others like her, who, like flowers, are pristine in their innocence yet cannot speak out.

A thread of simplicity and lucidity runs through the book — from Nirala's lonely poem in the autumn of his life (he was always a loner) to Sara Rai's 'Love', in which an imagined door in an imagined home keeps opening ajar, with the rustling leaves, the chirruping of crickets... sighing, heaving, whispering... an unseen orchestra...

Come, come, come, she writes. 'Beloved,' she says... 'Beloved!' 'You've come!' 'Do you remember?'

No one enters the door. In 'Loneliness and Love: Building Castles in Moonlight', poet Nabina Das writes about a friend who speaks of the "loneliness of love" — how love travels hundreds of miles to reach the body and soul, the agony of the beloved, and the magical sensations we miss. Her essay moves from Akka Mahadevi to Marquez to Meerabai and Anne Frank. Among other fascinating journeys into the inner self are writings by Mamta Kalia, Tarana Husain Khan, Perundevis, and Jamuna Bini.

This book could be a slow, solo, solitary read in the stillness of dark, stark solitude, or its pages can be gently turned in the middle of a chaotic, dusty, noisy bus station in a mofussil town. It does not matter. In slow motion, these writings open up ancient wounds and revelations. And suddenly, for no rhyme or reason, you sense saline waters well up between your moist eyelashes, a burning sensation somewhere deep inside, while a slow half-smile lingers and spreads across your lips.

A must-read.  
— *The reviewer is a teacher and senior journalist*

## But who is Salman Khan?

ABHIRAJ LAMBA

**I**F you're a die-hard fan of Bollywood superstar Salman Khan and believe he can do no wrong, Mohar Basu's new book, 'Salman Khan: The Sultan of Bollywood', is for you. Anything less, skip this one.

Five pages into the biography, Basu describes Khan's birth like this: "It is said that Salman opened his eyes immediately after birth, unlike many infants who take days, even weeks to do so. While newborns keep their fists clenched and eyes shut, Salman seemed eager to see the world." That passage immediately makes it clear what this book is about — Salman Khan the myth and not so much the man behind the myth.

Few stars have had a public life as versatile as Khan's — towering highs and public lows, achievements and controversies, devotion and disdain — all for the world to see, giving his biography enormous potential.

Basu had the opportunity to unpack the complexities behind the man celebrated for his magnanimous generosity, fierce loyalty and larger-than-life on-screen presence, while also being criticised as immature, impulsive and even violent. Instead, she decides to smooth over the latter while highlighting the former. That is not to say that she avoids the controversies. Basu addresses everything from his infidelities, allegations of violence, his abusive relationship with Aishwarya Rai, even the infamous hit-and-run case.

Yet these incidents are consistently framed less as moral or personal failures and more as PR disasters. At one point, Basu uncritically quotes Khan's father, screenwriter Salim Khan, "He did not know how to handle the media during his initial years. He is a normal boy who was not aware of his responsibilities as a superstar." Little seems to be Khan's fault, but rather circumstances and misfortunes are left to take accountability.

Basu seems aware of what this biography's perspective is and perhaps, even its



**SALMAN KHAN: THE SULTAN OF BOLLYWOOD**  
by Mohar Basu.  
HarperCollins.  
Pages 328. ₹799

limitations. She recounts how while researching this project, she was warned by senior journalists to not gloss over Khan's "missteps", with one editor advising her, "That'd be a gross misrepresentation of this man-child, who lives in his father's house till date and refuses to grow up. It's not endearing — it's a cautionary tale of what happens to a man who doesn't grow up."

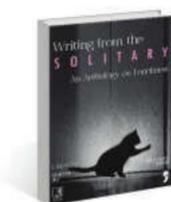
However, she undermines this advice in the very next paragraph, quoting a fan who asked if this editor had ever saved someone's life and segwaying into how Khan was the first bone-marrow donor in the country.

"I don't want to reduce Salman's philanthropy to a footnote," Basu writes. "His fans won't let me, and this is a book told from their perspective."

To her credit, Basu does a compelling job writing about the parts of Khan's life and career she seems to want to talk about — his softboy 'Prem' era, his philanthropy, his loyalty to his friends and family. If only it was grounded in the reality of the messier sides of his life, this book would've made for a far more interesting read.

Instead, we are left with a biography that forgoes complexities for fan service and can only serve two kinds of readers — the die-hard "Bhai" fans or someone who has never heard of Salman Khan at all.

— *The reviewer is a freelance contributor*



**WRITING FROM THE SOLITARY: AN ANTHOLOGY ON LONELINESS**  
Edited by Semeen Ali and Priyanka Sarkar.  
Simon & Schuster and Yoda Press.  
Pages 161. ₹399

## What the body remembers as accomplice, adversary, witness

BINDU MENON

**I**N her acceptance speech after winning the Nobel Prize in 2024, writer Han Kang deliberated on the questions that are asked of literature: "What is the meaning of our brief stay in this world? How difficult is it for us to remain human, come what may?" In her best-known novel 'The Vegetarian', Kang plumbs the depths of the bodily experience, treating the body as a site of violence and one of resistance and transcendence. David Szalay, too, follows a similar trajectory in his Booker Prize-winning novel 'Flesh': "to write about what it's like to be a living body in the world".

The living body in Szalay's 'Flesh' is an adolescent, Istvan. The novel begins with him trying to fit in a new environment. Having moved into a drab housing estate with his mother in a Hungarian town, the 15-year-old is soon initiated into a sexual relationship by a much older married

neighbour. Though initially repulsed by the woman, he begins to find incremental pleasure after every encounter. To the point that he cannot let go of the woman when she decides to end their affair.

A scuffle with her husband at their house ends with the man falling off the stairs to his death. Accused of murder, Istvan is sent to a detention centre. The first chapter ends on this note, with minimal description but a heightened sense of disorientation. We are palpable to Istvan's bafflement about a tragedy that will impact him forever. What is unsaid builds the atmospheric in much of the novel.

Everything is pared down in this narrative, even memory. There are no backstories here, no verbal calisthenics, and not much interiority. One wonders what to make of this laconic young loner as he reaches middle age across the 349 pages of the novel. Every chapter is a progression in Istvan's life journey. But each can be remarkably read as a standalone story too.



**FLESH**  
by David Szalay.  
Penguin Random House.  
Pages 349.  
₹899

After serving time at the detention centre, Istvan joins the army when he can find no other job. When he returns home from the war in Iraq, we learn about his trauma not through any inner monologue but from a shocking act of violence — Istvan bloodies his hand after punching it into a door.

It is as if the body is singularly in charge —

acting, emoting and responding to Istvan's internal turmoil.

