

Psychology shows signs of recovery from replication crisis

The Hindu Bureau

As if political broadsides weren't enough to undermine public confidence in science, a deep-seated issue became apparent from within science itself in the 2010s: the replication crisis. Researchers began to realise many published papers, especially in psychology and medicine, contained results that couldn't be replicated. It was a surfeit of bad science that also undermined the work of others that was

erected on faulty results.

But according to a new paper published in Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science, psychology at least may have learnt its lesson. Its author, Duke University postdoc Paul Bogdan, parsed 2.4 lakh papers published between 2004 and 2024 to check whether the field had become more robust since the crisis unfolded. Bogdan focused on fragile pvalues: statistical results that barely clear the usual

cut-off to be considered significant (0.01 to 0.05). The larger the share of such values, the shakier the evidence.

According to Bogdan's analysis, the share of fragile significant results had dropped from 32% at the start of the crisis to 26%. He also found that the downward slide appeared in every major sub-discipline, suggesting a broad cultural shift toward sturdier work.

Sample size was a key driver. The median size climbed rapidly from 2015 while the reported effect sizes inched downward. This was likely because small studies inflate the effects of their findings whereas bigger ones give truer but smaller estimates. Together, these trends pointed to rising statistical pow-

Journals with higher impact scores and papers with more citations also tended to feature fewer fragile p-values, reversing a pre-crisis pattern in which splashy outlets often pu-

er across the literature.

blished weaker but more sensational findings.

Bogdan revealed one curiosity: scientists at topranked universities still published slightly shakier numbers. He used textmining to explain the mismatch. Words tied to biology-heavy, clinically demanding studies were associated with fragile results as well as high-ranking institutions. This is because such projects are expensive, labour-intensive, and often ethically constrained, making large

samples difficult to gather. In sum, psychology appears to have tightened its standards even as some better-funded corners of the field remain under-powered because they're

tackling tough questions. To rebuild public trust. scholars at large have recommended that research groups and journals adopt open-data policies and preregister studies (so even negative results are reported), and that governments better fund resource-heavy studies.

Arc therapy beats tricky cancer while sparing nearby tissue

The first person to receive step-and-shoot SPArc was a 46-year-old woman whose parotid-gland cancer had spread along her facial nerve towards the base of her skull

Vasudevan Mukunth

team of experts in the U.S. has successfully used a technique called step-and-

shoot spot-scanning proton arc therapy (SPArc) to treat a patient's adenoid cystic carcinoma for the first time. SPArc works by targeting tumours with protons while sparing surrounding tissue.

The findings of the team, at the Corewell Health William Beaumont University Hospital, were published in the June 2025 issue of the International Journal of Particle Therapy.

The team compared the results of three techniques: SFO-IMPT (the current standard of care), stepand-shoot SPArc, and fully dynamic SPArc (simulated with computers). The SPArc methods reduced radiation delivered to the brainstem (by 10%), optical chiasm (56%), oral cavity (72%), and spinal canal (90%) over SFO-IMPT.

"This is definitely sign icant," Narayana Subramaniam, lead consultant, Head and Neck Surgical Oncology at Aster International Institute of Oncology, Bengaluru, said. "In tumours of the head and neck, limiting dose delivery to organs at risk is a major consideration of treatment planning. When these organs receive a higher dose of radiation than they can tolerate, they undergo irreparable damage."

fully-dynamic While SPArc performed better, Step by

SPArc works by targeting

A woman receives radiation therapy to treat her cancer. GETTY IMAGES

- A team has used step-and-shoot proton arc therapy to treat a parotid gland cancer for
- The therapy significantly minimised damage to nearby organs over SFO-IMPT, the current standard of care
- A 46 y.o. woman received step-and-shoot SPArc after her parotid-gland cancer had spread towards the base of her skull

continuing working

■ In this time, the woman reportedly had 'minor skin irritation" and no issues eating or

■ In June-August 2024, she completed 33

sessions with step-and-shoot SPArc and

received 66 grays of radiation

Synthetic CT scans were used to track dose delivery, the therapy's performance, and develop adaptive treatment plans

the difference between the two arc styles was small, the team wrote. In dynamic SPArc, the dose's energy and point of delivery is constantly adjusted, whereas in step-and-shoot the machine follows a pre-programmed pattern.

The researchers wrote that dynamic SPArc is still under development and awaits regulatory clearance and integration with existing oncology information systems.

The first person to receive step-and-shoot SPArc was a 46-year-old woman whose parotid-gland cancer had spread along her facial nerve towards the base of her skull. In June-August 2024, the team said she completed 33 sessions with step-and-shoot SPArc. During this, the woman reportedly had "minor skin irritation" and no issues eating or continuing working. According to the American Cancer Society, conventional side-effects of radiation therapy for head and neck cancers include fatigue, nausea, trouble swallowing, etc. Dr. Subramaniam said

the technology is "likely to be valuable in tumours that are located in anatomically compley areas like the skull base ... where dose delivery has to be precise with reduced spillage to surrounding critical areas. It's also likely to be valuable in large or extensive tumours, where the tumour can be targeted accurately with limited collateral damage to the surrounding tissues."

The treatment protocol included a computer programme that scanned through all possible spots and energy layers where the proton beams could be

of tissue that receives proton beams of a specific energy. The energy determines the beam's range: how far it is able to penetrate the tissue. When the machine fixes one energy level, its scanning nozzle sweeps dozens of suitable spots and deposits the radiation dose in that energy layer. Then the machine switches to the next energy level and repeats the process, this time delivering a beam with a little more range. This way the whole tumour is 'painted' with radiation.

An energy layer is a slice

In each session, once the woman was in position, the team performed a cone-beam computed tomography (CBCT) scan. A machine-learning model converted the CBCT data into a synthetic CT with which the team could track the doses to be delivered.

Over the first two weeks, synthetic CT revealed the woman had lost weight and the tumour dose coverage had thus slipped 3-5%. The team adjusted

for this from the 13th day. The gantry was set up to have nine beam angles covering a 180° arc around the woman. It delivered one dose, moved 20°, delivered the second, moved 20°, delivered the third, and so on. The paper said each session took 15-18 minutes and the treatment benefited from the nearcontinuous

The SFO-IMPT and (simulated) dynamic SPArc methods used the same target plan and had the same goals: deliver a fixed total dose in 33 daily treatments and ensure the proton range isn't off by more than 3.5%.

delivery.

"With very precise radiotherapy delivery, the concern is that small tumours can be missed, referred to as geographical miss, as movements as subtle as breathing can change their position, and they can shrink in size over the course of treatment and result in inferior cancer cure rates," Dr. Subramaniam said.

significant "Another concern is cost," he added. "These technologies are very expensive and are often suitable for a small patient population. This results in a significant financial burden on the healthcare system and the risk that it may be used in situations where it is not indicated."



3D-printed electronic nose sniffs out deadly methanol

Drinking spirits that secretly contain methanol often causes serious blindness or death in India. To spot this danger cheaply, Australian researchers have 3D-printed an electronic nose: a thin film that mixes a porous metal-organic framework with a conductive graphene on a ceramic chip. When methanol vapour touches the film, its electrical resistance jumps more than it does for ethanol. This way, the sensor reliably picks up methanol at just 50 ppb even when ethanol levels are 10 ppm and humidity is high.



This penicillin needs the green light to work

Scientists have made a version of penicillin that only works when green light is shined on it. They plugged a small light-sensitive 'cap' onto the antibiotic's handle, so in the dark it couldn't grab its bacterial target. Exposing the capped drug to green light popped the cap and restored the drug's potency. In lab tests, the awakened drug stopped Escherichia coli from growing wherever light fell while the penicillin in the dark didn't. The scientists say the technology could help slash antibiotic overuse.



Life of Mongolian dino presages T. rex rise as apex

Scientists have found a new meat-eating dinosaur in Mongolia called Khankhuuluu mongoliensis. Its bones show it was a midsize cousin of T. rex that lived roughly 90 million years ago. By lining up its skeleton with many other tyrannosaurs, the team found that small Asian dinos like Khankhuuluu first crossed a land bridge into North America, where they rapidly evolved. The discovery reshapes our picture of when, where, and how the tyrannosaur family rose to the top.

Cooking oils can help recover silver from e-waste



In families across the world, silver is used as a precious metal, next to gold. Happy occasions in most families are celebrated with gold and silver garlands and rings. Silver is, of course, less expensive than

But when it comes to use in industry and energy production, silver beats gold flat. Silver is used to capture sunlight through rooftop solar panels across India, generating about 108 GW of clean and green electricity yearly across the nation (about 10% of what is generated from coal). In addition, mobile phones used by about 1.4 billion people across India use silver for electricity

conduction and storage. Each mobile phone uses 100-200 mg of silver. Likewise, a typical laptop computer uses 350 mg of silver, and we have about 50 million laptops in India.

If these are the numbers in India, one can imagine what the numbers across the world might be. It is estimated that about 7,275 metric tonnes of silver are used across the world for these purposes, but barely 15% is recuperated. And when a phone or a computer is damaged or discarded, the silver content is lost. If only we could get back this silver from the waste electrical and electronic equipment...

Clearly, silver plays a critical role in the clean energy transition. Maria Smirnova writes in the 2025 'Sprott Silver Report' that as more and more countries generate renewable power using solar panels, the demand for silver



Vegetable oils used in our daily cuisine contain organic fatty acids. GETTY IMAGES

in the coming years will steadily increase. She points out that while some groups have considered using other metals (including lithium, cobalt, and nickel), it is still silver that plays a fundamental role in cleaner and greener energy production. And demand for silver is expected to increase by about 170% by the year. In addition, cars, buses, and trains have started using solar power rather than petrol as fuel. Ms. Smirnova further points out that the International Energy Agency predicts that by 2035, every other car sold worldwide will be electric. That would mean the need for more silver. It is against this back-

ground that a paper by Anze Zupanc, Prof. Timo Repo, and colleagues from Finland has come up with an efficient chemical method to recycle silver: using organic fatty acids, such as linolenic or oleic acids, which are found in seeds, nuts, and vegetable oils (such as olive oil or groundnut oil), which in turn are used in our daily cuisine.

Recovering silver from electronic waste is not simple: it may generate toxic substances from the use of strong acids and cyanide. Rather than use traditional methods of isolating silver from other metals and alloys, the group has come up with a method to separate and recover silver using the chemical method of using common unsaturated fatty acids, abundant in sunflower, groundnut, and other oils. The group found that these are recyclable and thus better than organic solvents and water media.

The researchers also found this method applicable to 'urban mining', where silver retrieval from waste electrical and electronic wastes (WEEE) from discarded computer motherboard pieces becomes possible. The research team concludes, "fatty acids may, therefore, become the next generation of media for treating precious multi-metal waste substrates". evenly mixed instead of

Question Corner

Squishy stuff

What is soft matter?

Soft matter is the branch of

science that studies materials that can be shaped, stretched, squished or flowed by applying small forces. The building blocks of soft matter are held together by weak forces that heating can easily displace, so the material changes shape without needing much energy. Soft-matter research asks questions such as: How do long polymer chains become entangled to make plastic flexible? How do soap molecules arrange themselves to form stable foams? Why do nanoparticles in milk stay

these questions lets engineers design better bike helmets with energy-absorbing foams, tastier ice cream by controlling ice crystals and air bubbles, safer drugs using gel networks, and stronger yet lighter materials like graphene aerogel nanolattices. In short, soft matter is the science of squishy stuff, where tiny interactions create the rich, often surprising behaviours seen in materials we use every day. Research on it is currently gaining in attention.

sinking? Understanding

Readers may send their questions /

Why has the Axiom-4 mission been delayed?

Why was the mission postponed four times? Has a new date for the launch been announced?

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:

n June 10, Axiom Space announced that the launch of its Axiom-4 mission to the International Space Station (ISS) would be postponed indefinitely. The mission crew included India's astronaut-designate Shubhanshu Shukla, who – if the rocket had lifted off as planned – would have become the first Indian in earth orbit after 40 years and the first Indian onboard the ISS.

What is the Axiom-4 mission?

The Axiom-4 mission is the fourth mission planned by U.S.-based spaceflight company Axiom Space to the ISS. It consists of a crew of four people – Peggy Whitson, Shubhanshu Shukla, Sławosz Uznański-Wiśniewski, and Tibor Kapu – plus cargo. To facilitate the mission, NASA had contracted Axiom, which in turn had contracted the Falcon 9 rocket and the Dragon crew capsule for the mission from SpaceX. The mission is commercial in nature and isn't part of

Ahead of Thursday's flight, SpaceX had tested one of the rocket's engines as a matter of procedure and discovered it was leaking liquid oxygen

the regular resupply missions NASA undertakes to the ISS. Following an announcement to strengthen India-U.S. ties in 2023, the Indian Space Research

Organisation (ISRO) spent more than ₹500 crore for Mr. Shukla to fly on the mission. Mr. Shukla is one of the four astronaut-designates for ISRO's forthcoming Gaganyaan human spaceflight mission. His compatriot Prasanth Nair is part of the Axiom-4 backup crew.

Why was the launch called off?

Ahead of Thursday's flight, SpaceX had tested one of the rocket's engines as a matter of procedure and discovered it was leaking liquid oxygen (LOX). LOX is cryogenic, meaning it needs to be stored at an extremely low temperature. If it is exposed to warmer conditions, the oxygen will turn into gas and not be usable as fuel.

Falcon 9 engines combust a mix of rocket-grade kerosene and LOX to generate thrust, so a LOX leak is a serious issue. The Axiom-4 mission had first been scheduled for lift-off on May 29 but had to be postponed four times. The delays were a result of a combination of unfavourable conditions related to the weather and the launch vehicle.

