

Space beyond political parties



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

THE JANTAR Mantar agitation started by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) taught a lesson that was not learned by political parties in 79 years of democratic politics in India. The first hint of such a 'lesson' was visible earlier this year, but of that a little later.

Hitherto, history has taught us that political parties, through struggle and winning elections, can bring about change. That lesson still remains true. Congress led the movement that won independence. By winning successive elections, Congress erected several pillars of Indian democracy such as Constitutional rule, secularism, reservation, linguistic states, an independent central bank, devolution of resources, etc. Regional parties — for example, the Dravidian parties — won elections in states and asserted the primacy of the State's language, States' rights, cultural identity, land reforms, etc. The JP-led movement in 1975 replaced a central government and enacted Constitutional safeguards for liberty. The AASU movement in 1978 triggered legal provisions to control cross-border migration. In fact, it can be confidently asserted that *all* major changes in the governance of India were

brought about by political parties through struggle and elections.

Unusual Qualifications

CJP is not a political party in the conventional sense. It was born out of the angry reaction of one person, Mr Abhijeet Dipke. Evidently, Mr Dipke and some of his friends were deeply hurt by a seemingly provocative remark. Mr Dipke started a platform and asked "*What if all cockroaches got together?*". He declared that anyone can join the platform who is '*unemployed, lazy, chronically online and having the ability to rant professionally*'. Apparently, there are many including students and scholars who meet the unusual qualifications! There are also many who are employed but are chronically online and can rant professionally. These include honourable men and women such as artistes, teachers, doctors, nurses, advocates, businesspersons, journalists, other professionals and junior government employees.

The platform has a founder-leader, spokespersons, grit and little else. As far as is known, there is no organization, no membership, no registration, no declaration of policies, or any other features of a political party. Yet, through a 35-day protest, CJP has obliged two Cabinet ministers to negotiate, extracted the resignation of a minister, forced the government to withdraw the cases against the protesters, and got written commitments from the government. This is unprecedented.

Hint of New Phenomenon

As I said, the first hint of such a space *beyond* and *outside* political parties was

Yet, through a 35-day protest, CJP has obliged two Cabinet ministers to negotiate, extracted the resignation of a minister, forced the government to withdraw the cases against the protesters, and got written commitments from the government

sighted in 2026 in Tamil Nadu. Mr Joseph Vijay announced a political party (Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam or TVK) in February 2024 but it not take the 'form' of a regular party; by all accounts it remained an amorphous Fans' Association. Mostly, the office bearers of the Fans' Association became office bearers of TVK at various levels. TVK candidates were selected defying conventional political wisdom — ignoring caste, religion, gender, legacy, wealth, etc. Over 200 of the 234 candidates did not have or spend money. In the vast majority of constituencies, TVK candidates did not have the semblance of a campaign. Many TVK candidates were strangers to the constituency concerned and they had few booth agents or polling agents or counting agents. Mr Vijay held a few roadshows and spoke at fewer meetings. Apparently, the only things that mattered to the voters were 'Mr Vijay' and the 'whistle' symbol. The alchemist was the social media (Instagram and YouTube): Mr Vijay was seen *everywhere* and he was heard in *every home*. TVK won in 108 constituencies against the two formidable political and election machines of DMK and AIADMK, and polled 35 per cent of the votes.

No political party, no leader, no journalist, and no pollster foretold a TVK victory. When election results poured in, it was received with as much surprise by the TVK as it was received with shock by the established political parties.

The political change in Tamil Nadu was brought about by citizens occupying the space *beyond* and *outside* political parties. Following the Tamil Nadu example, it is not beyond imagination that change can be brought about by citizens who may not

know each other, may not talk to each other, may not belong to an organization, but vote in the same manner and elect sufficient number of representatives to form a government.

Challenge to Political Parties

Political parties should closely examine the phenomenon of the election result in Tamil Nadu and the outcome of the Jantar Mantar protest. Organized political parties may not become obsolete but traditional concepts such as High Command, Executive Committee, General Council, *Maha-sabha*, membership and party elections may become irrelevant. The obnoxious phrase 'vote bank' may vanish.

The citizens have shed silence thanks to the mobile, Twitter (now X), Facebook and Instagram; now, they seem to have shed fear. *Khaki* or blue, police, *lathis*, tear gas, guns, and arrest/detention no longer intimidate the youth, and older citizens may follow. I wish the political space beyond and outside political parties will grow larger.

Gen Z and other protesters have challenging tasks ahead of them:

- First, they must drag the Universities out of medievalism and obscurantism.
 - They must stand up to the brute force of the uniformed police, moral policing, and Bajrang Dal-like 'enforcers'.
 - They must fight against legislated morality and discrimination.
 - Gen Z must stop the oppressive corruption in local revenue and registration offices, hospitals, ration shops, local bodies, etc.
- After Jantar Mantar, every change for the better seems possible.

No lessons from cockroaches



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

SADLY, I must begin this piece on a gloomy note. It appears that no lessons were learned from Jantar Mantar by either the government or the opposition. If they had been learned, the opposition would have chosen to speak inside Parliament about students being shot at instead of playing into the government's hands by making the usual racket and reckless demands. Rahul Gandhi led the charge by insisting that the Home Minister would have ordered pellet guns to be used and that he should resign for doing this. The government, for its part, lied that no guns were used when there is clear evidence that they were.

The government should have discovered from the Cockroach Janta Party's remarkable protest in Jantar Mantar that they are dealing with a new generation of Indians who will not accept lies and will not be afraid. It should have learned that going back on its promises will be immediately spotted and opposed. Since it did not, it reverted to the typical tactics that we have seen against dissidents, which is to bully them into obedience. Criminal cases have been filed against young people who mocked the Prime Minister in Jantar Mantar and the founder of the CJP has been personally threatened with dire consequences.

This newspaper in a report last week had this comment from Abhijit Dipke. "I received threats saying that it would be better if I join the BJP...otherwise we will beat you up and shoot you." He said that intimidation devices had been used not just against him but against his family as well. Anyone vaguely familiar with the BJP's methods will find this comment from Dipke credible. Anyone who follows politics even slightly knows that opposition political parties have been broken because of these methods. And that supposedly corrupt politicians became miraculously cleansed as soon as they entered the ranks of the BJP.

The only person who appears to have learned a lesson of sorts is the Prime Minister himself who has taken to popping up on Instagram every other day to make some announcement or other. What he has not learned is that he needs to change his message if he wants to reach the generation he is trying so hard to reach. His videos are neither well-made nor interesting. In them he stares woodenly at the camera and then proceeds to deliver a monologue on his latest achievements. Surely, he should have discovered by now that this generation of young Indians can be reached much better with dialogue than monologue.

Unlike older Indians, like your aged columnist, younger Indians are mercifully unwilling to accept the mess that our political leaders and officials have made of India. They do not accept that year after year when the rains come, there will be states like Assam and Himachal in which people will lose every one of their possessions because the government has been unable to prepare better for the rains. They do not accept that the rains will bring chaos in our cities because of badly built roads and drains. They are impatient with politicians who tell them that by next year our sacred rivers will be clean and the air in our cities will be fit to breathe.

They know well that the real reason why the education system is broken is because of massive corruption in which politicians collude with mafioso types to make sure that nothing changes. If real change ever happens, then political leaders will lose the so-called educational institutions that enable them to get government land and grants. If real change happens, then the coaching centres who thrive on the misery of students will close and be replaced by real colleges. If real change happens, government schools will have properly trained teachers instead of highly paid frauds. If real change happens, Indian children will be taught to think instead of being taught to learn by rote.

These are not problems that have been created only in the age of Modi. They are legacy problems that have developed over decades of neglect and criminal negligence. What is sad is that Modi has done so little to rectify the problems he inherited. What is sad is that he has paid so much more attention to non-issues like making it a criminal act to interrupt the singing of Vande Matram. We did not need a new law for this, but it is one of only two that so far got passed in the monsoon session of Parliament.

If opposition leaders had understood the cockroach protest better, they would have allowed Parliament to function this time instead of using the usual tactics to make it non-functional. They are right to demand that the Home Minister explain why protesting students were shot at with pellet guns, but it would have been so much better if this had been discussed and debated. When are the opposition parties going to discover that they should leave street fighting to a new generation of Indians who know how to do this much better?

All in all, none of our political leaders covered themselves in glory in the week gone by in which we saw the aftermath of the cockroach protest. And since no lessons were learned, we are likely to see much more of what Bob Dylan unforgettably described as 'music in the cafes at night, revolution in the air'. This could be good.

A call for disaster drills for Indians



ROXY MATHEW KOLL

WHEREVER WE live in India, we now face some form of extreme weather. The danger may be a heatwave, cyclone, cloudburst, flash flood or landslide. The hazards differ, but no part of the country can assume it is safe. Yet most of us have never taken part in a disaster drill.

Every summer, people collapse. Every monsoon, children and adults are swept away. During the recent Assam floods, 13-year-old Hridip Panika entered the floodwaters to save his puppy. He saved the animal, but lost his life in the current. Many of these deaths unfold within minutes, before trained help can arrive. Survival depends on a few immediate decisions.

In a recent assessment, we found that hot days have increased by about five to ten days per decade since the 1950s, while extreme rain events causing floods over India tripled. Meanwhile, India has improved its ability to forecast heatwaves, cyclones and heavy rain. Alerts now reach millions through television, mobile phones and social media. However, a warning only tells us that danger is approaching. It does not teach us what to do. That knowledge has to be learnt and practised before the emergency.

A World Health Organization regional report cites 36,362 drowning deaths in India in 2021. Just 15 centimetres of fast-moving water can knock an adult down, while about 30 cm can carry away many cars. Yet people routinely walk, ride or drive into floodwater without knowing its depth, speed or what lies beneath. India needs a national culture of disaster drills. Every school, college, government office and workplace should conduct two mandatory seasonal drills each year, one before the heatwave season and another before the monsoon.

A heat drill should simulate a student or worker developing severe weakness, dizziness or confusion. Participants should know who calls for medical help, where rapid cooling will begin and who checks on those at greater risk. Every institution should identify a shaded or cooled room, maintain drinking water and know when outdoor work, sports and assemblies must stop.

A monsoon drill should be equally practical. Students and staff should walk the evacuation route to higher ground, practise head counts and test an alternative route in case the main exit is flooded. They should learn never to enter or drive through moving water, and to stay away from submerged drains and electrical wires. Children should be taught to throw a rope or flotation aid from a safe position and call trained rescuers, instead of jumping into the water. Survival swimming and basic water-rescue skills should become part of education in flood-prone districts.

Disaster management must become a practical part of education from the primary level. Children should learn local hazards, warning colours, safe routes, signs of heat illness and basic first aid. Older students can learn emergency communication, evacuation and community volunteering. These abilities should be demonstrated, not memorised. A child who learns them at school will also carry them home.

India is not starting from zero. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) already provides for school disaster plans, mock drills and village-level drill calendars based on local hazards. Yet a six-state survey found that most schools had not held the drills, many lacked evacuation plans and only about a quarter had trained staff and students.

Japan shows what sustained preparedness can achieve. During the 2011 tsunami, around 3,000 schoolchildren in Kamaishi reached safety after years of disaster education taught them to move quickly to higher ground. In June 2026, Taiwan tested how multiple agencies would respond to three consecutive days at 40°C. Bangladesh has built a standing network of about 76,000 coastal volunteers trained to carry warnings to communities, organise evacuations, manage shelters and provide first aid.

Every panchayat and urban ward should designate at least one local safety point. It should be accessible to people with disabilities and have water, cooling, first aid, toilets, backup lighting and communication. Its location and routes should be displayed publicly. District disaster management authorities should coordinate drills with schools, health departments, fire services, local governments and trained volunteers. Strong infrastructure, health services and emergency response remain essential.

Half an hour of practice twice a year is a small demand. In an emergency, the decisions made during those first few minutes can determine who reaches safety.

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Santiago to Shopian and Delhi — pellet guns in crowd control



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY MURARI

ON JULY 30, inside the Supreme Court, legal arguments clashed with a physical tragedy. At the heart of the debate were Sahil Lochab, a 19-year-old student fighting to save his eye after a metal pellet tore into it, and Irshad Sheikh, a young worker who underwent surgery for embedded pellets.

The court refused an outright ban, noting exceptional situations, but left the door open for an inquiry. Yet, a chilling question hung in the air. How did a shotgun, used for years in conflict zones, end up being fired at unarmed students in the heart of Delhi?

To understand how we got here, we must look at the history of pellet guns and their use in crowd control. Using them on civilian crowds is a modern nightmare born from an attempt to be 'merciful'. The blueprint was drawn in 1950s' Hong Kong. Following the bloody Double Ten riots, colonial police fired wooden baton rounds, or projectiles made of wood, to control violent mobs. The British military improvised further during The Troubles in Northern Ireland. In 1970, facing Catholic civil rights protests, soldiers fired rubber and later, plastic bullets. Fired at close range, they shattered bones and skulls. A 10-year-old boy in Derry was completely blinded, and 17 people were killed. Pellet-firing shotguns followed, causing immediate, severe facial injuries.

The weapon travelled the world, almost always finding the fragile human eye. During the First Intifada between 1987 and 1993, the Israeli military fired rubber and plastic rounds directly at Palestinian protesters, starting decades of life-altering eye injuries affecting children. This approach to riot control eventually found its way to Europe. In France, during Yellow Vest protests over



During the Cockroach Janta Party protests at Connaught Place. GAJENDRA YADAV

economic inequality, police fired heavy rubber-pellet launchers at crowds, leaving protesters with torn ears, shattered jaws, brain trauma, and irreversible eye damage.

During Chile's 2019 civil unrest over inequality, health agencies recorded up to 445 cases of severe eye trauma. Anger boiled over when a university study proved the supposedly rubber pellets were actually 80% heavy metals. Forced into a corner by blinded citizens, Chile's military police chief finally suspended their use. Following racial justice protests in 2020, 19 American cities agreed to pay 80 million dollars in settlements to maimed people. Meanwhile, during protests in Iran, shotguns became tools of mass blinding. On January 9 and 10 alone, a Tehran hospital reported nearly a 1,000 patients arriving for ruptured eyeballs, with scans from Mashhad showing metal pellets lodged deep inside eyes.

For years, the police fired these weapons into crowds with no clear international rules. The United Nations finally stepped in with the UN Human Rights Office releasing in 2020 its first-ever comprehensive guidance on less-lethal weapons to fill this void. They realised that governments were deploying these weapons with zero global standards on their design, test-

ing, or use. When it came to metal shotgun pellets, the UN was absolute: they should never be used for crowd control. Because they scatter wildly, it is physically impossible to aim them safely, making them inherently indiscriminate.

India too has a documented history of deploying pellet guns. The pump-action shotguns used by paramilitary forces are made at Rifle Factory Ishapore in Ichhapur, West Bengal. A single cartridge shoots hundreds of high-velocity metal pellets that scatter wildly. Beyond Kashmir, the weapon has surfaced in other civilian protests. During the 2024 farmers' protests along the Punjab-Haryana border, farm leaders alleged several protesters were injured by pellets, though police firmly denied using them. Similarly, allegations of pellet gun usage during the late 2025 unrest in Ladakh were met with official denials. The weapons were also reportedly used during ethnic violence in Manipur.

At least 2,524 people were injured by pellets, many in the eyes, in eight of the 10 districts in the Kashmir valley during the crackdown on protests that followed the killing of militant Burhan Wani on July 8 last year, according to data compiled from official records by the J&K government for the State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) in 2017.

During that 2016 unrest, schoolgirl Insha Mushtaq was hit by pellets while standing by her window, losing her sight completely. Ten years later, the government finally released funds to help her run a gas agency.

Following the 2016 outcry over Kashmir, the Union Home Ministry formed a committee, deciding that forces must first use chilli shells and stun grenades, keeping pellet guns as a final resort.

Governments worldwide often reach for these weapons hoping to control crowds without killing. But as courts argue over police manuals, for many young people with pellet injuries — from Santiago to Shopian to New Delhi — the reality on the ground remains unchanged.

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Until my mother was diagnosed with lung cancer

THERE ARE things they don't tell you about lung cancer until your feisty mother is diagnosed with it, and they say it is terminal. They don't tell you that lung cancer has no symptoms in the early stages, and that the lungs have few pain nerve endings, and tumors can grow large before causing any discomfort. They don't tell you that even at an advanced stage, symptoms are mild — a persistent cough, hoarseness, wheezing, a little chest pain, and perhaps some breathlessness, which is what your mother complained about. Because she was a Hindustani classical vocalist, and the breathlessness was interfering with her *riyaz*, which was also her *sadhana*, her deeper, spiritual discipline.

They don't tell you that even if your mother never smoked a single cigarette in her life, bore four healthy children, ate clean, and was rarely sick, a single PET scan can quickly unravel that illusion of good health, show it for what it is — smoke and mirrors — and alter the trajectory of her life on her birth-

day. They don't tell you that it was the polluted air she breathed for most of her adult life that triggered her disease. And when they do, they say it almost casually, like you should have known. Aren't you the daughter who studies air pollution, simplifies and amplifies that research, and writes to bring awareness about the health harms air pollution triggers? All that information seems to have coalesced in your mother's lungs. What sort of a cosmic joke is this?

August 1 is World Lung Cancer Day. Here are some things they don't tell you that you should know. It is preventable, but rising sharply. It was previously mostly linked to smoking, targeting older, male smokers; it now attacks more non-smoking women, and younger people. The WHO classifies outdoor air pollution and PM2.5 as Group 1 carcinogens, the same category as tobacco smoke. Delhi's annual average PM2.5 in 2025 was nearly 20 times the WHO safe limit. Children, older people and pregnant women are the most vulnerable. Every newborn in



SHE SAID
BY JYOTI PANDEY
LAVAKARE

India is a smoker from their first breath. Smoking kills. Breathing is the new smoking. But more than data, what they don't tell you is what your family will go through. That, at first, everything will feel normal — until it doesn't. They don't tell you about the collective denial amongst your mother's dearly beloved; the tears and fights that will lead to tests and retests, CT scans, MRIs, X-rays, molecular testing, genetic and biomarker testing. They don't tell you about the many doors of doctors, pathologists, and technicians you will wait outside, the many labs you will visit to repeat biopsies and cytologies in the hope that one of them may cast doubt on the death sentence served to your mother. They don't tell you about the rise and the fall of hope. They especially don't tell you about the despair.

Yes, things will still feel normal — until they draw pleural fluid from your mother's lungs during the first biopsy. The thought of a needle in her lungs is scary, but the relief she feels immediately after makes it bear-

able. Even when it happens again, and again. You wish you hadn't learnt that pleural effusion is the buildup of fluid in the narrow space between the outer lung lining and the chest wall, so the lung can't expand fully. It feels like slow drowning, someone tells you, and you wish they hadn't. After nearly two litres of pleural fluid are removed over three extractions, tested and retested, malignant cells are found, then a malignant mass, and dismay turns to despair — they don't tell you how quickly. They don't prepare you for the stunned disbelief in your mother's eyes when she finds out, even when no one tells her. A death sentence on a birthday. Just days after Diwali, when you were happy and lit oil lamps and celebrated the Supreme Court banning firecrackers.

Lavakare is the author of 'Breathing Here is Injurious to Your Health'

Editor (Planning & Projects) Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column

While governments continue to ramp up efforts to contain the fires, Europe can also count on a herd of donkeys chomping away to prevent the next one.

New private physics institute hinges success on 'less is more'

Is China's AI bet turning U.S. AI labs into new Apple?

SNAPSHOTS



Plant-based diet's winning hand is protein-fibre combo

Researchers have figured out why plant-based diets improve gut health. While animal proteins are easily absorbed, many plant proteins reach the colon. There, gut bacteria turn them into beneficial compounds like hippuric acid. Soluble fibre protects the gut. When a diet lacks fibre, bacteria often eat the body's own protective mucus, producing toxins. The researchers found fibre prevents this process. So fibre and plant proteins work together to help the microbiome create a healthier internal environment.



Scientists have found small, previously unknown hair-like structures on beetles' tongues that help saliva spread and evaporate rapidly to cool the animal, and based on it created a material called BioCCS. Its surface has microscopic grooves that help liquid spread rapidly across the surface while nanowires within the grooves weaken bonds between water molecules, allowing them to evaporate more easily.



Savoury secret

The primary reason plant-based foods are rarely salty while animal products have a more savoury taste profile is that animals have nervous systems and blood and plants don't. Animals generally need lots of sodium to maintain their extracellular fluids like blood and lymph and to fire neurons. And because salt is vital but historically rare in nature, animals have evolved to seek it out and animal tissues naturally store it in their fluids. Most plants have no

nervous system or circulatory system and use potassium mainly to regulate their internal pressure (called turgor) and growth. In fact, high levels of sodium are actually toxic to most land plants, which is why salting the earth kills vegetation. There are a few plant-based foods called halophytes that naturally taste salty. They include sea beans, sea grapes, and celery. They have evolved to live in salt marshes. Finally, fruits are sweet to attract animals. A naturally salty fruit would be dehydrating to the animal eating it.

PROFILES

The three faces of a revolt

Abhijeet Dipke, Ashutosh Ranka and Saurav Das

Fuelled by viral outrage and youthful anger, the Cockroach Janta Party’s rapid rise was driven by three very different men whose skills, ambitions and political histories transformed a satirical online campaign into a national protest that brought down Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan

Sobhana K. Nair
Nikhil M. Babu

From satire to sit-in is the most popular, and perhaps the easiest, explanation for the student protest movement that culminated in the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. This explanation is empowering in its simplicity. But it is incomplete.

By now, everyone knows how the story goes. On May 15, 2026, Chief Justice of India Surya Kant likened unemployed youth turning to activism and social media to “cockroaches”, triggering widespread backlash. Seizing on the remark, Abhijeet Dipke, an Indian student in Boston, launched a satirical online platform for fellow “cockroaches”, transforming an insult into a rallying cry for disaffected youth. Within the first 24 hours, 50,000 people signed up. That number swelled to more than a million within five days, while the movement’s Instagram account surged past 22 million followers.

Yet behind the viral posts, soaring follower counts and colourful symbolism stood a trio: Abhijeet Dipke (30), Ashutosh Ranka (30) and Saurav Das (27), whose skills complemented one another. They come from different parts of the country, different social backgrounds and possess markedly different temperaments.

Those who have spent time around Jantar Mantar since the movement began describe Mr. Dipke as politically intuitive, though at times a touch emotional, and the beating heart of the movement. On July 18, after activist Sonam Wangchuk was removed from Jantar Mantar, it was Mr. Dipke who argued that the movement should escalate its demands. Instead of limiting itself to seeking Mr. Pradhan’s resignation, he proposed demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Mr. Dipke loves discussing A.R. Rahman’s music and reciting Shah Rukh Khan’s dialogues from *Swades*. He brought a sense of lightness to the protest, spending time in the evenings talking to the protesters, posing for pictures with them and cracking a joke



Fearless fronts: Saurav Das, Abhijeet Dipke, and Ashutosh Ranka.

every now and then.

Mr. Ranka, meanwhile, has been described as decisive, though at times authoritarian, and quicker to lose his temper than others. He remains the mind of the movement and its principal strategist. Mr. Das, the youngest of the three, is known as much for his affable demeanour as for his outreach skills, though colleagues say he can occasionally be indecisive.

If Mr. Ranka and Mr. Dipke rave about Shah Rukh Khan starrer *Swades* and Aamir Khan’s *Rang De Basanti*, Mr. Das represents the other end of the social spectrum where his favourite series is *Modern Family* – a mockumentary about a multigenerational family based out of Los Angeles.

Association with AAP

One obvious thread connecting the three is their association with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), a link none of them has sought to conceal. Both Mr. Dipke and Mr. Ranka have worked for the party, while Mr. Das’s proximity to former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal is hardly a secret.

Mr. Dipke was born in Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar (formerly Aurangabad), Maharashtra, into a Dalit family, though his caste identity largely remained in the background during the protest. “He is a student leader who is also a Dalit and not the other way round,” a leader associated with the 36-day protest said. One occasion on which he publicly asserted his caste identity came after ink was thrown at him at Jantar Mantar on July 18. His response was brief: “Blue is my colour. Jai Bhim.”

He studied journalism at Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth in Pune before moving to the U.S. in 2023 to pursue a Master’s degree in Public Relations at Boston University. Mr. Dipke worked in political communications and was associated with the AAP social media team between 2020 and 2023, working closely with senior leader Manish Sisodia.

Mr. Ranka’s journey to the CJP was unlike that of most protest leaders. Born and raised in Jaipur, he studied Materials Science and Engineering at IIT-Kanpur, where he was elected

president of the Students’ Gymkhana, an early indication of his interest in public life.

He served as a Delhi Assembly Fellow during 2019-20, working closely with the team of former Delhi Chief Minister and current Leader of Opposition Atishi during the pandemic, before pursuing a Master’s in Public Administration at the London School of Economics. He subsequently worked with McKinsey & Company and with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, before gradually moving away from the worlds of consulting and international policy in favour of Indian public life.

Mr. Ranka also worked on the AAP campaign for the February 2025 Delhi Assembly election, focusing exclusively on the New Delhi constituency, where Mr. Kejriwal was the candidate. He was part of the team examining voter deletions and continued to publicly defend Mr. Kejriwal and the party even after the election. His most recent article as AAP’s “national spokesperson” was published on March 16.

Unlike many political organisers, Mr. Ranka has never hidden his

ambitions. He has often expressed a desire to focus on Rajasthan politics. Following the 2025 Assembly election, he turned his attention to the State, running campaigns to protect a 100-acre forest near Jaipur. More recently, he gave Rajasthan Education Minister Madan Dilawar a three-month ultimatum to address issues faced by students at Rajasthan University, warning that the CJP would otherwise seek the vice-chancellor’s resignation.