One is never really privy to what goes on in his mind. And perhaps Istvan too is unable to register it as his conversation oscillates between "okays", "maybes", "don't knows" and "yeahs". The word 'okay' apparently appears 340 times across the novel. Szalay has explained how such "repetitions and circularities and non-meaningful grunts" constitute a lot of real dialogue between people.

In one of the novel's few reflective moments, Istvan observes, almost with surprise, that "you and your body are not entirely identical, that you occupy the same space without being quite the same thing". It's a line that resonates deeply, serving as the novel's thesis: the body as accomplice, adversary and witness.

As Istvan moves to London, this physicality defines him even more as he plays out the multiple assigned roles of the immigrant — as a bouncer and chauffeur. Though

his physical features are not described at length, one gathers that he is attractive. Soon, his employer's wife takes him as her lover and eventually marries him. The world he has viewed from the outside now becomes his. But does he still remain on the margins in the high-class world that is thrust upon him? Even while experiencing affluence, pleasure and grief, we see a man who cannot be fully invested in it. Perhaps this social and emotional detachment is what propels Istvan in life — at home, in the battlefield or in an alien country.

When asked about his immigrant experience, Szalay spoke of the ever-present duality, of never being quite at home in Hungary or the UK. It's a feeling that afflicts Istvan as well.

In the end, the rather lame question to ask would be if 'Flesh' is the kind of novel that stays with you. Well, there is no easy answer. However, the inscrutable Istvan does stay with you, in an unsettling, troubling way.

— *The reviewer is a freelance contributor*

**PROSPECT**

**AIKS slams US cotton import deal, seeks Goyal's resignation**

The All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) has launched a scathing attack on Union Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, demanding his immediate resignation following his declarations regarding raw cotton imports from the United States. The farmers' body termed the move a "naked betrayal" of domestic cultivators and a total capitulation to US trade interests. In a joint statement issued on Saturday, AIKS President Ashok Dhawale and General Secretary Vijoo Krishnan alleged that the Union Minister's recent pronouncements have exposed the "falsehoods" that agriculture remained outside the ambit of the India-US trade deal. Goyal had reportedly stated that India could purchase raw cotton from the US to facilitate zero-percent reciprocal tariffs on finished textile exports.

"This declaration is anti-farmer and atrocious," the statement read. It warned that importing raw cotton from the US would further depress domestic prices, pushing the already crisis-ridden and suicide-prone cotton belts of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Telangana, and Madhya Pradesh into deeper indebtedness.

The AIKS noted that the Government's stance effectively encourages domestic industrialists to favour American imports over local produce. "The Minister is supporting highly mechanised, state-sponsored US farmers while our own peasantry is suffocating due to escalating production costs and the failure to secure even the limited MSP," Krishnan said. The AIKS leadership rejected the Government's argument that limited US exports would not harm domestic interests. They drew a parallel to the devastation of rubber farmers in Kerala following the ASEAN-India FTA.

**PM Modi unveils IIM, data centre in Assam**

TONY DAS ■ Guwahati

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday inaugurated several projects in Assam, including a bridge on the Brahmaputra River, an IIM and a data centre for the northeastern region. The projects, which were rolled out months ahead of Assam assembly elections, aim to boost connectivity, strengthen digital infrastructure, promote higher education and enhance public transport.

The first project the prime minister inaugurated in the state Capital was a six-lane bridge over the Brahmaputra River. He launched the Kumar Bhaskar Varma Setu, built at a cost of around ₹3,030 crore. The six-lane extradosed Prestressed Concrete (PSC) bridge will connect Guwahati with North Guwahati and is the first extradosed bridge in the Northeast.

After the inauguration, Modi took a walk on the bridge. Assam Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya



(Right) PM Narendra Modi takes a walk with Assam Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya and CM Himanta after the inauguration of the Kumar Bhaskar Varma Setu, a six-lane bridge over the Brahmaputra River in Guwahati on Saturday

and Chief Minister Himanta Biswa were present on the occasion. The bridge will cut travel time between Guwahati and North Guwahati to just seven minutes. Presently, only the Saraighat Bridge in Jalukbari area connects the two banks of the Brahmaputra in the Capital region, with travel time taking around 30 minutes.

Considering the high seismicity of the region, the bridge incorporates base isolation technology using friction pendulum bearings. High-performance stay cables

were used to ensure durability and long-term structural performance, it added. A Bridge Health Monitoring System (BHMS) has also been incorporated for real-time condition monitoring, early damage detection and improved safety and service life of the extradosed bridge.

Modi had laid the foundation stone for the bridge on February 9, 2019 and construction started on March 1, 2020 by the then Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal. The initial cost of the bridge was ₹2,608 crore, which escalated to ₹3,030



(Right) PM Narendra Modi takes a walk with Assam Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya and CM Himanta after the inauguration of the Kumar Bhaskar Varma Setu, a six-lane bridge over the Brahmaputra River in Guwahati on Saturday

crore, and the project was estimated to be completed within four years. The length of the bridge is 7.75 km, including approach roads and flyovers on both sides of the Brahmaputra, while the actual bridge over the river is 1.24 km long.

Later, in nearby Lachit Ghat, Modi unveiled the Indian Institute of Management Guwahati, inaugurated a high-tech data centre that would cater to the entire Northeast, and flagged off 225 electric buses for four cities, including the Assam Capital. Union Minister of

Ports, Shipping and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal, several state Ministers, MPs, MLAs and senior Government officials were also present along with the CM and governor during inauguration of these projects.

The PM virtually inaugurated the temporary campus of the IIM Guwahati, which is expected to give a major fillip to higher education and management education in the northeastern region.

The main IIM Guwahati project will entail an expenditure of ₹555 crore.

The central Government had last year approved the establishment of an IIM in Guwahati. This is the second IIM in the Northeast and the 22nd in the country. The first IIM in the region is in Shillong. "The permanent campus will be developed at Palasbari near Guwahati, while the institute will commence its academic session from a transit campus at Tech City, Bongora. IIM Ahmedabad will monitor the temporary arrangements," the Assam Government official said.

The PM also virtually inaugurated the National Data Centre (NDC) for the northeastern region, set up at an investment of ₹348 crore at Amingaon in Kamrup district of Assam.

The state-of-the-art data centre with a total sanctioned load of 8.5 MW and an average rack capacity of 10 kW per rack will host mission-critical applications of various Government departments and also function as a disaster recovery centre for other NDCs.

**Saxena inaugurates DDA Green Expo 2026**

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena on Saturday inaugurated the first-ever Delhi Development Authority (DDA) Green Expo at Baansera, underlining the administration's commitment to building a greener and healthier national Capital.

The two-day expo, themed "Beyond Growth: Reimagining Urban Futures" brings together senior Government leaders, urban planners, climate experts and industry stakeholders to deliberate on sustainable city planning and climate-responsive development.