Then on June 12, NASA also said it and Russia's Roscosmos were tracking an anomalous pressure reading on an ISS service module after recent maintenance. "The postponement of Axiom Mission 4 provides additional time for NASA and Roscosmos to evaluate the situation and determine whether any additional troubleshooting is necessary," NASA had said in a statement.

Why was a new date not given immediately?

Since a LOX leak is a serious issue, SpaceX needed to find the precise source of the leak and why the underlying component(s) failed. How much time this would have taken was unclear. There are also particular launch 'windows' when a launch can deliver the crew to the ISS with minimal fuel and energy use, including the amount of time the crew capsule will be exposed to sunlight.

But because the ISS is so close to the earth, launch windows appear more frequently than those for the moon or Mars. NASA has already indicated there are more opportunities through June and July. Other factors that affect the suitability of a launch window include time on the launch pad for lift-off and access to free docking ports on the ISS. The U.S.'s NASA, Russia's Roscosmos, and (less often) some other space agencies also send missions to the ISS and need to plan when and for how long their capsules are docked.

At noon on June 14, it was announced that Axiom would reattempt the launch on June 19.

How hard is it to fix a LOX leak?

When it leaks, LOX flashes to an invisible vapour almost instantly and can be blown away by winds or fans nearby. Detecting it often entails time-consuming and labour-intensive work. Many joints in the components associated with storing and pumping LOX are insulated with foam or are located in nooks, meaning many regular leak-detecting methods can't physically reach them. Materials contract at cryogenic temperatures (around 90 K), so a hole may appear closed at ambient temperature but open at cryogenic temperatures. So once a hole has been fixed, engineers may need to repeat tests at both warm and cold conditions or test with liquid nitrogen to mimic operating conditions. Testing with LOX itself can be hazardous.

Fortunately, experts have been working with cryogenic engines for long enough to know which tools to use and which processes to follow once the leak has been identified. These include visual inspections, bubble tests, helium signature tests, flow-metre tests, ultrasonic microphones, and thermal imaging.

Who takes responsibility when a ship sinks?

What were the two recent shipping-related accidents which have happened across the coast of Kerala? What is a bill of lading? What role does the International Maritime Organization play when it comes to global merchant shipping? What is the SOLAS Convention?

Kalyanaraman. M

The story so far:

n June 9, *MV Wan Hai 503*, a Singapore-flagged vessel, caught fire nearly 88 nautical miles off Kerala's Beypore coast. The vessel was carrying more than 2,000 tonnes of fuel and hundreds of containers, the burning of which has caused concerns about the potential ecological impact. Search operations for the hazardous containers are still on. Earlier on May 25, the Liberian container ship *MSC ELSA 3* sank off the coast of Kochi, Kerala.

Who regulates global shipping?

Global merchant shipping is primarily regulated by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The IMO is among the most powerful UN agencies as many of its prescriptions and guidelines apply across shipping, given the multinational nature of the industry. Countries that are members of the IMO, India included, sign various conventions that lay down norms regarding pollution, safety, accidents, liabilities and responsibilities, after which member states pass appropriate domestic legislation or lay down rules that sync with convention prescriptions. In India, it is the Directorate General (DG) of Shipping which issues notices for such purposes. In some cases, Parliament sanction may also be needed.

In general, India is a signatory to many conventions, barring a few such as the 2004 Ballast Water Convention and the 2010 Hazardous and Noxious Substances (HNS) Convention. The HNS Convention deals with liability and compensation for damage related to Countries that are members of the IMO sign various conventions that lay down norms regarding pollution, safety, accidents, and liabilities the carriage of hazardous and noxious substances on ships. Given the increasing accidents on its coast, India may be served by ratifying this convention. In the case of the *ELSA* 3, in which many containers carrying noxious substances such as calcium carbide sank, India will seek remedies under its own merchant shipping laws.

Ships are owned by companies across the world. Greece and China lead in being homes to many of these companies. But the ships are often registered in various other nations for convenience and ease of operations. Though members of the IMO and governed by IMO norms, such nations offer less intrusive scrutiny and are therefore called Flags of Convenience (FOC). Liberia is one such country, Marshall Islands is another.

Who is liable for the loss of cargo and any damage to the environment?

The ship owner is liable for both. The trade of goods is governed by a contract called the bill of lading, which covers the transport of goods from one port to another, and is issued by the ship owner to the exporter during the loading of cargo. The owner of the bill of lading is the owner of the cargo. The bill of lading is a contract that lays down that the owner undertakes to ship the cargo from one port to another among other things. The bill of lading is transferred to the importer or the consignee, as per various shipment forms, after payment to the exporter. Typically, the importer opens a letter of credit to the exporter, and the bank then extends the credit and acquires the bill of lading from the exporter. When the receiver receives the cargo and makes the payment, he gets the bill of lading from the bank.

In case of damage or loss of cargo, the ship owner has to pay whoever owns the bill of lading. But that payment is covered by the Protection and Indemnity (P&I) Club, which is a cluster of several insurance companies who share the risk. Damage to the body of the ship and machinery, that is a business loss for the owner, is usually covered by indemnity. But in P&I, the insurer protects the owner against any claims on the owner too, such as in the case of damage to environment or loss of cargo or loss of life onboard the ship and elsewhere as a consequence of an accident involving the ship.

International conventions have capped the liability of the ship owner on loss of cargo, but there is no limit on claims against environment damage such as in the case of oil pollution or hazardous substances. The last could apply to the sunken containers of *ELSA 3* or *Wan Hai 503* that caught fire. Oil pollution damages itself

cover a vast range – impacting fish catch, affecting tourism, loss to other businesses, transportation and so on. The International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships upholds the polluter pays principle. Sometimes, however, national laws do protect against extended and potentially endless claims.

Who should salvage a ship that has sank?

This responsibility also rests with the ship owner. The Nairobi Convention on the Removal of Wrecks, 2007 governs this situation, and India is a signatory. Under this, the ship owner whose ship has sunk within the sovereign waters of India – up to 200 nautical miles from a reference line on the coast – has to salvage the ship. In case the ship cannot be refloated, especially if the waters are too deep, then the ship owner is liable for any claims of damage.

Why do ships still sink?

While advanced materials, knowledge, expertise and skill go into building ships, they are exposed to the vagaries of the sea and its multi-layered impact cannot always be predicted in a pinpointed way. For instance, in *ELSA 3*, as the ship started tilting to one side – listing, in shipping parlance – containers that were stowed on top fell into the sea that was already rough. This led to the list increasing on the heavier side which could have led to the ship sinking.

Quite often, a series of errors, mistakes and small incidents sync to create a major accident. By themselves, each of these mistakes and incidents are not a cause of much concern. Too often, such mistakes are manmade and often, egregious. Today merchant ships tend to sail close to the coast in search of mobile phone signals so that seafarers with roaming facilities can stay in touch with their friends or family. Wakashio, a bulk carrier, ran aground off Mauritius in 2020, leading to an oil spill, because it went too close to the shore in search of mobile phone signals. This was during the COVID-19 pandemic when seafarers were spending extended periods out at sea amidst concerns about their health and that of their families'.

The unsinkable Titanic was sunk because of human error. But after the sinking, a convention called Safety of Life At Sea (SOLAS) came into being. SOLAS is one of the key conventions that governs shipping and is often revised. A key lesson from the Titanic, that has now been implemented as a SOLAS norm, is that lifeboats on either side of the ship should have enough capacity to carry the number of people the ship is designed to carry. This means that if the ship tilts to one side and the lifeboats on only one side are accessible, even then they should be able to carry all those people on board to safety.

The shipping industry learns from each accident. The IMO revises and supplements its guidelines periodically regarding ship design and construction that are then adopted by the industry.



Wan Hai 503 that caught fire off the coast of Beypore in Kerala on June 10. AFP

How should sexual abuse survivors be treated?

Why was timely medical care denied to a minor rape survivor? What were the guidelines issued by Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma to hospitals about treating sexual assault survivors? Can a sexual assault survivor seek the termination of a pregnancy beyond 24 weeks?

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:

he Delhi High Court recently issued a series of guidelines to streamline procedures in hospitals handling Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) cases involving sexual assault survivors, after finding that miscommunication, and administrative lapses had resulted in the denial of timely medical care to a minor rape survivor.

What was the case?

Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma issued the guidelines while adjudicating upon the plea of a 17-year-old rape survivor who had been taken to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi, for medical examination and termination of pregnancy. Although accompanied by a police officer following the registration of an FIR, hospital authorities initially refused to conduct an ultrasound, citing the absence of identity documents. The matter was then referred to the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), which directed the hospital to proceed with the termination and submit a status report. However, the hospital continued to insist on identity proof and age verification through an ossification test.

In all cases where a rape or sexual assault survivor is found to be pregnant, a medical examination must be conducted without delay

The ultrasound was eventually carried out after a CWC member personally intervened. By that time, the minor was found to be approximately 25 weeks and 4 days pregnant. The hospital then declined to convene a medical board, contending that a court order was required as the pregnancy appeared to exceed the 24-week statutory limit prescribed under the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, 1971. Following the court's intervention, a seven-member medical board was finally constituted at AIIMS to assess the feasibility of terminating the pregnancy. After conducting an ultrasound, the board determined that the gestational age of the foetus was 23 weeks and 4 days, and that the survivor was physically and mentally fit to undergo the procedure. This contradicted the hospital's earlier record, which had put the gestational age at 25 weeks and 4 days. The court noted with anguish that no explanation was provided for this discrepancy.

What directions were issued to hospitals? The court observed that when an investigating

The court observed that when an investigating officer presents a sexual assault survivor for medical examination, along with the official case file and FIR details, separate identity verification may be dispensed with. It further stressed that in cases involving minors, procedural safeguards applicable to routine diagnostic cases should not be applied rigidly or mechanically.

be applied rigidly or mechanically. Justice Sharma directed that in all cases where a rape or sexual assault survivor is found to be pregnant, a comprehensive medical examination must be conducted without delay. In instances where the gestational age appears to exceed 24 weeks, hospital administrations were instructed to immediately constitute a medical board to conduct the necessary examination and submit a status report to the appropriate authorities without awaiting specific court orders. Hospitals were also directed to ensure that updated Standard Operating Procedures and relevant legal guidelines are readily accessible in both Emergency and Gynaecology Departments, and that duty doctors are regularly briefed and sensitised on their obligations under the MTP Act, the

Protection of Children from Sexual Offences

(POCSO) Act, and other binding directives issued by the Supreme Court and High Courts.

The court further mandated that quarterly training programmes be organised for doctors and medical staff in coordination with legal aid bodies such as the Delhi State Legal Services Authority and the Delhi High Court Legal Services Committee (DHCLSC). Each government hospital was also directed to designate a nodal officer to oversee MTP cases and related medico-legal processes, serving as a single point of contact for the CWC, investigating officers, and the courts. Additionally, consent for MTP procedures was to be obtained from the survivor or her guardian, in a language they fully comprehend, such as Hindi or English.

What was the Delhi police instructed to do?

The court directed the Delhi Police to ensure that investigating officers handling POCSO and sexual assault cases undergo mandatory training every six months, with a focus on MTP procedures, court orders, and coordination with medical and welfare authorities. Certificates of completion are to be duly recorded in the officers' service files. Police officers were also instructed to ensure that sexual assault survivors are presented before the concerned doctor, hospital, or medical board at the earliest opportunity, along with all requisite case files.

What were the guidelines issued earlier? On April 17, Justice Sharma issued guidelines for

CWCs and the DHCLSC to prevent delays in such cases, while hearing a plea involving a minor sexual assault survivor seeking termination of a pregnancy beyond 27 weeks. She directed that whenever a minor survivor with a gestational age exceeding 24 weeks is referred by the CWC to a hospital for examination or termination, the CWC must immediately notify the DHCLSC. Upon receiving such information, the DHCLSC shall promptly assess the need for legal intervention, including approaching the competent court for permission to terminate the pregnancy, so as to avoid further delay.

Earlier, in January 2023, the judge mandated that during the medical examination of a sexual assault survivor, a urine pregnancy test must be conducted. If the survivor is found pregnant and is an adult seeking termination, the investigating officer must ensure that she is presented before the medical board on the same day. State governments were also ordered to ensure that medical boards are constituted in the hospitals.



Timely care: Duty doctors should be briefed on their obligations under the MTP Act and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act. ANI

The last 'revolutionary' of Iran

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

The head of Iran's theocratic regime faces the greatest test since the 1979 revolution with the country's regional influence waning and Israel freely carrying out attacks at its nuclear and missile facilities and assassinating its top commanders

Stanly Johny

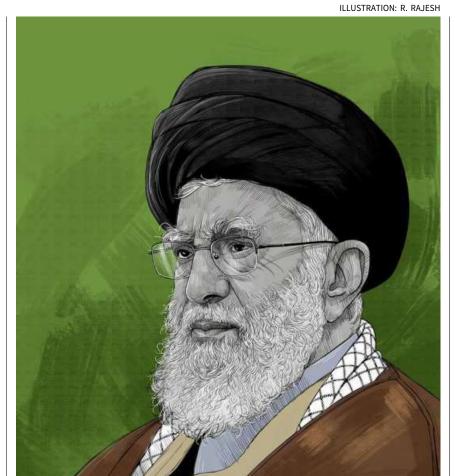
n Tehran's Ebrat Museum, once a notorious prison for political detainees under the Shah, a narrow corridor is lined with photographs of former inmates. Among them, in a brown wooden frame, is the image of a middle-aged man with a bearded face and thick rectangular glasses. The name beneath, written in Farsi, reads: Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. Preserved by the revolutionary regime as a grim reminder of the brutality of the Shah's secret police, SAVAK, Ebrat displays torture chambers and documents torture methods. One tiny, dimly lit cell, with a single barred window, has been left intact - it is where Mr. Khamenei was held. Inside stands a life-size wax figure of the Ayatollah, older than he appears in the photograph. Dressed in a black turban, which suggests lineage to the Prophet Mohammed, round spectacles, and a brown robe, the statue evokes both suffering and resolve. "Khamenei was imprisoned six times by the Shah's police. He was brought here in 1974," a museum official told this writer during a visit in February 2022. "In autumn 1974, he endured the most brutal and savage torture for eight months in there," reads a short biography posted outside the cell. "The Shah wanted to break him. But God wanted him as the country's rahbar (leader)," said the museum official.