Saurav Das, the movement’s young spokesman, became its public face. A journalist before he became a protest leader, he understood how newsrooms functioned, how narratives were shaped and, more important, how to keep a movement in the headlines.

Mr. Das spent part of his childhood in Puducherry and speaks a smattering of Tamil. He studied Journalism and Mass Communication at Amity University, Noida, graduating in 2019. He is best known for his detailed profile of former Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud for *The Caravan*, and has also written for *Frontline* and other publications.

‘The language of Gen Z’

Mr. Das is also the co-founder of Climate Action Front, an initiative focused on climate governance, sustainability and environmental policy. Alongside journalism, he has been working on his debut book, *Complicit Silence: The Court’s Role in India’s Quiet Suffering*, which examines the judiciary’s role in contemporary India through a series of case studies involving citizens seeking justice. Videos of Mr. Das dancing after Mr. Pradhan’s resignation also went viral, attracting admiration as well as criticism. Mr. Das defended the celebrations as “the language of Gen Z”, arguing that young people express political victories differently.

None of the three had ever led a protest of this scale before they laid siege to the government near the 18th century observatory, Jantar Mantar. Nor had the majority of the protesters who took to the streets of Delhi, in response to their call. For now, the three insist that the CJP will continue to function as a pressure group rather than a political party.

THE GIST

Those who have spent time around Jantar Mantar since the movement began describe Abhijeet Dipke as politically intuitive, though at times a touch emotional, the beating heart of the movement

Ashutosh Ranka, who has been described as decisive, remains the mind of the movement and its principal strategist

Saurav Das, the youngest of the three, is known as much for his affable demeanour as for his outreach skills, though colleagues say he can occasionally be indecisive

A slice of Europe in Africa

Ceuta

The Spanish exclave witnessed one of its largest migration crises as up to 60,000 Moroccans breached its borders and arrived in the city, seeking asylum

Smriti Sudesh

“They told us we would have a place of refuge in Spain, and it was a lie”. That is how one migrant described his journey to Ceuta. He was among tens of thousands who believed Europe had finally opened its doors. Some scrambled over razor-wire fences. Others slipped through gaps in the chain-link barrier. Many plunged into the Mediterranean wearing wetsuits, kicking with flip-flops or clutching inflatable rings as they swam towards the tiny Spanish enclave on Morocco’s northern coast.

For a few hours, Europe seemed within reach.

By Friday evening, the illusion had vanished. According to Spain’s Interior Ministry, more than 48,000 migrants had already crossed back into Morocco. Hungry, exhausted, and disappointed, many took the same route they had taken only hours earlier. At least 67 people died in the chaos. Once again, the spotlight fell on Ceuta: a territory barely 15 square km in size but one that has repeatedly found itself at the centre of Europe’s migration politics. Ceuta, together with Melilla, further east, is one of only two Spanish territories on the African mainland. Although both are located on



AFP

Morocco’s Mediterranean coast, they have remained under Spanish sovereignty for centuries. Today, they constitute the EU’s only land borders with Africa.

For migrants fleeing war, poverty, or economic hardship, Ceuta is one of the shortest routes into Europe. But reaching Ceuta does not necessarily mean reaching Europe in the way many would imagine. While the enclave is part of Spain and the EU, migrants cannot continue to mainland Spain. For many, Ceuta becomes a waiting room rather than a gateway.

And that reality has transformed the enclave into one of Europe’s most heavily guarded frontiers. Double-layered border fences topped with razor wire, surveillance cameras, motion sensors, observation towers, and constant patrols by Spanish security forces line the frontier. Yet, despite heavy border security, migrants continue to attempt dangerous crossings.

Spanish authorities estimate that about 60,000 migrants entered Ceuta over two days. As thousands poured into the city, residents largely stayed indoors while shops and businesses shut their doors.

Court ruling

Why so many people attempted the crossing remains unclear. Spanish officials say trafficking networks spread false claims that asylum could easily be obtained in Spain.

On June 29, Spain’s Supreme Court ruled that migrants arriving by sea cannot be summarily deported because they do not cross the physical border referenced in Spanish law. Some believe traffickers and migrants interpreted the ruling as protection against deportation for those entering Ceuta by sea. Many migrants said, according to an *NYT* report, Moroccan security personnel appeared unusually permissive and even encouraged them to

“come to Spain”. Spain-Morocco ties have long been shaped by disagreements over migration, border management, and the disputed territory of Western Sahara.

The Ceuta crisis also quickly spilled into domestic politics. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez swiftly travelled to the exclave, describing the mass crossing as a “violation of Spain’s territorial integrity”. The Opposition, meanwhile, saw things differently. Conservative parties and the far-right Vox accused Mr. Sánchez of encouraging irregular migration through policies that offer pathways to legal residency for undocumented migrants already living in Spain. Human rights organisations, on the other hand, criticised the authorities, pointing to overcrowded reception centres and Spain’s long-standing practice of rapidly returning migrants from the enclaves.

Most of those who entered Ceuta have now returned to Morocco, and the immediate crisis may have subsided. But for many migrants who believed Europe had finally opened its doors, the journey ended with them back where they had started. “They had nothing for us,” one migrant said. “They were screaming, ‘Get out of Spain!’”

The climate diplomat

Ed Miliband

Britain’s new Foreign Secretary, once a strong critic of Donald Trump, says tackling climate change and promoting international development will be his core priorities

Joan Sony Cherian

As Ed Miliband took charge as the U.K.’s new Foreign Secretary on July 20, he stated that international development and tackling the climate crisis would be the core priorities of the U.K.’s foreign policy under him.

Under the previous Labour government led by Keir Starmer, Mr. Miliband held the position of Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. He had previously been the Energy Secretary under Prime Minister Gordon Brown from 2008 to 2010. In that short stint, Mr. Miliband strengthened the 2008 Climate Change Act and implemented the U.K. Low Carbon Transition Plan, which was the country’s first economy-wide decarbonisation strategy.

After taking on the role again in 2024 under Mr. Starmer, Mr. Miliband oversaw the implementation of various policies that backed the U.K.’s commitment to renewable energy. He established the Great British Energy, a publicly owned energy company, to expand and accelerate homegrown clean energy production and deployment.

He also laid out the Clean Power 2030 Action Plan, which aims to reduce the U.K.’s dependency on volatile fossil fuel markets.



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

One of his very first moves as Foreign Secretary was to visit Spain and France, the two countries which are now dealing with devastating wildfire disasters. After Mr. Miliband met with Spain’s Foreign Minister, both governments released a joint statement which acknowledged climate change as a global challenge and detailed that these “summer’s wildfires demonstrated that climate change was now a national security emergency facing Europe and threatening our way of life.”

Seasoned politician

Mr. Miliband is the son of Polish Jewish refugees who came to the U.K. fleeing the Nazis during the Second World War. He started his career in TV journalism before entering politics. He was recruited as a speechwriter by then Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Harriet Harman, in 1993, and climbed through the ranks to work

with Gordon Brown. He stood for elections for the first time in 2005, and attained his first Cabinet position under Mr. Brown in 2007.

His older brother, David Wright Miliband, a former labour party MP, had also, coincidentally, served as the Foreign Secretary in the Brown Cabinet from 2007 to 2010. Both of them ran against each other for the post of Labour Party leader in 2010 after Mr. Brown resigned. The race was eventually won by the junior Miliband.

One of the prominent reforms that Ed Miliband made as Labour Party leader from 2010 to 2015 was to abolish the electoral college within the party, and make it a ‘one member, one vote’ system. He also sought to unify the party, under the campaign ‘One Nation Labour’, as one working for the country and its people as a whole rather than for sectional interest groups. Mr. Miliband was once

one of the biggest critics of U.S. President Donald Trump. After Mr. Trump’s election as President in 2016, Mr. Miliband had remarked that he had “lowered the bar for idiocy.” However, in his statement after his appointment as Foreign Secretary, Mr. Miliband affirmed that he would “nurture our strong, enduring and essential alliance with the United States”.

Rebuilding ties with the EU, post-Brexit, is also a distinct challenge for Mr. Miliband. “Britain’s national economic and security interests are served by having a stronger relationship with our European allies,” Mr. Miliband said in his statement.

Domestically, the immediate challenge seems to be the shift in Prime Minister Andy Burnham’s stance on new drilling licences for oil and gas in the North Sea.

Mr. Miliband has vociferously opposed renewed drilling for oil and gas in the North Sea as it would delay the transition to clean energy. He has also argued that since North Sea energy is sold on the international market, domestic consumers would not see much of a reduction in their energy bills. If Mr. Burnham goes ahead with allowing drilling in the North Sea, Mr. Miliband and he could potentially be at loggerheads.

“WE MUST FORCE THE GOVERNMENT TO STOP THE BIRD
MIGRATION. WE MUST SHOOT ALL BIRDS, FIELD ALL OUR
MEN AND TROOPS... AND FORCE MIGRATORY BIRDS TO
STAY WHERE THEY ARE”
— VLADIMIR ZHIRINOVSKY

Canada permanent residence was never a door-to-door promise



SURJIT SINGH FLORA



A CANADIAN STUDY PERMIT ISN'T A PERMANENT RESIDENCE DOCUMENT. A COLLEGE LETTER ISN'T A JOB OFFER. A POST-GRADUATION WORK PERMIT ISN'T A GUARANTEE THAT A GRADUATE WILL QUALIFY FOR PR

Canada didn't go to homes in Punjab, Gujarat, or any other part of India and promise every child a Canadian future. Yet Canada permanent residence was often sold that way, through glossy offices, confident agents, and assurances that study would lead straight to settlement.

For many families, the pitch sounded simple: pay the tuition, get the visa, find a job, and secure PR. The real system was never that simple. It involved rules, scores, work experience, language tests, provincial programs, occupation requirements, and changing immigration targets.

A study permit was only the first decision. Every later step required a separate application and a separate assessment. A student could follow the rules and still fail to qualify for permanent residence because the student's score was too low, the job wasn't eligible, or a provincial program changed.

The painful question isn't whether every consultant cheated. Many did legitimate work. The question is who created and benefited from a market where uncertainty was sold as certainty.

A Canadian study permit isn't a permanent residence document. A college letter isn't a job offer. A post-graduation work permit isn't a guarantee that a graduate will qualify for PR.

Still, this distinction was often buried under sales language. Families in Punjab and Gujarat were told that Canadian education was an investment in a secure life abroad. The language was emotional. Canada was presented as safe, prosperous, welcoming, and almost automatic for young people willing to study and work.

That message had commercial value. A family that understood the path was uncertain might pause before borrowing money. A family told that its child was almost certain to settle in Canada was more likely to pay quickly.

This was often the point of the sales pitch. It compressed a complicated immigration process into a short chain of promises. Each promise sounded manageable on its own. Together, they made permanent residence appear like the natural final step of a college admission.

Canada permanent residence depends on programs that can change without warning. Express Entry scores rise. Provincial nomination rules shift. Occupation lists are revised. Language requirements matter. A graduate may struggle to find skilled work even after paying for a Canadian diploma.

No private agent can promise a visa, a job, a work permit, or permanent residence because none of those decisions belongs to the agent. An agent can't control a case officer, a provincial government, an employer, or the number of applicants competing for a limited program.

An honest consultation should include hard facts: tuition costs, rent, weak job prospects in some cities, limited work

hours, and no assured PR outcome. It should also explain what happens if the student can't find qualifying employment or if the immigration rules change before graduation.

This is where the system failed many students. The business rewarded volume. Families were asked to make life-changing payments before they understood how fragile the pathway could be. Some families sold land. Others mortgaged homes or took high-interest loans. For them, a Canadian file wasn't paperwork. It was the family's savings, social standing, and hope for a better future.

A failed application could leave a family with debt and no clear way to recover the money. A fraudulent application could create a second problem, immigration enforcement, even when the student didn't know how the documents were prepared. Words such as “guaranteed visa,” “guaranteed job,” and “guaranteed PR” should have stopped the process immediately. Authorized representatives can advise clients and submit applications. They can't control Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, provincial governments, or employers.

Canada created the immigration rules. It issued study permits. It approved designated learning institutions. But Canada didn't send officials into Punjab or Gujarat to assure parents that every student would get permanent residence.

In many cases, private intermediaries made that promise because they wanted fees, commissions, or both. That fact doesn't clear Canadian institutions of responsibility.

Colleges accepted international tuition and benefited from recruitment systems that brought students across the world. Regulators and government agencies had information about enrollment, complaints, labor shortages, and immigration applica-

tions. The public question is whether they acted quickly enough when the warnings became difficult to ignore.

The case linked to Brijesh Mishra, an agent associated with Education Migration Services in Jalandhar, showed how damaging false college letters can be. News reports connected the case to hundreds of Indian students, with around 700 students facing fears about removal from Canada.

The Canada Border Services Agency filed criminal charges against Mishra in June 2023. The charges included unauthorized representation, counselling misrepresentation, and communicating false information. In May 2024, reports said he received a three-year Canadian prison sentence after pleading guilty to immigration offenses.

Some affected students said they trusted their representatives and didn't know their admission documents were forged. That claim required investigation, not automatic dismissal. A student may have paid an agent to handle admissions, forms, and communication with a college without understanding what was uploaded in the student's name. That doesn't erase the need to examine the application. It does mean the investigation must identify who created the false document, who knew about it, and who received payment.

Gujarat has also seen complaints alleging promises of Canadian visas, jobs, and PR. Reported allegations involved sums of about Rs 31 lakh, Rs 26.86 lakh, Rs 25 lakh, and Rs 4.25 lakh. Those figures are allegations, not court findings. Still, they show the scale of potential damage when migration is marketed as a guaranteed product. Police raids on 17 consultancy firms in Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, and Vadodara over document irregularities added to public concern.

The loss can be brutal: vanished savings, loan repayments, delayed education, removal proceedings, and future immigration difficulties. Families can also lose years. A student may spend time in Canada trying to repair a file, find a new program, or respond to a removal notice. During that period, loan interest continues and the family may have no reliable answer about what happens next. International students shouldn't be blamed as one group. Each case needs evidence.

A student who knowingly bought fraudulent papers must face legal consequences.

A student misled by an agent deserves a fair review.

Canadian authorities have shown why individual review matters. IRCC reviewed 108 cases connected to fraudulent college admission letters. Many students reviewed were found to be genuine, and some received temporary resident permits.

Overseas agents, Canadian consultants, colleges, provincial authorities, IRCC, and the CBSA all have duties. A college should know who recruits in its name. A consultant should know who works under or beside the firm. Regulators should follow the money, not only the student at the end of the chain.

The College of Immigration and Citizenship Consultants, or CICC, regulates Canadian immigration consultants. Anyone paying a Canadian consultant should check that person's status through the CICC public register.

IRCC also warns people against websites and representatives promising entry to Canada, high-paying jobs, or guaranteed results. A license allows a consultant to provide paid advice. It doesn't make the outcome certain.

Licensed consultants may also remain responsible for agents acting on their behalf. Hidden partnerships make enforcement harder, but they shouldn't become an excuse for weak scrutiny.

Colleges should publicly list authorized recruitment partners and disclose commission arrangements. Consultants should disclose every overseas agent involved in a file.

Students should receive written notice that admission doesn't guarantee work authorization, a job, or PR. Agencies should preserve application records. Investigators should examine document preparers, payment trails, and everyone who earned money from a fraudulent application.

The student shouldn't be the only person whose records are available. If an agency collected millions from applicants, its contracts, bank transfers, advertisements, and communications should be part of any serious investigation. Fraud complaints can go to local police, the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre, the RCMP, or relevant Indian authorities. The crisis can't be dismissed by claiming students expected too much from Canada. Many expectations were shaped by a commercial chain that sold uncertain routes as near-certain outcomes.

There is a counterargument: adults who borrow money and sign applications should understand that no immigration result is guaranteed. That is true, but it doesn't excuse false advertising, forged documents, hidden fees, or undisclosed risks. Personal responsibility and institutional responsibility can exist at the same time.

Canada didn't personally promise permanent residence to every Indian family. But Canadian colleges, consultants, and regulators had a duty to control the system that profited from those promises. Families need documents, written terms, and verified credentials before paying an agent. They should ask which institution will issue the credential, what work authorization may follow, which immigration programs could apply, and what happens if PR isn't available. Canada permanent residence must be treated as an immigration decision, never as a product on sale.

Surjit Singh Flora is a veteran journalist and freelance writer based in Brampton Canada

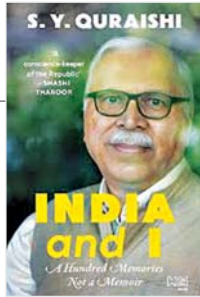
NEW ARRIVALS

India and I: A chronicle of Quraishi's memories

TEAM AGENDA

Public lives are usually captured in heavy, chronological autobiographies. Dr SY Quraishi shatters that predictable format in *India and I: A Hundred Memories, Not a Memoir*. Instead of sweeping histories, the former Chief Election Commissioner delivers a deeply personal mosaic of one hundred self-contained moments. Each memory is crafted in exactly two pages.

Javed Akhtar describes these vignettes as “short films,” noting they form a portrait of India no single narrative could capture. Meanwhile, Shashi Tharoor calls the collection an “urgent, vital book” that pushes readers to build upon the dreams of the nation's founders. Quraishi proves the real story of a country hides in small, overlooked interactions like a split-second decision, a career-altering meeting, or a quiet chat revealing the true nature of power. He takes readers far beyond sterile bureaucratic corridors. The episodes seamlessly transition from his nostalgic childhood in Old Delhi and a distinguished Indian Administrative Service career to global observer missions in war-torn Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Through candid, insightful prose, Quraishi maps encounters with Nobel laureates alongside conversations with a humble gardener. He balances political intrigue within Delhi's highest power circles with insider accounts of landmark electoral reforms.



Author: SY Quraishi
Publisher: Hachette India
Price: ₹699

FROM AGENDA COVER

CJP protest...

Millennials debated politics on Facebook and television. Today's young organise through reels, memes, stitched videos and digital communities that often command greater trust than conventional newsrooms. Every smartphone became a camera, an archive and a broadcasting station. Politics no longer travelled only from party headquarters to television studios and then to citizens. It travelled horizontally, creator to creator, page to page and reel to reel. That transformation is perhaps the most enduring legacy of the past month's protests. It signalled not merely a revolt over examinations, but the arrival of a generation that has chosen to participate in politics on entirely new terms.

The emergence of this new political culture also exposed the limitations of the ruling establishment's response. For more than a decade, the Bharatiya Janata Party has set the benchmark for political communication in India. It recognised the electoral potential of television before its opponents, mastered WhatsApp as a campaign tool and built one of the country's most sophisticated political communication machines. Yet every political strategy eventually encounters a generation whose instincts it struggles to understand. For the BJP, that generation appears to be Gen Z.

This is not because young Indians have suddenly become ideological opponents of the government, but because they inhabit an entirely different information ecosystem. They are influenced less by television studios and WhatsApp forwards than by creators, peer networks and digital communities where authenticity matters more than choreography and satire travels faster than carefully curated messaging. The challenge before the ruling party is therefore no longer simply one of commu-

nication. It is one of credibility.

If the resignation of the Education Minister reflected the movement's political success, the weeks that followed revealed the State's continuing discomfort with youth-led dissent. Instead of sustaining a national conversation on examination reforms and institutional accountability, attention increasingly shifted to the conduct of individual protesters.

In Parliament, concerns were raised that young people were being detained, questioned and investigated across Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Bihar, Assam and Maharashtra. Questions were also raised regarding the number of students detained, the number placed under investigation, whether social media accounts were being blocked or scrutinised and whether assurances that peaceful protesters would not be targeted were being honoured in both letter and spirit. The demand was not merely for restraint but for transparency through a detailed state-wise statement from the government.

The conversation soon moved beyond the streets and into the digital sphere. Several young protesters, particularly women, found themselves at the centre of intense online targeting. Personal details were circulated, workplaces were contacted and individual social media posts were amplified to discredit the larger movement. One of the most striking examples was that of 15-year-old Ruchika Singh, who publicly apologised after an abusive slogan directed at the Prime Minister drew nationwide attention and legal scrutiny.

The episode quickly became less about a teenager's words and more about the political spectacle surrounding them. Equally troubling were attempts by sections of the political establishment to personalise the movement. Remarks by BJP MP Kangana Ranaut targeting young

WEEKLY MOON SIGN FORECAST | 2 - 8 AUGUST

Clearing Confusion, Taking Initiative and Finding Stability

Dr Shanker Adawal
Astrologer, Author & Researcher

This forecast is based on your Moon Sign (Janma Rashi), which often reflects day-to-day emotional and instinctive patterns more closely than general Sun-sign readings.

Moon Watch

The Moon's quiet message for the week ahead. The week moves from detached observation towards emotional understanding and timely action. Avoid forcing an early conclusion; what appears uncertain may become easier to handle.

Weekly Overview

The week opens under the Aquarius Moon, encouraging observation, fresh thinking and some emotional distance. Pisces then deepens intuition, though assumptions may need checking. As the Moon enters Aries, decisions and movement gather speed. By the weekend, Taurus restores a steadier rhythm, helping practical matters and personal priorities settle into place.



Aries (Mesh): Friends, professional contacts or future plans may bring useful ideas during the opening days. Midweek feels quieter, and unfinished thoughts may need attention before action begins. Once the Moon enters Aries, confidence rises and delayed work can move again. The weekend turns focus towards finances and practical priorities. Take initiative, but leave room to review the details.



Taurus (Vrishabh): Professional expectations may remain active at the beginning of the week, though not every discussion needs an immediate response. Pisces encourages reflection on friendships and long-term plans. Midweek may feel faster as pending matters begin moving. By the weekend, the Moon enters Taurus, bringing emotional steadiness and clearer personal priorities. Your calm approach may quietly influence others.



Gemini (Mithun): Learning, travel plans or discussions about the future may hold your attention early in the week. Professional responsibilities become more noticeable as the Moon enters Pisces, so keep communication simple and clear. Midweek supports teamwork and fresh contacts. The weekend may encourage a slower pace, allowing you to review recent decisions before taking on another commitment.



Cancer (Karka): Shared responsibilities, finances or an unresolved personal matter may require closer attention during the opening phase. Pisces broadens perspective and may bring helpful advice through an experienced person. As Aries energy develops, career matters gather pace and visibility increases. By the weekend, friends or professional networks may offer practical support. Avoid carrying every concern alone.



Leo (Simha): Partnerships and close relationships may require patience at the beginning of the week. Midweek brings deeper emotional understanding, though it is better to ask than assume. The Aries Moon restores confidence and supports travel, learning or future planning. By the weekend, professional priorities become clearer. A thoughtful decision may carry more weight than a dramatic statement.



Virgo (Kanya): Routine work, health priorities and unfinished responsibilities may occupy the early days. As the Moon moves through Pisces, relationships and shared decisions require greater sensitivity. Midweek could bring financial discussions or matters involving trust. The weekend broadens your outlook and supports learning or planning. Keep expectations realistic, especially where others are also adjusting.



Libra (Tula): Creative work, personal interests or family activities may provide useful relief from routine. Pisces turns attention towards work habits and practical organisation, making small corrections worthwhile. As Aries energy develops, partnerships become more active and direct conversations may be necessary. By the weekend, financial commitments or shared responsibilities deserve a careful and balanced review.



Scorpio (Vrishchik): Home, family matters or personal comfort may remain important during the opening days. Pisces supports creativity and warmer emotional expression, helping some relationships feel easier. Midweek brings greater activity in work and routine matters. By the weekend, partnerships move into focus and practical cooperation becomes necessary. Listen carefully before deciding what the other person intends.



Sagittarius (Dhanu): Communication, paperwork or short journeys may keep the opening days busy. As the Moon enters Pisces, home and family concerns may require more emotional attention than expected. Midweek encourages creativity, confidence and social activity. The weekend returns focus to health, routines and practical work. A simple plan will be easier to follow than an ambitious one.



Capricorn (Makar): Financial priorities and practical responsibilities may need careful handling at the beginning of the week. Pisces improves communication and may help clear an old misunderstanding. Midweek turns attention towards home, family or personal arrangements. By the weekend, creativity and lighter social moments bring relief. Progress may feel modest, but it is likely to be more dependable.



Aquarius (Kumbh): With the Moon beginning the week in Aquarius, ideas, independence and personal priorities become stronger. Pisces then shifts attention towards money, values and emotional security. Midweek brings quicker conversations and movement, but impatience may create confusion. By the weekend, home and family matters settle into a more manageable rhythm. Choose clarity over cleverness.

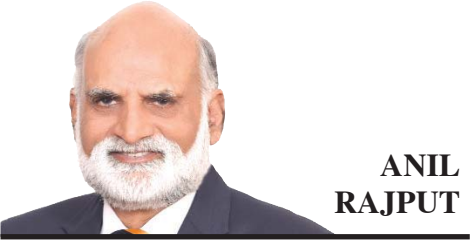


Pisces (Meen): The opening phase may feel inward-looking, giving you time to observe before becoming involved. Once the Moon enters Pisces, intuition strengthens and personal concerns become easier to understand. Midweek turns attention towards finances and practical decisions. By the weekend, communication improves and useful discussions may reopen. Trust your instincts, but support them with facts.