Officials described the approach as a transformative moment for Delhi's public spaces. In addition, DDA also signed several Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with leading national institutions to expand the scope and impact of its green initiatives. On the occasion, the Lt Governor also unveiled the DDA Greens logo and the DDA Greens Year Book 2026.

Inaugurating the green expo, Lt Governor said, "The expo reaffirms our commitment to a greener, healthier, and more hopeful future for Delhi." Saxena said the expo reaffirms the city's commitment to "a greener, healthier, and more hopeful future for Delhi." He emphasised



that the initiative goes beyond conferences and exhibitions.

"This expo is not only about conferences and exhibits, but also about people. It honours thousands of Delhi residents who nurture small green patches outside their homes, teach their children about local birds, plant saplings and care for them. They are the everyday heroes of our environmental journey," he said.

Recalling the transformation of the venue, he noted that few could have imagined three years ago that a degraded and polluted site would host a green expo and become a platform for planning Delhi's sustainable future. Describing Baansera as a "stellar example" of reclaiming degraded land, he said it stands as a testimony to resilience and collective endeavour.

DDA Vice chairman N Saravana Kumar said that the role of the Delhi Development Authority is often viewed as that of a

master planner, developer, and regulator. However, alongside these responsibilities, DDA also has an extremely important and accountable role—that of Delhi's Environmental Trustee.

While the two-day Expo brings together policymakers, planners, climate experts and industry leaders to deliberate on sustainable urban development, the highlight was the signing of strategic partnerships that will redefine how DDA parks function in the city.

A key highlight of the expo was the signing of strategic partnerships aimed at redefining the role of DDA parks in the city. Through these collaborations, DDA Greens are expected to evolve into living laboratories for learning, innovation, ecology and culture.

Under a first-of-its-kind partnership with the National School of Drama, DDA parks will host curated community theatre workshops and children's theatre

programmes, transforming open spaces into cultural classrooms.

An MoU with the University of Delhi will facilitate urban ecological research and student-led fieldwork within park landscapes, while collaboration with Delhi Technological University will introduce technology-driven sustainability solutions and youth innovation into park planning and management. Through the National Medicinal Plants Board, DDA will develop herbal gardens of national and state importance and medicinal nurseries across selected parks to strengthen biodiversity conservation.

In partnership with WWF-India, Citizens' Nature Hubs will be established at Asita to promote environmental awareness and community stewardship. Additionally, following an approach from the Mathura-Vrindavan Development Authority, DDA will enter into an MoU to serve as a knowledge partner in sustainable urban planning and nature-based development practices.

The expo to feature high-impact panel discussions and expert sessions addressing some of the most pressing urban challenges, including extreme heat, flood resilience, nature-based infrastructure, circular food systems and innovative financing for green cities.

**Kala celebrates emerging voices and cultural dialogues**

GYANESHWAR DAYAL ■ New Delhi

The two-day Kala Literature Festival 2026, hosted at the prestigious Civil Services Officers' Institute (CSOI), New Delhi concluded on a high note, marking a vibrant confluence of literature, art, governance and social dialogue. Organised by Kala - Crazy About Literature and Arts, an initiative of Sanjay Chandra, the festival reaffirmed its growing stature as a powerful platform for promoting literary excellence while nurturing emerging creative voices.

Bringing together senior civil servants, industrialists, authors, poets, artists and cultural practitioners, the festival underscored the vital role storytelling plays in shaping society, deepening empathy and amplifying new aspirations. It was supported by a diverse group of partners including Let's Talk, CSOI, CSC WICCI, The Alcove, Readomania, IP Infra and the Indie Authors Group.

The festival opened with Manoj Kumar Dwivedi, IAS, alongside noted painter-poets Vishnu Nagar, Ashok Bhowmik and Hemraj. In his address, Dwivedi highlighted literature's unique ability to nurture empathy and reflection, particularly within institutional and public life.

Founder Sanjay Chandra spoke of Kala's journey from a passion project to a meaningful cultural movement.



He reiterated the organisation's commitment to creating inclusive spaces where voices—especially emerging ones—find encouragement, mentorship and visibility.

Curators Neena Chandra and Atri Pandey reflected on how literature intersects with sustainability and social inclusion. "Stories allow us to step into lives beyond our own. That empathy is the foundation of responsible leadership and sustainable change," Neena said.

Payal Chandra, drawing from her legal background, observed that both law and literature are rooted in interpretation, ethics and human narratives.

Day One featured panel discussions, workshops, book launches, a spirited Kavi Sammelan and an Odissi dance performance, blending intellectual exchange with artistic expression.

The next day began with Ashok Lavasa, Retd. IAS, along

with industrialists Sushil Kumar Sayal and HKL Magu. Lavasa spoke about literature's role in sustaining democratic values and informed societies, while Sayal and Magu stressed the importance of collaboration between business and creative communities.

A key highlight was the launch of two books commissioned by Kala-Light of Spring, an anthology of short stories by emerging writers, and Echoes of Dharma by Japan-based Indian author Dr Sarath. The publications reflected Kala's commitment not only to conversation but also to giving promising writers a tangible platform to reach readers.

The Kala Literature Awards added a celebratory edge, honouring excellence across categories and drawing enthusiastic participation from authors nationwide. The evening concluded with the evocative

dance drama *Tawayafama*.

**A Platform with Purpose**  
A special collaboration with Let's Talk, a peer-powered wellness and conversation platform, further enriched the festival. Co-founders Pooja Chandra and Vivek Pathak noted that literature ignites thought, while conversation gives it movement—together fostering understanding and emotional well-being.

As the festival closed, Sanjay Chandra shared Kala's vision of evolving into a sustained cultural platform—one that continues to mentor new voices, publish meaningful work and keep dialogue at the heart of creative life.

Kala Literature Festival 2026 thus stood not merely as a literary event, but as a powerful statement on the role of culture in shaping aspirations, building empathy and giving India's emerging storytellers a stage to be heard.

**Manufacturing—Icon for India's sustainable economy**



**DR T SENTHIL SIVA SUBRAMANIAN** and **YADU KR YADAV**

**India's Innovation ecosystems - Manufacturing Mantra**

India is spearheading in investment, innovation, and infrastructure. India has emerged as top countries for investment destination after the US as per the survey by PwC. Indian grassroots lands are transforming into technological valleys such as Quantum Valley, Green Hydrogen Valley, Silicon Valley. Innovation and technological capabilities are a key growth driver for India's economic advancement that facilitate manufacturing industries to cater local, global customers, thereby marching to achieve Viksit Bharat@2047. India's 3M Mantra for manufacturing is **Made in India, Made for India and Made by India**. India is undergoing rapid transformation in manufacturing like Digital Smart Manufacturing because of our countries adaptability to fast-growing industry 4.0/5.0 technologies like Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT) and most importantly the cyber security. Indian mission programs like National Semiconductor Mission, National Green Hydrogen Mission and National Quantum Mission give a big boost to the manufacturing. Indian startups like QNu labs, boAt—a youth-centric brand, Ola, have created striking success case studies in terms of frugal innovation, investment, indigenous infrastructure, and manufacturing. Additionally, India home-grown industries like Sahasra semiconductors, Bhiwadi unit which has manufactured, shipped Swadeshi and Make in India micro-SD cards to various e-commerce platforms and RRP

Electronics, Maharashtra which has established India's first major Outsourced Semiconductor Assembly and Testing (OSAT) are creating manufacturing platform and products in semiconductor space.