Mr. Khamenei, who has been the rahbar of the Islamic Republic since 1989, has built a theocratic system that is loyal to him. He is the Supreme Leader, the jurist of the guardians. A conservative cleric, he has led Iran through political and economic upheavals, and has survived both reformist and hardliner Presidents. But in recent years, on Mr. Khamenei's watch, unrest has spread across the country. In recent months, Iran's influence abroad has dramatically waned, particularly after Israel started attacking the so-called 'axis of resistance', the Iran-backed militia network in West Asia. On June 13, Israel, Iran's arch foe, launched a daunting attack inside Iran, targeting its nuclear facilities and ballistic missile sites, and assassinating its top chain of command. With the Israeli leadership threatening to "burn" Tehran, the 86-year-old Ayatollah must be feeling the weight of the revolution on his shoulders.

Child of revolution

Born in 1939 in royalist Iran, Ali Khamenei grew up in the holy city of Mashhad, which hosts the shrine of Imam Reza, the eighth Imam of Twelver Shiism. Like many clerics of his generation, his political views were influenced by the 1953 coup, a covert operation orchestrated by the CIA and the MI6, against the elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh. The coup reinstated Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran. This episode turned a generation of Iranians against the Shah. The clerical establishment, under the leadership of the exiled cleric, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, played a critical role in the anti-Shah agitation that was building up across the country. From the early 1960s, Mr. Khamenei was actively involved in the protests. When the Shah regime collapsed and Khomeini returned to Tehran from Paris in February 1979 to establish a new Islamic Republic, Mr. Khameni rose quickly through the clerical ranks. Khomeini named him as Deputy Defence Minister. He became the Imam of Friday prayers in Tehran, a position which he still holds. If Imam Khomeini was the Supreme Leader of the new regime, Imam Khamenei emerged as its chief commissar.

In June 1981, he was seriously wounded by a tape recorder bomb that went off in Tehran's Abouzar Mosque. His right arm got paralysed and he lost hearing in one ear. "I won't need the hand; it would suffice if my brain and tongue work," Mr. Khamenei once said about the attack. The blast, however, solidified his image as a survivor - a living martyr of the revolution. Within a few months, he got elected as Iran's President. When Khomeini died in 1989, the revolution became an orphan. Khomeini had established a unique system in Iran vilayat-e-faqih, 'guardianship of the jurist' or the rule of the clergy. With no clear successor in line, senior clerics tuned to Mr. Khamenei. Ali Akbar



Hashemi Rafsanjani, another revolutionary figure with considerable influence in the system, played a key role in the selection of Mr. Khamenei. "I am truly not worthy of this title," Mr. Khamenei told the assembly that picked him. "My nomination should make us all cry tears of blood." But he took the chalice. And Rafsanjani became President.

Soon after his ascent to the top office, Mr. Khamenei promised Iranians that the revolution would "lead the country on the path of material growth and progress". But he faced daunting political and economic challenges. He became the Supreme Leader at a time when the revolutionary fervour was receding.

The Iran-Iraq war was over. The new regime's internal enemies and critics, from the terrorist Mujahideen-e-Khalq to the leftist Tudeh party, had been suppressed. But there were still strong liberal currents in Iranian polity and society. Despite Mr. Khamenei's vision for a centralised clerical rule, voters elected Mohammed Khatami, a moderate reformist, as President in 1997. Mr. Khatami had promised reforms from within. But when protests broke out seeking more individual freedoms, Mr. Khamenei stood by the hardliners. The protests were brutally suppressed, and Mr. Khatami was turned into a lame-duck President. The election of Khatami was an opportunity for Iran to open up the system and implement incremental reforms. But the way the regime handled the protests only reinforced the rigidity of the system,

Perilous cycle

While political tensions persisted, what made them worse was the economic mess Iran was in. A country

which led to further cracks.

rich with natural resources, Iran was grappling with hyperinflation, stymied growth and a tanking currency, mainly due to the western sanctions. Mr. Khamenei knew that the future of the revolution was linked to the state's ability in creating economic opportunities. So even when he called America the 'Great Satan', he sanctioned nuclear talks with the U.S. after Hassan Rouhani, a moderate cleric, became President in 2013.

The 2015 agreement between Iran and world powers was the best chance for Tehran to enter the global economic mainstream and rebuild itself. But then Donald Trump entered the scene. In 2018, Mr. Trump, in his first term, destroyed the agreement and reimposed sanctions on Iran. Ever since, the economic crisis at home got worsened, along with tightening repression, which triggered frequent uprisings. It became a perilous cycle for Iranians.

And then Israel, after the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack, turned against the Iran-backed network in West Asia, which acted as Tehran's forward defence and its deterrence. Mr. Khamenei watched helplessly when Israel destroyed Gaza, degraded Hezbollah and bombed the regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria, which eventually collapsed. It was only a matter of time before the Israelis came for Iran. And they did so on June 13.

Set against Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu, Ayatollah Khamenei finds himself with few good options. Iran's retaliatory strike against Israel on the night of June 13 was a bold display of force - a message that the Islamic Republic still has the firepower to hit the "Little Satan'. But the conflict is far from over. Iran's defences remain vulnerable; its regional axis has been rolled back; its partners have their own problems. And Mr. Trump, who extended an offer of dialogue which Iran had cautiously accepted, is throwing his weight behind Mr. Netanyahu. Mr. Khamenei, once described by a reformist politician as the 'Sun of the Iranian solar system', now faces the greatest test since the revolution – to protect the regime and protect the

THE GIST

When the Shah regime collapsed and Imam Khomeini returned to Tehran from Paris in February 1979 to establish a new Islamic Republic, Ali Khamenei rose quickly through the clerical ranks

In 1981, months after surviving an assassination attempt, Khamenei became the President. In 1989, after the death of Khomeini, he was chosen as the Supreme Leader

As the Supreme Leader, Khameini promised 'material growth and progress', but his rule has been marred by economic decline, political unrest and security crises

Manipur's Black T-Shirts

Arambai Tenggol

The radical Meitei group, which is accused of violence and looting weapons, says its main goal is to 'defend and protect Manipur and India'

Rahul Karmakar

jolence returned to Manipur after a brief lull when security personnel picked up Asem Kanan Singh, the self-styled 'army chief' of Arambai Tenggol (AT), a radical Meitei group, from one of its strategic units in Imphal on the night of June 7. The following day, sleuths of the CBI arrested him at the Imphal Airport and brought him to Guwahati for questioning. The AT lifted its 10-day shutdown across the Imphal Valley on the fourth day after officials assuaged tempers by saying Mr. Singh, a suspended Manipur Police head constable, was not arrested for his AT connection but for involvement in several criminal cases.

One of these cases related to arms smuggling in 2020 is almost as old as the AT, which derives its name from a poisoned dart-like weapon (Arambai) used by the troops of the Manipuri kings against Burmese invaders and a cavalry platoon (Tenggol). It was no coincidence that the AT's primary fight turned out to be against the Kuki-Zo people, perceived as "illegal" settlers from Myanmar.

Founded by Manipur's titular king and the BJP's Rajya Sabha member, Leishemba Sanajaoba, the group uses the 'Salai Taret' flag, representing seven



Meitei clans. It adopted a religious and nationalist rhetoric, invoking the pre-Hindu Sanamahi faith of the Meiteis and envisaging a return to the old glory of the Meitei kingdom of Kangleipak.

The group is headed by Korounganba Khuman, referred to by his subordinates as pathou, meaning revered leader. The members of the group, estimated to be 60,000 now, can be identified from their black T-shirts bearing a red insignia of three horsemen charging with weapons.

The AT came into discussion in 2022, around the same time the Meitei Leepun – a similar radical group founded by Pramot Singh in 2015 – began drawing attention. Both shot to prominence after the ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities broke out in May 2023, but the more organised, aggressive, and armed AT soon pushed the Meitei Leepun into near-

obscurity. The organisa-

tion believes its members are like the warriors who once served the Meitei

During the initial days of the conflict, AT members were accused of going on a rampage, organising blockades on roads leading to the hills where Kuki-Zo people living in the Meiteidominated Imphal Valley fled to, looting arms from the police armouries, and indulging in arson. It was also accused of hounding and killing Kuki-Zo people.

Parallel government

The group allegedly received the support of former Chief Minister Nongthombam Biren Singh and virtually ran a parallel government during much of the conflict.

This was evident when it summoned two MPs, including Mr. Sanajaoba, and 37 MLAs to Imphal's historic Kangla Fort in January 2024, made them take an oath to preserve the integrity of Manipur and sign a six-point demand to be

communicated to the Centre. In a Facebook post before the summoning, the AT said it would consider absentee political leaders as "enemies of the Meiteis" and would deal with them accordingly. The AT went on the

back foot after the President's Rule was imposed in Manipur on February 13, days after Mr. Biren Singh quit as the Chief Minister. Soon after, the group surrendered some 300 firearms during a seven-day ultimatum set for wielders of weapons looted during the peak of the conflict.

The AT has often underlined its nationalist outlook, unlike several Meitei extremist outfits, which insist on Manipur's sovereignty. At a traditional annual event in Imphal on April 13, Mr. Sanajaoba stressed this difference to an audience that included muscular "men in black" belonging to the AT.

He said the group was established to "defend our land, culture, and identity" and that it was not antinational. "Our goal is to defend and protect Manipur and India, but we were compelled to take a role we never intended to. Some may say that Arambai Tenggol have surrendered their weapons and are living as civilians. But, at any given time, we will be ready for the call to defend our land," he said.

Meta's data broker

Alexandr Wang

The Scale AI CEO, who is set to lead Meta's 'superintel' research lab, says AI will dominate warfare in near future and data will become a new kind of ammunition

John Xavier

lexandr Wang, a 28-year-old entrepreneur, emerged as a key player in the rapidly evolving landscape of artificial intelligence. His company, Scale AI, has strategically positioned itself at the forefront transformation.

Founded in 2016 as a data labelling company for autonomous vehicles, Scale AI quickly gained prominence. It secured partnerships with major tech giants such as OpenAI, Microsoft, Nvidia, and even the U.S. government.

In a significant development, Meta Platforms has invested \$14.3 billion to acquire a 49% stake in Scale AI. This acquisition marks a pivotal moment for the company, which now specialises in data curation and intelligent dataset management. As part of this deal, Mr. Alexandr is expected to assume a leadership role within Meta, leading the company's new "superintelligence" research lab.

This move is a muchneeded talent refresh and reputation boost for Meta, which has been losing AI researchers and struggling with its Llama 4 launch. The company is bleeding AI talent as researchers are leaving for rival French startup Mistral.



Meta's investment in AI is a significant move, and it aligns with the strategies employed by other tech giants. For instance, Microsoft has backed OpenAI, while Amazon supports Anthropic. These partnerships highlight the crucial role of specialised AI firms in the broader ecosystem.

However, the Meta-Scale AI deal has sparked discussions about its implications. Some believe it represents an "exit" for Scale AI, potentially impacting its ability to serve Meta's competitors like Google and OpenAI. Others question whether it's a strategic partnership to enhance Scale AI's capabilities while bolstering Meta's AI standing, or if it's a talent acquisition move by Meta.

The deal's structure, with Mr. Alexandr reportedly retaining voting control over Scale despite his move to Meta, indicates a complex arrangement aimed at balancing these interests. Regardless, this move underscores Meta's commitment to leading the AI race. Mr. Alexandr, a vocal advocate for the strategic importance of AI for the U.S. as a matter of national security, was shaped by his upbringing in Los Alamos, New Mexico, the birthplace of the atomic bomb. In a TED Talk, he drew parallels between the transformative impact of the atomic bomb on past warfare and the current potential of AI to redefine global power.

AI arms race

Mr. Alexandr asserts that, as seen in the Second World War with the atomic bomb, the country that rapidly and effectively integrates new technology into warfare emerges victorious. He warns that the U.S. risks falling behind in the AI arms race, particularly against China, which he claims is ahead in accumulating the vast datasets necessary to develop powerful AI models. Mr. Alexandr has urged the U.S. government to establish a national data reserve, treating data as a strategic national resource

akin to petroleum. Scale AI has actively pursued defence contracts, collaborating with the U.S. Department of Defense, Air Force, and the Army to test and evaluate large language models for military purposes. Mr. Alexandr views this work as a "moral imperative", especially after witnessing China's advances in AI for surveillance and military

Mr. Alexandr predicts that AI will dominate warfare within the next decade. He emphasises that "data will become a new kind of ammunition in the era of AI warfare". This underscores his call for robust investment in data infrastructure, not only for military superiority but also as a deterrent, akin to

nuclear capabilities. For Mr. Alexandr and Scale AI, the mission is clear: to provide the foundational data layer that accelerates AI development across all sectors, including national security. While Meta's significant investment marks a new chapter for Scale AI, potentially altering its client dynamics, Mr. Alexandr's core message about the paramount importance of data and the strategic implications of AI remains unchanged.