“OOD NUTRITION CREATES HEALTH IN ALL
AREAS OF OUR EXISTENCE. ALL PARTS ARE
INTERCONNECTED”
— T COLIN CAMPBELL

GANGAUR

The sacred flavours of Gauri’s homecoming



ANIL
RAJPUT

In Rajasthan, spring enters courtyards through folk songs, appears on palms in patterns of mehendi, travels through bazaars in processions of colour and takes edible form in delicately shaped gune, syrup-laced ghevar and meals prepared for reunion, worship and farewell. Gangaur is often described as a festival of marital devotion, but its meaning is wider than a prayer for domestic happiness. It celebrates fertility, renewal, companionship and feminine creativity, as well as the enduring relationship between a woman’s marital home and her maternal family. Its cuisine reflects these ideas. Food is moulded like jewellery, sent as affection, offered before it is eaten and shared after restraint, turning the kitchen into one of the festival’s most important sacred spaces.

Gangaur, also known as Gauri Tritiya, is celebrated on Chaitra Shukla Tritiya, the third lunar day of the bright fortnight of Chaitra. This year, it was observed on 21 March, while in 2027 it will fall on 9 April. In Rajasthan, the festivities traditionally begin after Holi and unfold over approximately eighteen days, culminating in the principal worship and ceremonial farewell of Gauri. The name Gangaur brings together “Gan”, associated with Isar or Shiva, and “Gaur”, referring to Gauri or Parvati. Married women worship the divine couple for marital harmony, family well-being and prosperity, while unmarried girls traditionally pray for a worthy partner and an auspicious future. Yet Gangaur extends far beyond household worship, filling courtyards, streets, lakesides and village squares with songs, decorated images, processions and a shared celebration of spring, feminine creativity and community life.

The story at the heart of Gangaur presents Gauri as both goddess and beloved daughter. In Rajasthani tradition, she is imagined as visiting her maternal home after Holi, remaining there through the celebration before Isar arrives to take her back. Her departure on Gangaur carries the tenderness of a daughter’s vidai, which explains the festival’s mixture of joy and wistfulness. Women fashion or decorate clay and wooden images of Isar and Gauri, offer water, flowers, sacred grass and food, and sing songs in which the divine couple is addressed with the familiarity of family. The rituals transform distant divinity into an intimate presence within the household.

The history of Gangaur cannot be reduced to a single founding moment. It grew through regional customs, royal patronage, household worship and the seasonal rhythms of western and central India. Rajasthan’s princely courts gave the public processions grandeur, but the festival’s continuity has always depended upon women in homes and communities. Jaipur’s ceremonial procession traditionally moves from the City Palace through the old city, while Udaipur’s Mewar Festival carries images of Gauri towards Lake Pichola amid music, decorated boats and public celebration. Beyond Rajasthan, Gangaur is also observed in parts of Madhya Pradesh, especially Nimar, where the goddess is honoured as a powerful maternal figure and the conclusion of the festival may include collective worship and community meals.

Gangaur also reveals the vital role of women as custodians of intangible cultural heritage. Although the festival is rooted in traditional ideas of marriage, fer-

tility and household well-being, its continuity depends upon a distinctly female world of knowledge, memory and collective participation. Women preserve not only the visible customs of worship, song, dress and food, but also the less tangible understanding behind them: when a ritual must be performed, how an offering should be shaped, which songs belong to each stage of the observance, and how meanings are adapted within different families and communities. Much of this knowledge is not formally written down. It is absorbed by watching mothers and grandmothers, joining group rituals, preparing food together and taking part in processions and seasonal gatherings. In this way, women do more than maintain inherited practices. They interpret them, renew them and decide how they will be transmitted. Gangaur therefore gives women cultural authority within the household and the community, positioning them not simply as participants in tradition, but as its principal knowledge-bearers and the people most responsible for carrying it into the future.

The cuisine becomes one of the clearest expressions of this inherited knowledge, beginning with the festival’s most distinctive preparation, Gangauri Gune. These crisp forms are made from wheat flour, refined flour or gram flour and shaped to resemble ornaments, discs, flowers or other auspicious designs. Sweet versions may contain jaggery or be coated lightly with sugar syrup after frying. The word gune is often connected with gehne, meaning jewellery, because the edible shapes are offered to Gauri as symbolic adornments. After worship, they are shared among women of the family, including mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law and other relatives. Flour becomes ornament, while shaping and sharing it become acts of devotion. Alongside them appear Besan ke Namkeen Gune, a savoury counterpart made by combining gram flour with turmeric, salt, carom seeds, cumin or crushed spices. The dough is rolled, cut or shaped by hand before being fried in a kadai until firm and golden. Their restrained seasoning distinguishes them from ordinary snacks, while their jewellery-like forms preserve the ritual association with Gauri. Some households prepare both sweet and savoury batches so that the ceremonial plate contains contrasting flavours, textures and colours.

The second great emblem of the Gangaur season is Ghevar, whose intricate surface seems designed for a festival devoted to beauty and adornment. A thin batter of flour, ghee and chilled water or milk is poured repeatedly from a height into a deep kadai of hot ghee or oil, allowing each stream to set around the previous one and gradually form the sweet’s porous, honey-combed structure. Once crisp, the disc is drained and lightly soaked or coated with sugar syrup.



Ghevar is finished with thickened milk, saffron, pistachios and almonds, while Mawa Ghevar carries a richer layer of sweetened khoya. Ghevar is closely associated with Sinjara, the gifts traditionally sent from a married woman’s maternal home before the main celebration. Along with clothes, mehendi, ornaments and other festive items, the sweet conveys remembrance and affection across households. It is therefore more than a dessert. It becomes an edible expression of the continuing bond between a daughter and the home in which she grew up, even after marriage has taken her elsewhere.

That exchange of sweetness continues through Mawa Kachori, particularly associated with Jodhpur. This festive pastry encloses sweetened khoya, nuts and cardamom inside a crisp flour shell before being glazed with sugar syrup. Its contrast between brittle pastry and soft filling makes it especially suited to celebratory trays. Mohanthal, prepared by slowly roasting coarse gram flour in ghee in a heavy-bottomed vessel and setting it with sugar syrup, cardamom, saffron and nuts, offers a denser sweetness. Its characteristic grainy texture depends upon patient roasting and careful control of the syrup, making it a preparation through which culinary skill becomes visible.

A more rustic expression of celebration appears in Churma Laddoo. Wheat dough is baked or fried, crushed and combined with ghee, jaggery or sugar, cardamom and dry fruits before being shaped by hand. Dilkhushal, also known as besan chakki in parts of Rajasthan, is similarly built upon gram flour, ghee and sugar but cooked into a firm mass and cut into diamonds. These preparations create richness through the slow transformation of flour, fat and sweetener rather than elaborate decoration. Their ability to remain fresh also makes them suitable for gift trays, family visits and the steady movement of food between maternal and marital homes. The sweet sequence may conclude with dishes served warm. Malpua with Rabri combines shallow-fried pancakes, often flavoured with fennel, with thickened milk scented by cardamom and saffron. The edges remain crisp while the centre absorbs syrup and rabri. Kesar Mawa Kheer, made by gently simmering milk with rice or reduced milk solids, saffron and nuts,

provides a softer conclusion. Neither dish is an obligatory Gangaur offering across every community, but both belong naturally to the larger festive table of Rajasthan and neighbouring regions. Gangaur cuisine is not one fixed menu. Its sacred core is surrounded by family recipes, local preferences and dishes selected according to place, season and means. Once the fast or principal worship is complete, the savoury meal restores appetite through dishes that are substantial without losing their regional identity. Hing Kachori is filled with ground lentils seasoned with asafoetida, fennel, coriander and chilli, then fried until blistered and crisp. Its powerful aroma awakens the palate after restraint. Kanji Vada, particularly suited to the spring period following Holi, offers an entirely different sensation. Lentil dumplings are soaked in a mustard-spiced liquid and left to ferment, creating the sourness and pungency that balance the richer fried foods of the festive meal.

The main table often turns to Rajasthan’s mastery of gram flour. Govind Gatta elevates the familiar gatta into a festive preparation by filling or enriching gram-flour dumplings with khoya, paneer or nuts before simmering them in a spiced yoghurt gravy. The gravy must be cooked over a controlled flame and stirred carefully so that the yoghurt does not split. Pitod ki Sabzi begins with gram flour and buttermilk or yoghurt cooked into a firm mixture, spread, cooled, cut into diamonds and finished in a tempered gravy.

Papad Mangodi ki Sabzi begins long before it reaches the stove, with seasoned lentil paste shaped into small nuggets and dried under the strong Rajasthani sun for storage. When required, the mangodi is cooked with papad, spices, yoghurt or a light tomato base to create a dish of surprising depth from ingredients that can be preserved for months. Such preparations arose from practical necessity but became an essential part of Rajasthan’s culinary identity.

The relationship between cuisine and ecology becomes most visible in Ker Sangri, a dish shaped by an arid landscape where water was precious, rainfall uncertain and fresh vegetables highly seasonal. Dried ker berries and sangri beans, gathered from hardy desert plants, are soaked repeatedly, boiled and cooked with oil, chillies, coriander, cumin, dried mango or yoghurt until tangy and concentrated. The soaking softens the ingredients and reduces their natural sharpness, while slow cooking allows them to absorb the spices.

Panchkuta expands the same desert logic by bringing together five preserved ingredients, commonly including ker, sangri, kumatiya, dried gunda and amchur. Although the combination varies between communities, the preparation expresses a culinary culture built upon sun-drying, storage and careful use of what the land could sustain. Papad, mangodi, gram flour, millet, dried berries and fermented dairy were not merely substitutes used in times of shortage. They became the

basis of a distinctive cuisine that transformed ecological restraint into flavour and variety. During Gangaur, these dishes connect the goddess’s associations with fertility and abundance to a tradition that defines abundance not as excess, but as resilience, preservation and respect for limited resources.

Traditional Rajasthani cooking methods are woven into nearly every part of this festive meal. Ingredients are dried beneath the sun, yoghurt gravies are simmered gently, milk is reduced slowly into khoya and rabri, and flour is patiently roasted in ghee until its aroma changes and its flavour deepens. Heavy iron, brass or thick-bottomed vessels help retain heat, while frying gives gune, kachori and ghevar the crispness needed for ceremonial sharing and storage. Fermentation sharpens kanji, and slow cooking allows dried ingredients to regain tenderness. These techniques conserve ingredients, limit waste and create the concentrated tastes that distinguish the region’s cuisine.

Bread and grain complete the savoury range. Khoba Roti is a thick wheat bread whose surface is pinched into decorative patterns before being cooked slowly on a tawa or over gentle heat and brushed generously with ghee. Its sculpted appearance is especially appropriate to a festival in which adornment carries ritual meaning. Rajasthani Dhokla with Kadhi, made from firm wheat dough rather than the soft Gujarati gram-flour preparation, is steamed or cooked and then broken into pieces to be eaten with tangy yoghurt kadhi.

Jodhpuri Kabuli adds a more elaborate note through layers of fragrant rice, vegetables, fried bread, nuts and warming spices. The ingredients are arranged and cooked together so that each serving reveals contrasting textures. Across the border in Madhya Pradesh, particularly in areas connected with Nimar and Malwa, Dal Bafla provides a fitting communal preparation. Wheat balls are boiled before being baked, giving them a softer centre than baati, and are then opened, enriched with ghee and served with lentils, chutneys and sometimes churma. Its generous, shareable character suits the family gatherings and community meals associated with regional Gangaur observances. Beverages provide relief from the early summer warmth and balance the ghee-rich sweets and fried foods. Kesar Badam Thandai, blended from milk, almonds, melon seeds, fennel, pepper, cardamom and saffron, carries forward the cooling flavours associated with the season after Holi. Makhanjiya Lassi offers thick yoghurt churned with sugar and crowned with malai, while salted Chaas, flavoured with roasted cumin, mint and black salt, cools the palate during the savoury meal. Fermented Kanji may be served separately from the vadas as a sharp, mustard-scented drink. In some households, Kesar Doodh or Bael Sherbet provides a gentler alternative for children, elders and those breaking a fast.

To carry Gangaur forward, future generations must inherit more than the sight of a procession or a date on the calendar. They should know why flour is shaped into jewellery for Gauri, how a stream of batter becomes the lattice of ghevar, why Sinjara travels from a daughter’s maternal home, how desert berries become a dish of celebration and why mangodi is dried long before it is cooked. They should also recognise the women whose knowledge keeps each practice alive. When children are invited to shape gune, stir mohanthal, learn a Gangaur song and serve the first offering before eating, heritage moves from observation into experience. Gangaur will endure when its cuisine remains cooked, shared and understood, allowing Gauri’s homecoming to nourish the cultural confidence of generations yet to come.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)

A delicious window into tea-shop culture

TEAM AGENDA

Some meals are about eating; others are about slowing down, sharing and discovering a culture one bite at a time. Burma Burma’s limited-edition PaukSe & Palata: Windows to Burma, running till August 31, falls firmly into the latter category. Inspired by Yangon’s lively tea shops, the menu brings together steamed buns, flaky flatbreads, curries, desserts and Burmese teas in an experience that feels both comforting and unfamiliar.

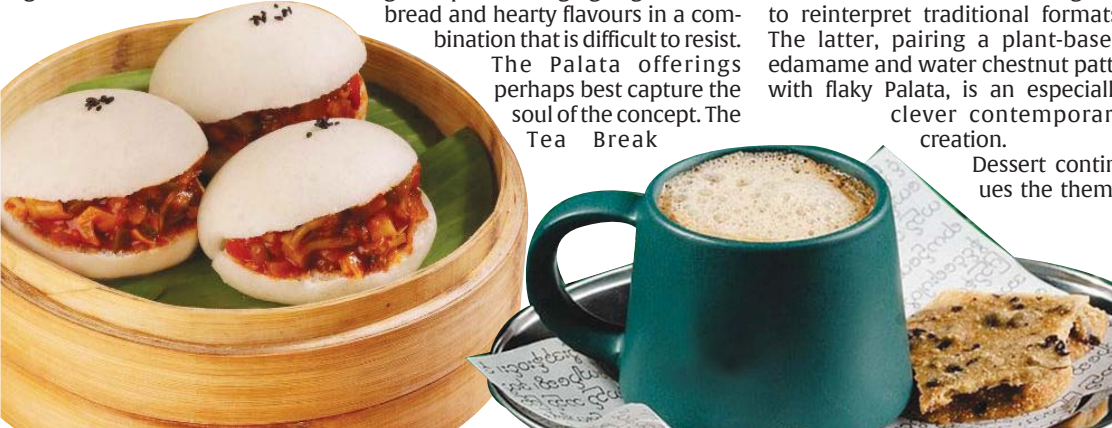
At the heart of the menu are PaukSe, soft, pillowy steamed buns, and Palata, the crisp, layered flatbread whose flaky texture carries echoes of South Asian culinary influences. In Burma’s tea shops, these breads are everyday staples, enjoyed alongside curries and fillings while conversations linger over endless cups of tea. The menu captures that spirit beautifully, giving these humble favourites a contemporary restaurant treatment without stripping away their character. The PaukSe selection is particularly appealing. The Tofu &



Scallion Twist is delicately spiced and flavourful, while the PaukSe Burger, with its crisp corn patty tucked inside a sesame-topped steamed bun, is an inventive meeting of familiar comfort food and Burmese inspiration. The Spicy Curry Palata adds another layer of comfort, while the Soya Keema Tacos and Palata Sando demonstrate the kitchen’s willingness to reinterpret traditional formats. The latter, pairing a plant-based edamame and water chestnut patty with flaky Palata, is an especially clever contemporary creation.

Palata, topped with lentil curry, brown onions, mint and green chillies, has the easy, unfussy appeal of something made to be enjoyed between long conversations. The Sunday Curry Palata adds another layer of comfort, while the Soya Keema Tacos and Palata Sando demonstrate the kitchen’s willingness to reinterpret traditional formats. The latter, pairing a plant-based edamame and water chestnut patty with flaky Palata, is an especially clever contemporary creation.

Dessert continues the theme



with a playful touch. The Tea Shop Cream Puff, paired with Thai tea mas-carpone, offers a refined finish, while the Nutty Banana Sundae, served over flaky Palata with banana, condensed milk and hazelnut spread, is delightfully indulgent.

No Burmese tea-shop experience would be complete without the drinks. The Pistachio & Saffron Pulled Tea and Cinnamon Spice Pulled Tea bring warmth and aroma, while chilled creations such as Sea Salt Honeycomb and Jasmine Rice & Brown Sugar provide a refreshing counterpoint. The house tamarind-infused cola adds yet another layer of fun.

What makes the menu work is that it does not merely borrow dishes; it recreates the social spirit of Burma’s tea shops, where food, tea and conversation are inseparable. PaukSe & Palata: Windows to Burma is therefore less a conventional limited-period menu and more a culinary invitation to slow down, share generously and take a passport-free journey through the flavours of Burma.

THE PISTACHIO & SAFFRON PULLED TEA AND CINNAMON SPICE PULLED TEA BRING WARMTH AND AROMA, WHILE CHILLED CREATIONS SUCH AS SEA SALT HONEYCOMB AND JASMINE RICE & BROWN SUGAR PROVIDE A REFRESHING COUNTERPOINT

Ayurveda: Reviving Ritucharya

GYANESHWAR DAYAL

For Ayurveda, the seasons are not merely weather changes. They alter the environment in which the human body functions. What suits the body in summer may not suit it in the rains or in winter. Ritucharya is an Ayurvedic concept that means “seasonal regime” It is derived from two Sanskrit words: Ritu (season) and Charya (conduct or routine). Ritucharya therefore advocates adapting food, physical activity, rest and other habits to seasonal conditions.

Modern life has steadily separated people from seasonal rhythms. Air-conditioning, processed food, sedentary routines and artificial lighting have made it possible to live much the same way throughout the year. Yet the human body remains part of nature. Ayurveda’s seasonal regimen begins with the simple recognition that the body must continually negotiate its environment. This makes Ritucharya particularly relevant today.

According to Ayurveda, the body’s doshas — Vata, Pitta, and Kapha — change with the seasons. To maintain health and prevent disease, one should adapt diet, exercise, sleep, clothing, and daily habits to each season. The objective of Ritucharya is to align human physiology with nature’s rhythms, thereby improving immunity, digestion, mental well-being, and overall health



while reducing the risk of seasonal illnesses. It is one of the foundational principles of preventive healthcare in Ayurveda and remains relevant even today as a holistic approach to healthy living. Kerala offers perhaps one of the most vivid settings in which to understand this idea. The state’s intense monsoon, humid climate, long coastline and rich plant diversity have helped preserve a distinctive Ayurvedic culture. This is where Ritucharya moves beyond the pages of classical texts. It becomes a way of life.

This is not simply an old custom being preserved for sentimental reasons. Kerala is increasingly attempting to explain Ayurveda to a new generation and to an international audience through a combination of public education, institutional development and tourism.

Kerala has also begun giving Ayurveda a stronger international platform. The first International Ayurveda & Wellness Conclave, held in Kozhikode on February 2 and 3, 2026, brought together more than 125 delegates from 34 countries. Discussions covered research, education, policy, wellness tourism and medical-value travel, with the objective of positioning Kerala as a global destination for Ayurveda and wellness.

And perhaps that is the real strength of Ritucharya. It reminds us of something that modern wellness culture is only beginning to rediscover—align with nature!



Free Yourself From Intoxication

AMMA (SRI MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI)

Today, Amma and her children joined Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi's launch of the Nasha Mukh Yuva for Viksit Bharat campaign. The youth movement encourages every citizen to choose a healthier, drug-free future through awareness, action, and community participation.

Amma's participation is led by her AYUDH youth movement, spanning Amrita University's 10 campuses, 86 Amrita Vidyalayam throughout the country, and 2800 villages reached by Amma's humanitarian initiatives across Bharat.

Children, the increase in the use of intoxicants among today's generation of youth is cause for alarm. It is gnawing away at society like some incurable disease. It is humankind's journey towards mere self-gratification that is leading to drink and drugs.

In truth, are we really getting any happiness from these intoxicants? Does happiness reside in cigars, cigarettes, marijuana or other intoxicants? When a dog chews a bone for too long, its gums start bleeding. Imagining that the blood is coming from the bone, it continues chewing it. This is exactly what we are doing when we strive to obtain happiness from intoxicants.

In truth, happiness is within us. The thinking that we can obtain bliss from intoxicants is just our imagination.

Amma remembers a story. Seeing a frail old man sitting happily on a swing in the garden in front of his house, swaying in pleasure, a passerby asked, "Uncle, you look really happy. What's the secret behind your happiness and health?"

"I smoke six packets of cigarettes daily, drink six cases of whisky every week, eat meat thrice daily, and never exercise," the man replied.

"Unbelievable!" declared the passerby. "By the way, how old are you?"

"Twenty six," said the man.

Intoxicants might help one forget everything briefly. But addicts do not



realise that intoxicants rob the body of vitality and destroy them. Their health is impaired and they age prematurely, leading to an early death. Instead of being an asset to their families and country, they ruin themselves and cause suffering to others.

There was a family that used to live happily. The husband fell into bad company and started drinking. With that, the peace and contentment that used to prevail in the family began to disappear.

He stopped going to work for many days, and on the days he went, he would arrive in a drunken stupor and quarrel with his colleagues. Finally, he lost his job. Having no money to buy drinks, he began harassing his wife for her jewellery, and when she resisted, he started beating her. Fearing further assaults, she handed it over; he sold it and spent the entire amount on drink.

He then began selling the pots and pans and other items in the house. One day, he started fighting with her for the small necklace around their baby's throat. That was the final straw. Unable to tolerate his behaviour any longer, the wife grabbed the baby and came to Amma. This is just one example. Amma sees and hears about many such incidents every day.

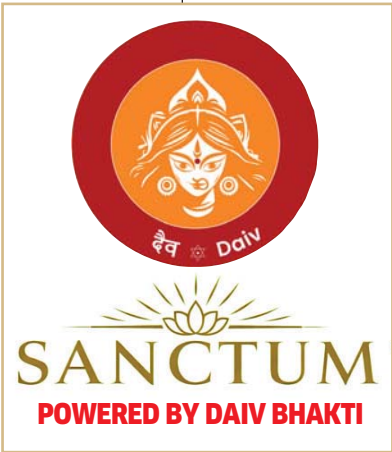
Children, everyone today thinks: "What did I gain?" That is not correct. Instead, we should ask ourselves, "What was I able to contribute to society?" Rather than shortening our lives by living

like beasts and thinking solely of our own happiness, live with an awareness of life's purpose. Having consumed what we really need, we should distribute the rest as alms.

It is only through spiritual thinking that we can move away from the narrow world of selfishness and suffering, and reach the expansive universe of selflessness and happiness. Only through spirituality can we realise that real happiness lies in loving and serving others.

If we grasp spiritual principles, there will be a revolution in our character and outlook. We will become compassionate towards our fellow beings. It will give us enough strength to free ourselves from the grip of intoxicants and other bad habits. Then, we will always be able to enjoy peace and contentment within.

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



Sports for Leadership

SADHGURU

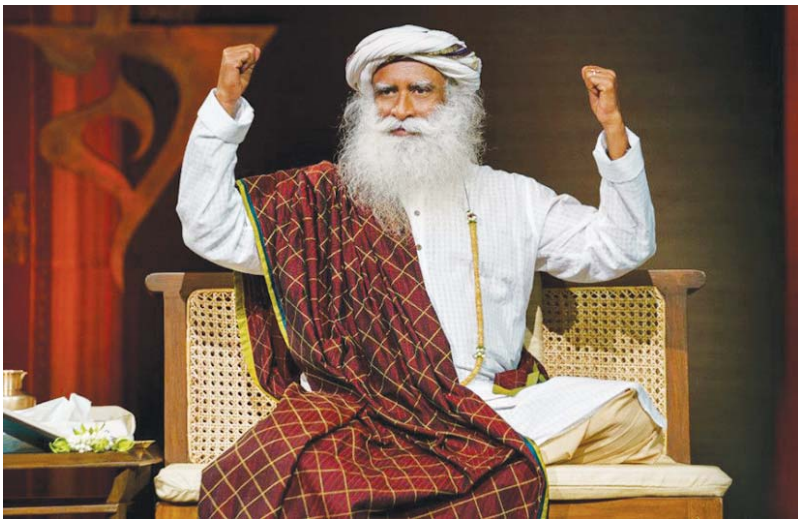
You may go to work half-hearted, you may live half-hearted, you may do everything in your life half-hearted, but a game is one thing you cannot do half-hearted. Unless you plunge yourself into it, there is no game; this is so for anybody. The moment they get into a game, knowingly or unknowingly they become 100 per cent participation. This is an absolute requirement for a leader. A leader learns to participate, that he does not hold himself back in anything, that he learns to give himself absolutely.

In many ways, sports sets the rhythm for every human being to become a leader in his own right. For example, another aspect which is most important for a leader that is naturally inculcated

by playing a game is the desire to win or achieve — you cannot play a game unless you develop a strong desire that you want to win. Without this there is no sport. At the same time, sports also sets this condition that you really want to win but you are willing to lose. If you lose, it is alright with you. This is most essential for a leader

that he goes out to achieve things. At the same time, when things do not happen, he will not become a bundle of frustrations.

Whenever you set big goals in your life, many things don't happen. For people who do not set big goals, they may believe that many things are happening in their lives but their things are



SPORTS CAN BECOME A TREMENDOUS TOOL IN BUILDING LEADERS. WE HAVE SEEN THIS IN OUR OWN EXPERIENCE WITH ISHA'S RURAL SPORTS PROGRAM AND VARIOUS OTHER PROGRAMS IN ALL OF WHICH SPORT IS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT

happening because you are not aspiring for anything big.

So the very fundamentals of leadership is that you aspire to achieve certain things, to take people with you towards that goal, and if it does not happen, for whatever reason you will never become a bundle of frustration. These qualities which are most essen-

tial for leadership, are naturally inculcated by the very nature of the sport.