**Zero Defect Zero Effect (ZED): A push for Sustainable Manufacturing**

India is undergoing a huge transformation in terms of converting service-based domain to product-based sector. The products are developed in-house which leads to Swadeshi spirits and Vocal for Local to global. India remembers the vision and mantra of Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi on National Startup Day Jan 16, 2026, the Indian startup to focus on manufacturing. The schemes like Production Linked Initiative and Design Linked Initiative form the fulcrum and give a great momentum for manufacturing of local swadeshi products. The advancement in digital technologies like collaborative robots (COBOTS), Automated Guided Vehicles, telepresence robots, humanoid robots facilitate the manufacturing industries to increase the Total Factor Productivity (TFP), Labor Productivity (LP), and quality of the products. The quality manufacturing initiatives of MSME like Zero Defect Zero Effect (ZED) accelerate the high and excellent quality in manufacturing with Zero Defect in product development and process control. Indian industries and startups are manufacturing products which strictly adhere to the best practices of ZED. Additionally adding values to environment socially governance thereby giving a big boost for competitiveness, sustainable manufacturing. It also adds enormous value to reducing waste thereby achieving six sigma quality. The international and national organization like Asian Productivity Organization, Tokyo, Japan where National Productivity Council, under Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India is a member facilitate the manufacturing industry especially promoting the green productivity. It also conducts various capacity building programs like 5S, Kaizen, and Total Quality Management (TQM) which form the essential elements of manufacturing.

India is moving ahead to an innovation-led circular economy because inventions bring new business ideas, concepts, and technologies to cater to the needs of local and global markets and thereby produce more vital technological outputs with the same manufacturing productivity inputs. This leads to achieving results in better-made goods and services, boosting earnings and business profitability of Indian industries especially.

India fosters in product design and process of springboard innovation by executing a framework of structured local and global process such as improved budget spending on research and development, funding in education and skill development, and most importantly

facilitating entrepreneurs led by vibrant startups, micro small and medium industries to initiate an enterprise more efficiently and for also promoting failed businesses to retire the market more quickly through simplified schemes and process. Indian policies and schemes are carrying its intricacy to its benefit by utilizing the extensive and heterogeneous market segments in India that are keen on exploring new innovative solutions to their unmet needs through Indian MSMEs. The combination of strong capabilities and mature varieties of MSME schemes offered by different ministries makes India a strong productive innovation base.

**MSMEs: Growth Engine for Smart India**

Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSME) have been enormously contributing to the expansion of entrepreneurial endeavors through product, process, and business innovations. MSMEs in India are significantly widening their domain across different sectors of the economy through different clusters, producing diverse range of local products and services to meet demands of domestic as well as worldwide markets. MSME area is actively involved in different innovative activities through various implementing schemes and policies which function as growth drivers to achieve the \$5 trillion global economy through strong industrialization.

**India's manufacturing productivity: Total**

**Factor Productivity and Labor Productivity**

MSMEs being a large vibrant sector in India create many jobs at low Capital costs and hence play a crucial role, second only to agriculture. They drive economic growth, employment generation, and innovation in India. India, with a low share of value added and large employment base, labor productivity in the agriculture and construction sectors has grown slower than other sectors since 1980. In comparison, labor in 2019/20 in manufacturing and services was over 4.5 times more productive than in agriculture. With low productivity workers in agriculture and construction making up over half the Indian work force, there is significant potential to boost growth by enacting productivity-enhancing reforms to the sectors which will free workers to move to other, more productive sectors.

The Government is also implementing the Micro and Small Enterprises-Cluster Development Program (MSE-CDP) across the country. Under this, Common Facility Centres (CFCs) are developed to address common issues, such as improvement of technology, skills, quality, etc. National Productivity Council has conducted a research study which explores that the scheme has been able to improve the efficiency of the value chain of the units in the cluster, resulting in overall productivity growth of around 10-15% and growth in turnover in the range of 20-30%.

The steps are being taken by the Government to further enhance labor productivity in the unincorporated non-agricultural sector, following a 5.6 per cent increase in gross value added (GVA) per worker in 2023-24. The way Government plans to sustain the observed growth in the GVA of the unincorporated sector, which recorded a 16.5 per cent increase in 2023-24 and the specific measures taken to enhance the skills of workers in the unincorporated sector, particularly in high-growth areas. In India enhancement of labor productivity and skills of workers is continuous and achieved a state of dynamic process.

**Centre's of Excellence: A Momentum for Manufacturing**

The establishment of digital technological public infrastructures like Samarth Udyog Bharat

4.0 flagship initiative of Ministry of Heavy Industry & Public Enterprises, Government of India across PAN India, Smart factory in Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru, Centre of Excellence for Industry 4.0 by National Productivity Council, New Delhi accelerates the manufacturing capabilities of Indian industries.

Additionally pioneering schemes such as CRTDH which is called as Common Research and Technology Development Hubs established under flagship organization Council of Scientific and Industrial Research supports Indian MSMEs and Startups with pilot plants through Responsible Research and Development, technology licensing, and transfer. It also gives flexible access to innovative infrastructures in various domains like healthcare, climate, green energy and many more. WEF has taken a major initiative to reskill and upskill 850 million people across the globe. World Economic Forum has launched the center of excellence in fourth industrial revolution across the globe. WEF has established the center for fourth industrial revolution in Maharashtra and Telangana. It has also been planned to establish the centre in Andhra Pradesh. The centre will give great momentum to facilitate AI innovation, cyber resilience and emerging frontier technologies in the manufacturing industry as well. The centre will act as fulcrum to connect the Government and industry experts to a common platform thereby framing policies and pilots leading to addressing the local and regional industrial needs.

India has achieved chairmanship of Asian Productivity Organization, Japan and BRICS 2026 which will lead to build enhancement in productivity, digital transformation, resilience, cooperation and sustainability respectively. This showcases the success path and marching towards the Viksit Bharat@2047.