HT TO THE REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Indira Gandhi and the making of Emergency

The structural transformation of Indian politics since 1967 that shifted power towards the executive, leading to a collective jettisoning of the rules of the game by the Indian political elite, and accentuated by the global conjuncture, fastened the lurch towards authoritarian rule

lmost 50 years to date, on June 12, 1975, Justice Jagmohan Lal Sinha of the Allahabad High Court delivered a judgement that came as a thunderclap. Justice Sinha held Prime Minister Indira Gandhi guilty of corrupt practices during the 1971 general elections, voiding her membership of Parliament and barring her from holding elective office for six years. Thirteen days later, Indira Gandhi got President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed to issue a proclamation under Article 352 of the constitution declaring an internal Emergency. This enabled her to inaugurate a spell of avowedly authoritarian rule, incarcerating her political opponents, muzzling the press, casting aside the fundamental rights, and mauling the Constitution.

Five decades on, the Emergency continues to haunt Indian democracy as a memento mori (reminder of one's mortality). This is hardly surprising, for many leaders who bestride contemporary politics — from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin — were shaped in the crucible of the Emergency. The Union government has declared its anniversary on 25 June as "Sam-

vidhan Hatya Divas". Public debates on the Emergency also tend to generate more heat than light. These focus all but exclusively on Indira Gandhi's decision to impose the Emergency: Was it solely to ensure her continuance in office or was it principally a response to the Opposition's drive to unseat her in the wake of the high court's verdict? How credible was her claim that there was a grave internal threat abetted by external powers?

Inasmuch as Indira Gandhi was responsible for imposing the Emergency, these questions will continue to be probed. Yet understanding her concerns and intentions is not the same thing as causally explaining the onset of the Emergency. As I argue in my new book, such an explanation must bring together changes and develop-

ments at the levels of structure, conjuncture and event.

Start at the structural or systemic level. Political systems should be understood not merely as agglomerations of leaders, parties or social groups, but with reference to two system-wide components that influence all actors. The first is the institutional arrange-

ment of political actors according to their differing functions and relative power. In the Indian case, this is the functional separation of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. The second component is the constituent rules

EMERGENCY

- procedures, principles, norms, understandings — that regulate political competition: The "rules of the game" of parliamentary democracy. The Indian political system underwent a significant transformation between 1967 and 1975. This transformation occurred on both systemic dimensions. Importantly, this transformation preceded the Emergency

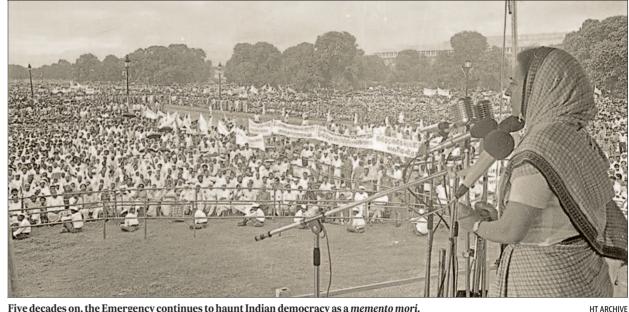
The years between 1967 and 1973 witnessed a dramatic shift in relative power towards the executive, especially the office of the prime minister. This began with the Congress party's poor showing in the general elections of 1967 - an event that catalysed a power struggle within the party, culminating in Indira Gandhi's move to split the Congress in 1969. This left the prime minister in stronger control of her party. Soon, Indira Gandhi gambled in calling for elections a year ahead of schedule. And her party won a stunning victory in March 1971. This was followed by India's military triumph over Pakistan later that year. This, in turn, propelled the new Congress to a dramatic win in the state elections of 1972. None of these could have been predicted, but

cumulatively they cemented Indira Gandhi's hold over her party. The parliamentary party ceased to operate as a subtle check on the executive. On the contrary, the party was now beholden to the prime minister for its political survival.

The political opposition had coalesced against the Congress ahead of the 1967 elections and had reaped the dividends of the first-past-the post system. Yet their Grand Alli-

ance in 1971 proved spectacularly ineffective and unravelled after their abysmal performance. However, the opposition parties' decision to go alone in the state assembly elections of 1972 also failed to revive their fortunes. The political opposition was now a blasted heath and the parliament's position turned merely topographical.

This extraordinary strengthening of executive power enabled Indira Gandhi to challenge the functions and powers of the judiciary, culminating in the assertion of prime ministerial



Five decades on, the Emergency continues to haunt Indian democracy as a memento mori.

Srinath

authority by the supersession of judges and the appointment of a pliant chief justice in the Supreme Court in April 1973. A tame Supreme Court would go on to endorse the executive's actions during the Emergency.

These dramatic power shifts were accompanied by changes in the collective beliefs and expectations of political actors about the rules of the game of parliamentary democracy. As the game grew increasingly competitive from 1967 onwards, its rules, procedures, and norms were frequently cast aside in pursuit of power. Horse-trading of legislators

shifting party allegiances, weak and unstable governments, misuse of constitutional powers to undermine governments and dissolve legislatures - all became accepted features of the Indian political landscape.

This dimension of systemic change was accelerated by the global conjuncture; processes that played out concurrently and impinged decisively on India. In particular, the collapse of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates and the oil shock triggered by the Arab-Israel war of 1973 touched off a tidal wave of global inflation. The Indian economy experienced its most serious bout of inflation

in the 20th century. Massive popular protests in Guiarat. Bihar, and elsewhere were a direct consequence of this economic crisis. The student movement's success in ejecting the Con-

> gress government in Guiarat and the upsurge in Bihar under Jayaprakash Narayan led the main opposition parties to regard extra-parliamentary mass agitation as the political route to weaken the Congress party, given their inability to humble it in the hustings

Raghavan This shift in beliefs and expectations occurred across the political spectrum. In April 1974, LK Advani told the Jana Sangh's general council that

"dethroning an elected government by extraconstitutional means had acquired legitimacy". The Socialist Party adopted a resolution later that year: "Since the capacity of the parliamentary system to achieve reform and renewal from within is getting severely limited, extra-constitutional action and popular initiative become absolutely necessary." EMS Namboodiripad of the CPI(M) wrote that "they do not accept the position that every issue must be solved only through constitutional means". Above all, the prime minister herself had ceased to believe in the intrinsic

value of democracy. As she wrote to Yehudi Menuhin soon after imposing the Emergency, "Democracy is not an end. It is merely a sys tem by which one proceeds towards the goal. Hence democracy cannot be more important than the progress, unity or survival of the

Against the background of this systemic change and conjunctural crisis came the events of 12 June 1975 that threatened the prime minister's continuation in office. The lurch towards authoritarian rule was now unavoidable in the sense that the conditions needed to prevent it were no longer obtained.

Indira Gandhi was, of course, culpable for the decision to impose the Emergency, But its onset was caused by this larger structural transformation of Indian politics. This was, in turn, the outcome of a collective jettisoning of the rules of the game by the Indian political elite. This perspective on the origins of the Emergency when juxtaposed with its disastrous course and its turbulent aftermath invites a historical verdict in the vein of Shake speare's Romeo and Juliet: All are punished

Srinath Raghavan is the author of Indira Gandhi and the Years that Transformed India The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Valmik Thapar: Cousin, critic, and wise counsel

have to admit I was surprised. I knew he was a celebrity. On the subject of tigers, he was a world authority. His 40 books and his BBC series, Land of the Tiger, were clear testimony. But the newspaper coverage of his death suggested a level of admiration and respect I sidered a truly special person — in many ways, an icon

Thus, Valmik Thapar's death revealed a legacy and a reputation his family had probably not appreciated. Perhaps even understood. Now, belatedly, we have realised the enormous impact he had as a conservationist and as an authority on tigers. He was the star of the present generation of our family.

In many ways, Valu, as we knew him, was like the tigers he loved. He was powerful and gruff. He was a man of few words but capable of large warm gestures. And his appearance was striking. Big and broad, with a most beguiling

smile and large twinkling eyes. Valu's laugh could bring everything to a sudden halt before the room spontaneously laughed with him.

Though I have known him all my life, I really got to know him in my 20s. I was of the age when you think you know more

On a holiday in India with a dear friend, Claire Winterschladen, Valu suggested we visit Ranthambore. "If vou haven't seen a tiger, you haven't lived", he teased and taunted us. "I'll take you there and you'll have the time of your lives.'

He was right. By day, we drove in jeeps, Valu often at the wheel, following tiger pug marks and sighting several of them often just a few feet away.

At night, by a bonfire on the banks of a lake, we drank rum and listened to his tales. Valu's stories of tigers and the jungle, told with his inordinate sense of drama, were riveting.

But what I didn't realise — although

clearly Valu knew — is what those days in Ranthambore would mean. It was my first holiday in a jungle. The first time I'd vacationed with a girlfriend. The first time there was no parental authority or guardian to watch over and ensure I didn't step out of line. But Valu knew this would be the case. That's why he was so keen we visit Ranthambore. He was doing his bit to help a cousin grow up!

In later years, when I was a journalist. he would often invite me to dinner and open my eyes to hidden aspects of stories I was following or to interpretations I had not thought about. Whenever he began a sentence with the words "have you thought of this", I knew I had not.

At first, I didn't realise that he was gently but cleverly guiding me. He did it unobtrusively. Sometimes, he would invite people to educate me. On other occasions, he would call to comment on an interview I'd done.

Once or twice, he would alert me to a story in a newspaper he thought I may have overlooked

On each occasion his advice was invaluable. He wasn't a politician, but he had an unerring feel for what would attract attention. He instinctively knew what would excite curiosity and could easily distinguish it from what was of interest only to the elites of Delhi's drawing

But Valu was also my fairest critic. Others may have chafed at his comments, but I knew he had watched what I'd done and

HE WASN'T A POLITICIAN, BUT HE HAD AN **UNERRING FEEL FOR** WHAT WOULD ATTRACT ATTENTION. HE INSTINCTIVELY KNEW WHAT WOULD EXCITE **CURIOSITY AND COULD** EASILY DISTINGUISH IT FROM WHAT WAS OF INTEREST ONLY TO THE ELITES OF DELHI'S DRAWING ROOMS

thought carefully before speaking. The never fully mastered — was his advice not to let my voice rise when I'm speaking. 'There's no need to let vour excitement show", he said, "The content of what you say should be sufficient to capture the audience's attention. Keep your voice at

an even pitch.' I rarely did. Now, every time I can't control my vocal chords and my voice rises up the register, I will remember Valu's sage advice. And that means I will be remembering him a lot!

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

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare



Marriage, and space for women to say No

conniving wife (allegedly). Splashy wedding videos (visibly). Picturesque honeymoon (unarguably). And then, the plot twist, murder. The exclamation marks just insert themselves.

Hathyakaand" in the mainstream press, TV news and social media. So much of what is being recorded is speculation with a large side of moralising — women are going too far, laws "favouring" women must be repealed and, even, take the family along on your honeymoon. The police investigation into the death

of 30-year-old Raja Raghuvanshi whose body was found in Sohra, the former and famous Cherrapunji, on June 2 is underway. Married on May 11, his 25-year-old wife Sonam has been arrested with four other men, including one said to be her boyfriend, allegedly for a hit job on the new husband.

Tucked away behind the screaming headlines is a story of love, longing, and marriage in modern India.

It's a story where marriage remains central to our lives. Even as daughters are being educated, the families consider it their foremost duty to see them properly married. And that means marrying in conformity with caste endogamy and family preferences. A 2018 survey found 93% of Indians chose arranged marriages against just 3% who marry for love. If you slice the data in terms of age, then amongst over-80s, 94% had had arranged marriages; amongst those in their 20s, it was 90%. In other words, over two generations, young Indians are still marrying the way their

Sonam's choice of a partner, reportedly, was a man not just three years younger but of a different, lower caste. To marry him would amount to dishonouring her family and the clan. Moreover, we are told that he was an employee in her father's business establishment and so, there was a class difference too.

Four months ago, Sonam met Raja in an arranged marriage set up where details a family-vetted stamp. Couples, invariably referred to as the boy and girl rather than the adults they actually are, are given the fig leaf of choice through a personal meet-

Why on earth did Sonam agree? We know very little of what was going on inside her head. And, most emphatically, nothing justifies the taking of an innocent life. Social circumstances cannot justify a choice between killing and saying no.

But in a country that in 2021 reported 33 murders in the name of honour, many women don't have the freedom to say No No to a man picked by their fathers, No to walking out of unhappy marriages, and No to marriage itself.

Ask why this crime is receiving the sort of coverage it is, and the answer is evident. When 140 women and girls globally are murdered every day by their intimate partners, it is not news. It's just another day in the life of a world where gender-based violence is normalised. But when the gender roles are reversed, you have an aberration and the patriarchy responds by asking: Are

women going too far? With the investigation far from over, the mob is already baying for Sonam's head and this includes her brother who has declared her "100% guilty". "I will make sure she is punished." he is reported to have told Raja's family. It shouldn't come as a surprise that the men in Sonam's life would want to continue controlling it.

The views expressed are personal.

grandparents did. Much pan-Indian thought went into the preparation of the Constitution

Namita Bhandare writes on gender.

our civilisational ethos hese days it has become fashionable for political leaders to swear by the Constitution, and even flaunt a copy of it in public rallies.

Constitution represents

Pavan K

Varma

Yet few are fully aware of the drama and sweat that went into its making.

The Constitution was a product of three years of intense and cerebral deliberations of the Constituent Assembly (CA), from August 1946 to January 26, 1950, when it was signed by each member and formally adopted. We celebrate that day as Republic Day. But there is a long history pre-

Krishna Menon (later the country's defence minister) as far back as 1933. In 1936, at its Lucknow session, the Congress party formally asked for it. When there was no immediate response

ceding the convening of the CA.