Sports can become a tremendous tool in building leaders. We have seen this in our own experience with Isha's Rural Sports program and various other programs in all of which sport is an essential component. We have seen how just because they are involved in a game, people are able to come out of their limitations and take on the leadership for that moment to handle a particular situation. This in itself sets them up as a leader.

So leadership and sports are very directly connected. All the fundamental qualities that are necessary for a leader are naturally brought forth when one learns to play a game.

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

Do you feel stuck in life?

You are stuck for a while, and then you come out of it anyway. If you were never stuck, you would never know what freedom is. You realize, "Oh, I was stuck. It was like a nightmare

GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

Watch your thoughts at the level of the mind when you are stuck. The same thought comes to your mind again and again. You wake up in the morning, and the same thought hits you; you drink your tea, and the same thought hits you; you sit at the dining table, and the same thought keeps bothering you. It is like a gramophone needle caught in a groove, repeating the same line instead of moving forward. You have to lift that needle and place it on the next groove.

You are so lucky to realize that you are stuck in life, doing the same things repeatedly-waking up, having breakfast, going out, shopping. Recognizing this monotony is itself a significant step. Being stuck indicates that you have already woken up from the slumber.

The mind tends to get stuck on one event, and then, after some time, it gets released. It is elastic, like rubber. It goes back and forth, trying and struggling to get rid of a particular thought. When the mind gets stuck in one place, that becomes the cause of worry.

You are stuck for a while, and then you come out of it anyway. If you were never stuck, you would never know what freedom is. You realize, "Oh, I was stuck. It was like a nightmare."

You know a nightmare is a nightmare only when you wake up. Even then, its impact lingers. Your heart is still pounding, and you are still perspiring. Instead of fighting with yourself, simply wake up and say, "I was stuck. It is okay to be stuck." The moment you look at it this way, that very moment becomes transformative.

A closed mind says, "This is how it is. I know it. That is it." An open mind says, "Maybe. Perhaps. I do not know."

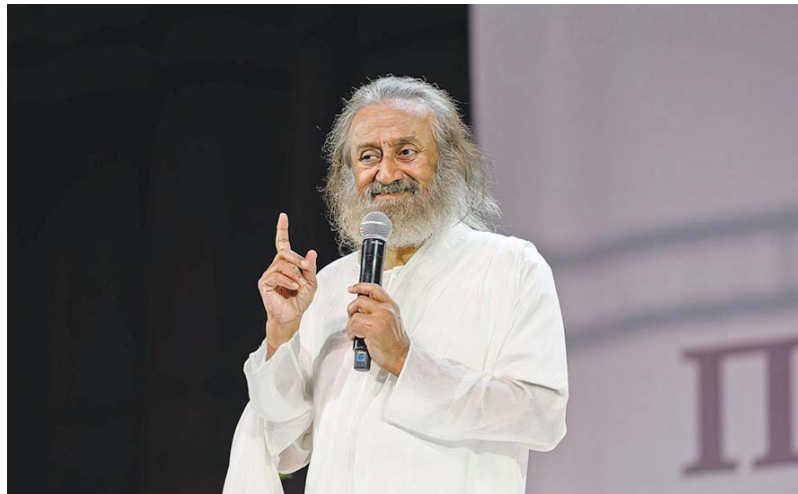
The moment you look at a situation and label it, saying, "I know this is how it is," that is the beginning of your problem. That's when you get stuck. Suffering is a product of limited knowledge. Staying open to "maybe" and "perhaps" is what allows that hold to loosen, makes you flexible.

When a cloth is pure white, even a speck of dust on it appears very big. In the same way, the more subtle and peaceful you become, the more small disturbances will stand out in contrast.

If you are stuck with a problem, know that you already have the capacity to face it. You already have answers, so the question appears in front of you. The first step is to stop eternalising the problem, so you stop attracting it further into your life.

Never tell yourself that you are always the one with problems, that you are always stuck, that you are simply unlucky, or that you always fall sick. Such statements become a seed, a sankalpa, planted deep in the mind. When you say, "I will never succeed," or "I cannot do this," you are planting that very seed within yourself.

These are the weeds we need to remove from the mind and replace with trust in ourselves. The moment you



“WHAT IS COMMITMENT? A COMMITMENT IS FELT ONLY WHEN IT OVERSTEPS CONVENIENCE, SINCE WHAT IS MERELY CONVENIENT IS NOT COMMITMENT AT ALL”

- GURUDEV

drop the judgments you carry about yourself, trust begins to grow on its own, and self-doubt gradually disappears.

Our mind has two choices. One, it can become like a photograph, retaining all the impressions and emotions. You click a photograph and the image stays on the film. Another is you become like a mirror. In a mirror, you also see the picture. But the moment you move, the picture disappears. The picture doesn't stick to the mirror. So the whole journey is from being a photograph to becoming a mirror, you don't let events and their memories stick in your mind.

A river needs two banks to flow. The difference between flood and a flowing river is that in a river, water flows in between the banks. During floods, the water is muddled and has no direction. Similarly, the energy in our life needs some direction to flow. If you don't give direction, it leads to confusion. Today most people are confused because there is no direction in life. When you are happy, there is so much life energy in you; but when this life energy doesn't know where to go, how to go, it gets stuck. When it stagnates, it rots! Just like the water has to keep flowing, in the same way, life has to keep moving. For life energy to move in a direction, commitment is essential.

What is commitment? A commitment is felt only when it oversteps convenience, since what is merely convenient is not commitment at all. At the same time, if you are too rigidly stuck in commitment, and it becomes inconvenient, you will feel frustrated and unable to fulfil it in the long run. Wisdom lies in striking a balance between convenience and commitment.

If you are stuck in a kind of spider's web created by your own decisions, know that there is another dimension to life. Make a firm resolve: Come what may, I am going to do it, I am going to come out of the illusions created by my own mind. No cobweb



IF YOU ARE STUCK IN A KIND OF SPIDER'S WEB CREATED BY YOUR OWN DECISIONS, KNOW THAT THERE IS ANOTHER DIMENSION TO LIFE. MAKE A FIRM RESOLVE: COME WHAT MAY, I AM GOING TO DO IT, I AM GOING TO COME OUT OF THE ILLUSIONS CREATED BY MY OWN MIND

can destroy you. After all, a cobweb is just a cobweb; it cannot destroy anybody.

When the mind is caught in a whirlpool, three things will carry you through: an unshakable faith that someone out there cares deeply for you, loves you, and will never let you down; your daily practice; and the spiritual knowledge you have already gained. These three-practices, knowledge, and faith-will help you through such moments.

This spiritual journey begins in recognizing the monotony of all the routine activities we do. Once you see it clearly, that very seeing becomes the doorway to being more creative, light-hearted and happier.

Be a Student Forever

Life never stops teaching; only we stop learning. Every sunrise carries a lesson, every failure hides a blessing, every stranger knows something we do not, and every moment quietly asks us to grow. Keep the wonder of a child and the humility of a seeker, for the heart that remains a student never grows old; it only grows wiser

DR SWAMI GYANANANDDAS

The day we believe we have learned enough is the day our growth quietly begins to die. Degrees may have an end, classrooms may close their doors, and examinations may finally cease, but the greatest university 'life' never declares a graduation ceremony. Every sunrise opens a new lesson, every encounter introduces a new teacher, and every experience writes another chapter in the curriculum of wisdom.

A person does not become great because he knows everything. He becomes great because he never stops learning. It is often said, "Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever." These words reveal one of life's deepest truths. Since tomorrow is uncertain, we should live each day with purpose and sincerity. Yet because the pursuit of wisdom has no finish line, we should learn as if every new day were another opportunity to become better, regardless of age.

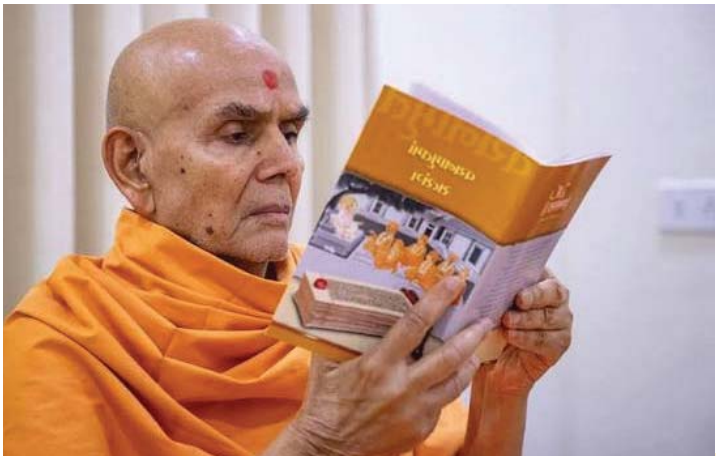
A classroom may educate the mind, but it cannot alone educate life. Beyond its walls lies nature, humanity's greatest academy, where life's deepest lessons are taught. Observe the tiny ant. Possessing neither strength nor stature, it carries loads many times heavier than itself. If its path is blocked, it does not complain to destiny or curse the obstacle. It simply searches for another way. The ant silently teaches that failure is never final unless we ourselves decide to stop walking.

Look at the sky. The sun arrives every morning without excuses. Clouds may hide it from our eyes, yet it never neglects its duty. It echoes that punctuality is not merely about keeping time; it is about keeping one's promises. The moon reminds us that imperfection is temporary. Some nights it appears as a delicate crescent; on others it shines in complete brilliance. Yet throughout its changing phases, it never loses its identity.

Similarly, the river inspires perseverance, flowing around every obstacle. The mountain embodies steadfastness, standing firm through every storm. Silence nurtures wisdom, for life's deepest lessons

are heard in moments of quiet reflection. Thus, our nature provides real-life lessons, if we wish to learn them.

Remarkably, our greatest teachers are not always scholars or philosophers. Sometimes they are children whose innocent curiosity challenges our assumptions. Sometimes they are labourers whose perseverance humbles our



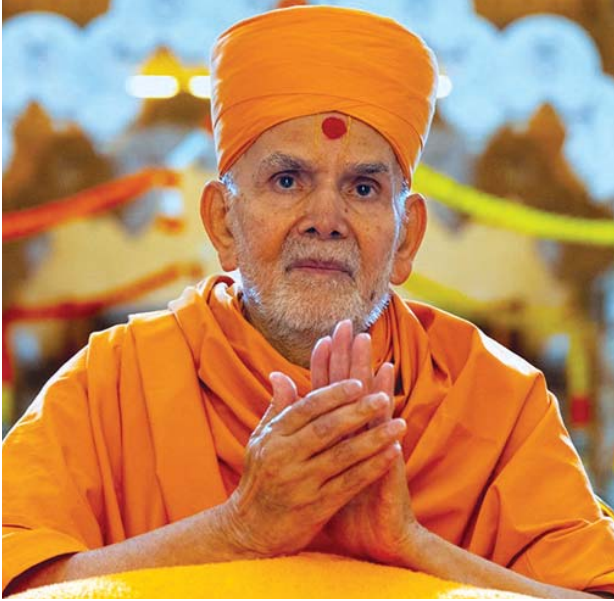
A TRUE LEARNER NEVER COUNTS THE YEARS OF LIFE; HE COUNTS THE LESSONS THAT MAKE LIFE WORTH LIVING

complaints. Sometimes they are failures that reveal truths impossible for success to teach. Every person we meet knows something we do not know. Every experience carries a message that no book can fully explain.

History consistently honors lifelong learners. The wisest sages continued asking questions until their final breath. The greatest scientists remained fascinated by mysteries they could not solve. The finest artists never stopped refining their craft. Their greatness was not born from possessing all the answers, but from retaining the humility to keep seeking them.

Unfortunately, success often becomes the enemy of learning wisdom. Achievement whispers, "You have arrived." Wisdom gently replies, "The journey has just begun." The moment pride replaces curiosity, progress comes to a halt. A cup already full cannot receive fresh water. Likewise, a mind convinced of its completeness cannot receive new understanding.

Life changes every day. Technology evolves, societies transform, relationships



deepen, and challenges become increasingly complex. Yesterday's knowledge alone cannot solve tomorrow's problems. Those who stop learning gradually lose their ability to adapt and flourish. Therefore, lifelong learning is no longer merely a virtue; it is a necessity.

The attitude of a life-long student transforms every day into an opportunity to grow. Every experience enriches wisdom, every challenge deepens understanding, and every new lesson becomes a step towards excellence.

At ninety years of age, when most people would rely on memory accumulated over a lifetime, Mahant Swami Maharaj continued to learn with the enthusiasm of a young student. Memorizing the intricate verses of the newly composed Akshar-Purushottam Bhagwan Arti was no easy task, yet

he embraced it with remarkable humility and determination.

For several consecutive nights, while the world slept, he quietly woke at one, two, or even three o'clock in the morning to practice the verses. Careful not to disturb anyone, he softly whispered each line, patiently repeating it until it became firmly etched in his memory.

Though revered worldwide as a spiritual master guiding millions, he approached this task not as a guru who knew everything, but as a sincere learner eager to keep learning. His humility, discipline, and unwavering commitment transformed a simple act of memorization into a timeless lesson: true greatness lies in remaining a student throughout life. Mahant Swami Maharaj demonstrated that the spirit of learning never grows old; it only grows deeper.

Of course, a true learner never counts the years of life; he counts the lessons that make life worth living.

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

Guarding Trust

Faith has always been the greatest asset of India's temples. Their towering spires, ancient rituals and growing revenues all rest on one invisible foundation: the confidence of millions of devotees that every offering made before the deity will be treated with honesty and reverence. Once that confidence is shaken, the damage extends far beyond missing money. The alleged siphoning of donations from the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya has therefore become more than a criminal investigation. It has forced some of Uttar Pradesh's most prominent temples to confront an uncomfortable reality: reputation is now as important as ritual.

In an era of instant communication, one scandal at a nationally revered shrine casts suspicion on every temple that depends on public donations. The differing responses of major temples reveal both the scale of the challenge and the choices before them. Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi in Mathura has tightened surveillance, strengthened cash-counting protocols and introduced additional layers of oversight over donation handling. Banke Bihari Temple in Vrindavan, however, finds itself consumed by a parallel battle over who should control its administration. At Bade Hanuman Temple in Prayagraj and Kaal Bhairav Temple in Varanasi, hereditary custodians have defended the traditional management model while warning against greater government involvement. Together, these temples illustrate that the debate is no longer confined to Ayodhya. It has become a statewide reckoning over trust, transparency and authority. Yet the larger question is not whether temples should be run by hereditary custodians or government-appointed bodies. It is whether either model can inspire public confidence through credible governance.

A poorly managed institution does not become trustworthy merely because it is supervised by the state. Equally, centuries of tradition cannot substitute for financial transparency when institutions receive crores of rupees in public donations. The irony is that stronger governance would ultimately strengthen the case for institutional autonomy. Temples that can demonstrate impeccable financial discipline leave little room for demands that outsiders assume control. Conversely, recurring scandals inevitably invite calls for greater external oversight, regardless of whether such intervention ultimately proves effective. The response of Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi suggests that robust internal safeguards are possible without compromising religious traditions. Other major temples, including Banke Bihari, Bade Hanuman and Kaal Bhairav, would do well to complement their defence of institutional autonomy with equally visible commitments to financial accountability.

Devotees are unlikely to judge temples by who manages them. They will judge them by whether every rupee offered in faith reaches its intended purpose. That is the real lesson of the Ayodhya episode. For India's great temples, preserving faith now requires more than protecting sanctity inside the sanctum. It demands protecting integrity outside it. Ultimately, the greatest offering a temple can return to its devotees is not merely spiritual solace, but the assurance that their trust has been honoured with the same devotion with which it was given.

The Fifth Test

Anthony Fauci, the controversial infectious disease specialist who became the public face of America's Covid-19 response, invoked the Fifth Amendment before a US Senate committee in a decision that will inevitably become one of the defining images of America's long-running reckoning with the pandemic. Legally, the choice neither establishes guilt nor delivers exoneration. Politically, however, it marks the point at which a public health crisis has fully transformed into a battle over institutional trust, accountability and historical memory. The pandemic was never merely a medical emergency. It exposed the strengths and weaknesses of governments, scientific institutions and democratic communication. As evidence evolved, official advice changed on masks, lockdowns, vaccines and the virus's origins.

Scientific revision is neither unusual nor inherently suspect. It is the foundation of scientific inquiry. Yet the obligation to explain uncertainty with candour is equally fundamental. Public confidence is damaged not only by incorrect advice but by any perception that uncertainties were minimised or inconvenient evidence dismissed. The release of Fauci's private diary has ensured that this debate will not disappear. The entries suggest that, early in 2020, he privately entertained multiple possibilities regarding both the virus's origins and its likely fatality rate before later expressing greater confidence in specific conclusions. Critics argue that these reflections differ from the certainty conveyed in public. Supporters counter that private deliberation naturally precedes public guidance during an unfolding emergency, when officials must balance incomplete evidence against the need to prevent panic and save lives.

Neither interpretation can be accepted without qualification. Policymakers are expected to make decisions before perfect information exists. Equally, democratic societies have every right to scrutinise whether those decisions accurately reflected the evidence available at the time. Accountability requires rigorous examination, not retrospective certainty or partisan score-settling. That distinction matters because the consequences extend far beyond one individual. Public health depends upon trust. Future outbreaks will again require citizens to accept disruptive measures based on expert advice. If political institutions appear more interested in criminalising scientific disagreement than uncovering facts, confidence in expertise will erode further. Conversely, if scientists appear resistant to legitimate scrutiny, scepticism will deepen regardless of the evidence. The unresolved debate over Covid's origins illustrates this dilemma. Years after the pandemic began, competing hypotheses continue to command attention because definitive evidence remains elusive. That reality should encourage intellectual humility rather than ideological certainty.

Democracies are strongest when institutions acknowledge what is known, what remains uncertain and why conclusions may change. The pandemic claimed millions of lives and reshaped global politics, economics and public health. History's judgment should therefore rest not on courtroom theatrics or partisan triumphalism, but on a sober assessment of whether governments, scientists and elected leaders communicated honestly, corrected mistakes transparently and remained accountable to the citizens whose trust they sought. The credibility of future crises may depend less on who wins today's political battles than on whether that trust can be rebuilt.

Delimitation Alternative

Proportionality in representation is an inviolable constitutional principle, and all delimitations must restore this proportionality, which has to be done gradually, over the next two or three delimitation cycles, to make it politically acceptable. But we must urgently reform representation in the Rajya Sabha to give greater federal powers to states with smaller populations, whether by equal representation or by weighted voting so that each state gets the same votes

Article 326 of the Constitution provides that elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies shall be based on universal adult suffrage, implying that every adult citizen has an equal right to vote. Articles 81 and 82 further provide that the ratio between population and seats should be broadly the same for all states and hence needs adjustments after every census, implying that every vote across India shall have the same weight.

Thus, representation in legislatures will be based on population, with each constituency representing more or less the same population ~ hence the need for delimitation after every census and consequent readjustment of seats, which may or may not cause an increase in the total strength. This principle was followed initially, and the Lok Sabha strength went up from 489 in 1951 to 521 after the 1971 census. After the creation of new states in the North-East and the bifurcation of UP, MP and Bihar, 22 more seats were added by amending the Constitution and the Representation of People Act, raising the strength to 543.

But in 1976, during the period of Emergency, this strength was frozen under the infamous 42nd Amendment Act, ostensibly to balance population equality with federal equity. Southern states were making better progress in population control through family planning, a national priority that became an obsession during the Emergency, and to encourage population control, it was stipulated that further delimitation would occur only after 2000. The idea was simple: if a State could not control population, its relative representation in parliament would decline. In 2001, the 84th Constitutional Amendment extended this freeze until the first Census after 2026. Now we are into it.

The average population represented by one Lok Sabha member was only a million in 1971. By the next Lok Sabha election in 2029, it would increase 2.7 times, but this increase would become extremely uneven between northern and southern states. Thus,



an MP from Bihar, UP, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala would represent respectively 3.5, 3.1, 2.7, 2.0 and 1.8 million people. This is a departure from the proportional representation principle. If delimitation is done according to the present Lok Sabha strength and the respective populations of states, Bihar and UP will gain about 10-11 seats each, while Tamil Nadu would lose 10-11 and Kerala 7-8 seats. Southern states are naturally concerned about losing their political influence and voice in national policymaking, while northern states are clamouring for equal representation frozen since 1976. Any attempt to increase the Lok Sabha strength while allocating the seats based on population would be unlikely to allay the fears of the southern states about a possible redistribution of political influence towards the BJP-ruled states in the Hindi belt.

In April 2026, the government introduced three related Bills in Parliament: Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, Delimitation Bill, 2026, and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill. These bills proposed to increase the Lok Sabha membership to 850 by increasing each state's representation by 50 per cent to 815 so that no state would lose any seat, while keeping 35 seats for UTs. But it kept intact the existing proportion of each State and the inequality in their relative representations. The Bill did not constitutionally guarantee protection of states' shares, and left it open for any Parliament in future to decide otherwise, for example, based on the population of a subsequent census. The government did not consult the opposition for a consensus, and the bills were defeated.

Perhaps it was introduced just to score a political point before the elections in West Bengal and Assam. But it opened up important constitutional questions, and experts have come up with many alternatives to address the concerns of both the North and the South, which include a pure population-based delimitation after the 2027 Census, a uniform increase in seats with protection of existing state shares, and hybrid formulas with population as the main criterion, but giving compensatory protection states with low fertility ratio, or, as suggested by professor Amitabh Kundu, adding additional seats depending on the states' respective shares in the population increase since 1971 to their existing numbers. While a pure population-based

redistribution, though the constitutional default, has become politically contentious, the Centre would need wider consensus to proceed in the matter. But none of these alternatives address the fundamental constitutional questions, which are: (a) Does the 1976 freeze on seats imply that federal accommodation has become an enduring constitutional principle? (b) Why delimitation must achieve a balance between electoral equality and federal accommodation? and (c) Why states that have achieved low fertility deserve continued constitutional protection through enhanced parliamentary representation? Let us try to address these.

First, the 42nd-Amendment freeze was a political compromise designed to address an exceptional historical situation. It never supplanted the underlying constitutional principle embodied in Articles 81 and 82, and a temporary constitutional arrangement cannot become a permanent constitutional norm; it will only replace one distortion with another.

Second, Constitutional debate is more complex than a mere balance between electoral equality and federal compromise; it deals with equality among states, but most importantly, equality among citizens. Lok Sabha is the House of the People, in which people, the citizens, are at the centre of democratic representation. Any departure from this undermines democracy. A citizen cannot possess greater parliamentary influence merely because his or her State successfully implemented family planning.

Third, attaining low fertility, which was a national objective, indeed deserves recognition and reward, but it does not follow that the reward must come only through higher political representation and permanently enhanced voting power. A better way is to reward the states fiscally, thorough Finance Commission transfers or other mechanisms. Democratic representation, thus dissociated from development policy, can then offer better incentives. Besides, it would be unfair to penalise non-performing states ~ their inability does not necessarily reflect their unwillingness or inefficiency. Fertility is a



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The ugliness over Beauty's reel

For someone who has been viciously trolled for an innocuous reel, Beauty Rani Pal, a headteacher of a primary school in Sylhet, has shown remarkable resilience. Recently, a video of her in a carefree mood roaming around her school against the backdrop of a popular Bangla '80s number sparked virulent misogyny and moral policing. Soon after the reel was uploaded, several Facebook pages emerged to spread the video with vicious remarks. It was branded as "vulgar," displaying "inappropriate behaviour" on the part of a primary school teacher. There were calls for an investigation into whether she had violated any code of conduct for government teachers. Yet, despite all this, Beauty has shown courage and refuses to be daunted by the onslaught, filing a general diary and naming the Facebook pages responsible for spreading the video to garner comments with the

intention of humiliating her.

In an unusual turn of events, the viral video, which was intended to crush her spirit and vilify her, also sparked an unprecedented level of solidarity from teachers of her own school and others around the country, as well as other netizens. Dozens of videos were posted using the same song in a show of support for Beauty and as a protest against cyberbullying. Later, Beauty, in a video message, expressed her gratitude to everyone for standing with her, including the state minister for education, who, when asked to comment on the matter, sharply retorted that there was nothing to discuss or criticise someone for listening to a song on a windy day.

While this story may seem to have a somewhat "happy ending," the whole

incident underlines the various layers of hate in society towards women. Watching the reel, it is hard to understand what exactly these trolls found so objectionable. Was it because she wore a sari? Was it because she was a teacher and therefore an easy target? Was it because of her name? Or was it simply because she was a woman who looked like she was enjoying the weather and the song that complemented it? There is very little logic behind the acts of bullies, whether they are in the streets or in cyberspace. Women are the favourite targets because they can always be accused of immodesty, even for enjoying an old romantic song! Even during the 2024 uprising when the whole nation had united for a single cause, women protesters, especially the more vocal ones, were incessantly trolled on social media. The trolling continued when they showed

political ambition, and it reached astonishing levels when women candidates were contesting the 2026 elections. Ultra-conservative religious groups who made no qualms about their disdain for women trying to enter the public space resurged in recent times, and weaponised religion to try to push women out. Moral policing became the dominant excuse for harassment and even physical violence.

The new government has shown its disapproval of cyberbullying, especially of women, by announcing that it will form a dedicated cell to fight against cyberbullying and strengthen digital safety. A central mechanism will be created to respond to online harassment, particularly on social media platforms, to provide faster support to victims. It will include a 24-hour hotline, an online reporting portal, and trained response teams to handle cyberbullying complaints.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Overhaul

Sir, This refers to the front page report, "LS passes anti-leak Bill amid uproar" (30 July). The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026 promises harsher penalties for irregularities. But the real problem lies in the National Education Policy's obsession with the centralisation of admission tests. This fails to cater to the diverse talents of India's youth. Centralisation invites opacity, and opacity breeds corruption.