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## YOUR VOICE

# Valentine's Day is all about romantic love. Let's talk about friendship instead

By **Colin Fleming**

The love we speak of at Valentine's Day almost always pertains to the romantic variety. We make our holiday efforts on behalf of that person with whom we are entwined in this manner or wish to be.

But there's something we tend to overlook on Valentine's Day, and that's friendship — a lost art of love in today's world.

Can two partnered people be successful in their union if they are not also friends? Can an artist truly be great if she doesn't seek to be a friend to those who partake of her work by offering them something vital and helpful that may be lacking in their own lives?

A friend is loyal, protective, nurturing. They help us grow. We can turn to them. They're true to their word. A parent doesn't want to be a friend to their child in the "one of the gang" sense, but these tenets of friendship also undergird parenting.

To have a true friend, one must be a true friend.

What happens often now is that people find someone with whom to pair up, and they remove themselves — as if on an island.

Children are had. The family unit all but has a circular wall put up around it for the



Friends Madysun Wynkoop and Cassie Cerna join aunt Angela Wynkoop wearing friendship bracelets while waiting in line to enter the United Center for Sabrina Carpenter's concert in Chicago on Oct. 13, 2024. **TESS CROWLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

adults. Sure, Dad knows this dad from Little League practices, and Mom joined a book club with other moms. But actual friendship requires effort, empathy, vulnerability and courage, and rarely do we "show out" in these areas.

Think of the couples you know. How many of those people have true friends? Consider yourself. How many true friends do you have?

I'd bet that most of us didn't expect it to

be like this, for it to be hard to make friends and have friends. There was a time in our lives where we never would have thought of our future self as friendless.

We may have encountered a maxim such as, "You're lucky to ever have a single real friend," but a part of us likely viewed that as clever lip service. A quote that sounds weighty, but surely it's not that grim?

Or we're a bit like that selfish grasshopper who has himself a gay time in summer without thought of choices and consequences and then must be bailed out in winter by the ant who made a point of becoming wiser.

There are seasons to friendship. Friendships are easier to start in school, during the spring and summer of our lives, before we're prone to retreat within ourselves, busted and reluctant.

Fall comes along, and if we've not bunkered down with our official family unit, we may find ourselves embarrassed by our friendlessness and taking pains to hide the truth. Phrases like "Living my best life" may or may not be used.

Then in life's winter, friendship can seem like a memory, a dream left over from another existence.

I'd argue that everything that is worthwhile in life involves friendship. To sit with

one's thoughts, doing nothing else, is an act of friendship. From you to you, for you, which in turns helps you be a better friend to someone else. If you aren't open and vulnerable with yourself, you won't be with anyone else either. Say it again: To have a true friend, one must be capable of being a true friend.

Friendship means making sure someone else is OK and then ministering to yourself. Who does that now? Who looks outward first? Who looks outward, period? Who looks outward for reasons other than seeing what others can do for us, hand to us, offer us? Remunerate us for the latest selfie we posted.

If you love, if you seek to be loved, if you wish to love better, be a friend. Build anew as a person who is able to be a part of the best kind of relationship any of us may have with others, which is right, decent, giving. Friendship is the foundation, even when we call the soul of it other things.

If you can't be a true friend, then you will become a stranger to love, whatever form love takes. Just because Valentine's Day cards don't say this doesn't mean it isn't true.

*Colin Fleming is the author of "Sam Cooke: Live at the Harlem Square Club, 1963," an entry in Bloomsbury's 33 1/3 series.*

## VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

### Bad Bunny's message

Columnist Christopher Borrelli hit the nail on the head ("Bad Bunny's halftime show was close to art," Feb. 10) — Bad Bunny's Super Bowl halftime show "was close to art"! I don't speak Spanish, so I didn't understand a single word of any of his songs, but the show was such an exuberant, wonderful celebration of Latin culture and its kind, hardworking people, I couldn't help but love it.

No one needed to know the language to understand its underlying message of goodwill toward others.

— *Dianne Casuto, Lake Forest*

### Entirely enjoyable show

Not being a football fan, I normally would only tune in periodically as the Super Bowl proceeded, and I never watched the halftime show.

However, with all the hoopla over this year's show, I did make it a point to watch it.

I have to give a thank you to the president and his MAGA followers. Without them, I wouldn't have had any idea who Bad Bunny was and would have missed an entirely enjoyable halftime show. Although I do not speak or understand Spanish, I thoroughly enjoyed the music and the dancers.

I also heard Bad Bunny say "God bless America" while he was flourishing the Stars and Stripes. And, on the football he spiked at the end of the performance were the words: "Together we are America." That seems very patriotic to me!

— *Frank W. Tedesso, Harwood Heights*

### Reflective of changes

Super Bowl LX showed that it isn't just a game anymore — it's a data-driven mirror of where America is headed.

While the "culture war" headlines focus on the uproar over Bad Bunny's halftime show, the real story is in the demographics. This year, the NFL made a strategic bet on the future of its audience, and the numbers back them up.

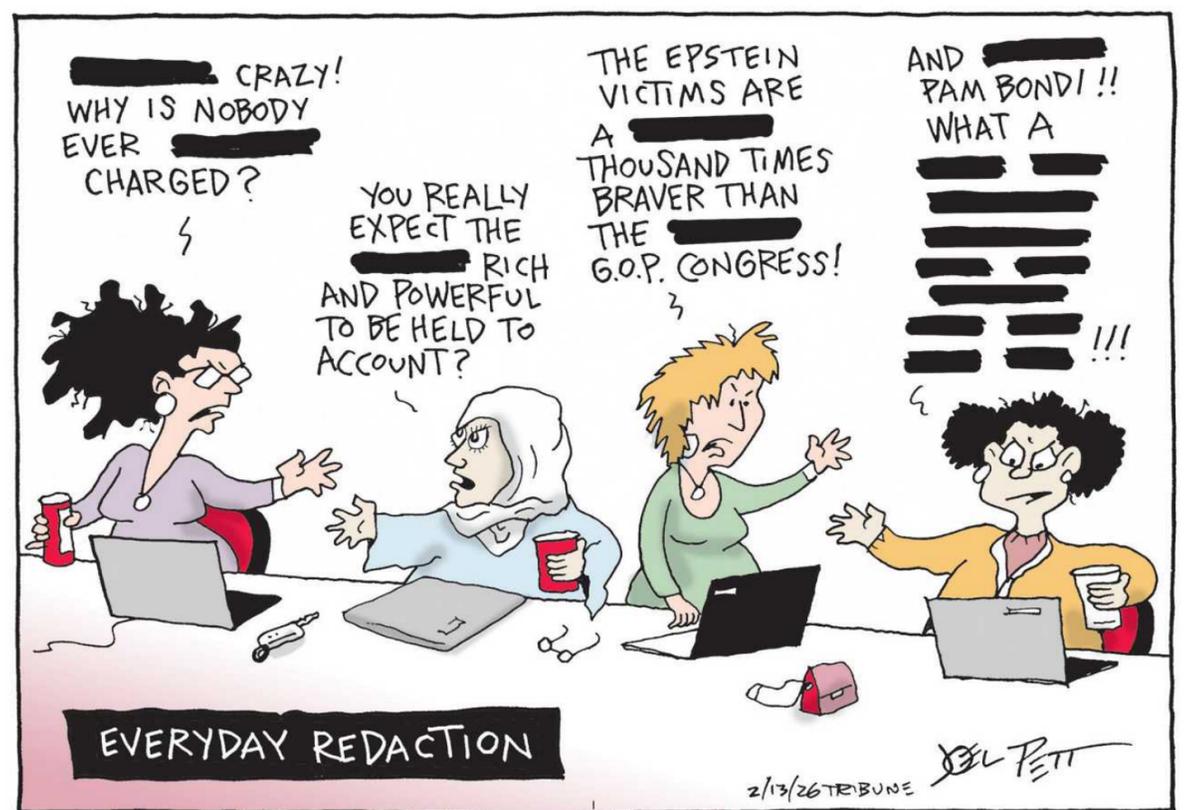
A recent study from Hofstra University confirms we've hit a historic demographic turning point: For the first time, minority births now make up the majority in the U.S. (with white births dipping to 49.6%).