The idea was first mooted by VK

from the British, C Rajagopalachari strongly reiterated the appeal. The British accepted it in August 1940.

Finally, under the British Cabinet Mission Plan, elections to the CA were held in July 1946. Not many know that these elections were not held under universal suffrage. The nominees were elected by the Provincial Assemblies by a single transferable vote system of proportional representation. To this were added the elected nominees of 93 princely states, and one each from the chief commissionerships of Delhi, Ajmer-Merwara, Coorg and Baluchistan. The elections were completed by August 16, 1946. Congress representatives

had the lion's share of 69%. The Muslim League won 73 seats. On the announcement of a separate Indian state, the League boycotted the CA, but 28 of its 73 members chose to ignore the boycott.

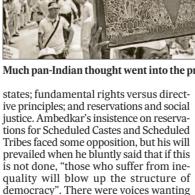
In its final configuration, the CA consisted of 299 members. Although not directly elected, they represented an entire spectrum of views — conservatives, progressives, Marxists, and all beliefs. including Hindu revivalists and Islamic

votaries. Historian Granville Austin has described the CA as "India in microcosm".

Rajendra Prasad, later the first President of India, was elected as the chairperson. Harendra Coomar Mookherjee, a Christian and former vice-chancellor of Calcutta University, was elected vice-president. BR Ambedkar was the chairperson of the draft-

ing committee. He was ably assisted by jurist BN Rau, who as Constitutional advisor, prepared the first draft. The CA had 114 sittings spread over two years, 11 months and 18 days.

Spirited debates took place on several issues: Universal suffrage, which some thought was premature, until Jawaharlal Nehru put an end to the debate by saying, "the voice of a peasant is as precious as that of a professor"; the integration into the Union of princely states, ably steered by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel; federalism, and the use of emergency powers by the Centre, but only in "extraordinary circumstances"; language and linguistic



edged, but after prolonged debate, the consensus was that the Republic will treat all religions equally. On November 26, 1949, the Constitution was passed, the longest of its kind in the world, with 395 Articles, eight Sched-

Hindu heritage to be especially acknowl-

ules, and 22 Sections, a remarkable tribute to its creators. As I studied its making, two often ignored facts struck me. First, there were 17 feisty women in the CA, including G Durgabai, Sucheta Kriplani, Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, and Kamala Chaudhri. They formed a distinctive voice, and have been referred to as the

"Mothers of the Constitution". Second, I was surprised at how preponderant the best minds of South India were. For instance, in the six-member drafting committee chaired by Ambedkar, save KM Munshi, the others were south Indian scholars: Alladi Krishnaswamy Iyer, Gopala Swamy Ayyangar, N. Madhava Rao and TT Krishnamachari. The house committee chairman was Pattabhi Sitaramayya. The second vice-president of the CA, elected later, was VT Krishnamachari. And, of course, the Constitutional advisor was BN Rau.

So, next time when political leaders brandish the Constitution, they should be aware of how much pan-Indian thought went into its preparation. Its courageous Preamble represents the soul of a nation, and the entire document our civilisational

Pavan K Varma is author, diplomat, and former Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha). The views expressed are personal.

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Cong's own goals This is with reference to

'By censuring Tharoor, Congress lost the plot' by Karan Thapar (June 8). The Congress party's surly reaction to Shashi Tharoor's spectacular success in putting across India's case against Pakistan-backed terror. in the context of the Pahalgam attack and aftermath, betrays the party's pettiness.

Ranjana Manchanda

Wildlife crusader non pareil

This is with reference to 'A life in service of the wild and wildlife' by Jaisal Singh (June 8). I feel that with Valmik Thapar's passing, India has indeed lost its foremost crusader for wildlife. His word on tiger conservation was considered the gospel truth.

Empowering coastal women

This is with reference to 'Seaweed farming: A path to empowering women' by Lalita Panicker (June 8). Seaweed is much in demand not only in our country but globally as well. Coastal women cultivating

Abhilasha Gupta

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

seaweed can become self-reliant.

Fifth

COLUMN

Eleven years: A critique

blighted by uncertainty, poverty, unemployment and fear.

Is India better for ALL?

Economic reforms and liberalisation were launched with the objective of raising India's growth rate. In the 10 years under UPA (2004-2014), the average GDP growth rate was 7.46 per cent (old series) and 6.7 per cent (new series). After 2014-15, and especially after 2019-20, the official data point to a slowing down of the growth rate. 2024-25 too has witnessed modest growth. The compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of real GDP since 2014-15 was 6.1 per cent; since 2019-20, the CAGR has fallen to 5.1 per cent. Agriculture, industry and manufacturing have recorded a deceleration and are under 5 per cent. It is only 'services' that has grown at 5.4 per cent.

The key to a better life of the vast population is the per capita income of the people, not the size of the nominal GDP. Under the UPA government, the per capita income more than doubled in 10 years; it actually increased 2.64 times from USD 543 to USD 1,438. Under the NDA government's first 10 years, it increased by only 1.89 times from USD 1,438 to USD 2,711, and it doubled to USD 2,878 only in the 11th year. At this level, India ranks 136 out of 196 countries. India has missed by a wide margin the target of growing at 8 per cent for a sus-

tained period of 20 years in order to reach the threshold of a developed country (per capita of USD 14,000).

Is India a fairer PLACE?

Apart from the growing inequality among the rich/uber-rich (the top 20 per cent) and the very poor (the bottom 20 per cent), there is a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity. Besides, there is abundant evidence of assertive majoritarianism, growing communal and caste strife, virulent hate speeches and writing, unashamed crony capitalism, collapse of the criminal justice system, severe fractures in the federal structure, and creeping authoritarianism. Two examples will suffice: (1) the weaponisation of laws from Income-tax Act to Prevention of Money Laundering Act to achieve political ends and (2) the callousness of investing Rs 1,08,000 crore on a bullet train project between Ahmedabad and Mumbai when 29,970 persons died and 30,214 were injured between 2014 and 2025 in the fund-starved Mumbai suburban train network.

Is India a stronger COUNTRY?

I refer to 'strong' in the sense of unity, friendly and cooperative relations with neighbouring countries, secure borders,

capable armed forces, cordial diplomatic and trade relations with countries of the world, and a honourable standing in international organisations. After the terrorist attack in Pahalgam and Operation Sindoor, the weaknesses were exposed. India did not send delegations to the neighbours such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Maldives or Mauritius; nor did these countries speak publicly. Many countries condemned the terrorist attack but no country condemned Pakistan as a sponsor of terrorism. India's presumed advantage over Pakistan in a conventional war has come under a cloud. Despite the foundational agreements and QUAD, the United States imposed tariffs on Indian goods and hyphenated India and Pakistan. Despite being one of only 25 members of the IMF Executive Board and of the World Bank Board of Directors, both bodies voted large loans to Pakistan after Operation Sindoor, India fought the fourday war using mainly French, Russian and Israeli military hardware. India may be

strong but not as strong as we believed. By all accounts, every power is concentrated in the hands of Mr Narendra Modi. He may deserve to claim sole credit for the government's achievements; he should also bear sole responsibility for its

When I ask myself 'Am I proud to be an Indian?', the answer is **yes**. When I ask myself 'Am I happy with the way India is governed?', the answer is **no**. I look forward to the day when India will become a better (for all), stronger and fairer country.

TAVLEEN SINGH Twitter@tavleen_singh Tragedy

and horror

THE HORROR and tragedy of the Air India crash last week inadvertently became personal for me. Not because I lost friends or family in the crash, but because I was on an Air India flight to New York when it happened. Somehow, the crew of my flight had no knowledge of the crash and at JFK, the only thing Indians in the queue at passport control were concentrating on was the fear that they may not get into the United States. Donald Trump's deportations and visa cancellations have made even ordinary tourists nervous.

The taxi that brought me into the city was driven by a fellow Punjabi from Amritsar and he did not mention the crash. He was more interested in telling me that he had been forced to leave India because the situation in Punjab 'has got so bad'. This led to my asking whether he was legally in the United States, and he said he had a work permit and had been here for five years and was earning on an average \$400 a day. Why would he want to go back to Punjab, where he would be lucky if his small farm earned him that much in a month?

Finally, as we headed towards Manhattan, my son called and said that an Air India flight had crashed and that when he woke that morning and saw the news in New York's newspapers, he had been frantic with worry that it could be the Air India flight that I was on. I am grateful to all the gods that I dodged Yama this time and totally devastated by the pictures from Ahmedabad and the heartbreaking stories of those who lost loved ones. So let me begin by expressing my sincerest condolences to those whose friends and family were on the doomed flight.

The memory of the Air India flight that crashed in June 1985 because of Khalistani terrorists haunts me to this day. They say that terrorism was not responsible for the crash in Ahmedabad and we must hope that this is true, because the consequences if it was terrorists who were behind it are too grim to contemplate. It has become clear in the days that have passed since Operation Sindoor that India will no longer allow terrorists to win the cowardly, dirty war they have waged against us for far too long. There have been terrorist acts against innocent Indians for more than forty years. For too long, our response was too feeble to stop these killers. First came the Khalistanis. Financed, sheltered and backed by the Islamist Republic next door. Then came jihadi terrorists. Financed, sheltered and backed by the Islamist Republic next door.

For far too long, those countries that could have put curbs on Pakistan by denying it money and weapons did nothing. In the city from where this piece comes to you, it was jihadis from Pakistan who first tried to blow up the World Trade Centre. But it was only after 9/11 that the United States started to notice that something very bad was happening in India's neighbourhood and that the fallout from this

was likely to affect the world. It is good that India is finally making a serious effort to convince the world that it needs to do more. The global fight against jihadi terrorism did not end with the death of Osama bin Laden. It continues. And now that Israel has attacked Iran, that fight has become more perilous. Israel may feel that it has no choice but to make a full attack on Iran because if there is one country that has done more than Pakistan to spread jihadist terror it is Iran. No sooner did the attack happen than social media was flooded by pictures of dead children and posted by Pakistanis with captions like 'why did

this child have to die'. It is heartbreaking when children pay for crimes committed by their parents but that usually is the way of war. It is a war that has been forced on the world by an ideology that is totalitarian and absolutist Those who are victims of this war have no choice but to fight back. It is unfortunate that in India's case we have failed repeatedly to convince the leaders of the world that our fight against jihadi terrorism is

necessary.

When Narendra Modi decided to send delegations across the world to tell India's story, I confess that I thought it was a stupid idea. It seemed to be no more than a summer holiday for our MPs before the next session of Parliament. But now that I see how well they have done, I admit that I was wrong, and I hope that when the monsoon session of Parliament begins, the bilateral bonhomie that has been established between our political parties will grow and flourish. The wars being fought in the world right now are too serious for silly ones to be fought inside the Lok Sabha.

I have consciously tried to end this piece on a hopeful note because the week just ended has been one of the worst in a long while. I would like to express once more my deepest condolences to those who lost loved ones in last week's crash. If it was an accident and not terrorism, then it will be easier to deal with, but it will not be balm.

inside TRACK **COOMIKAPOOR**

its failures

EMERGENCY TACTICS

THIS JUNE marks the 50th anniversary of the Emergency, a black mark in India's history when Indira Gandhi used sledge hammer tactics to silence the media. Even before the Emergency proclamation was signed, electricity supply to Delhi newspapers was shut off. Censorship was imposed and guidelines were so rigid that not a line on the mass arrests of Opposition politicians, censorship and shutting down of publications could be carried. When *The* Indian Express displayed a blank space in its editorial column to convey subtly to the readers the ugly reality behind the scenes. the censor decreed that in future, no blank spaces or quotes of famous personalities would be permitted in editorials.

Nothing could be published on Parliament, except statements on behalf of the government, and the name and affiliation of the MPs who spoke. I & B Minister V C Shukla had police inducted into the Central Information Service to keep a close watch on journalists. Foreign correspondents were told to either sign a document to adhere to the government's media guidelines or leave. National Herald editor Chalapathi Rao, after a meeting with Shukla and his fellow editors, remarked to Sharda Prasad, Indira's media adviser, "I have not seen such a performance of toadies even at the height of the British Raj."

EMERGENCY ENCORE?

A question often posed is, can India have an Emergency-style repression of the media again? A total blackout of news, as happened between 1975 and 1977, is no longer possible since sources of information dissemination have multiplied. During the Emergency, there was only one government controlled TV channel, Doordarshan, and a few hundred newspapers. Fifty years on, the print media is just one segment in the huge spectrum of news operations. There are over 400 privately owned TV news channels. The Internet is crowded with messages from bloggers and vloggers on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook et al. The WhatsApp universe is available to anyone with a cell phone. Today, no matter how powerful a government and the number of media advisers, spokespersons and trolls — the equivalent of yesteryear censors — the narrative cannot be controlled if the facts do not match up. Even during the Emergency, news spread by word of mouth. But that has not deterred governments from attempting to control news dissemination, although the methods employed are more subtle and sophisticated, not in-your-face as with the Emergency.

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WEAK GOVT, STRONG **PRESS**

In my long years as a journalist, I have discovered one rule of thumb, that the more powerful the leader, the more ruthless he or she is likely to be in suppressing uncomfortable facts. For instance, towards the end of Rajiv Gandhi's tenure, I worked for a newspaper started by a major business house which was wound up practically overnight, ostensibly sold to a vernacular newspaper chain, because the coterie around the PM decreed that the daily had crossed the line in its investigative reporting. When governments are weak, particularly when they survive through shaky coalitions, which was largely the case between the regimes of PM Narasimha Rao, from 1991, to PM Manmohan Singh, ending in 2014, the media was particularly spunky. Incidentally, while the mild-mannered Singh as PM was often targeted by journalists, most of them refrained from offending the Congress's first family. There have been godi media in all regimes.