Furthermore, the National Testing Agency ~ a registered society with alleged ties to coaching centres ~ is itself part of the problem. The government must address root causes rather than the symptoms if it wants to halt the erosion of students' trust.

India needs nothing less than a root-and-branch overhaul of its examination system ~ a task that requires educationists and administrators with

proven expertise in educational reform. Yours, etc., S S Paul, Nadia, 30 July.

Reassuring

Sir, Today's interim order passed by the Hon'ble Supreme Court to probe allegations of police excesses mark a reassuring and vital step toward safeguarding the democratic fabric of our nation. As the ultimate guardian of the Constitution, the highest court of the land continues to fulfill its solemn duty of upholding the fundamental rights of citizens, reinforcing the principle that no institution or individual is above the law.

A democratic society derives its strength from the trust its citizens place in the administration of justice. While law enforcement agencies are entrusted with the immense responsibility of maintaining public order and safety, their authority must remain anchored within the boundaries of the rule

of law. Power decoupled from accountability inevitably breeds abuse, eroding public trust and undermining the very foundations of a civil society. The proactive intervention of the Supreme Court reaffirms our collective faith that justice will always prevail, and that the rights of the individual will remain shielded against arbitrary overreach. It is a timely reminder that the preservation of democracy requires eternal vigilance ~ not just from the judiciary, but from every pillar of the state.

Yours, etc., Prabir Kumar Pal, Kolkata, 28 July.

Real test

Sir, Apropos 'After the Agitation' published today, the student movement over examination integrity has done what many elections could not. It has forced the political establishment to notice a generation that judges by results, not rhetoric. These young

citizens are not driven by inherited ideologies or regional loyalties. They want fair exams, accountable institutions, and opportunities that are not stolen by systemic failure.

This is not a passing storm. It is a quiet shift in how democracy works. Governments that rely solely on GDP growth to secure public trust are making a dangerous bet. Opposition parties that assume discontent automatically becomes votes are equally misguided. The new political temper is practical, impatient with excuses, and unwilling to accept mediocrity as normal.

The real test lies ahead. Will the government respond with genuine reform or merely cosmetic fixes? Will this generation stay engaged after the protests fade?

Durable change requires more than street mobilisation. It demands sustained participation in public debate, institutional oversight, and electoral choices.

Yours, etc., K. Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru, 30 July.



Religious freedom must be basic human right in S Asia

GAJENDRA SINGH

The demolition of a 500-year-old Hindu temple in Noakhali, Bangladesh has come to light. The action was allegedly taken on the "orders" of Bangladesh Prime Minister Tariq Rahman. If this incident had happened at a mosque in India, it would have probably drawn a barrage of reactions from the international media, human rights organizations and social media criticizing it as an atrocity on Muslims.

It is natural in a democratic society to raise questions on the rights of any community and make governments accountable. But an important question is rarely asked, is the situation of Hindus, Sikhs and other religious minorities in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan discussed with equal seriousness and sensitivity? If human rights are universal, then they should be evaluated on the same criteria for all countries and all communities.

To find the answer to this question, it is enough to look towards Rawalpindi. Before partition, Rawalpindi was counted among the major temple cities of North-West India (present-day Pakistan), where many temples, dharamshalas and religious institutions were the centre of cultural and social life of Hindu society.

The Lal Kurti Valmiki Temple is still in existence with limited religious activities, while the Maharishi Valmiki Swami Temple, Gracey Line, which was the centre of faith especially for the Dalit Hindu community, has long been in a dilapidated state. The Kalyan Das Temple at Kothari Bazaar, which was constructed in the nineteenth century, is now being used as a government school for visually impaired children.

The historic Raghunath temple complex of Bagh Sardaran, which

comprised three temples and two gurdwaras, has been closed for a long time. The Mahadev temple of Sarafa Bazaar has been partially converted into shops. The Ramlila temple at Kanak Mandi was used for other purposes after Partition, while the Mohan temple at Lunda Bazaar and the Ganesh temple at Urdu Bazaar are today abandoned or in ruins. In contrast, the Sri Krishna Temple at Sadar, built in 1897, is still in limited use today and is considered a symbol of the continuity of Hindu religious life in Pakistan.

The present condition of Rawalpindi's Hindu temples is not just a question of their renovation, but it is also a silent testimony to the gradual erosion of the Hindu faith, religious symbols and cultural-social heritage of this country after the partition of Pakistan.

There is no difference in the situation in Bangladesh. An example of the challenges related to religious freedom in Bangladesh is that the construction of the 81-feet high Lord Shri Ram statue, built with donations of devotees in the Sri Sri Radha Govind and Kali temple complex located in Palashbari of Gaibandha (district), had to be stopped after almost 80 per cent completion due to threats from fundamentalist groups. The government is citing law and order issues to stop its construction and discussions are on to demolish the statue.

Since the ouster of Sheikh Hasina, there have been attacks on the Hindu community. In the name of communal tension, there were continuous attacks on temples, houses and business establishments. Minority youth Deepto Rai (Prince Rai) of Sunanganj district was accused of blasphemy through social media. Eyewitnesses termed the allegation as untrue or unproven, but as soon as the allegation became public, the police took action and the family's

house, livelihood and local temple were attacked. According to a report of the local human rights organisation, 17 cases related to blasphemy were registered between January and June 2026, while 73 minority youth were arrested on such charges in 2025. In many cases, arrests and mob violence begin even before digital forensic verification.

Article 20 of Pakistan gives the right to every citizen to practice religion, Article 22 gives right to a person to receive religious education, Article 26 and 27 prohibit discrimination and Article 36 deals with the rights of religious minorities. But on the other hand, some provisions of the Constitution clearly give a Islamic character to the constitutional structure of Pakistan.

Article 2 declares Islam as the state religion. Article 2A provides the constitutional basis for Islamic principles. According to Article 41(2) only a Muslim can become the President of Pakistan. According to Article 91(3) it is mandatory for the Prime Minister to be a Muslim. Article 227 dictates that all laws shall be in accordance with the Quran and Sunnah.

Within the same constitutional framework, punitive laws related to blasphemy also apply, which have been used against religious minorities, particularly Hindus, Christians and the Ahmadiyya community. Similarly, in Bangladesh, Article 2A declares Islam as the state religion, while also stating that followers of other religions will be able to practice their own religion. Thus, the Constitution of Bangladesh, on the one hand guarantees equal civil rights and religious freedom, and on the other, recognizes Islam as the state religion. This constitutional duality gives rise to debate on practical challenges.

In contrast, India's constitutional model is different. The Constitution



of India does not declare a state religion, but Articles 25 to 30 provide freedom to all citizens to practice, propagate and manage religion, while Articles 29 and 30 give special constitutional protection to religious and linguistic minorities to establish and operate their culture, language and educational institutions.

Religious freedom in India is not only constitutional but also part of an institutional system. A provision of about Rs 3,350 crore was made in the Union Budget for the financial year 2025–26. Apart from this, the National Minority Commission, State Minority Commissions and Minority Welfare Departments of various states provide the institutional basis to this constitutional framework.

The Waqf Board in India has more than 872,000 immovable properties spread over about 9.4 lakh acres of land. There are 700,000 mosques and 350,000 madrasas for about 19 per cent Muslim population, about 75,000 churches for 1.5 per cent Christian population and the number of church-affiliated educational institutions is about 50,000.

In contrast, Pakistan and Bangladesh do not appear to have separate constitutional protections for the Hindu community, a comprehensive institutional framework or dedicated ministries for education, cultural preservation and development of religious heritage, and budgetary

arrangements comparable to India. This is why while discussing minority rights in South Asia, a comparative assessment of their actual implementation, institutional support and state commitment – rather than just constitutional declarations – is also necessary. The future of South Asia requires that religious freedom be elevated from political discourse to a universal human right. Be it temple, mosque, gurdwara or church, the security of every place of worship is equally important. Violence against any religious community, forced conversion, occupation of religious places, or social media-based mob justice must be equally opposed.

The real test of human rights is not that we protect the rights of our own community, but that we protect the rights of every community with equal commitment. The path to lasting peace and social trust in South Asia also passes through this principle. The credibility of human rights is proved when justice is done not on the basis of the identity of the victim, but on the basis of principles. If religious freedom in South Asia is truly a universal value, then it must be evaluated with the same sensitivity, the same ethics and the same standards for all countries and all communities.

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Amid Gulf tensions, the sea needs rules

SANTHOSH MATHEW

U.S. Coast Guard Day, observed on August 4, comes at a time when the world's attention is again focused on the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Rising tensions in the region have once again shown how closely maritime security is connected with energy, trade and global peace. The U.S. Coast Guard has a long history of protecting American waters, rescuing people at sea, preventing smuggling and helping ships in distress. Its role also reflects a larger reality of the modern world: the oceans are too important to be governed only by naval power. They need common rules accepted by countries.

The most important international framework for this purpose is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS. It is widely regarded as the basic legal framework for the world's oceans. It covers navigation, territorial waters, maritime boundaries, fishing, seabed resources, marine pollution and the rights of coastal countries.

The United States signed UNCLOS in 1982 but has not ratified it. The U.S. Senate has never approved the Convention. American objections have included the original provisions dealing with deep-seabed mining, international dispute settlement,

military activities at sea and concerns about national sovereignty. The deep-seabed provisions were later revised through the 1994 Agreement.

America's position remains unusual. Although it is not a party to UNCLOS, the United States accepts many of its basic navigation rules as customary international law. Washington strongly supports freedom of navigation and regularly challenges maritime claims it considers excessive. The continuing tension in the Persian Gulf makes this issue especially important.

The Gulf is a narrow and crowded maritime region surrounded by several countries. It contains some of the world's most important oil and gas resources. The Strait of Hormuz connects the Gulf with the Arabian Sea and the wider Indian Ocean. It is one of the world's most important energy routes. Any disruption in the Strait can affect oil supplies, shipping costs, energy prices and economies far beyond West Asia. The impact can reach India, China, Japan, Europe and many other parts of the world.

UNCLOS provides a basic system for managing maritime spaces. A coastal country can claim a territorial sea of up to 12 nautical miles from its baselines. It exercises sovereignty in this area, subject to international law and the right of innocent passage for foreign ships.



Beyond the territorial sea lies the Exclusive Economic Zone, or EEZ, which can extend up to 200 nautical miles. The EEZ is not an extension of national territory. A coastal country has special rights over natural resources such as fish, oil and gas, while other countries retain important freedoms of navigation and overflight.

This distinction is particularly important in crowded maritime regions. A country cannot treat its entire 200-nautical-mile EEZ as territorial water. International law balances the economic rights of coastal states with the navigation rights of other countries. UNCLOS also provides rules for international straits, continental shelves, fisheries, marine environmental protection, scientific research and the peaceful

settlement of maritime disputes. It has helped bring a degree of order to an ocean covering most of the planet. India is a party to UNCLOS and has a strong interest in maintaining this rules-based maritime order. India's long coastline, island territories and vast EEZ make the law of the sea central to its national interests.

India's economic future is closely connected with the ocean. A large part of India's international trade moves by sea. Energy supplies from the Persian Gulf are particularly important. Millions of Indians live and work in Gulf countries, making stability in the region important not only for India's economy but also for millions of families.

The Strait of Hormuz therefore has a direct connection with India. Any prolonged disturbance in the Strait can increase energy costs, affect shipping and put pressure on the Indian economy. The issue also has a wider strategic dimension. The United States is one of the world's most powerful maritime countries. Its Navy protects important sea lanes, while its Coast Guard performs vital functions related to maritime law enforcement, rescue and security. American participation in the international law-of-the-sea system would add greater weight to the rules that govern global maritime activity. The United States

is not alone among countries that have not ratified UNCLOS. Turkey, Israel, Colombia and Venezuela are also outside the Convention, for different reasons.

The American case attracts greater attention because of the country's enormous economic, naval and global maritime influence. The present Gulf tensions show the importance of a predictable maritime order. Ships carrying oil, food and other essential goods cannot depend only on the goodwill of competing powers. They need internationally recognised rules. The sea connects economies even when politics divides countries. A conflict in the Persian Gulf can affect fuel prices in India, shipping companies in Asia and consumers across the world.

U.S. Coast Guard Day therefore carries significance beyond America's maritime service. It is also an opportunity to recognise the importance of safe seas, freedom of navigation and international maritime law. The future of the oceans cannot be secured by warships alone. It requires countries to respect maritime law, protect freedom of navigation and settle disputes peacefully. A peaceful sea keeps the global economy moving. A lawless sea can bring the whole world to a standstill.

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Incels ko gussa kyon aata hai?

I took me a while after I got to the US to realise that I dressed weird. It was less the colours than the specific shades. Pink, yellow, and green were all men's colours, but my shirts were in hot pink and turmeric yellow, the green of a banana leaf that just unfurled, sharp checks and block prints, instead of a pale pastel layer between their skin and their suit jacket. If anyone wondered if this was some Indian variant on camp, they were too polite to ask.



Abhijit Banerjee

TASTING ECONOMICS

Many non-Indians, when first in the country, are struck by the way men dress and the casual arms that they throw across each other's shoulders, and wonder if there is a lot of easy and open homosexuality. The truth is quite the reverse. Homosexuality is no longer a crime, but gay marriage is still illegal, and most gay couples, outside certain elite circles, still keep themselves outside the public eye. The men holding hands in the streets and the hairy-chested machos in their raspberry-pink paisley shirts don't need to think about what it signals, precisely because almost no one dares to be openly gay.

There were, I have to admit, advantages of growing up with such (false) clarity. When classes were cancelled, we would sit in a group and sing. Mostly Rabindrasangeet or the beautiful SD Burman standards, full of angst and adoration. Never stopping to wonder what it could mean for a group of young

through many hoops — competitive exams and/or advanced degrees, interviews, and internships. Then, a job secured, an appropriate bride had to be found, and terms negotiated, before that much-anticipated suhaag raat.

All this often took ten years or more, precisely at an age when the desires are the strongest. And even then there was no guarantee, since exams often go wrong, including, as we just saw, when someone powerful decides to profit from them. Sadly, but perhaps predictably, the subject of women would push many of my otherwise sweet and generous companions (always happy to share their mutton roll) into a sullen meanness. X is a bitch, she never returns my smiles; Y is too busy eating; she is going to lose her figure; and Z, she likes them rich, she is always at the back of somebody's motorbike. And worse. Much worse. Especially when an attractive woman happened to pass.

And I fear that these years warped their entire lives; after spending 15-20 years post-puberty being uncomfortable around women, how do you get to an easy intimacy with a woman who happens to be dropped into your life? Even as a child, I had noticed that a lot of men from my father's generation seemed easy with their friends, warm with us children, but formal and ill at ease with their own spouse.

The world has changed in many ways,

Male anger, alas, is a global problem these days. One reason is that men are economically falling behind. The consequence is that women seen as too uppity are now routinely threatened with rape, murder on social media

men to be serenading one another. Which is precisely why it could happen.

Looking back, I see how important these moments were for young men. Then, as now, few had girlfriends, or even friends who were girls. The myth that female purity has something to do with sex created a society anxious about all forms of physical contact across genders. Yet touching and holding someone, or lovingly locking eyes, are physiological needs, especially for young people. There is, of course, a natural continuity between these and sex, which is why lovers also hold hands, but when that is out, even committed heterosexuals can get comfort from same-gender friends.

But it was still a very peculiar arrangement. We were twenty then. For most middle-class men of my generation, the age at marriage, the one socially sanctioned sexual relationship, was over 30. To get there, one had to jump

but I doubt that Indian men are less misogynistic today. The age at marriage has been drifting up, and for the educated young, who advertise on the website Jeevansathi, 29 is the median age of initiating a quest for a partner, consistent with marriage in the early 30s. On the other hand, exposure to other people having sex, via phones and computers, is vastly expanded, which must add to that resentment. The political system senses that frustration and anger, and uses it cynically: when gau-rakshaks turn into rakshasas or when brothers kill sisters for straying beyond caste and creed, there is somewhere a connection to this unnatural celibacy.

Male anger, alas, is a global problem these days. In the US, they call them these incels, short for involuntary celibates, men who want sex but can't get it, making the source of the anger quite explicit. They blame feminism and wom-



Illustration by Cheyenne Olivier (France)

en's economic independence for interfering with the 'natural' order of things by empowering women to choose who to be with and when to walk out.

One reason this problem is getting worse is that men are economically falling behind. Men still occupy the highest echelons of the corporate sector everywhere (why this is the case will have to wait for a future column), but at less elevated levels the patterns are very clear: men used to dominate tertiary (i.e. university) education; now women in the OECD between the ages of 25 and 34 are 12 percentage points more likely than men to have some tertiary education. In the US, the fraction of women with some college education was two-thirds that of men among those born in 1930 but among those born in 1950, women were already ahead and in the 1995-born cohort, women are ahead by nearly 20%.

Last you think that this is because men are off doing something more exciting, my MIT colleague David Autor and Melanie Wasserman, an MIT PhD who now teaches at UCLA, document that at least in the US, trends in the labour market parallel those in education. Between 1979 and 2010, women's hourly wages grew much faster than men's hourly wages for people at all levels of education, but the most striking difference was among those who had no college education, where men's wages, adjusted for inflation, fell by 20-25%, while women's earnings stayed more or less the same. Since women were

also exiting the no-college education category much faster than men, this was a double whammy, and it is not doing anything to assuage male rage.

The consequence is that women who are seen as too uppity are now routinely threatened with rape and murder on social media. There have been several mass shootings (mostly of women and gays) that are directly linked to incels. One reason Trump won is his support from less educated young men, which is not unrelated to his history of abusing women, physically and otherwise. Indeed, despite his constant racist abuse of brown men, many Hispanic men (but not women) voted for Trump, underlining just how important male insecurity has become in US politics. In the UK, Andrew Tate, wanted in the UK and Romania for rape and trafficking of under-age women, is seen as a positive figure by a quarter of males between 15 and 29, and in Colombia, another country where women are way ahead of men in terms of schooling, the recent election was won by a right-wing politician whose politics features the size of his gonads and the shape of his butt.

And to be fair, one might say that Trump, in his own way delivered to them. He upped the daily dose of insults he throws at women who dare to stand up to him, and unleashed his two macho boys, secretary of war Peter Hegseth and health secretary RFK Jr., on the country. Hegseth has been on the 'warpath', firing every woman in the upper echelons of

the armed forces (and every black man), and his current obsession seems to be with the masculinity of men in the army — every male (and female!) in the armed forces over 30 will now be tested for testosterone! RFK is helping out there — his preoccupation is with testosterone-boosting foods — raw beef and giant steaks are big on his menu. In liberal Massachusetts, every barbecue has provisions for those who don't eat beef, but I wonder what this means for Indian immigrants, invited to a barbecue with Republican friends, say in Texas.

None of this chest-beating helps men find jobs or lovers. Instead, it reinforces their belief that there is something intrinsically precious about their maleness, and that women need to be made to value it more. In fact, the incel *zeltan schauung* (worldview) is deeply pessimistic about men: they are seen as losers, unattractive, with not much to offer beyond the magic potion of their maleness. But they need sex, and the only way they think it will work is to make women economically dependent on men again, and limited to one partner for life.

In India, we have engineered this through a range of social pressures ("who will make cha-junkhabar (late morning snack)?" my aunt was told when she was offered a job) at the cost of wasting the many talents of our women, and the happiness of those forced to play housewife to someone they may not love or feel attracted to. But even if we

RECIPE FOR GRILLED VEGGIES WITH ROMESCO SAUCE

Whenever we grill, the thing I look forward to most are the grilled vegetables, sliced eggplants and zucchini, quartered onions or whole shallots, grilled till soft and then dressed with a simple emulsion of red-wine vinegar in olive oil in 1:3 proportion, with salt and dried thyme, doused in the delicious Catalan romesco sauce.

To make romesco sauce, roast 3 red bell peppers at 200 degrees centigrade till they are collapsing and then put them in a paper bag to steam and loosen their skin, and then peel them (or use store-bought roasted red peppers). Along with the peppers, but in a different pan, roast 4 tomatoes and one head of garlic till the tomato is fully wrinkled. Roast ½ cup hazelnuts or blanched almonds till fragrant, and add to your blender with 3 tbs breadcrumbs and 1 tsp salt. Blend till pulverised. Add the peeled peppers, roasted tomatoes, 1 tsp smoked paprika or Kashmiri mirch, enough peeled roasted garlic cloves to fill a tablespoon plus half that amount of fresh garlic cloves to the mixture, and blend while dribbling in 1/3 cup of olive oil. Lighten with 2 tbs water if the mixture seems sticky.



Image: AI

were totally indifferent to this suffering, there is another problem. Faced with the prospect of being permanently economically dependent on one man, women and their families want to be sure that the man can provide. Hence, love life was delayed to the edge of middle age.

It seems to me that the only way forward is for young men everywhere to recognise that most of us, male and female, will settle for someone kind and generous, funny and sweet. And this is something most of us can be — the companions of my youth were no different, as long as there were no young women around. The social structures around gender, and the resulting myths that women are somehow different and need to be won by muscle or money, is what turned them into monsters, as it still does all too often.

This is part of a monthly column by Nobel-winning economist Abhijit Banerjee illustrated by Cheyenne Olivier

THE KIDS ARE LOOKING UP AGAIN AS BIRDWATCHING GETS COOL

Once seen as a retiree's hobby, birding is attracting youngsters who are swapping lie-ins for dawn walks, bird calls and citizen science

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Jiya Kathayat began birding with her ears. A high-pitched plea from a banyan tree called out an Indian grey hornbill. A rapid warble from a lantana cued a red-whiskered bulbul. "For one year, I just listened," says the 17-year-old. In 2024, she began actively seeking out feathered fauna around her home in Nanakmat, Uttarakhand.

When Dehradun-based nonprofit Nature Science Initiative conducted a nature education workshop at her school, she was hooked. "They taught us how to identify birds using apps like Merlin and eBird, record sightings, maintain bird lists, and what real-time data could do for conservation."

Jiya and her friends started staking out the wetlands around Nanak Sagar dam, and soon began leading the school birding group they'd formed there. "We were 40 students, all sharing a single pair of binoculars," she laughs. The group birded with purpose — not only recording but researching anthropogenic impacts on local bird behaviour. "Projects examined bird diversity before and after cropping, and the impact of Diwali noise on species like mynahs and rose-ringed parakeets."

Her passion paid off. In June, Jiya was invited to the Young Birders Event at Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, New York, on an all-expenses-paid trip — one of 16 high school students from nine countries given a four-day immersive experience at the mothership of bird research. She came home with a pair of Zeiss 8X42 binoculars.

Across cities and small towns, a growing number of young birders are swapping weekend lie-ins for crack-of-dawn stakeouts, curiosity turning to wonder, wonder turning to conservation thinking.

Aradhya Khope came to birding at 13, though he was always drawn to wildlife. "Nature walks and cleanup drives made me aware of how urbanisation and mining were destroying Amravati's habitats. I wanted to do something for nature, so I began reading books on ornithology." Books led to birders on social media, and eventually to his terrace, where binoculars, field guide and eBird in hand, he started scoping the skies, recording red-rattled lapwings in winter and scaly-breasted munia in the monsoon.

Earlier this year, Aradhya used his saved Diwali money to upgrade from a Rs 250 pair of binoculars to one costing Rs 1,000. In Feb, his new binoculars rewarded him with a sighting that had him crowing for days. "During the Great Backyard Bird Count, we spotted the hair-crest-



Photo: Saunak Dutta

EYES ON THE SKIES: Birding trips like these at Kolkata's Rabindra Sarobar lake provide an immersive experience

ed drongo, a species never before recorded in Amravati," says the 15-year-old, who was birding with the Wildlife and Environmental Conservation Society. He is now saving for a camera and tripod, hoping to replace the monopod he fashioned from a curtain rod.

Much of this birding boom among the youth has been driven by naturalists through workshops, webinars, games and field guides. Last Nov, Early Bird, a nature education initiative, launched Young Birders' Month, a series of outings and events conducted by organisations, schools, nature educators and parents across the country, drawing more than 3,000 young participants to 200 events in 80 locations, from Upper Siang in Arunachal Pradesh to Salem in Tamil Nadu. "When we proposed the idea, we thought even 50 events would be a success. We were pleasantly surprised," says Garima Bhatia, project manager, Early Bird. Bhatia sees Jiya's selection to the Cornell programme as significant: "It acknowledges birding's expanding reach beyond the elite urban, English-speaking club into small towns." Early Bird offers free learning resources, while NCF's Ornithology in guides aspiring ornithologists with academic advice, researcher access and information on grants and fellowships.

For Lisa Ghosh, 27, a microbiologist from Mumbai, birding journey began with a lifer. "A lifer is spotting or hearing a species for the first time," she explains. Hers was the Eurasian wryneck, discovered on her first nature trail to Bhugaon Beach at 18. "The bird was camouflaged against a casuarina tree. It was then that I understood the joy of birding — like a puzzle, you have to search for the bird in its environment."

While she agrees that birding has become popular with young people — particularly college students — she says many who join bird counts

and trails treat them as pleasure trips. "Only 20% become birders."

Ishaan Deodhar, 8, from Navi Mumbai, was initiated into birding by his father at six. "He takes me to Green Valley Park, a birding spot near our house, where I've spotted the oriental magpie-robin, common tailorbird, and white-throated kingfisher. The Eurasian hoopoe was harder to find." His uncle sent him a picture of the bird and challenged him to find it. "I looked for months — and one day, I saw it."