Why this matters for business:  
■ Hispanic births now exceed 27% of the U.S. total. Hispanics make up nearly 30% of Chicago's population, making them the city's second-largest ethnic group after non-Hispanic white residents.

■ Latino fans are projected to contribute one-third of all U.S. sports industry growth by 2035.  
■ Bad Bunny — a global superstar and natural-born U.S. citizen from Puerto Rico — made history with the first all-Spanish performance, proving that "global" and "domestic" markets are now one and the same.

Major brands and platforms such as the Super Bowl aren't "going woke" — they are following the growth. They are using a multicultural lens to engage a younger, more diverse and more digitally active fan base that represents the next 50 years of revenue.

I didn't have skin in the game (go,



JOEL PETT/TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Chicago Bears!), but from a strategy perspective, the NFL won, and millions of people from around the world are still talking about Bad Bunny's most watched halftime performance.

— *Glenn Eden, Chicago*

### Chicago Bears unite us

What a great piece by Erendira Rendon ("My immigrant family and I became Bears fans this season. The joy was beautiful," Feb. 8) about our football team bringing the joy of community! Go, Erendira! Go, Bears! Go, Chicago!

— *Roger Becker, Chicago*

### A surprise in Boston

In a recent letter ("Hawks fans' hospitality," Feb. 7), Richard Sawyer describes his son Michael's positive experience with Blackhawks fans.

My family and I had a similar experience several years ago while in Boston for a Blackhawks game. The Hawks played a particularly rough game and were shut out. Afterward, we walked into a local Boston bar still wearing our Blackhawks gear. As we entered, a man who was at least 6-foot-4 and dressed in Boston colors gave us what I can only describe as the evil eye as we made our way to our table.

A few minutes later, he slowly walked toward us. I remember thinking, "This is going to get ugly real fast." He had a menacing look, and we braced ourselves for an uncomfortable encounter.

Instead, when he reached our table, he broke into a huge smile, stuck out his hand, offered his condolences for how poorly the

Hawks had played and insisted on buying our group a round of drinks. He and his friends invited us to join them at their table.

We spent the next four hours enjoying a great time with our new Boston friends.

— *Steven Sapya, Brookfield, Wisconsin*

### 2 sports stars inspire

Living in Bloomington, Indiana, I've had the good fortune to witness firsthand the rise of two extraordinary athletes, one here at home and another just up the road in Indianapolis. WNBA player Caitlin Clark and Indiana University quarterback Fernando Mendoza are not only exceptional competitors but also remarkable people.

Clark's generosity toward fans is well known. She signs autographs for anyone, including supporters of opposing teams, and treats every interaction with warmth and respect. Mendoza, the humble Heisman winner, consistently credits his teammates before himself and expresses sincere gratitude to fans after every victory. His humility and authenticity are qualities that cannot be manufactured.

This Valentine's Day, I simply want to express my appreciation for these two young stars, who stand out not only as once-in-a-generation athletes but also as individuals who embody the best qualities of sportsmanship and character.

Over the years, my enthusiasm for sports had faded. Watching these two emerge has rekindled my interest and reminded me why sports can still inspire.

Happy Valentine's Day, Caitlin and Fernando.  
— *Scott Thompson, Bloomington, Indiana*

### Valentines for friends

For me, Valentine's Day is the day I remember family, of course, but also my wonderful lifelong friends. Some of these friends, treasured as they may be, I wouldn't know if they walked in the door because we have always lived great distances from each other. Nevertheless, our bygone days of carefree youth, joy and fun live on in happy memory.

Marilyn was in the fourth grade when I was a first grader in a small Nebraska school. Now we are both in our late 80s, and we still exchange valentine cards. Claudette was the girl assigned by the nun to be my "guardian angel" when I entered a new grade school in Colorado. We exchange valentines to this day.

Connie was the rascal I teamed up with in high school. Elaine was our dear friend who tried to bring some sense to the two of us. Both received my yearly valentine cards until they went to their heavenly reward late in life.

Mark is the young man, a complete stranger, who from a distance saw a mysterious plume of smoke rising from the roof of my parents' home and drove straight there to help. A yearly valentine for him is a must.

Later in life, I had Billy in my fourth grade class, and after somehow reconnecting later in life, we now exchange Valentine's cards every year. He must be in his 70s by now.

I love dining out with Mary, Lois, Jean, Bev, Nancy and Pat, where the waiters at our favorite restaurant on Harlem Avenue always remember us. These friends probably have received their valentines by now.