TRUE RATING SYSTEM

Today we have the most powerful PM since Indira. If the yearly listing of Reporters without Borders is to be taken seriously, India has been pegged a lowly 151 on the World Press Freedom Index, down from the 80th spot in 2014. The opaque methodology of rating is highly suspect. It is based on subjective opinions of anonymous individuals, many with a deep suspicion of the BJP's Hindutva nationalistic agenda. Can India, with its plurality of opinions, news outlets and cacophony of critical voices even in the midst of a war, really rank lower than coun-

tries like Qatar, Rwanda and Congo? My own methodology to assess the index of media independence is based on three factors. The media should be financially stable and not dependent on government largesse. It should not be a stakeholder in business interests which could conflict with its role as a purveyor of truth. (It is therefore troubling that India's two richest men, Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, have expanding media empires.) The chill factor is another impediment to a free press. The media sometimes self-censors for fear of reprisal from the state which has been known to book journalists under non-applicable laws. The third indicator for a healthy press is the degree of the government's accessibility to the media. We may be better positioned today as regards media freedom than during the Emergency, but is that good enough? Do we fully reflect Tagore's immortal poem, "Where the mind is without fear...

History **HEADLINE**

VAPPALA BALACHANDRAN

FREDERICK FORSYTH, who died on June 9, would never have dreamt that the storyline of his immensely popular novel *The* Day of the Jackal (1971) and its film adaptation (1973) would inspire somebody to issue a fake alert in 1974 to frighten India's security management, resulting in the cancellation of an event that was to be attended by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in Bombay. Papers on this might still be available with the Mumbai Special Branch archives.

In 1974, the National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA) wanted Mrs Gandhi to perform the bhoomi poojan (groundbreaking) ceremony of its new premises, which were to be built on reclaimed land at Nariman Point.

In 1969, she had inaugurated the temporary NCPA auditorium in Akash Ganga building on Bhulabhai Desai Road in the presence of eminent persons like JRD Tata and Karan Singh, and she was keen to participate in the foundation laying ceremony in 1974.

I was then working as the head of the Bombay City Special Branch CID and was in charge of all security arrangements in the city, including VVIP security. I was also liaising with NCPA chairman Jamshed Bhabha, the brother of nuclear scientist Dr Homi Bhabha, and executive director, Dr V K Narayana Menon.

Making the security arrangements for the PM, who would be a stationary target among the audience at night, was a nightmare since the concrete shells of several incomplete buildings surrounded the open place where the function was to be held. I decided to post hundreds of policemen on every floor of

the ghost buildings. This was when the sensational movie, The Day of the Jackal, was running in theatres. It was on everybody's mind, including the Intelligence Bureau, which was responsible for organising the PM's security through the local police, as the Special Protection Group did not exist then. The film's plot was based on an actual incident, which took place on August 22, 1962, when Jean-Marie Bastien-Thiry, a French Air Force lieutenant colonel, ambushed President Charles de Gaulle and his wife. Bastien-Thiry had conspired with the Organisation Armée Secrète, which had opposed Algerian independence, to fire at the president's convoy in the Paris suburb of Petit-Clamart.

In the film, "the Jackal" (played by





JRD Tata laying the NCPA foundation stone in Mumbai on April 17, 1976. NCPA

British actor Edward Fox) hid in a building adjoining the ceremonial area and shot at the president while he was awarding medals during the Liberation Day function.

A FREEDOM FIGHTER **REPORTS**

As the security arrangements were being organised, Maharashtra Governor Ali Yavar Jung summoned me and the Commissioner of Police, M G Mugve, to the Raj Bhavan. He told us that Soli Batlivala, a freedom fighter and wellknown social activist, who was also connected with the NCPA, had met him to convey some worrying information.

Batlivala said he had overheard two students discussing an assassination attempt on the PM during the function. The Governor asked me to get full details from Batlivala. We briefed him about the vulnerabilities of the location, although we were confident of organising enough protection.

However, all my attempts to contact Batlivala failed. He was just not traceable. Several of my officers were detailed to track him down. He seemed to have vanished into thin air after setting the cat among the pigeons.

I reported this to the Governor, who decided to personally go to Delhi to request Mrs Gandhi to cancel the function. Reluctantly, she agreed, much to the dismay of Jamshed Bhabha.

The truth came out later. After the function was cancelled, Batlivala reappeared and told the officers trailing him that it had been a hoax. He did not want Jamshed Bhabha to be in the limelight as "he did not like him".

Commissioner Mugve was furious and wanted to prosecute him. He wrote to the Maharashtra government, seeking permission to initiate prosecution, but clearance was denied.

Amiya Nath Bose, Subhas Chandra Bose's nephew, has recorded that Batlivala, on behalf of the Politburo of the Communist Party of India, was in talks with Netaji about his plan to send a secret letter to the Soviet Union leadership, seeking help for India's liberation. Why did this eminent man pull such a fast one on the Maharashtra Governor? I have no answer.

Ultimately, it was JRD Tata who laid the NCPA foundation stone on April 17,

> The writer retired as Special Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat. Views expressed are personal

She **SAID SHALINI LANGER**

SONAM RAGHUVANSHI once had dreams of getting an MBA degree, and expanding her father's plywood business. In the bylanes of Indore's Kushwah Nagar where, in her father's words, her movements were "strictly curbed", she would only make it so far as the Kushwaha community's matrimonial directory. The Samaj Parichay Pustika was a timetested way to form 'safe' marriage alliances.

Six months after her biodata was added identity, of "the woman who killed her husband on their honeymoon". Worse, she did

Every story has a beginning. Even Sonam's

it due to "an affair with a younger man". Even worse, "the families didn't match her horoscope" with the man she would marry - a man she barely knew except as a "compatible" matrimonial biodata.

Police are still building their case, but her brother has declared he has little doubt "she did it". Her mother-in-law and her "lover's" mother have been pitted against each other on national TV, united in their censure of Sonam; the "lover's" school-going sisters have been captured too, their "breaking down" and "fainting" played on repeat.

Year after year, the National Crime Records Bureau registers "love affairs" as the fastest rising cause for murder in India, and top third among all reasons, including "honour killings". However, it would appear

Sonam has gone where no man — or, should it be, woman? — has gone before.

Speaking to news agency UNI last week, Dr Naresh Purohit of the National Mental Health Programme said that a surge in spousal murders reflects "deeper societal issues where forced marriages and inability to express views about relationship choices can lead to violent outcomes". However, they tell us that all Sonam should have done under the circumstances is "walk away".

Meghalaya's famous root bridge, near where Sonam allegedly carried out the murder, is a place bustling with tourists, with shops selling snacks to knick-knacks, run mostly by women. A girl belonging perhaps to bylanes no wider than where Sonam grew up can often surprise you with

a perfect rendition of an English pop song. Wonder what Sonam, presumably frustrated with her marriage, presumably con-

templating a new start, thought of that girl.

In another lifetime, maybe, Sonam could have left home in the months between when her groom was chosen for her and the marriage festivities started. Maybe, her family would have accepted the younger man she is said to have loved, who was their employee and lower in social standing. Maybe she and the man could then have been one of those couples taking selfies on the root bridge.

However, how many of us would bet on this parallel lifeline for Sonam? And yet, we are a country that breathes

Sindoor' as a "tribute to all women, daughters, sisters". But even before the dust had settled,

from within the ruling establishment came questions about why the women who survived the Pahalgam terror attack had not fought back for their "sindoor". An appeal for peace by one of those women drew a swift backlash.

long ago, two women were the face of

India's efforts against a warring neighbour,

as the government celebrated its 'Operation

Across these very different lifelines, one thing is common: a woman can thrive all she wants, as long as she sticks to the course drawn for her by others.

National Editor Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column

to the *pustika*, barely snatches remain of that 24-year-old, who now has only one

> parallel lifelines. In one such lifeline, not too epaper.indianexpress.com

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SUNDAY, JUNE 15, 2025



India's new Test captain, Shubman Gill will lead the five-Test series in England starting June 20

New World Test Championship cycle brings new challenges



THE UPCOMING TEST series between England and India will be a contest between two teams in transition. The recent retirements in the visitors' camp are well documented, but Ben Stokes and his charges will be fielding a largely unheralded side, especially on the bowling side.

That's what makes the five Tests, beginning with the game in Leeds on June 20, an intriguing prospect — a batting line-up short on experience against an attack missing some of its biggest names. James Anderson's name will be on the trophy at stake over the English summer, not in the hosts' line-up. Stuart Broad will not be there either while Jofra Archer will be missing at least the first Test.

When the decision-makers in Indian cricket chose Shubman Gill as Rohit Sharma's successor, they would have had the option of Rishabh Pant, KL Rahul or promoting incumbent vice-captain Jasprit Bumrah. But the pace spearhead needs to have his workload managed and can't play every game, and the others haven't made heads turn with their captaincy in the opportunities they have got. Most of the regular India stars hardly play any domestic cricket but with nine of the 10 IPL teams led by Indians, there should have been more options. Gill's ascension is a decision made more on hope than past record, and the selectors would like to see him grow into the job. But as of now, it may be head coach Gautam Gambhir calling the shots to a large extent, with the team bereft of a lot of star power. It remains to be seen how well this coach-captain combination works, but it will only be fair that Gill is given some time to learn the ropes.

The upcoming few weeks are quite crucial for England as well. Any series between the Big Three – India, England, Australia – is a marquee event with a full five-Test treatment. If results are the sole yardstick, the Bazballers' bark is more potent than the bite. It's been three years since Brendon McCullum became their Test coach, and hype and a positive narrative seem to be driving the engine.

The start to McCullum's stint was promising enough — though anything would have been an improvement over a record of one win in 17 Tests — but as he had taken over in the middle of a World Test Championship (WTC) cycle, they never challenged for a spot in the final.

Underwhelming

But even in the 2023-25 cycle, England have, more often than not, flattered to deceive. They won three of the six series played — two home and one in New Zealand — and were often docked points for slow over rates. They lost a Test to Sri Lanka at The Oval, and failed to win the Ashes on home soil.

Moreover, their batsmen were found wanting whenever pitches were anything other than batting beauties. They dominated Pakistan in the first Test at Multan last October with Harry Brook scoring a triple century, but when the subsequent surfaces were tailored for

the home spinners, England's mantra of 'see ball, hit ball'was found to be wholly inadequate. Years of treating spin as an afterthought in domestic cricket has meant that it will take time for them to develop pedigree in that department. Now with their legendary pacers retired and a lot of the current lot struggling with injury, their bowling attack is sporting an uncertain look.

On the batting front, Joe Root is among the greatest Test batsmen of the current era, but most of the others in the line-up seem to go to the middle for a good time, and not necessarily a long time. They make hay when the pitch is flat, but struggle big time when there is something in it for the bowlers. Brook, Ben Duckett, Zak Crawley and Ollie Pope are known more for flamboyance than the number of runs they score. In such a scenario, skipper Stokes — who has had knee problems of late — may have to shoulder a great deal of burden, both with bat and ball.

Among the Indians, the skipper has also historically found it difficult to handle deliveries moving into him, while Yashasvi Jaiswal — who has had quite an initiation to Test cricket — has failed to find his feet in the couple of tour matches against local sides.

Rahul looks a million dollars when on song, but his Test average of just over 33 is one of the mysteries of contemporary cricket. His cause hasn't been helped by being shunted up and down the batting order, as per requirement. With Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma no longer around, Rahul will need to take on a more senior role. Sai Sudharsan and Abhimanyu Easwaran will hope to take advantage of the vacant slots and make their Test debuts, while Pant may no longer afford to carry on in his happygo-lucky approach evident in Australia. Comeback man Karun Nairwill hope to maintain his rich vein of form, while Nitish Kumar Reddy will like to show that his exploits in Australia were signs of genuine Test-match class.

Other concerns

But even if the batting side of things functions smoothly, winning a Test invariably requires taking 20 wickets. Here too, India are not without problems. There's a Ravichandran Ashwinsized hole in the side. The champion offspinner had the ability to rise above the conditions and hence, could be expected to provide a wicket-taking threat even on pitches not considered friendly to tweakers. In his absence, left-arm wristspinner Kuldeep Yadav will have to don that role.

Poor fitness has prevented Mohammed Shami from making the trip to England and with Bumrah certain not to play all five Tests, the support cast of Mohammed Siraj, Prasidh Krishna, Arshdeep Singh, Shardul Thakur and Akash Deep will have to do the hard yards, not just in keeping an end tight, but also contributing to the wickets column. The start of a new WTC cycle is a stage for all teams to take fresh guard. After two consecutive disappointments in the final, India couldn't even make it that farthis time. And England has never really been in contention in any of the three cycles. These are two teams that play more Tests than most so, in theory, their players should be more attuned to

the rhythms of the longest form. However, it doesn't always work in practice, as the exploits of New Zealand and South Africa have shown.



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THERE IS NEVER one correct point of view. Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity was questioned by eminent scientists, among them Jayant Narlikar. As long as there is no ill-motive, every point of view has some truth and must be respected — a quality that the present government has not cultivated in the last 11 years.

Mr Narendra Modi has just completed 11 years in office, making him the third longest-serving prime minister of India. That is a testimony to his tenacity and ability to win elections for his party.

There are pluses and minuses in every government, and the NDA government is no exception. Mr Modi's government relies on metrics: in a developing country, the usual economic metrics can only <u>add</u> to the stock. If schools are built or roads are constructed, it will add to the stock of schools (in number) or roads (in kilometres). However, the people's standards for assessing a government's work are different: they are based on an unquantifiable metric called 'good governance'. Under good governance, the country is seen as a better (for all), stronger and fairer place and the individual is satisfied that his family's life will become even better. The quality of governance cannot be fully discerned in quantitative metrics.