His parents take him birding across Maharashtra and have bought him binoculars. "We thought of buying him a camera," says his mother, Gayatri. "But a birdler told us he's too young. His eyes are his best tools." Birding has evolved — not just in the age of its practitioners, but in their profile and attitudes, observes Raju Kasambe, former assistant director of conservation at the Bombay Natural History Society. "Until around 2010, birders were a small group of hobbyists, made up largely of men; few could afford scarce and expensive binoculars and cameras. Every picture had to be taken with thought."

Kasambe says the culture has changed in another way too. "Earlier, the attitude was, 'Why should I share my findings?'" Today, young birders routinely upload sightings to citizen science platforms, and treat every observation as a contribution to conservation. "Today's young participants want to understand bird behaviour; identify birds by sound, improve their photography, and learn about the conservation challenges affecting local habitats," says Aksheta Mahapatra of Atavi Bird Foundation, a nonprofit. Atavi runs bird walks, conservation activities and storytelling sessions through its College Chapter programme, while its new app connects birders with events, hotspots and guides. More than 60% of those guides are under 30.

Young birders bring digital skills and public engagement through apps that identify species, record calls and upload sightings, while seasoned birders provide mentorship, ecological knowledge and scientific rigour, says Mahapatra.

Maitreya Sukumar, 23, started birding at four with the Delhi Bird Club and now studies wildlife biology at the National Centre for Biological Sciences in Bengaluru. Having birded across Africa, Central America and Southeast Asia, he hopes to help conserve avifauna, particularly in threatened regions like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Northeast. "People say birding is a matter of luck. But it's mostly good planning," he says. He studies eBird distribution maps, memorises local bird calls and consults birders familiar with the region before heading out.

And when he does, the memory burns. It was a hot, rainy night on an island off western New Guinea. Maitreya and his guides sat in a hide, waiting. Eventually the rain let up — and suddenly four colours, blue, red, yellow and green, lit up the forest floor. He watched through his binoculars for five full minutes as one of the most elusive birds on the planet cleared leaves from its display ground — the Wilson's bird-of-paradise.

Meet the Japanese chef who won a Michelin for biryani

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Every few years, a chef who didn't grow up inside a cuisine earns the kind of recognition usually reserved for those born into it. Think pizza, sushi, ramen.

Biryani has never really had that story. Until Takamasa Osawa, a Japanese chef working out of a ten-seat basement in Tokyo's Kanda district, won a Michelin Bib Gourmand in 2026 for his restaurant Biriyani Osawa, which serves exactly one thing: a single pot of biryani per meal. Little wonder Osawa uses 'Biriyani or Die' as his motto and tagline, a conviction he once called 'biryani fundamentalism'.

This past week, the chef with that single-minded focus travelled to Mumbai for a sold-out two-day pop-up at Indian Accent, serving three expressions

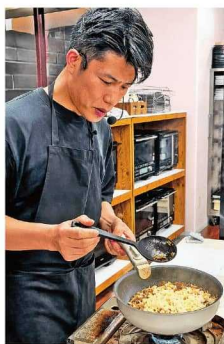
paring, laboratory notes. His favourite is Tamil Nadu. "Every grain carries flavour and umami there. The Hyderabad one is more layered; the flavour keeps changing. Kolkata biryani is the best example of how to make a delicious potato, which I sometimes enjoy more than the meat!" says Osawa. From Pakistan, he borrows "a sharper acidity, usually from tomatoes".

In his restaurant in Japan, each biryani has one carefully chosen companion: a chilli paste for the mutton biryani, an oil infused with Nepal's timur pepper and bergamot peel for the chicken biryani, and apple raita for the lobster biryani. "In Japan, biryani is still misunderstood as something to eat with curry poured over it. As a missionary of biryani in Japan, I keep accompaniments to a minimum and show people that a true biryani needs no curry at all. I also insist on bone-in meat, despite most Japanese diners' preference for boneless meat," says Osawa, who uses Australian mutton and Chinese onions, though most of his other ingredients are sourced from India.

Before Biriyani Osawa, the chef ran The Biriyani House, an informal series of group dinners. When Covid-19 killed that format, he needed something that could survive the restrictions. So, he borrowed the rules of sushi counters: reservations only, everyone seated and served in unison. With 'mokusoku', or silent eating, already the pandemic norm, a quiet, synchronised dining room wasn't a hard sell.

South Asian Michelin-starred kitchens abroad have long made room for biryani as a showpiece course. Semma in New York is known for its Dindigul short-grain biryani; Benares in London for its theatrical whole-baked sea bass version. But the Michelin Bib Gourmand recognises exceptional food at accessible prices, often rewarding hawkers' stalls, noodle shops and small specialist counters. Bismillah Biriyani

in Singapore, run by Arif Salahuddin from Pakistan, is a nine-time Bib Gourmand winner. Osawa doesn't flinch at joining that lineage from the outside. Asked how he reconciles calling his food both "authentic" and "original", he says: "If a dish is truly delicious, then it is authentic." Rijul Gulati, executive chef at Indian Accent Mumbai, sees Japanese craftsmanship in Osawa's approach. "Concepts like kaizen (continuous improvement) are ideas Indian chefs can learn from him." It's much the way Osawa describes himself while apologising for his broken English. "My English is improving and so is my biryani."



I learned to make biryani across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, then created my own recipe from the best of what I learned. In Japan, many people think biryani is eaten with curry, but I keep accompaniments to a minimum and insist on bone-in meat

Takamasa Osawa, CHEF



FLY HIGH: Jiya Kathayat, 17, at Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Vikram Doctor

You are stuck at a junction in Goa. This is common during the regular November-March tourist season, but this used to be uncommon during the monsoons. Yet here you are, stuck in a light rain and, worse, next to a sewage tanker trailing its unmistakable odour.

The vehicles jammed in all directions include many with out-of-state licence plates, particularly TS (or more up-to-date TG) from Telangana. Among the local cars is a taxi SUV crammed with a family of tourists, all wearing clothes cut from the same vibrantly floral fabric—men’s shirts, women’s frocks, even an old lady’s sari. Nothing is moving so should you get out and stretch your legs, maybe buy a paneer tikka roll from the cart on the corner, or some flowers from a shop with blossoms in buckets?

This could be a weekend scene in several parts of Goa just now. The monsoons used to be when tourism ended. Beach shacks were brought down, restaurants closed their doors and staff went home to their villages or looked for non-season jobs. Resorts tried to minimise losses with super-discounted packages and the state government tried to promote what was called, rather cringingly, rain-drop tourism, with talk about waterfalls and lakes.

IT’S RAINING TOURISTS

Monsoon tourism really seems to be taking off now for reasons more linked to West Asia than established tourism efforts. The ongoing hostilities have ruined the Gulf as a holiday destination while its influence on the plummeting rupee has made other foreign trips painfully expensive. Goa has always been an easy option for quick, last-minute domestic tourism. Many restaurants have realised that the costs of closing and reopening, particularly hiring and retraining staff, are more than those of staying open, even with losses, through the monsoons. Ever since Covid, there have also been more permanent residents which help with demand, especially for food delivery.

Much of this change isn’t captured in the standard metrics for tourism, which focus on flights and hotel room occupancy. A recent report showed a sharp seesaw, with a historic high of 18.18 lakh air passengers to Goa in May, most of them domestic, followed by a steep decline in June to 4.56 lakh, a 19.4% decline from the figures for June 2025.

This doesn’t take into account the large number of tourists arriving in other ways. The Konkan Railways’ monsoon services are particularly popular because they offer a spectacular glimpse of the Dudhsagar waterfalls, with spray often reaching the trains. The busloads of passengers that drive down from the west coast have resulted in Calangute becoming a mini-Gujarat, with pure vegetarian restaurants offering regional Gujarati food. Many regular tourists have realised that the best solution for Goa’s soaring taxi rates is simply to drive your own car down, particularly if you come from close-by states like Karnataka and Telangana.

This is where Goa’s traffic jam comes in.

OTHER METRICS

When regular indicators are ineffective people start looking at other metrics, even if they are more anecdotal than statistical. One well-known example is the Lipstick Effect, first advanced by cosmetics tycoon Leonard Lauder in 2008 when he noted that his company Estée Lauder’s lipstick sales rose after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Lauder’s theory was that when people were anticipating bad times, they switched expensive indulgences, like fashion wear, for smaller ones, like cosmetics. And so rising lipstick sales could indicate a coming recession better than government data which would take time to show a fall in economic activity—and could, quite likely, be massaged by governments to minimise bad news.

Another unusual indicator is cardboard box production, where rising sales are correlated with rising consumer purchases of the products it is used for packing. The Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis now tracks “corrugated and solid fiber box manufacturing”. The consulting firm Accenture has tracked pet services (grooming, boarding, pet sitting) as a sign of economic confidence since the high costs associated with pet ownership mean that few will adopt pets in a recession. The seeming anomaly here is the Covid years

Sonali Kokra

Buried in my phone live WhatsApp groups called Sole Sisters and Bag Ladies and half a dozen others with delightfully cringey, punny names. Cumulatively, these groups are roughly 500 women deep. I’ve met, at best, maybe a dozen of them.

And, yet, I can tell you with a fair degree of accuracy, who among these familiar-but-faceless women is struggling with caregiving responsibilities for a narcissistic mother who just won’t let up. Which one is burnt out by an ADHD child. How many have fallen out of love with their husbands. And who all uninstalled their dating apps for the 36th week in a row after their 228th run-in with a married man tediously quoting Rumi and sermonising about marriage being a social construct. The women in these groups have helped each other crack interviews, start SIPs, rehome shoe/pet/plant babies, build apps and appetisers and, on occasion, even fed and clothed each other.

In my 20s, I mythologised romantic love, built my entire emotional architecture around the idea that it is the main event. The meet-cute, the discovering of each other’s eccentricities and peccadilloes (and problematic exes that give you pause), the soft and hard launches, the nail-biting will-they-won’t-they (and by that I obviously mean both sets of vaguely

How Do I Count the Tourists in Goa?

As flights and hotel occupancy fail to capture the number of tourists flocking to Goa, here are some unusual indicators that also mark the changing nature of tourism—traffic jams in monsoon of vehicles sporting KL, MH and TG licence plates, rising short-term stays in villas and Airbnb properties and, of course, the many avatars of paneer on menus



traffic jam scenario brings together several unusual markers for tourism activity in Goa. Non-state licence plates obviously indicate cars being driven into Goa, though some of them will belong to non-Goan residents who haven’t changed their plates. Goa offers a huge diversity of outside licence

manage short-term rentals so that the cost of their investment can be recouped.

GLOBAL VILLA-GE

These short-term rentals currently fly under the radar of most hospitality data collection, but one website that offers an indication is Airroi.com, which collates Airbnb listings and revenue internationally. Its top 100 markets in India by active listings oddly lists Goan villages alongside major cities: Bengaluru, for example, leads with 3,282 listings, and Candolim is the highest listing for Goa, with 1,188 listings. Four roughly contiguous villages in north Goa—Candolim, Calangute, Arpora and Anjuna—feature in the top 30, and their combined listings come to 2,945 properties, which puts them at No. 3 on the list, ahead of New Delhi.

In total, 21 Indian locations on Airroi.com’s list are in Goa, giving a total of 6,781 short-term rental locations. The website also lists locations by revenue and this is even more startling: 15 of the 20 most profitable short-term rental locations are in Goa, with Assagao topping the list with an average monthly revenue of \$1,243 and a 32.9% occupancy. No. 2 is Badem near Assagao with an average monthly revenue of \$1,182.

On Airroi.com’s list, 15 of the 20 most profitable short-term rental locations in India are in Goa. Assagao tops the list with an average monthly revenue of \$1,243 and a 32.9% occupancy. No. 2 is Badem near Assagao with an average monthly revenue of \$1,182

gentrification. Around 20 years back, if you wanted flowers you had to head to a large market, like Mapusa’s, where flowers were mostly available as garlands for temples or wreaths for churches. Today, tourist locations like Anjuna have multiple shops selling expensive flowers grown out of the state, though Goan farmers are also now switching from rice and vegetables to more high-value crops like orchids and sunflowers.

CUT FROM THE SAME CLOTH

Groups of tourists wearing clothes of the same fabric is a small, but established part of mass tourism. One practical argument is that it helps large groups remain cohesive in crowded locations, but it’s mostly just a fun way to signal a collective vacation. Corporate offsites, a rapidly growing business in Goa, also use themed shirts as a way for office groups to relax. There are

Many regular tourists have realised that the best solution for Goa’s soaring taxi rates is simply to drive your own car down, particularly if you come from close-by states like Karnataka and Telangana. This is where Goa’s traffic jam comes in

plates, but some states like KA (Karnataka), MH (Maharashtra) and, above all, TS/TG (Telangana) predominate.

BIRYANI ON THE MANDOVI

A hospitality professional says that the casino boats on the Mandovi river are seeing a surge in customers from Hyderabad, and their Telugu food offerings have increased. It can’t be a coincidence then that Telugu food, which can be hard to find outside Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, is relatively well represented in north Goa now with restaurants like House of Telugu and Minapattu (Vagator), Trails of Taste (Anjuna) and Mana Andhra Ruchulu, Bhimavaram Vari Telugu Ruchulu and Royal Telugu Ruchulu (Calangute).

Aggregated hotel occupancy rates for May and June this year aren’t yet available, but one factor is making this an increasingly inadequate indicator. Non-hotel options have been increasing rapidly, whether classified as homestays, villa rentals, or just short-term rentals. Family or friends who come to Goa often find renting two-three villas a better option than paying for many hotel rooms. Villas also come with more freedom from hotel surveillance and rules, and villa management companies can provide many of the services that hotels offer. Builders of villa clusters have now set up concierge companies that will maintain villas for those buying them as second homes and also



FOLLOW THE SEWAGE TANKER

Assagao, like many Goan villages, does not have sewage lines since most villagers have septic tanks. Builders of new villas typically skimp on providing adequate septic tanks or sewage treatment plants, preferring instead to hire sewage tankers to suck up the waste two or three times a week, depending on the level of occupancy.

This is then taken to sewage treatment plants, though it is often alleged that tankers discharge the waste in mangroves and secluded river locations. Whatever the truth of that, this does make the movements of sewage tankers one way to track occupancy rates in short-term rental properties—it is literally data that can’t be flushed away!

Other indicators are perhaps less impactful, though more visible. Flower shops are one of the less noted signs of

clothing websites that cater to this market, offering coordinated wear for groups ranging from couples (“Twinning is Winning”) to large family or friend groups.

Goa’s cuisine never featured dairy products in any major way, but now paneer is inescapable. It shows the changing nature of domestic tourism. In the past, visitors to Goa, whether Indian or foreign, eagerly consumed the abundant seafood, pork and other meats on offer in the state. Most still do, but the prevalence of paneer on most menus signals the importance of domestic vegetarian tourists who view it as their desired protein.

Paneer usually appears in the standard north Indian dishes, but some places now offer a Goan-style paneer cafreal! You can get paneer pizzas, paneer momos, Thai fried paneer and a van outside Mapusa offers paneer shawarma. Perhaps paneer on menus could become the best unusual indicator of the spending power of Indian tourists.

Our Unwritten Love Story

Friendship is possibly the only relationship that welcomes the slightly unhinged, unfinished version of the person lurking beneath the competent-adult exterior

disappointed parents who think their simple-minded spawn deserves better than what they’ve chosen for themselves), the invariable separation (because every good love story needs a cliffhanger), the ring and, finally, the choking declarations of finally finding the person who “completes” you and is your “everything”.

But the thing about trying to complete someone and being their everything is that it’s a fantasy. And it is profoundly draining. Love requires equal partnership. Parenting needs you to be a bottomless container. Work asks you to be efficient. Friendship is possibly the only relationship that welcomes the slightly unhinged, unfinished version of the person lurking beneath the competent-adult exterior.

OUR TRUE BETTER HALVES

Which is why, now, in my 30s, I have far more appreciation for the people who have been doing the actual heavy lifting. The ones who watch us go through more personality changes in a decade than



Ranbir Kapoor has managed in his entire filmography (so far), who are our cheerleaders through three career pivots, who saw us at our most diminished—sedated with grief or humiliated by failure—and still chose to stay. They’re really the ones we should be introducing as our “other half” to the world.

The friend who, at 18, smoked beedis with me outside the principal’s room as a form of silent protest for something that seemed like a good hill to die on for two rebels without a cause during a college trip, is still, at 38, the one who determinedly floods her phone book with my fledgling business’s catalogue while waiting for her mammogram.

Another one has flown across continents on little notice because “something felt very off” when I suddenly stopped responding to texts for a fortnight. No judgement, no leapfrogging to bitchy interpretations, just a gut that said, “that’s not normal”, which ultimately resulted in “I’m here” at 2am with five ice creams and the kind of hug that glues something—

you don’t yet know what—back together:

COUNCIL OF WOMEN

One of the most delightful things about getting older is that if you do it right, you end up with a small council of scarily competent, gossipy-but-not-judgy women who will organise themselves around your crises, combat-ready, wielding Tupperwares and enough packets of Electrol because obviously you need to be reminded to eat and drink and at least brush your teeth and hair; if you can’t be bothered to shower, because you’re not a heathen. There’s more romance in their no-nonsense presence than the collective poetic oeuvre of all the men I’ve encountered in the dating world.

Men do all of this, too, but while studiously pretending they’re doing nothing at all. An ex and his best friend maintained their own two-decade-old friendship built almost entirely on cricket statistics, aggressive mockery and a shared refusal to ever say the words “I love

There’s more romance in the no-nonsense presence of women friends than the collective poetic oeuvre of all the men I’ve encountered in the dating world

you, man” without immediately following it with an insult. Unlike my WhatsApp groups with long, verbose paragraphs providing context for the life event currently being dissected and equally sturdy walls of texts dedicated to the pursuit of ferreting out subtexts and undercurrents, his have subsisted almost entirely on memes, cricket/football arguments and the occasional four-word check-ins. For 11 years!

Women narrate their closeness. Men, pressured into emotional impermeability early in their lives, often build intimacy through the shared absurdity (and comfort) of doing something pointless together for decades. Both, I’ve come to appreciate, are expressions of love. One just comes bearing better voice notes.

Romantic love, for all its theatre, exists largely to convince you that you were chosen—that one person looked at the field and picked you over everyone else. And, of course, it feels good to be chosen.

But friendship never bothered with the audition. It just kept showing up, on its own schedule—mammogram texts, 2 am ice cream, four-word check-ins—sometimes after years of near-total silence, refusing, rather rudely, to make a big deal of itself. Maybe that’s the real reason it never got its own love story. We didn’t bother to write it down because it was never trying to be literature. It was just trying to get us to Saturday.

Sonali Kokra is a Mumbai-based writer

THE ASIAN AGE

2 AUGUST 2026



Shashi Warriar

Off the beaten track

Why the ‘return’ of PoK may be less than ideal

A neighbour — I’m not going to offer any information that might enable him to find himself here — arrived at home in a celebratory mood one afternoon in July. “You seem to be having a good day,” I said.

“Yes, yes,” he said. “This is a happy day for all of us.”

I looked out of the window. It was sunny; we were preparing for drought. “Why?” I asked.

“Because Pakistan is breaking up!” he announced. “They will undergo what they wanted us to!”

Whatever trouble there is in Pakistan has a habit of spilling over into India. I kept quiet, thinking perhaps that this neighbour knew something I didn’t. I settled him down and brought him a drink. Prita refused to join us. “The man’s nuts,” she said. “I don’t want to talk to him.”

So I was shrinking at the thought of spending a drink with this man when I was saved by the bell: the doorbell. On the doorstep stood Murthy and Raghavan and a bottle of Scotch, and they couldn’t have come at a better time!

Prita emerged from her shell. “I want to see Murthy and Raghavan take this guy apart,” she whispered.

Soon we were all seated, with finger food and drink, and after the introductions I told Murthy and Raghavan that the neighbour was here to celebrate the breakup of Pakistan.

“They might be breaking up,” said Murthy, “but why are you celebrating?”

“Because Akhand Bharat is coming,” said the neighbour — let’s call him BB, the initials of my nickname for the man — “and we will see the return of our old glory.”

“Are you talking about POJK?” asked Raghavan, “and the JAAC’s 38-point list of demands?”

“Yes, yes,” said BB. “But there are other things. There is unrest in Balochistan, and in Khyber Paktunkhwa. These two will separate, and then even Sindh will go, and only Pakistani Punjab will be left of the old Pakistan!”

From the way he was dropping the names of parts of Pakistan he seemed to know what he was talking about.

“How do you think that’s going to happen?” asked Murthy.

“I don’t know,” said BB, “but the stars say it will happen, and I believe them!”

“What stars?” asked Raghavan.

BB pointed at the sky. “All the ones that matter,” he said. “Jupiter and Saturn and Rahu and Ketu... We have the star positions of the Mahabharat repeating themselves. So there will be war soon, and we will win, and Akhand Bharat will once again be a *dharma* nation!”

“Do you know how many people died during and just after the Mahabharata war?” asked Raghavan.

“A lot,” said BB, “but I don’t know exactly. It’s not mentioned.”

“It is,” said Raghavan. “Only 12 major figures survived the war, and, if we go by the text itself, nearly four million soldiers were killed, including the ones massacred the night after.”

“It was all for *dharma*,” replied BB. “It was worthwhile. After all, it cleansed the earth.”

Murthy sat up. “You said that the stars tell of another war,” he said. “Do you mean to say we’re going to see lots of people dying in the near future? Millions?”

“In the next six or seven years,” said BB. “There will be World War, not just European war like in the past! China will break up. They are hiding their problems from the rest of the world but the problems will only grow. Pakistan will break up. The Bangladeshis will be in big trouble because they irritate India!”

“So how do you think Akhand Bharat will form again?” asked Murthy.

“All those people who seceded will ask to come back again!” said BB. “The war will weaken them and they will do a *ghar wapas*! They will want to be part of Bharat!”

“Do you know what happened in Kashmir after the Soviets left Afghanistan?” asked Raghavan.

“Yes,” replied BB. “The troubles in Kashmir started then.”

“Most of the people who caused the troubles in Kashmir were from POJK,” said Raghavan.

“So what?” asked BB.

“Those people are still there,” said Raghavan. “If we allow them to rejoin India, all those people, and the weapons they’ve stockpiled, will be part of India. It’s going to be like hugging a nest of wasps! Is that what you want?”

“I’m sure we’ll find a way to deal with all that,” said BB. “We dealt with Kashmir, didn’t we?”

“Right” said Murthy. “Have you heard of a place called Mirpur?”

“Of course!” said BB. “It’s only about a hundred kilometres from Islamabad, in the southern part of POJK.”

“Yes,” said Murthy, “and do you know its commonest nickname?”

“No,” replied BB.

“They call it ‘Little England,’” said Murthy. “And do you know why?”

“No,” replied BB, smiling. He didn’t know Murthy. We did, so we, too, were smiling. “Because lots of Mirpuris settled in Britain, mostly doing simple jobs, like driving cabs,” said Murthy.

“Honest workers!” said BB. “Like all Indians.”

“Have you heard of the Rotherham grooming scandal?” asked Murthy.

“Of course!” said BB. “It demonstrates the bias of the West! The police didn’t investigate the crime because they were afraid of being called Islamophobic!”

“Well,” said Murthy, “All those cabbies in the Rotherham and related scandals are Mirpuris. So, we’ll have to call them ‘Indian grooming gangs’, not ‘Pakistani grooming gangs.’”

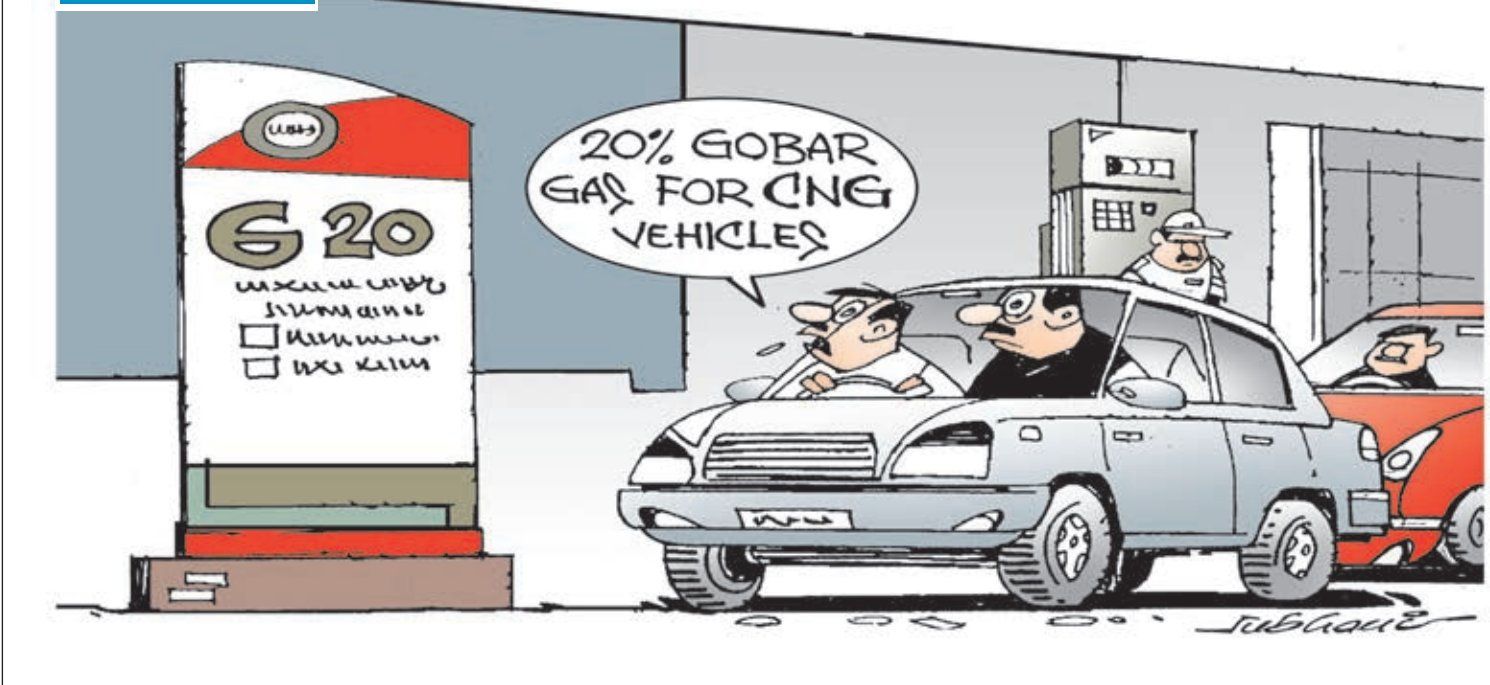
BB put his unfinished drink on the table with a bang and rose to go. “I don’t have to listen to your nonsense!” he said as he left.