My grateful heart never forgets.  
— *Kathleen Melia, Niles*

...معنى الموت هو أن نعرف الآخرين ونظل نحيا معهم.  
الموت هو وجوه من حولنا حينما تسقط الأقنعة عنها.  
(غادة السمان)

**YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB**  
*The meaning of death is knowing others and continuing to live with them; death is the faces of those around us when their masks fall off.*  
Ghada Al-Samman  
(Contemporary Syrian writer, author and woman of letters)

# Opinion

## Negotiation, Trump style

JASON D. GREENBLATT

I don't know what is in President Donald Trump's head. No one does — except him. And that is by design. Revealing his strategy would forfeit leverage, eliminate surprise and weaken negotiations before they even begin. I spent more than 20 years working on many of Trump's largest business deals and three years serving as Middle East envoy in the White House. I am often asked what I believe he is thinking about Iran. My phone has been ringing off the hook since Wednesday's meeting between Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Here is my assessment. Many predicted he would strike quickly. I did not. Weeks ago, I wrote that he would first test whether diplomacy could work — real diplomacy, aimed at real results. Not another Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action-style agreement riddled with loopholes and excuses. Not another paper promise that looks good in headlines and collapses in practice. The last deal, among its many flaws, merely kicked the nuclear threat down the road and gave the Iranian regime space to cheat. And cheat they did. Trump wants something different. He wants an agreement that eliminates

the nuclear threat — one that is verifiable, enforceable and immediate. One where enforcement does not depend on endless UN handwringing. One that addresses Iran's growing missile capabilities and regional aggression. This week, I attended the World Defense Show in Riyadh. The weaponry on display from around the world was breathtaking — and terrifying. More lethal. More precise. More sophisticated than ever. It was a glimpse into the future of warfare. And it should sober anyone who cares about what kind of world we are leaving to our children. Trump understands this reality. He does not sugarcoat it. He does not hide behind pleasant speeches that mean nothing. He tells hard truths — even when they are uncomfortable. He also understands that the first victims of the Iranian regime are the Iranian people themselves. They live under crushing sanctions imposed because of their leaders' warmongering, repression and extremism. They suffer for ambitions they did not choose. They have paid the highest price for a regime that values ideology over life. At the same time, the threat to Israel and



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to America's Arab allies remains real — and, if left unchecked, will only grow far more dangerous. People often forget something fundamental about Trump. He seeks peace and prosperity. That is what drives him. He is, at heart, a dealmaker. If anyone has a chance to resolve something this complex, it is him. Why? Because of his direct, unsentimental approach. Because leaders across the region — despite differing tactics — share a clear-eyed understanding of Iran's threat. Because the Middle East is undergoing historic, positive change under pragmatic leadership. Because people across the region are exhausted by endless war. I heard this repeatedly during my visit this week. And because Trump has rebuilt American strength and is unafraid to use it. He negotiates from power, not apology. Let me be clear: I am deeply skeptical of Iran's leadership. To my core. I believe they seek to buy time, build capacity and survive long enough to pursue their long-term goals: destroying Israel and dominating the region. History gives us no reason to trust their intentions. But I have also seen Trump accomplish

what others said was impossible. Over 23 years, I watched him close deals so-called experts dismissed as fantasy. He does not accept conventional limits. He does not surrender to pessimism. Above all, he has a duty to protect America — America's soldiers, American families, the American economy and America's future. He also believes in the future of the Middle East. A much better future. No one should fault him for exhausting every peaceful option before choosing the hard path. Trying to prevent war does not make him weak. It does not make him naive. It does not make him indecisive. It means he is doing his job. If a strong, enforceable agreement is possible, he and his team may be the ones to achieve it. If it is not, then the world will see what he decides next. The Middle East is ready for a new era. People want stability. Opportunity. Normal lives. Endless conflict has delivered none of that. Trump may be the leader capable of breaking old patterns. We should give him the space to try. One way or another.

**Trump wants an agreement that eliminates Iran's nuclear threat — one that is verifiable, enforceable and immediate**



**Saudi Arabia was the first country in the GCC to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization**

## Is Saudi Arabia abandoning moderation?

SALMAN AL-ANSARI

We will not waste 30 years of our lives dealing with extremist ideas. We will destroy them today! This is what Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said publicly in 2017 at the Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh, expressing with unmistakable clarity how Saudi Arabia views extremism. He did not frame it as a gradual debate or a distant ambition, but as an urgent national priority. That statement alone undermines the orchestrated narrative portraying Saudi Arabia as drifting away from moderation and toward the Muslim Brotherhood. This claim is not only misleading but fundamentally naive. Saudi Arabia was the first country in the Gulf Cooperation Council to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, doing so in March 2014. Other states followed later. Riyadh

has long regarded the Brotherhood as an existential threat, alongside all rigid and ideologically driven movements that undermine state authority and social cohesion. This position was reaffirmed clearly in 2021 on the official Saudi TV channel, when the crown prince stated: "Anyone who adopts extremist thinking is a criminal and will be held accountable. We cannot advance with the presence of extremist thought in the Kingdom." At the same time, Saudi Arabia does not allow others to exploit its criminalization of the Muslim Brotherhood as a gateway to wreaking havoc across the region. Riyadh does not and will not support non-state actors under the false pretext of fighting extremism, nor does it accept reckless geopolitical adventures justified by ideological slogans. For Saudi Arabia, counter-extremism is not rhetorical posturing but a matter of state responsibility, governed by law, institutions, and long-term stability.



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This doctrine is not theoretical. Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Riyadh has become a global hub for combating extremism through a comprehensive MMM approach — men, mind and money. "Men" refers to coordinated state capacity and multilateral cooperation. In this context, the crown prince established the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, the world's largest Islamic counterterrorism alliance. The coalition brings together more than 40 member states, alongside observer countries, and operates across military, security, ideological and media domains to confront extremist movements. "Mind" reflects Saudi Arabia's focus on defeating extremism at its intellectual roots. The crown prince launched Etidal, the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology, now one of the world's most advanced platforms for monitoring and

countering extremist content digitally and in real time across multiple languages. He also established the Center for Safeguarding the Intellect under the Ministry of Defense, recognizing that lasting security requires protecting societies from radicalization before it turns violent. "Money" targets the financial lifelines of extremism. Saudi Arabia has led international efforts to disrupt terrorist financing, strengthen financial oversight and shut down the channels through which extremist groups fund recruitment, propaganda, and operations. This financial dimension is a cornerstone of Riyadh's counter-extremism doctrine and its international cooperation. Riyadh's position is clear. Extremism cannot be defeated by empowering militias or separatism. It can only be defeated by strengthening legitimate states and enabling them to overcome their challenges economically, in security and socially.

## Opinion

## Unpacking Netanyahu's rush to Washington

MICHAEL HOROWITZ

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu traveled to Washington this week for his seventh meeting with US President Donald Trump, carrying with him intelligence files, a track record of bypassing American diplomacy when it suits him, and a deep conviction that the US is about to make a deal that could leave Israel vulnerable. The meeting with Trump on Feb. 11 was moved up a full week from its original date and took place shortly after talks began between Iran and the US. This was not a routine consultation between allies, it was an intervention.

The meeting followed weeks of tension in the wake of Iran's crack-down on mass protests in January and December. At the time, Trump called on Iranians to take over state institutions, saying that "help was on its way."

But the help never came. Instead, the US seemingly backed down on its earlier aggressive posture and is currently exploring a potential deal with the Islamic Republic. And while Washington has sent an armada of ships and aircraft to the region, Israel appears to be worried that the US could quietly drop some important conditions, particularly when it comes to

Tehran's ballistic missile program.