In my assessment, India is not better for all or stronger or fairer place today than what it was in 2014. Besides, while the lives of millions have become better, the lives of many more millions are blighted by uncertainty, poverty, unemployment and fear.

Is India better for all?

Economic reforms and liberalisation were launched with the objective of raising India's growth rate. In the 10 years under UPA (2004-2014), the aver-

2014-15, and especially after 2019-20, the official data point to a slowing down of the growth rate. 2024-25 too has witnessed modest growth. The compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of real GDP since 2014-15 was 6.1%; since 2019-20, the CAGR has fallen to 5.1%. Agriculture, industry and manufacturing have recorded a deceleration and are under 5%. It is only 'services' that has grown at 5.4%. The key to a better life of the vast population is the per capita income of the people, not the size of the nominal

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Is India a fairer place?

Apart from the growing inequality among the rich/uber-rich (the top 20%) and the very poor (the bottom 20%),

evidence of assertive majoritarianism, growing communal and caste strife, virulent hate speeches and writing, unashamed crony capitalism, collapse of the criminal justice system, severe fractures in the federal structure, and creeping authoritarianism. Two examples will suffice: (1) the weaponisation of laws from Income-tax Act to Prevention of Money Laundering Act to achieve political ends and (2) the callousness of investing ₹1,08,000 crore on a bullet train project between Ahmedabad and Mumbai when 29,970 persons died and 30,214 were injured between 2014 and 2025 in the fund-starved Mumbai suburban train network.

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi with members of Operation Sindoor global outreach delegation, in New Delhi

Eleven years: A critique

Is India a stronger country?

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When I ask myself'Am I proud to be an Indian?', the answer is **yes**. When I ask myself 'Am I happy with the way India is governed?', the answer is no. I look forward to the day when India will become a better (for all), stronger and fairer country.



Website: pchidambaram.in Twitter: @Pchidambaram_IN



Emergency tactics This June marks the 50th anniversary of

the Emergency, a black mark in India's history when Indira Gandhi used sledge hammer tactics to silence the media. Even before the Emergency proclamation was signed, electricity supply to Delhi newspapers was shut off. Censorship was imposed and guidelines were so rigid that not a line on the mass arrests of Opposition politicians, censorship and shutting down of publications could be carried. When The Indian Express displayed a blank space in its editorial column to convey subtly to the readers the ugly reality behind the scenes, the censor decreed that in future, no blank spaces or quotes of famous personalities would be permitted in editorials.

Nothing could be published on Parliament, except statements on behalf of the government, and the name and affiliation of the MPs who spoke. I&B Minister V C Shukla had police inducted into the Central Information Service to keep a close watch on journalists. Foreign correspondents were told to either sign a document

to adhere to the government's media guidelines or leave. National Herald editor Chalapathi Rao, after a meeting with Shukla and his fellow editors, remarked to Sharda Prasad, Indira's media adviser, "I have not seen such a performance of toadies even at the height of the British Raj."

Emergency encore?

A question often posed is, can India have an Emergency-style repression of the media again? A total blackout of news, as happened between 1975 and 1977, is no longer possible since sources of information dissemination have multiplied. During the Emergency, there was only one government controlled TV channel, Doordarshan, and a few hundred newspapers. Fifty years on, the print media is just one segment in the huge spectrum of news operations. There are over 400 privately owned TV news channels. The Internet is crowded with messages from bloggers and vloggers on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook et al. The WhatsApp universe is available to anyone with a cell phone. Today, no matter how powerful a government and the number of media advisers, spokespersons and trolls — the equivalent of yesteryear censors — the narrative cannot be controlled if the facts do not match up. Even during the Emergency, news spread by word of mouth. But that has not deterred governments from attempting to control news dissemination, although the methods employed are more subtle

and sophisticated, not in-your-face as with the Emergency.

In my long years as a journalist, I have

discovered one rule of thumb, that the

Weak Govt, strong press

more powerful the leader, the more ruthless he or she is likely to be in suppressing uncomfortable facts. For instance, towards the end of Rajiv Gandhi's tenure, I worked for a newspaper started by a major business house which was wound up practically overnight, ostensibly sold to a vernacular newspaper chain, because the coterie around the PM decreed that the daily had crossed the line in its investigative reporting. When governments are weak, particularly when they survive through shaky coalitions, which was largely the case between the regimes of PM Narasimha Rao, from 1991, to PM Manmohan Singh, ending in 2014, the media was particularly spunky. Incidentally, while the mild-mannered Singh as PM was often targeted by journalists, most of them refrained from offending the Congress's first

True rating system

all regimes.

family. There have been *godi* media in

Today we have the most powerful PM since Indira. If the yearly listing of Reporters without Borders is to be taken seriously, India has been pegged

New Delhi

a lowly 151 on the World Press Freedom Index, down from the 80th spot in 2014. The opaque methodology of rating is highly suspect. It is based on subjective opinions of anonymous individuals, many with a deep suspicion of the BJP's Hindutva nationalistic agenda. Can India, with its plurality of opinions, news outlets and cacophony of critical voices even in the midst of a war, really rank lower than countries

like Qatar, Rwanda and Congo? My own methodology to assess the index of media independence is based on three factors. The media should be financially stable and not dependent on government largesse. It should not be a stakeholder in business interests which could conflict with its role as a purveyor of truth. (It is therefore troubling that India's two richest men, Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, have expanding media empires.) The chill factor is another impediment to a free press. The media sometimes self-censors for fear of reprisal from the state which has been known to book journalists under nonapplicable laws. The third indicator for a healthy press is the degree of the government's accessibility to the media. We may be better positioned today as regards media freedom than during the Emergency, but is that good enough? Do we fully reflect Tagore's immortal poem, "Where the mind is without fear..."

Regd. No. DL -21048/03-05. R.N.I. No. DELENG/2001/21855. Printed and Published by Ramesh Chander Malhotra on behalf of The Indian Express (P) Ltd Press, A-8, Sector-7, Noida - 201301 and published at The Indian Express (P) Ltd, Mezzanine Floor, Express Building, 9 & 10, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: 0120-6651500. (Cover price: Patna: ₹12,; Raipur: ₹12, Srinagar ₹15). Chairman of the Board: Viveck Goenka, Editor: Shyamal Majumdar, Editor (Delhi): Shobhana Subramanian* (*Responsible for selection of News under the PRP Act) ©Copyright: The Indian Express (P) Ltd All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner, electronic or otherwise, in whole or in part, without prior written permission is prohibited. The Financial Express®

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WORLD OF WARS AND BONFIRE OF G7 VANITIES

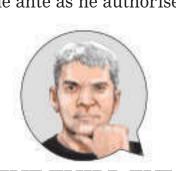
week is indeed a long time in geopolitics. On Tuesday, the world markets celebrated headlines about a trade deal between China and the US. On Friday, world markets plummeted following Israeli strikes on Iran. Real wars tend to make trade wars look insignificant.

This week, the G7, the group of advanced economies, is observing the 50th anniversary of its origin in picturesque Kananaskis in Alberta, at the foothills of the Canadian Rockies. The theme, as always, is lofty: international peace and security, global economic stability and growth, digital

transition and global challenges. The ground realities mock at the ballyhooed heft of advanced economies to sustain predictability and stability. Global trade is upended, thanks to Donald J Trump's America First tariff policies. Sure, there is a ceasefire on tariffs, a détente with China and talks about talks with other countries. Peace is in pieces. Trump's promise of peace in 24 hours is consigned to the bunker by Russian President Vladimir Putin. The ceasefire-forhostages deal in Gaza is comatose. Newly 'liberated' Syria is haunted by sectarian killings despite a relief on sanctions—US Secretary of State Marco Rubio warned the country is weeks

the "end of bombing", the Houthis warned of attacks. This week, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu upped the ante as he authorised Israeli forces to attack Iran. With it,

away from an epic civil war. On Wednesday, after US declared



THE THIRD EYE SHANKKAR AIYAR Author of *The Gated Republic, Aadhaai* A Biometric History of India's 12 Digit Revolution, and Accidental India

(shankkar.aiyar@gmail.com)

Trump's agenda in West Asia—and a possible Nobel honour—was washed off. In a sequence of complex manoeuvres, Israeli forces targeted the leadership of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, nuclear scientists, military units and nuclear facilities. The sequence is instructive. The audacious attacks were executed just before officials from Iran and the US were to meet in Oman over a new nuclear deal. The US president authorised the talks for the new deal and gave a deadline of 60 days; the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and six countries including the US took 20 months.

There is much lather about the changing stance of the US, which reneged on the 2015 deal in 2018, only to re-initiate talks in 2025. History shows Iran's nuclear programme was born in the US in 1957. America provided Iran with its first reactor and fuels in 1967 during the Shah regime. Following the 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini opposed the programme and suggested the unfinished plants be used as silos to store wheat. The programme, which was revived after the war with Iraq, has been a target for Netanyahu since 1996.

Be that as it may, the timing of the latest attack merits attention. It followed the expiry of the Trump deadline and a IAEA Thursday report on Iran's non-compliance of safeguards and non-cooperation. There is a political aspect too—opinion polls showed the coalition led by Netanyahu losing its majority in the 120-seat Knesset. The imminence of the attack was known. Trump warned Israel not to "blow it" by attacking Iran. Right after the attack, the US distanced itself, stating it was "not involved in strikes" and warned Iran to "not target US interests in the region". But Trump later admitted "we knew everything" and even said it improved the chances of a deal. While that is debatable, the impact of escalation could be catastrophic. At the UN Security Council, Iran said the US was complicit.

The conflict overshadows all else. The magnitude of challenges, the spectre of a polycrisis facing the G7, is daunting. The timing of the G7 meet in Canada, as its people re-assert their Canadian identity in the face of Trumpism, affords an opportunity for Prime Minister Mark Carney to shepherd the agenda towards resolutions. He could leverage his stature as a central banker. He has shown sagacity by distancing himself from the past and inviting Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The inclusion of leaders from Australia, Mexico, Brazil, Indonesia, South Korea, South Africa and Ukraine could enable a coalition of common sense. It remains to be seen if Carney can emerge as a modern-day Lester Bowles Pearson, who won a Nobel for his role in resolving the Suez crisis.

The trouble, though, is the character of G7, which has in the recent past been dominated by the US—effectively, as G1+6. Trump's uncanny knack to occupy attention makes it more so. The bloc was born out of a necessity to confront the global oil crisis, just as the G20 was formalised in 2009 after the global financial crisis. On both occasions, it was the need of the US which clarified the course of action. It is noteworthy that neither forum has delivered since. Sustaining cooperation calls for recognition of interdependence and participative processes. Can G7 coalesce to succeed?

The past is often the prologue of the future, and is validated by communiqués. The leaders' communiqué issued in June 2022 from Elmau in Germany, four months into the war in Ukraine, mentioned 'trade' 17 times and 'peace' nine times. In May 2023, the one issued from Hiroshima in Japan mentioned 'trade' 18 times and 'peace' 12 times. Last year, the communiqué issued in June from Apulia in Italy mentioned 'trade' 20 times and 'peace' 24 times, covering the conflicts in Ukraine, Palestine, Iran and Yemen and the Indo-Pacific. Yet, in 2025, the spectre of crises has only expanded.

Ironies fuel cynicism and thrive on hypocrisy. There is no quarrelling with piety, but pious intentions are never enough. If the G7 wants to douse the bonfire of vanities, it must propel solutions.

BOLLYWOOD FLOPS AS THE SOUTH SHINES



POWER & POLITICS **PRABHU CHAWLA** prabhuchawla@newindianexpress.com

Follow him on X @PrabhuChawla

HE theory goes that there are only seven stories in the world, and every story ever told is their permutation. In the same vein, there are seven clichés in Bollywood—Akshay Kumar, the Khans, Deepika Padukone, the Kapoors, and Karan Johar—who tell

the same story over and over again. This dictum was recently proved in a cavernous PVR auditorium that stood eerily silent during an opening day show of *Housefull 5*, its plush seats untouched despite the top booking app flashing a deceptive 60 percent sold status. Akshay Kumar's latest comedy caper, backed by a staggering ensemble of 19 stars including Abhishek Bachchan, Sanjay Dutt and Nana Patekar, limped to a ₹24-crore opening on June 6—a pale shadow of the franchise's earlier debuts—and failed to cross ₹100 crore in its opening week.

Social media buzzed with disdain, branding it a "cringe disaster" and "waahiyat", with its trailer scraping just 8 million YouTube views in 21 hours—one of Akshay's lowest. This flop, coupled with whispers of producers inflating ticket sales to mask empty theatres, paints a grim picture for Bollywood's biggest names. Their star power is dimming, which threatens India's ₹12,000-crore entertainment industry, its 9,500 screens, and the hundreds of millions of film watchers who fuel it. The ironic twist is that as Hindi cinema stumbles, South Indian films surge. It exposes Bollywood's creative famine.

Akshay, the indefatigable 'Khiladi', once ruled B-town with hits like *Hera* Pheri and Welcome. But his recent offerings like *Sky Force*, *Kesari 2*, and now *Housefull 5* have floundered, failing to cross ₹100 crore. The Big B lent his gravitas to *Housefull 5* via Instagram

couldn't improve the film's ₹54 crore two-day haul. His recent roles, like in *Kalki 2898 AD* (₹550 crore in Hindi), leaned on South Indian production muscle, underscoring Bollywood's reliance on external firepower.

Salman Khan's *Sikandar* gathered a disappointing ₹26 crore, despite its ₹200-crore budget. Kangana Ranaut's *Emergency*, where she played Indira Gandhi, crumbled at ₹18.4 crore. Though Anupam Kher praised Kangana's directorial vision, audiences shunned the film, echoing their rejection of his patriotic cameos in flops like The Vaccine War (2023).