Murthy took a long slow draught of his Scotch. “And we don’t have to listen to yours!” he said softly, but his prey had already departed.

Shashi Warriar

is an author and a columnist

Subhani



Resignation of Pradhan: What took him so long?



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya’s View

In the parliamentary elections of 2014, Nitish Kumar’s JD(U) got just two seats out of 40. I was with him when he decided to resign as chief minister and take moral responsibility for the debacle. Soon the news spread, and party leaders and MLAs thronged his residence to persuade him not to do so. The JD(U) still had a comfortable majority in the state Assembly, and there was no compulsion for Nitish to resign. But he was adamant. An unsuspecting Jitan Ram Manjhi then became CM.

What Nitish Kumar did was a matter pertaining to politics. But the principle is the same: *Authority and accountability are inseparable*. A public office is not merely a privilege but a burden of responsibility. A minister is not expected to resign only when he has personally committed an illegality, or when an inquiry had established his direct culpability. He could resign because something grave had gone wrong in the department he headed.

Constitutionally, the position is clear enough. The Council of Ministers is collectively responsible to the Lok Sabha, and individual ministers hold office during the pleasure of the President, in practice on the advice of the Prime Minister. But constitutional accountability is only the minimum requirement. There is also a moral and political accountability which cannot be reduced to a clause in the Constitution. A minister is entrusted with a portfolio because he is presumed capable of exercising supervision over it. If that system suffers a catastrophic failure, the minister cannot simply say: I did not personally do it; some subordinate officer did.

That was once understood in India, and there are many such examples in our democratic history. The most celebrated example is Lal Bahadur Shastri. As railway minister, he offered his resignation after the Mahbubnagar accident in 1956, in which more than a hundred people died. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru initially persuaded him against it. But after the Ariyalur railway disaster later that year, which killed over a hundred people, Shastri resigned. He had not caused the accident. Yet he believed that as the minister responsible for the grave failure, he had to bear moral responsibility. His resignation became one of the defining examples of political probity in independent India.

T.T. Krishnamachari resigned as finance minister in 1958 in the aftermath of the Mundhra scandal, involving the controversial investment of LIC funds. The issue was not that Mr Krishnamachari had personally enriched himself. The larger question was whether the minister could disclaim responsibility for the functioning of his ministry. He could not.

V.K. Krishna Menon resigned as defence minister in the aftermath of India’s disastrous performance in the 1962 war with China. Again, resignation was not a judicial verdict of personal guilt. It was an acknowledgement that the person at the apex of a crucial ministry could not indefinitely remain insulated from the consequences of institutional failure.

Madhavrao Scindia, as civil aviation minister, resigned in 1992 after the crash of a leased Russian aircraft, although there was no loss of life. The resignation was accepted. Nitish Kumar resigned as railway minister after the Gaisal train disaster in

1999, in which nearly 300 people died. The resignation was an explicit acceptance of moral responsibility. Mamata Banerjee did something similar in 2000 after the Howrah-Amritsar Mail accident in Punjab, in which more than 40 people were killed. She said she regarded it as her moral duty to resign. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, however, did not accept her resignation. Union home minister Shivraj Patil and Maharashtra chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh resigned after the grave security failures responsible for the Mumbai terror attacks of November 2008, explicitly owning moral responsibility. The higher the office, the greater the obligation to answer for what happens under one’s watch.

The Prime Minister is, of course, constitutionally entitled to decide whom he wants in his Cabinet. A minister’s resignation cannot become a weapon that the Opposition brandishes after every administrative failure. Nor should ministers be sacrificed merely because a political adversary demands it. Government cannot function if every accusation automatically becomes grounds for dismissal.

But the opposite extreme is equally dangerous: The notion that a minister should remain in office unless a court, investigative agency or parliamentary committee establishes personal culpability. That reduces ministerial accountability to merely theory. Democracy requires something more.

A minister is not a bureaucrat. Bureaucrats administer; ministers lead, supervise, defend policy and accept political responsibility.

It was unfortunate that for very long Mr Pradhan did not accept moral responsibility for the failure, because resignation in such circumstances is not an admission of criminal guilt. It is an affirmation of accountability.

onsibility. If a system fails spectacularly, it is hardly sufficient to suspend a few officials and announce a committee of inquiry. The minister must ask himself whether his continued presence strengthens public confidence in the system or weakens it. Which brings us to Dharmendra Pradhan. The Neet-UG controversy was not a minor administrative inconvenience. It involved allegations of paper leaks, irregularities and compromised examination procedures affecting the future of lakhs of young Indians. The education ministry itself was compelled to order investigations; the NTA’s conduct came under intense scrutiny; and the Supreme Court had to intervene in the matter.

The issue, therefore, was not whether Mr Pradhan personally leaked a paper. That would be a wholly different question, to be determined by investigation and law. The question was whether the minister responsible for the country’s examination architecture should accept political and moral responsibility when that architecture spectacularly failed. It was unfortunate that for very long Mr Pradhan did not, because resignation in such circumstances is not an admission of criminal guilt. It is an affirmation of accountability.

Instead, the prolonged refusal to accept the moral dimension of the controversy conveyed an altogether different message, that responsibility would travel downward, to the National Testing Agency, officials and bureaucrats, but need not necessarily travel up to the minister.

Dharmendra Pradhan has finally done the right thing by resigning. But the question that will persist is: Why did he take so long? For his own image, and of the government, he should have done so much earlier. Public office is not a shield against accountability; it is the reason accountability exists.

The writer is an author, diplomat and former member of Parliament (RS)

LETTERS INVALID ARGUMENT

Recently, the Centre told the Supreme Court that the Prime Minister’s post has a “sanctity” and his choice of chief election commissioner or election commissioners cannot be distrusted. Therefore, the Chief Justice of India’s exclusion from the election panel cannot be faulted. This argument seems to attach a rider to universally accepted democratic principles of adopting the separation of powers and avoiding conflict of interest. The rider suggests that no conflict will arise regarding the interests of a person holding a sanctified post, one so protected that no democratic principle or practice can touch it. Yet such a post suits a monarch or a dictator well, but not a Prime Minister in a democracy.

Sujit De Kolkata

FONT OF CLARITY

DEMOCRACY is measured less by the ritual of elections and more by how patiently a society listens between them. The vote at 18 is not a mere state concession: It is recognition that those inheriting the future must help shape it today. The activist on campus would be tomorrow’s scientist, judge, entrepreneur and legislator. Governments would do well to view today’s protester not as an adversary, but as the prospective custodian of the Republic. Students have been history’s earliest conscience and fount of uncompromised idealism. To cherish that spirit is to ensure a nation’s perpetual renewal. Let us dip into youth’s moral clarity that springs, unfiltered and uncompromised, and is so essential to democracy.

R. Narayanan Navi Mumbai

NEW HORIZONS

DOUBLE OLYMPIC medal winner Neeraj Chopra won the silver medal with a season-best throw of 85.83m, while Yashvir Singh clinched the bronze with a personal best of 85.41m, giving India a memorable double podium finish in javelin throw at Glasgow Commonwealth games. The javelin legacy is in safe hands. And Asmita Day and Harsh Singh claimed gold in their 48 kg and 60 kg category respectively in judo. India has won medals in judo but a top finish always eluded it. With silver medals in long jump, high jump, 10k m and triple jump, India has touched new horizons in track and field and achieved its best ever Commonwealth Games medal haul. Their success is a matter of great pride for the nation. And it will inspire young children to take up these sports.

Bal Govind Noida, UP

Anita Katyal

Political Gup-Shup



Did BJP just lose the middle class? Delhi CM Rekha likely to face axe

The student protesters at Jantar Mantar have gone home after the Narendra Modi government bought peace with them by accepting their key demand for the resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan but the disquiet in the Bharatiya Janata Party continues to linger. The ruling party leaders are trying to ascertain the long-term political impact of the protests led by angry, outspoken and irreverent students. For a change, many of them are openly saying the protest could have been handled better. Party insiders do not hesitate to point out that the government should have settled matters amicably by reaching out to the protesters much earlier. Besides worrying about how the carefully crafted image of the party has taken a beating, BJP leaders are concerned that the fire lit by the protests is reaching their homes as their own children are sympathetic towards the protesters. It is also feared that the party could end up alienating a large section of the middle class if the government takes harsh action against the students as, in many cases, their parents are BJP supporters.

Besides brooding over the fall-out of the recent student protests, the BJP ministers and MPs are on tenterhooks over the much-talked about Cabinet reshuffle which appears imminent after Dharmendra Pradhan’s resignation. While ministers are hoping they are not axed or moved to inconsequential ministries, those outside are waiting to get their foot into the door. According to the political grapevine, the performance of BJP chief ministers is also on the cards and changes are not ruled out. The performance of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan chief ministers is said to be lacklustre while Haryana’s Nayyar Singh Saini and Maharashtra’s Devendra Fadnavis are considered to be in the safe zone. With Punjab Assembly elections coming up next year, several Punjabi leaders in the BJP are pinning their hopes on replacing Delhi chief minister Rekha Gupta whose record has not exactly been impressive.

Last week’s Lok Sabha debate on the anti-paper leak bill witnessed some interesting scenes. The breakaway faction of Trinamul Congress MPs who

have merged with a little-known regional outfit — the National Citizens Party of India (NCPi) — finds itself in an awkward situation. The rebels have been recognised as a separate group by Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla but they continue to be listed as Trinamul Congress MPs in parliamentary records for all official purposes as the NCPi is not a recognised party. Predictably, there is palpable tension between the breakaway group and the original Trinamul MPs. This was on display during last week’s debate when the more senior and eloquent MPs like Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar, Satabdi Roy and Saayoni Ghosh didn’t want to participate in the debate as they feared incessant heckling from their former colleagues. As a result, the group picked Sharmila Sarkar as its lead speaker. The Trinamul Congress fielded Abhishek Banerjee to send out a clear signal to the deserters, who complained about his style of functioning, that Mamata Banerjee’s nephew is there to stay.

And then there was an awkward moment when Opposition and BJP MPs clashed last week at the main

entrance of the new Parliament house. While Opposition members kept up chants of “*chanda chor*” to highlight the theft of donations at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya and also drew attention to the police action against student protesters, the ruling party MPs countered it with slogans hailing Dharmendra Pradhan. It was during this shouting match that Priyanka Gandhi Vadra came face-to-face with Sushmita Deb, a one-time member of Rahul Gandhi’s core team who first jumped ship to join the Trinamul Congress and then moved on to the BJP. Priyanka looked Sushmita in the eye and shouted “*Nehru chor nahin hai*”. A visibly embarrassed Sushmita was initially taken aback but recovered sufficiently to put her arm around Priyanka’s waist, saying, “I think we need to move on.”

The season’s mango party hosted by Lok Sabha MP Shashi Tharoor at his Lodhi Estate residence last week was attended by a galaxy of politicians, diplomats, media personalities and, not to mention, many wannabes. The party drew a full house but the debate in the

Lok Sabha played spoilsport as Congress MPs were unable to make it because Rahul Gandhi was scheduled to participate in the debate on the anti-paper leak bill around the same time. Among those who put in an appearance included Congress MP Karti Chidambaram and party office bearers Major Dalbir Singh and Captain Praveen Davar. But the presence of Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, Trinamul Congress MP Derek O’Brien and BJP’s Jay Panda compensated for the absence of senior Congress leaders. However, Delhi’s humid weather proved to be a dampener, both literally and figuratively. The best of chiffon sarees and halter tops were soaked in sweat. Ditto for the men in suits and Nehru/ Modi jackets. As for the food, there were plenty of mangoes but the long queues put off many guests while the chaat and pav bhaji proved to be a poor substitute for lunch. Several well-heeled guests rushed to the India International Centre to partake of more substantial fare.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

- INDIAN TOP 10
- NON-FICTION
- 1

A HISTORY RETOLD: AURANGZEB ALAMGIR

Munis D. Faruqui, Juggernaut, ₹999
- 2

BIRTH OF A NATION

Josy Joseph, Westland, ₹799
- 3

FRACTURED COMMUNITIES

Umar Khalid, Juggernaut, ₹499
- 4

INDIA OUT OF WORK

Santosh Mehrotra, J. Parida, Bloomsbury, ₹699
- 5

BATANAGAR

Paromita Sen, Pan Macmillan, ₹399
- 6

IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

M. Mohammadi, Adroit, ₹1,495
- 7

SPECTACLE STATE

Brahma Prakash, HarperCollins, ₹599
- 8

THE ONCE AND FUTURE RIOT

Joe Sacco, Metropolitan Books, ₹2,864
- 9

STRANGERS A MEMOIR OF MARRIAGE

Belle Burden, Penguin, ₹999
- 10

ADVANTAGE INDIA

Anil K. Antony, Rupa, ₹795
- FICTION
- 1

THE CORRESPONDENT

Virginia Evans, Penguin, ₹699
- 2

YESTERYEAR

Caro Claire Burke, 4th Estate, ₹599
- 3

TAIWAN TRAVELOGUE

Yang Shuang-Zi, Pan Macmillan, ₹599
- 4

THE THINGS WE NEVER SAY

Elizabeth Strout, Penguin, ₹1,099
- 5

IT COULD HAVE BEEN HER

Lisa Jewel, Penguin, ₹899
- 6

JOHN OF JOHN

Douglas Stuart, Pan Macmillan, ₹899
- 7

THE BOOK OF EVERLASTING THINGS

Aanchal Malhotra, HarperCollins, ₹599
- 8

THEO OF GOLD

Alan Levi, HarperCollins, ₹599
- 9

COOL MACHINE

Colson Whitehead, Hachette, ₹799
- 10

THE FIRST HOUSE

Avni Doshi, HarperCollins, ₹599
- Bahrisons Booksellers, New Delhi

Fiery memoir locates role of law



Satabdi Das

review

Written in dialogue with Ritu Menon, Indira Jaising's recently published memoir chronicles over five decades of her engagement with the law, while simultaneously tracing the evolution of constitutional rights in postcolonial India. The book compellingly embodies the feminist dictum that "the personal is political". Jaising's experiences of displacement, gender discrimination and professional struggles are not merely individual narratives but sites through which larger constitutional, feminist and democratic questions are articulated. On the other hand, her feminist legal vision reshapes constitutional interpretation by challenging assumptions of legal neutrality that obscures structural inequality based on gender, caste, class, religion and sexuality. Jaising conceptualises the

Constitution as a site of belonging. Drawing upon her family's experience of displacement during the Partition, Jaising concedes there was no geographical terrain that she could call home. Instead, the constitutional idea of inclusivity and unity within diversity; the idea of rights guaranteed to citizens irrespective of caste, class, creed and gender, became her personal space, a home to return again and again. This formulation resonates with contemporary debates on constitutional morality vs majoritarian politics. The Constitution emerges not as a static legal text but as a dynamic and contested framework whose vitality depends upon continuous public engagement and institutional accountability.

Departing from the conventions of chronological autobiography, the book unfolds through discussions of landmark legal cases, personal experiences, and political

struggles. This conversational format checks self-celebration and allows personal experience to illuminate broader questions concerning justice. The duo revisits several landmark legal struggles on issues ranging from gender justice, sexual harassment, domestic violence to labour rights, environmental protection, minority rights and citizenship. Rather than treating these cases as isolated judicial achievements, Jaising demonstrates how strategic litigation founded on interpretation of the Constitution has functioned as a means of expanding democratic rights for the marginalised communities. For her, litigation and social movements have always remained intertwined. The Sabarimala case is discussed as a pivotal moment where the Supreme Court affirmed women's right to enter the temple, foregrounding constitutional morality over religious exclusion. The Rupal Bajaj case is highlighted as a landmark in recognising sexual harassment as a violation of dignity. The debates around NRC and

CAA are examined as instances where questions of selective citizenship challenge the inclusive vision of the Constitution. Jaising also emphasises that justice must remain independent of religion, that constitutional principles cannot be subordinated to faith-based norms in a secular democracy.

Finally, the book reflects on the challenges faced by the judiciary post-2014. The increasing pressures on judicial independence, the threat to collegium system of recruitment, the manipulative rostering of cases to the favoured judges and the shrinking space for dissent — all these endanger the future of the hard-earned autonomy of judiciary, notes Jaising. The role of judiciary in safeguarding constitutional values is being jeopardised. This is what makes the book a politically timely contribution. It demonstrates that constitutionalism is a continuous practice of democratic resistance sustained through legal activism, feminist politics and civic engagement.

Satabdi Das is an author, translator, teacher and feminist



THE CONSTITUTION IS MY HOME
By INDIRA JAISING
HarperCollins
pp. 236; ₹699

Those Sunday pavement worlds of wonder



Shashi Warriar

review

For older readers, this book is pure nostalgia, for it harks back to times when books were rare and precious. Old books spread out on the pavement near Flora Fountain on weekends, old books on staircases off Church Street and on platforms in Chickpet in Bangalore on Sundays... A whole generation of middle-class city-dwellers got their reading at places like these. Every city had a street or neighbourhood where you could spend your Sundays with books without having to empty your wallet for them. There were the weekday shops — Shop Number 42, Shankar Market, for example — or book fairs such as the ones at

Delhi's Pragati Maidan, but the Sunday markets were the ones that mattered. For the middle-aged, born in the 1970s and 1980s, in a country not quite as poor as it was before the economic reforms of the early 1990s, this book triggers memories.

Delhi had the biggest and most varied of these Sunday book markets, and the most notable Sunday book market was in Daryaganj, the 'Daryaganj Sunday Patri'. Few would be more qualified to write about this than Prof Kanupriya Dhingra, whose PhD thesis was on Daryaganj's parallel book culture.

Dhingra traces the genesis and growth of this market from the 1950s, not long after Independence, when publishers began to set up shop in Daryaganj market, an old commercial hub in Shahjahanabad, the capital of the Mughals. There were few shops to begin with, but as literacy grew, so did the

need for books. But books were expensive, and hence the demand for cheap, used books. The growth in universities in the 1950s and 1960s and even after pushed the growth spiral ever outwards and upwards. Small vendors turned up and set up stalls for second-hand books, growing until they occupied a kilometre of pavement in the Sunday market.

Perhaps the most important thing about this market — more so, perhaps, than similar markets in other cities — is that it shaped Delhi's reading habits over the decades. In 2019 it shifted from its original venue, Netaji Subhash Road, to Mahila Haat. And the crowds kept coming.

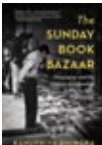
But things are no longer the same. There are digital books, digital libraries, that offer convenience and ease of reading; no missing pages, no words

blurred by stains, no dog-ears... Yet there are those who come despite the ebooks, including a student who finds reading on screens a strain. Besides, he finds that using paper books increases his attention span, a crucial ability for a student, or perhaps anyone.

But vendors there, like vendors everywhere, come for profit. Their experience counts. They know publishers, authors, titles. Like cynics, they know the price of every book they carry, but perhaps not its value. That drives the market.

Dhingra's writing is a bit academic, but clear enough, and competent. Perhaps the progress of the digital age will, over the years, stamp out the very notion of a second-hand book. But even then, this book will carry the memories of many generations of readers who found their lives shaped by cheap, accessible books on crowded Sunday pavements.

Shashi Warriar is an author and a columnist



THE SUNDAY BOOK BAZAAR
By KANUPRIYA DHINGRA
Speaking Tiger
pp. 336; ₹599

WORLD

SHORT TAKES 50 TERRORISTS ARRESTED IN PAK'S PUNJAB

Lahore, Aug. 1: More than 50 terrorists belonging to multiple outlawed organisations were arrested in Pakistan's Punjab province in over a two-month crackdown, police said on Saturday.

According to a statement issued by the Punjab Police's Counter Terrorism Department (CTD), 419 intelligence-based operations were conducted across various districts of the province in response to heightened terrorism threats.

The arrests were part of efforts to dismantle hostile networks, it said. The CTD said the 54 arrested individuals belonged to various terrorist groups, including Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Sipah-e-Sahaba. They were arrested from Lahore, Rawalpindi, Gujranwala, Faisalabad, Jhelum, Sargodha, Mianwali, Bhakkar, Sahiwal, Mandi Bahauddin, Pakpattan and Bahawalpur, it said.

GUNMEN SHOOT DEAD CLERIC IN N-W PAKISTAN

Peshawar, Aug. 1: Unidentified gunmen killed a Pakistani cleric in the country's northwest Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, police said on Saturday.

According to the police, the incident occurred on Friday in Birmal tehsil of South Waziristan district when the armed assailants attacked the cleric identified as Maulana Muhammad Ismail, who is also a local Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl group (JUI-F) leader.

No group or individual immediately claimed responsibility for the attack.

Police said motorcycle-borne attackers opened fire on Ismail after Friday prayers, killing him on the spot.

Investigations are underway from various angles to determine the motive and those involved in the incident, they added.

The deceased was also serving as a teacher at a religious seminary in the area.

Deadly strikes rock Kyiv as Ukraine sinks Russian ship

Zelenskyy appeals for Patriot air defence systems to ward off attacks



Smoke rises above residential buildings following a Russian ballistic missile strike on Kyiv on Saturday that damaged vehicles and left debris on the roads. — AFP

Kyiv, Aug. 1: Russian attacks on Kyiv and its suburbs killed 10 people early on Saturday, officials said, as Ukrainian drones sank a huge Russian container ship in the Black Sea.

The exchange of strikes comes amid a prolonged lull in US-led talks aimed at ending the conflict, Europe's deadliest since World War II.

Both Moscow and Kyiv have escalated long-range attacks on each other in recent weeks, with Russia more than doubling its use of missiles last month, according to an AFP analysis.

Civilian casualties in Ukraine have meanwhile soared to their highest since Russia invaded in 2022, according to UN human rights monitors, with Kyiv pressing its allies to provide more air defences.

In a statement on social media, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy appealed for supplies of Patriot air defence systems, Kyiv's only effective counter against Russian ballistic missile attacks.

"It is this shortage of ballistic missile intercep-

tors that only encourages Russia to launch such attacks that take human lives," Zelenskyy said in a post on X.

More than 30 people were wounded in Saturday's attacks on Kyiv, which struck five districts of the city, Ukrainian authorities said.

Among the buildings

damaged was the embassy of Lithuania, with the Baltic country's foreign minister publishing images appearing to show a cracked door and damaged light fixture.

AFP journalists reported hearing more than 10 explosions in a row early Saturday, triggering car alarms on the streets.

In Kyiv's eastern Darnytsky district, the attacks damaged multiple buildings and vehicles, with authorities reporting 7 people killed and 14 wounded. Two people were killed and eight were wounded in the Solomiansky district, where strikes damaged a five-storey residential building. — AFP

ZELENSKYY SEEKS STARLINK USE FOR STRIKES ON RUSSIA

Washington, Aug. 1: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has pitched President Donald Trump and other American officials on helping Ukraine win permission from tech titan Elon Musk to use his Starlink satellite communications system to guide strikes inside Russia.

The push for expanded use of Starlink comes as Zelenskyy looks for alternate ways to mitigate the need for US Patriot air defence systems to thwart the steady barrage of Russian missile and drone attacks on Ukrainian territory. The interceptors are in shorter supply as the US and Israeli war against Iran continues to rage, and Trump on Friday appeared to back away from a recent commitment to give Ukraine a licence to produce them. Zelenskyy made the request to Trump in an Oval Office meeting this week. — AP

Mountaineer Purja killed in avalanche

Skardu (Pakistan), Aug. 1: Renowned mountaineer Nirmal Purja died with other team members in a powerful avalanche in Pakistan, his climbing company confirmed on Saturday, after rescuers recovered the remains of three climbers from the 10-strong expedition during a high-altitude search.

The avalanche struck on Thursday, cutting off contact with the international expedition led by 43-year-old British-Nepali climber Purja on Broad Peak in northern Pakistan.

"It is with profound sadness and immense heartbreak that we confirm that Nirmal Purja tragically lost his life following the avalanche on Broad Peak," Purja's company Elite Expeditions said on social media. "We have also received confirmation that other members of the expedition sadly did not survive," it added.

The remains recovered so far — flown by helicopter to hospital for formal identification — included an American woman, an Omani woman and a Nepali man, the regional government said in a statement released on Friday night.