Netanyahu asked that the meeting be brought forward just days after the first round of US-Iran indirect talks ended in Oman. The apparent urgency to meet Trump likely stems from two main factors. The first is a surprising sense of self-confidence Tehran is displaying — refusing to budge even as it faces the prospect of US strikes at a moment when the regime is at its weakest.

**The US seemingly backed down on its earlier aggressive posture and is exploring a potential deal with Iran**

Iran has repeatedly said that it is only willing to negotiate on its nuclear program, dashing efforts also to limit stockpiles of ballistic missiles and support for Iranian proxies across the region. Even on the nuclear file, Iran appears unwilling to discuss a full dismantling of its program, with zero enrichment, and is floating the idea of getting full sanctions relief for concessions that Israel views as minimal.

This amount of bravado would be notable under any circumstances, but it is especially striking after a year in which the regime's fortunes have deteriorated so dramatically. Tehran has seen its key proxy, Hezbollah, hammered by Israeli strikes, while its main regional ally, Bashar Assad, was toppled in a lightning offensive by the Syrian



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opposition and fled the country.

During the 12-day war, Israel took out almost all of its air defenses, a chunk of its ballistic missile arsenal, and saw one of its main underground nuclear sites targeted by US B-2 bombers. To top it off, Iran then faced a wave of protests not seen since 2009. Yet the regime is displaying defiance in the face of yet another potential catastrophe: renewed US strikes that could be aimed at collapsing the regime itself.

This self-confidence may stem from the perception that the Islamic Republic's strategy has worked in the short term. As Trump claimed he was "locked and loaded" and ready to attack in mid-January, Iran's regime crushed the protests. At the time, Washington likely delayed a planned strike with the aim of deploying more military assets to the region to face Iranian missile strikes against US bases in the region and potential Iranian attempts to close the critical Strait of Hormuz. That time was used to silence Iranian protests in the hope that, faced with a fait accompli, Trump would prefer a deal to an attack.

It was a gamble, but one that appears to have worked. Though anger is still boiling below the surface, the country's streets are seemingly silent. More importantly, Trump

is back at the negotiating table.

Regardless of Netanyahu's intervention, the space for an agreement between Washington and Tehran remains narrow.

Trump will not want to go down in history as the US president who rehabilitated the Islamic Republic.

Yet force is not the obvious endpoint either. Iran retains leverage, particularly the capacity to strike Gulf energy infrastructure and choke critical sea lanes

**Netanyahu's task in is to ensure that as the dial turns, Israel remains the dominant voice in Trump's ear**

in ways that would send shockwaves through global markets and land squarely on American voters' radar. That nightmare scenario is precisely what drives regional powers to lean on Trump in turn, and these are not amateur diplomatic players. They understand his rhythms and his preference for being seen as the dealmaker who avoids the war his predecessors could not.

What emerges, then, is likely to be a slower-burning crisis than was initially expected.

Both Washington and Tehran will probe, test resolve, and incrementally raise the temperature, while searching for an off-ramp that does not look like surrender.

Netanyahu's task in Washington is to ensure that as the dial turns, Israel remains the dominant voice in Trump's ear.

## South Caucasus should be a strategic priority for the EU

LUKE COFFEY

A study commissioned by the EU, which was published last week, focused on what investments and infrastructure projects are needed to better connect Europe to Central Asian markets via the South Caucasus. The study, titled "Advancing a Cross-Regional Connectivity Agenda with Central Asia, Türkiye and the South Caucasus," said all the right things about the need to invest in and update infrastructure that is often outdated.

But this has all been heard before. At the same time the report was released, US Vice President J.D. Vance was on the ground in Armenia and Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus, discussing, among other things, a new transit route and economic connections that will be led and part financed by the US, as well as the next steps of the peace agreement and diplomatic normalization between Yerevan and Baku. This juxtaposition is a metaphor for Washington and Brussels' engagement in the region in recent years: another report and strategy document from Brussels and an on-the-ground presence by the US.

The South Caucasus should be a strategic priority for the EU, especially in the current geopolitical climate. The region serves as

a key source of energy resources at a time when Europe is trying to diversify away from Russian oil and gas. In the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Europe turned to Azerbaijan for more energy and even signed an agreement that would see energy resources from Azerbaijan to Europe double by next year.

Crucially, the region is also important for trade and transit. In particular, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route,

**The EU has struggled to turn many of its big ideas for the region into measurable policy outcomes**

commonly referred to as the Middle Corridor, connects markets from East Asia to the heart of Europe, bypassing both Russia and Iran. As European markets seek new economic opportunities, the Middle Corridor and the countries of the South Caucasus will play an important role.

The problem, however, is that the EU has struggled to turn many of its big ideas for the region into timely and measurable policy outcomes.

A good example of this is the Global Gateway initiative, which is meant to identify areas around the world that are strategically important for trade, energy and transit and then bring investment, either public or private, to improve infrastructure. Specifically for the South Caucasus and Central Asia, the EU has established a Cross-Regional



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Connectivity Agenda under the Global Gateway initiative. Since its inception, the EU has announced about €12 billion (\$14 billion) in funding and identified numerous infrastructure projects to receive investment.

However, the translation of these headline figures into visible, on-the-ground progress has at times moved more slowly than the rhetoric initially suggested. As is often the case with the EU, political and public announcements can outpace actual implementation on the ground.

Last April, the bloc held a summit with the five Central Asian states in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, with great fanfare and many at the time were optimistic that this would mark a new start in the EU's relations with the strategically important region. A good example of this dynamic, at least in the South Caucasus, is France's coziness with Armenia, which often places Paris at odds with Baku and can complicate closer EU engagement with that Caspian state.

As the months have passed, tangible results for the EU in the region have been limited. There are a few reasons for this. Political and public announcements often outpace actual implementation on the ground, which leads to heightened expectations in the beginning and greater

disappointment as time goes on. This is made more problematic by the fact that multiple EU institutions have different policy competencies over various parts of initiatives like the Cross-Regional Connectivity Agenda. In addition, the priorities of individual EU member states at times compete with or even block EU progress if there is a bilateral dispute with a country in the region.

All this political uncertainty and bureaucratic fragmentation has slowed the mobilization of private capital that could be raised to invest in the region. Meanwhile, the US has been able to do a better job with strategic messaging and attracting inward investment. The progress made in just the past 12 months under the Trump administration outpaces what the EU has been able to accomplish over several years.

It is time for Europeans to step up and become more actively involved in a region that has clear geopolitical significance for their overall stability and well-being.

The South Caucasus and Central Asia will only grow in importance in the years to come and Europe cannot afford to remain a secondary player in its own broader neighborhood.

**The US has been able to do a better job with strategic messaging and attracting inward investment**

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