SRK rode high with *Pathaan*'s ₹1,055 crore in 2023, but his sparse 2024 releases and a paan masala ad controversy

age, with X posts decrying Bollywood's "corporate booking laundering" to fake success. Ranbir Kapoor's Animal (2023) hit ₹553 crore, but his 2024 ventures, including a ₹400-crore film with Madhuri Dixit, struggled to match that scale with Shamshera (2022) still stinging as a high-profile flop. Deepika Padukone, once Bollywood's

have dented his im-

box-office queen, leaned on *Kalki 2898* AD's South Indian success, but her solo projects like *Chhapaak* (2020) flopped. These icons now rely on southern directors; one X post said, "BW top heroes like SRK, SK, AK are begging films embrace South Indian films' collectivist from South producers to get success."

This star-studded slump is strangling India's entertainment industry, which employs over 2 million people and relies on a shrinking number of big screens. In 2024, 1.2 billion tickets were sold, but the footfalls dropped 10 percent from 2023, with Hindi films capturing only ₹4,679 crore of the ₹11,833-crore total box office, a 13 percent decline. Only six original Hindi films crossed ₹100 crore in 2024—Stree 2, Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3, Singham Again among them—compared to 16 in 2023. At least 20-25 films

endorsements for son Abhishek, but starring Akshay, Amitabh, Salman, Kangana, Anupam, Shah Rukh, Ranbir and Deepika failed to hit this mark, a stark fall from 2018's 13 films.

The sociological shift is brutal. OTT platforms, with 96 million subscriptions, offer diverse content at ₹100-200 monthly, trumping theatre costs. In 2023, 400 films skipped theatres for streaming, up 30 percent from 2022. Southern cinema's mass appeal, with stars like Prabhas and NTR Jr. filled the void, while Malayalam and Gujarati films grew 10 percent and 66 percent in market share.

South Indian cinema is thriving, with dubbed Hindi versions of *Pushpa 2* (₹889 crore), Kalki 2898 AD (₹550 crore), and *Devara* (₹300 crore) outpacing Bollywood's best. Telugu and Tamil films lev-

> relatable narratives, resonating with rural Gen Z who drive 65 percent of video consumption, per an EY report. Chhaava's ₹567

erage spectacle and

crore shows Bollywood can still deliver, but its Maratha pride narrative mirrors southern cinema's cultural rootedness. Javed Akhtar noted, southern films' "dusky" stars like Allu Arjun connect better with In-

dia's heartland than Bollywood's urban elite. As one social media user declared, "All 90s actors are done n dusted." Bollywood's focus on marketing fashion and glamour alienates rural viewers, who ethos amid rising Hindutva sentiments.

Political messaging is another albatross. Kangana's *Emergency* and *The* Kashmir Files (2022) leaned into nationalist fervour, but alienated viewers with heavy-handed narratives, earning ₹18.4 crore and polarising reviews. SRK and Aamir faced boycotts for perceived "anti-Hindu" stances, with Laal Singh Chaddha (2022) crashing amid X-fuelled outrage. Deepika's endorsement of Operation Sindoor with Kangana and Akshay didn't translate to box-office wins, as audiences reject ideology-driven films.

The claim of Karan Johar and SRK's faction stifling others holds historical weight—production houses Dharma and Yash Raj's 1990s' dominance marginalised independents—but OTT and southern cinema have broken their stranglehold. Still, Johar's "herd mentality" critique rings true, with Housefull 5's recycled gags epitomising Bollywood's creative rut.

Bollywood is a fading star, its light dimmed by tired tales, uninspired tunes and a growing chasm between its urban elite lens and the vibrant pulse of India's heartland. The numbers don't lie: theatre attendance has crashed from 1.6 billion in 2018 to a mere 0.8 billion in 2025, investments are drying up, and South Indian cinema—think *Pushpa 2* raking in ₹889 crore—has stormed the Hindi market with a vigour Bollywood can only envy.

The analysis lays bare these wounds, but it stops short of gazing into the crystal ball. In the long run, Bollywood could rise anew, a phoenix forged in the fires of reinvention. It can be a remote possibility if producers ditch sequel churns like, say, *Dabangg 7* for bold, pan-Indian epics that marry South India's mass appeal with Hindi cinema's emotional depth. Collaborations with Tollywood and Kollywood directors may spark a creative renaissance, with OTT platforms, now boasting 150 million subscribers, becoming Bollywood's laboratory for daring narratives and new faces. Music, the lost heartbeat of Hindi films, will have to return with soul-stirring anthems that echo from Mumbai to Madurai.

If Mumbai fails to smell its nemesis, it may find Bollywood a ghost town by 2035. Single screens will vanish entirely, multiplexes will screen dubbed South Indian blockbusters, and Hindi cinema's once-mighty stars will fade into nostalgia reels on YouTube. The industry, too stubborn to shed its elitist skin and embrace India's diversity, will become a footnote.

The Bollywood ecosystem's choice is stark: adapt or dissolve. Its legacy teeters on the edge, but its future hinges on a single truth: only by rewriting its script to reflect all of India can it reclaim the spotlight. If the script isn't redesigned and the choreography redone, the Bollywood story would be a comic tragedy.

SMELLING CASH IN THE SPACE RACE



SPEAKEASY PRATIK KANJILAL Senior Fellow, Henry J Leir Institute of Migration and Human Security, The Fletcher School, Tufts University



PACE has an odour. Visitors to the Goddard Space Flight Centre in Maryland, US, can smell it by pressing a button to inhale a puff of air that smells of space. Space is airless by definition, but the

workaround is essential because we can't inhale 'space' without fatal consequences. Despite this logical complication, the experience is evocative. Space smells of long-distance travel. It smells of Indian highways far from big cities. It smells like the world did long ago on the railways, when almost everyone travelled without air conditioning.

But hereafter, space could smell a little different. From the beginning of the space race, it has smelled of Cold War rivalry, military-industrial complexes and technology-based diplomacy. These metallic notes will remain; but from here on, space will also smell overwhelmingly of commerce, of paper money. Gold is economically and chemically stable. It has no smell, unlike space.

The countdown of the Axiom-4 mission to the International Space station has been aborted twice but soon, astronauts from India, Poland and Hungary could be back in space after 40 years and more. In anticipation, their national media have already declared it to be a turning point for their domestic space programmes. But the composition of the Axiom-4 mission also indicates that the whole world has

passed a turning point. The crew, led by American Peggy Whitson, will be taken to orbit on Elon Musk's commercial Dragon launch vehicle, and the project is a collaboration between NASA, the European Space Agency, ISRO and the Houston firm Axiom Space, whose most ambitious project is the first commercial space station. The purpose of the collaboration is to facilitate a range of commercial activities in space, from scientific research to tourism. Space is about to be opened up commercially, just like the world was opened like an oyster by the

European Age of Exploration. About 40 years ago, when India, Poland and Hungary last sent their citizens into space, it was a domain where national governments showed off their technological prowess to compete for geopolitical gains. These three countries made a place for themselves in space under the aegis of Interkosmos, a

Russian state programme launched in 1967 to help satellite nations of the USSR and other socialist nations like Afghanistan and Cuba reach space. Non-aligned nations Syria and India were also under its umbrella.

The India chapter began in December 1980, when Soviet head of state Leonid Brezhnev visited New Delhi and proposed a joint space mission under Interkosmos to Indira Gandhi. Four years later, in 1984, Rakesh Sharma got a



The private Axiom-4 mission, which promises to take astronauts from India, Poland and Hungary to space, shows we have entered a new space age—one where the sector is being opened up commercially

berth on the Soyuz T-11 mission bound for the Salyut 7 space station.

Sharma's mission beat the UK and Japan by over a decade. The journalist Toyohiro Akiyama was the first Japanese in space under Interkosmos. In 1990, he took the Soyuz TM-11 mission to the Mir Space Station and broadcast live to Japan. The next year, the chemist Helen Sharman became the first person from the UK to lift off and fly to Mir. She had simply responded to a rare radio spot: "Astronaut wanted. No experience necessary."

Interkosmos was a political project with a global footprint, running from Cuba to Mongolia. The USSR beat the US in the first, rapid-fire round of the war of perceptions. Sputnik was the first satellite, visible to the naked eye from Earth and piercingly audible on home radio sets. Audio-visually, it told the world that Russia had arrived. Then, they launched into space the first animal, the dog Laika, the first cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, and the first woman spacefarer, Valentina Tereshkova.

The US took the advantage with William Anders' iconic pictures of earthrise, shot as Apollo 8 orbited the moon. And after the "giant leap for mankind" of Apollo 11, the race was over. The USSR was trailing, but it had a unique proposition for the socialist countries—it took them to space. The effect was such that most of them did not invest in space until much later. Unlike India, Poland and Hungary have fledgling space programmes which are still not widely known.

The Axios-4 mission seems to transfer the mantle of patronage of less capable nations from Russia to the US. It's important for Washington at a time when its soft power is waning. But actually, the mantle has been transferred to private American enterprise, not the government of the United States.

QUOTE CORNER

A majority of Israelis, as public opinion polls indicate, support the slaughter and are even waiting for the population transfer that is to come in its wake. Therefore, the pressure and the punishment must be directed at Israel in its entirety... Diplomats and decisionmakers, do you get this? In Israel, all of us are now Ben-Gyir and Smotrich.

Gideon Levy, writing in the oldest Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, about five Western countries sanctioning two Israeli ministers

The whole trouble with this generation [of lawyers] is that they don't want to go to the trial court to learn the practice.

Justice S V N Bhatti of the Supreme Court, while hearing a POCSO case

There were doubters as to the route that we took, supposedly playing weaker

teams... Hopefully, this kind of squashes that.

Temba Bavuma, South Africa captain, on winning the Test Championship

MAII DAC WRITETO MAILBAU letters@newindianexpress.com

Safety first

Ref: How not to fly on a wing and a prayer (Jun 14). The author's views are significant as the safety of passengers and the crew is paramount. Even if the pilots are qualified, a technical snag is enough to put the lives of those aboard at risk. There should be no laxity in the intensive, mandatory checking of all parameters of an aircraft before each take-off.

V K Kumar, Thiruvananthapuram

Punish guilty

Ref: When spectacle crowds out governance (Jun 13). Kudos to the author. When the Karnataka team won several Ranji trophies with legends like EAS Prasanna, Anil Kumble, Rahul Dravid playing, there was no celebration. Private franchise RCB is hardly related to Karnataka except in its name. Let us not let the opportunity pass without accountability. The guilty must be punished.

Raghuram Rao Akkinepally, Mohali

Neighbourly nuisance

Ref: Erase hyphen between India and Pakistan (Jun 14). First, it's prudent to never underestimate your enemy. Second, Pakistan has great nuisance value. Pakistan is by no means our equal, but they have been bleeding us by a thousand small cuts. What was India's response in 2008 when Mumbai was attacked? The Congress government tried to coin a new term, 'Hindu terror'. It is better to be safe than sad.

Shreeram Paranjpe, Bengaluru

Taking responsibility

Ref: Committed to transparent communication: Tata (Jun 14). The Tata Group's commitment to transparency and responsible action in the wake of the recent Air India crash is appreciated. In such difficult times, leadership that prioritises openness and accountability is commendable. The focus remains on understanding the root cause of this tragedy and implementing necessary reforms to enhance safety.

V K S Krishnan, Kumbakonam

Fishers' fortunes

Ref: Fish caught from Kerala coast safe (Jun 14). It is good news for fishermen all over Kerala and in Kanyakumari district that the Central Institute of Fisheries Technology has certified the fish caught off the Kerala coast as free of contamination. The news comes when there is a steep fall in the demand for fish after the shipping accident. There should be more research done down the line to reassure consumers since the threat still looms.

P G Moorthy, Thiruvananthapuram

Schooling boost

Ref: Talliki Vandanam scheme: ₹2,000 per student to be deducted for school infrastructure (Jun 13). The scheme launched by the Andhra government is a blend of educational reform and social empowerment. By offering ₹ 15,000 per school-going child— ₹13,000 directly to mothers and the rest for school development—it transcends mere financial aid. By investing in both the learner and the learning environment, it incentivises schooling.

Asad Kabir, Nagari

Managing waste

Ref: Citizens to get reward for reporting waste dumping in Kerala (Jun 14). While the decision to penalise littering is welcome, the government must prioritise establishing facilities for scientific waste disposal. Most areas in Kerala lack effective waste management systems. Collecting evidence against violators is easy, but providing viable solutions is far more challenging. The Haritha Karma Sena collects only plastic and resalable scrap, leaving other waste unaddressed.

Girish R Edathitta, Pathanamthitta

Test glory

South Africa's victory in the World Test Championship final at Lord's will be etched in cricket lore as one of the best matches ever. Markram's century in the second innings is a fine tutorial for budding batsmen. And the oft-repeated criticism of the South Africans as perennial chokers has been laid to rest. In all, this match was an excellent advertisement for Test cricket.

M V Sundararaman, Chennai

THE NEW SUNDAY EXPRESS

Chairman of the Board: Manoj Kumar Sonthalia Editor: Santwana Bhattacharya

Resident Editor (Tamil Nadu): Anto T Joseph * Printed and Published by R K Jhunjhunwala on behalf of Express Gardens', 29, Second Main Road, Ambattur Industrial Estate, Chennai - 600 058. Chennai: Vol. 26, No. 24. RNI Reg. No.TNENG/2000/3090, Phone: 044-23457601, Fax: 044-23457619. * Responsible to decide the matter under the PRP Act. Copyright: Express Publications (Madurai) Private Ltd. All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner, electronic or otherwise, in whole or in part, without prior written permission is prohibited.

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