Purja, who served with Britain's Brigade of Gurkhas before joining the Special Boat Squadron of the

● RENOWNED MOUNTAINEER Nirmal Purja died with other team members in a powerful avalanche in Pakistan, his climbing company confirmed on Saturday, after rescuers recovered the remains of three climbers from the 10-strong expedition during a search.

Royal Marines, broke multiple climbing records since becoming a full-time mountaineer and tour guide.

Nepal's Prime Minister Balendra Shah offered his condolences over the "tragic" deaths of Purja and the other climbers, which he said "has shocked us".

"The physical journey of all the deceased climbers... has been interrupted, but the history of their courage, dedication, and contributions will always remain inspiring," Shah said in a statement on social media.

Police in the mountainous northern Gilgit-Baltistan region said in a statement that high-altitude porters and rescue teams were carrying out a second day of the operation on Saturday after the search was paused due to difficult weather conditions a day earlier.

Rescuers and military helicopters had been scouring the area and teams stayed at the base camp. — AFP



Kushalrani Gulab

review

There's a lot going on in Shuma Raha's novel, *The Sea has the Answers*. In Kolkata, the MeToo hashtag attaches itself to a senior advertising professional to the possible detriment of his career and his family. In a small seaside town, the guru of an ashram rapes a local teenager, but because of his strong political connections, nobody expects any kind of justice to be done, not even the filing of an FIR. And in that same town, when a young investigative journalist makes some headway amongst the rumours about the ashram, he's threatened, because of his Muslim name, with mob violence and worse.

Right at the centre of all this is Urmi Das. A woman who played little part in instigating the drama surrounding her but is caught in it anyway. Married to the advertising agency CEO accused of sexual harassment and rape, and jolted by his infidelity and misuse of power, Urmi is spending time at the seaside home she inherited from her grandfather to figure out what she wants to do now. There, because she has some experience of registering FIRs due to volunteering with a shelter for abused women in Kolkata, she is drawn into helping the violated teenager and her family. Having rediscovered her sexuality through the journalist, she now finds herself vulnerable to the vindictive supporters of the guru because of her married status and his religion. On top of this, her 17-year-old daughter wants Urmi to come back home despite being old enough and savvy enough to understand why her mother might not want to. Meanwhile,

Urmi's closest friend can offer her nothing but the direst warnings regarding women who live alone. Wherever Urmi looks, it seems she has little personal agency. And while she acknowledges that by just drifting along in her married life, she did put herself in that situation, she is also certain that's not how she



THE SEA HAS THE ANSWERS
By SHUMA RAHA
Niyogi
pp. 379; ₹595

wants the rest of her life to play out.

With all these issues knotted together, it's difficult to imagine that this novel will not grab attention. And it isn't clickbait material — Shuma Raha tells a genuinely good story that moves at a brisk pace even as it gives each problem the scrutiny it deserves. But — and this is a big but — the focus on the issues often turns pedantic, making the novel sometimes seem more like reportage than a story about something that could happen to you and me. Because of this, there is no sense of that satisfaction you feel when you finally turn the last page of a great book.

Kushalrani Gulab is a freelance editor and writer who dreams of being a sanyasi by the sea

Activists oppose Puerto Rico's \$2-bn luxury development

San Juan, Aug. 1: Puerto Rico's government has authorised construction of a \$2 billion luxury development in the island's southwest region that environmentalists have decried, warning it would strain the US territory's resources and threaten wildlife.

The project known as Esencia would be built on 2,000 acres in the coastal town of Cabo Rojo. It would include 500 luxury hotel rooms, 1,200 private residences, two golf courses, an equestrian centre, a school from kindergarten to 12th grade and a 24/7

medical centre, among other things.

Global investment firm Reuben Brothers and real estate development company Three Rules Capital said on Friday that more than 75 per cent of the project would be dedicated to conservation and green space, including restoring roughly 33 acres of wetlands and rehabilitating coastal dunes and mangrove ecosystems. They also said the development would be entirely powered by renewable energy and would have its own water and energy infrastructure.

Hotel brands joining the project so far are Mandarin Oriental and Rosewood Hotels & Resorts. Environmentalists decried the approval, which Puerto Rico's Adjunct Board of the Permit Management Office issued on Thursday. The approval was shared with The Associated Press on Friday.

"We are going to fight this in every forum possible," said Braulio Quintero, executive director of the Puerto Rico-based Institute for Socio-Ecological Research. He is among those opposing the project.

Quintero criticised officials for approving construction "without a public hearing, without governmental transparency". Quintero also called on the developers to face Puerto Ricans. "These individuals must be subjected to public scrutiny," he said. "These are serious threats to our sustainability as a people."

The developers have stressed that they will protect the environment and uphold public access to the beach. They noted that the project is expected to generate 17,000 jobs. — AP

2,000 acres area of the project known as Esencia, to be built in the coastal town of Cabo Rojo.

500 luxury hotels.

1,200 private residences.

2 golf courses.

1 equestrian centre.

1 school from kindergarten to 12th grade.

24/7 medical centre.

33 acres of wetlands to be restored.

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We are going to fight this in every forum possible. These individuals must be subjected to public scrutiny.

— BRAULIO QUINTERO, Opponent of the project

Divine feast

In Odisha, temple traditions are intertwined with the daily lives of people

SANDIP DAS, ALKA JENA & PALLAVI DAS

ODISHA is the holy land of Lord Jagannath — one of the four holiest shrines (*dhams*) of Hindus in India — situated in the sacred city of Puri. Odisha is also home to more than 7,000 temples across its expanse, like lotus petals rising from the earth, with over 500 or more existing in the historic 'City of Temples' — Bhubaneswar itself.

At the living temples of this divine land, ancient stones speak, incense swirls, holy chants rise, conch shells trumpet, and the air is filled with the fragrant grace of *bhogas* from sacred kitchens.

The temples of Odisha stand not merely as relics or places of worship from the glorious days of the ancient Kalinga Empire — they are living hearts that pulse with devotion, myth, and mystery, immersing generations of Odias.

The shrines hum with rituals older than empires and with recipes that are believed to have been passed down by the gods.

In Odisha, the gods do not feast in isolation. They eat what their people eat — seasonal, soulful, and shared with love. And in every offering made, whether on a banana leaf or in a temple corridor, the divine and the human become indistinguishable. Temple traditions are intertwined with the daily lives of people, most certainly their cuisine.

POETIC DIVINITY IN STONES

The temples of Odisha are poetry in stone, standing as proud testimony to the skill and grandeur of Kalinga temple architecture — a distinct sub-

style of Indian Nagara style temple architecture, prevalent in North India. The architectural style is characterised by the distinct grammar of elements or *deulas* (Odia term for temple tower structures).

Rekhadeula is a square plan with a curvilinear tower associated with deities like Vishnu, Surya, and Shiva. The main and tallest structure in the middle in Kalinga style is the Shikhara, a towering spire intricately carved above the sanctum sanctorum. It dominates the skyline and is constructed with tiers symbolising the layers of reality that the devotee must transcend to reach the Divine.

Pidhadeula is also a square plan but is topped by a pyramidal tower built in tiers, often used for *jagamohanas* (outer halls for devotees).

As temple architecture flourished, distinct halls were created and added. The sanctuary that housed the idol was called the Garba Griha, the dance hall the Nata Mandira, and the space for receiving

blessed offerings or *bhoga* (also called *mahaprasad* at the Jagannath Temple) to the pilgrims was known as the Bhoga Griha, situated next to the temple kitchen.

The Khakhara *deula* is a barrel-shaped tower built over a rectangular plan, dedicated to goddesses like Chamunda and Durga.

The walls of the temples are adorned with carvings and motifs, adding to the architectural beauty and spiritual significance. Deities in graceful poses, celestial musicians, mythical creatures, and scenes from everyday life — all narrate stories of faith, mythology, and the vibrant society that built them. The temple entrances or gates are guarded by a pair of fierce lions called the Singha Dwara, a semblance of which can be seen in some of the Far Eastern cultures influenced by Odisha's ancient maritime voyages.

TEMPLE KITCHENS TO HOMES

Odisha's temple cuisine dates back over 1,000 years and is closely linked to the Jagannath cult and Vaishnavism. The connection between Odisha's temples and its food is profound. The emphasis is on purity, simplicity, and the use of fresh, local ingredients. Some iconic temple foods that have found their way into Odia households include *anna*, *dalma*, *besara*, *khechudi*, *kanika*, *pitha*, and *kheeri*.

— Excerpted from 'The Orissan', with permission from Penguin Random House



The food in the temple kitchens is cooked in traditional earthen pots without onions, garlic, or spices like chilli.



More than 56 types of food items are served to Lord Jagannath (famously called the *Chhappan Bhog*) six times a day.

The revered Jagannath Temple kitchen (Roshha Ghara) has 32 rooms with 320 earthen ovens, 600 cooks and 400 assistants who prepare the Lord's food in around 700 pots.

On festival days, they can feed up to 100,000 devotees and on other days, between 50,000 and 100,000.

CAPTION CONTEST 1573



PAWAN SHARMA

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

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1572



SPECTRUM JULY 26 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

Lord of the springs — Pawan Kumar, Chandigarh

Tranquillity, on the rocks — Sanjeev Trikha via epaper, Fatehabad

Current balance — Rajiv Sharma via epaper, Amritsar

Testing the waters — Abhishek Kaith via epaper, Mohali

Cascading effect — Karnail Singh, Kharar

The gentle giant of Kaziranga

Joymala, one of India's most distinguished patrol elephants, died recently

PADAM PARKASH BHOJVAID

NOT every guardian carries a weapon, wears a uniform or receives a medal. Some spend an entire lifetime serving in silence, asking for neither recognition nor reward. Yet when they are gone, emptiness settles over the landscape they once protected. A few days back, Kaziranga National Park lost one such guardian. Joymala, one of India's most distinguished patrol elephants, died at the age of 66 after more than three decades of dedicated service with the Assam Forest Department.

Her passing marked not just the end of an elephant's life, but the closing of a remarkable chapter in the enduring partnership between humans and elephants that has safeguarded forests for generations.

Long before drones, GPS devices and thermal cameras entered the vocabulary of wildlife management, elephants were the forester's most dependable companions. From the colonial era to the present day, trained camp elephants have formed an integral part of forest management across Assam, Karnataka, Kerala, Uttarakhand and several other states. They have carried forest staff through dense forests, swamps, floodplains and steep hills where no vehicle could venture. They have tracked elusive wildlife, assisted in anti-poaching patrols, rescued stranded villagers and wild animals during floods, helped capture injured or rogue elephants for treatment, and transported supplies into inaccessible terrain.

Their immense physical strength made them invaluable, but it was their intelligence, composure and uncanny ability to understand both humans and the forest that made them truly exceptional. Technology can never replace the trust forged over the years between a mahout, a forest guard and an elephant — a bond built not through commands, but through patience, affection and mutual confidence. Joymala represented the very best of this proud tradition. For 34 years,



A forest official performs the last rites of Joymala, whose instincts often sensed danger long before humans did. PH

she carried generations of forest guards across the tall elephant grass and marshes of Kaziranga, silently becoming a partner in the protection of rhinos, tigers and elephants. To those who rode her, she was never merely a working animal. She was a trusted colleague whose instincts often sensed danger long before humans did.

The world came to know of Joymala through a remarkable photograph taken in 2004. During a routine patrol, a tiger leapt dramatically over her back. The image became an international symbol of Kaziranga's untamed wilderness. While the world admired the tiger's daring, foresters admired something else — Joymala's composure. She neither panicked nor bolted. She stood firm, allowing her riders to remain safe. That quiet courage defined her life.

I was reminded of this remarkable quality during an unforgettable encounter in 2018 with a wild elephant family in Sri Lanka's Yala National Park. As our safari vehicle stood motionless, a protective matriarch walked purposefully towards us. She gently inserted her trunk into the vehicle and examined each of us from barely a few inches away. We sat frozen, conscious that she possessed the strength to overturn the vehicle with effortless ease. Yet after satisfying herself that we posed no threat to her family, she quietly

turned away and disappeared into the forest. That evening taught me a lesson no textbook on wildlife behaviour ever could. Elephants are not inherently aggressive; they are extraordinarily perceptive. They assess, they judge and, more often than not, they choose restraint over violence.

Their immense strength is matched by remarkable emotional intelligence. Joymala, though a trained patrol elephant, possessed that same calm wisdom. When Joymala died, the Assam Forest Department accorded her a ceremonial Guard of Honour — an uncommon but deeply appropriate tribute. It acknowledged a simple truth: service knows no species. Joymala's footprints may have disappeared from the grasslands of Kaziranga, but her legacy will continue to echo through every successful patrol and every rhino that survives because dedicated guardians, both human and animal, stood watch together.

The forests will remain. New elephants will follow old trails, and the work of conservation will continue. Yet Joymala leaves behind something far more enduring than any monument of stone: a safer wilderness and a timeless reminder that the noblest service is often performed quietly, without applause.

— The writer is a retired Indian Forest Service officer

BOOKS

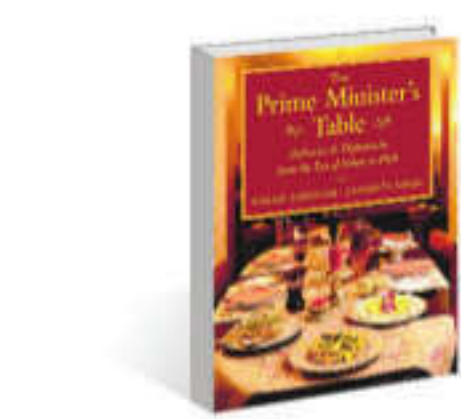
What's on the PM's table

SADAF HUSSAIN

I HAVE always believed that breakfast is the most personal meal of the day. Lunch is negotiation and dinner is duty, but the morning is intimate. I want, at that hour, only the people I actually like around me. So, when I read that Jawaharlal Nehru ran much of his inner life over breakfast, I felt an odd kinship with a man I never met.

That connection is what Purabi Shridhar and Sanghita Singh chase in 'The Prime Minister's Table'. The two journalists walked into the kitchens of India's PMs, from Nehru to Narendra Modi, talking to family, friends, staff and chefs about food.

At Teen Murti, the first meal was almost always a family affair — porridge, cereals, eggs and toast, with the occasional invited guest. Dr Karan Singh, who first met Nehru in 1947, remembered how he "often liked meeting people over breakfast, especially those he was fond of". That last clause is the whole thing for me. Nehru called you over because he wanted your company before the day turned into a country's worth of problems. And what a country it was in those first years — freedom barely arrived, Gandhi assassinated within six months, refugees pouring across a raw new border, whole regions short of grain. He held it together, and still found the morning hour for a violinist one day and a biologist the next. The diplomat K Shankar Bajpai recalled the roll call: "One day it would be Yehudi Menuhin, the next Sir Julian Sorell Huxley." Two guests



THE PRIME MINISTER'S TABLE: DELICACIES AND DIPLOMACIES FROM THE ERA OF NEHRU TO MODI

by Purabi Shridhar & Sanghita Singh.
Amariyllis.
Pages 322. ₹1,499

at most, so the conversation could breathe. I read that and thought, yes, that is exactly how the morning should be spent.

What draws me in most is his courtesy and mannerisms. Dehradun journalist Raj Kanwar, who first met him as a rookie in the 1950s, said Nehru was "polite and courteous to a fault". "I never heard him address anyone as *tu*; he would always say *aap*. Even the waiter and the cook who served him at the Circuit House were accorded due courtesy." A Prime Minister who says *aap* to the cook is telling you something no speech could. He had a temper, but a revealing one: he "would tolerate big blunders but would lose his temper at some inane idiocy". Kanwar also sensed that behind all the crowds, Nehru was a lonely man, and I guess a lonely man protects his mornings.

An office note from 1956 is almost comic in its precision: "The Prime Minister is not used to spice and chillies at all. When he eats meat, he does so sparingly and has far more vegetables. He likes a full vegetarian meal." Coffee with hot milk in the morning, weak tea in the afternoon. Here was a Harrow and Cambridge man who could have eaten anything, now running a country learning to feed itself, tilting towards planning, self-sufficiency and state-led socialism. Austerity was not a fad; it was of a piece with politics. Two small stories tell me more than any policy. Once, on a 12-hour train ride in 1950, this man who rose at 4.30 am got no morning tea until one stop before his destination. As the book puts it, he "neither flared up nor reprimanded anyone". And at a Teen Murti dinner for new MPs on the lawns, he saw slum children who had climbed the boundary wall to watch the guests eat. He picked up his plate, walked over, and handed it to a young boy. At once, every MP gave up his plate too.

His table was UP-Kashmiri: *dum aloo*, *khatti tarkari*, *roganjosh*. And then there was the mango. We all know the Ghalib stories, the poet who could put away dozens, who loved the fruit past all reason. Now I know Nehru's version too. His nephew Gautam Kaul once admitted that he ate mangoes with a knife from the side. Nehru called him over, a *langra* on his plate, and taught him the *asli* way: cut it around the centre, twist into two rounds, scoop the flesh, suck the seed. "He said mango is an Indian fruit and the English



Pt Jawaharlal Nehru at a formal dinner with the then US First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy (L) and her sister Lee Radziwill in March 1962. PIB

wouldn't be able to teach you. Until your hands have juice streaming down, you haven't eaten a mango." From prison, years earlier, he had written to his sister: "It is a delight to eat *langra* again."

There is an important gap, too, between what a PM serves and what he eats. At a UAE banquet in 2015, chef Sanjeev Kapoor laid out a lavish Indo-Arabic spread crowned by a royal Gujarati *thali*, but Narendra Modi quietly ate the plain Abu Dhabi vegetarian dishes instead, saying that to know a country, you must eat its food. That same year, on his visit to the Parliament canteen, he ate a normal vegetarian *thali*, with *palak*, *rajma*, *dal*, rice and a *tandoori roti*, for ₹29.

If a plate can show restraint, it can also

hold memory. And the deepest memory our kitchens carry is of Partition. IK Gujral, born in Jhelum, kept a Punjabi table that began not with breakfast but brunch — "they never had breakfast". Manmohan Singh, born in Gah in what became Pakistan, carried a lost world with him, the *masalewala* chicken whose recipe "was lost with uncle". He once said he dreamed of a day one could "have breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore and dinner in Kabul".

The book is at its best here, saving voices that are vanishing. It is more a scrapbook than analysis, warm rather than argued, but that is its charm. You finish it feeling you have had tea in these houses.

— *The reviewer is an author and chef*

Seeing Socrates in new light

ROOPINDER SINGH

HOW do you solve a problem like Socrates? How do you pen an account of a man whose writing does not survive? How do you write about a philosopher whose works are unavailable but widely quoted, forming the basis of much of Western philosophy? How do you construct the life of a person whom most scribes have seen as they want him to be?

We all know Socrates, and we don't know him. Widely considered among the wisest men in history, a statement attributed to him, asserting that he is wise enough to know that

he does not know, is one of the famous sayings passed down through centuries. He dangerously drew his fellow Athenians into debate, exposing their preconceptions and opinions.

Instead of constructing yet another portrait of the person, Vijay Tankha allows us to form our own — through the writings of his contemporaries and those who came later. We all know Plato, his most famous student. This book also acquaints us with the others, such as Aristophanes (Socrates' constant companion), Diogenes Laertius (who wrote a history of Greek philosophy), Xenophon (Socrates' associate).

Passages from their works inform us, including one where he wears sandals and explains why! Starting with his life and times, we see the man as reflected in various accounts; the charges of impiety against him and his own behaviour, which was devoted to piety and ethical living; his obedience to the laws to the extent that, following his death sentence, he refused to escape from prison even when his friends arranged it.

Love, as the author says, is one thing that Socrates affirms he knows about: "There are at least two different words that differentiate

erotic from non-erotic (filial) love. Eros, the god of love, gives his name to the former; as does his mother Aphrodite, while 'philos' does duty for affection and friendship.... If desire is a basic fact of human existence, *eros* must be controlled, philosophically, by *logos* (reason)." Both Socrates and later Plato find a way to redirect the erotic impulse into one of love, not of the body, but of the soul.

For Socrates, philosophy was to be practised by dialogue or conversation. His stress on instruction through interrogation fitted well with his claim of not knowing. We know him through the conversations that were later written by those who recalled them. Of course, moral behaviour, right conduct and justice were primary concerns. The important thing to remember is that Socrates would not give out moral instructions; his dialogues bring out the dilemmas and issues regarding morality. He stressed cross-examining those who said they knew. The Socratic method confronted a person with his own ignorance, pushing him to abandon his false beliefs.

While in college, the weekly Philosophical Society meetings encouraged us to debate. These attracted top academics of the time, including the late Profs Ramu Gandhi and JPS Oberoi, giving us students tremendous exposure. Studying philosophy did not make me an intellectual. Far from it. Yet it continues to shape me because of how it was taught by eminent teachers like the late Dr RK Gupta, Prof Ashok Vohra and Prof Tankha. Reading the book brought back memories, rekindled my love for Plato's dialogues, and reignited passion for a discipline that I leaned on as I navigated life.

This easy-to-read book has a useful glossary, a timeline, and a short bibliography. It is important not only because of what it says, but how it says it. The curated selections of excerpts from Greek authors who wrote about Socrates allow us to frame our own understanding of the philosopher.

— *The reviewer is a journalist*

POOJA VASHISHT ALEXANDER

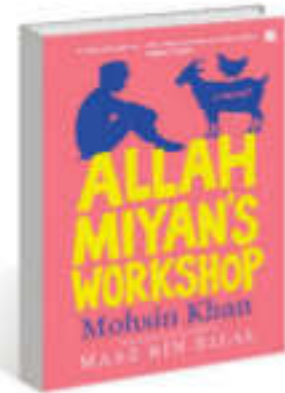
IN 'Allah Miyan's Workshop', a reader is immediately pulled into the warp and weft of Gibran's ordinary life, which is at once buoyant and crushing. The 14-year-old's is a world far from easy answers, yet the very innocence of his questions makes the weight of impending tragedy bearable. Hammered by circumstance, he finds refuge in imagination.

Gibran's life in an Awadh village is governed by his strict and conservative father who wants him to be well-versed in scripture and, hence, employable in a mosque. Like any child, he is absorbed in his world of play and mischief. The small adventures, rather misadventures, that he gets himself into between instruction and chores at home, and in the *madrasa*, add a lighter dimension to Gibran's childhood weighed down by family and faith.

He hates bathing on a winter morning for the *Jumma namaz* and wonders why Allah could not keep all the Fridays in summers. He loves running after kites, keeps an eye on family chickens, mourns the loss of a hen and asks Allah why he made the cat if he also made the hen. He gets scolded by his mother at home, punished by Haffiji at the *madrasa*, mocked by the local shopkeeper and tricked by his friend. It is Nusrat, Gibran's younger sister and confidante, with whom he shares an affectionate bond and who understands him the best.

The boy's means are meagre, life simple and desires simpler. All he wants is a shining new kite, or a *kurta* tailored like a shirt with big pockets such as worn by Salman Khan in a film.

It is the news of his father's arrest on suspicion of terrorism that completely dismantles life as Gibran knows it. Death, separation, longing and duty stand in stark contrast with carefree childhood and an unfiltered sense of wonder. What was



ALLAH MIYAN'S WORKSHOP
by Mohsin Khan. Translated from the Urdu by Maaz Bin Bilal.
HarperCollins.
Pages 266.
₹499

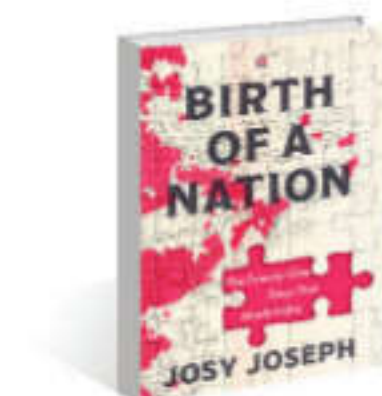
once uncomfortable but liveable is now uncertain and discomfiting.

But, at its core, this tale reflects how religious zeal douses sparks of curiosity; why misplaced beliefs threaten an entire community and what resilience looks like when faced with odds. Since the story is told from the perspective of a child, the gravity of issues such as poverty, radicalism and human fallibility hits with a deeply moving tenderness rather than a sharp blow to the face.

This could well be a short story but acclaimed Urdu writer Mohsin Khan masterfully stretches its scope and canvas into a full-fledged novel, his first. Translated into English by poet, writer and scholar Maaz Bin Bilal without verbosity, the novel is easy on the eye. As a bonus, one gets to read the 'confessions of a reluctant translator' in the postscript which, apart from many useful insights, describes in detail how Bilal carries in translation Gibran's childlike tone from Urdu to English.

The use of the first-person narratorial voice, indeed, makes the protagonist's small pleasures palpable and his abject abandonment piercing as one turns the novel's pages with hope and dread. You may find it easy to read but not so easy to forget.

— *The reviewer is a journalist*



BIRTH OF A NATION: THE TWENTY-ONE DAYS THAT MADE INDIA
by Josy Joseph.
Westland.
Pages 264. ₹799

The reporting and archival depth are formidable. Joseph and his research team mine the National Archives, private collections, university repositories, regional archives, correspondence between rulers and British officials, and recently declassified documents.

In another writer's hands, this could have become dry constitutional history. Joseph instead writes it like political espionage.

KAVITHA IYER

EVERY August, it is customary to return to Jawaharlal Nehru's immortal words: "At the stroke of the midnight hour..." Josy Joseph's 'Birth of a Nation: The Twenty-One Days That Made India' reminds us that Independence had been won, but nationhood was still a work in progress. Nearly two-fifths of the country's territory and a quarter of its people still lived in more than 560 princely states, many still undecided, some declaring themselves independent nation-states.

That unsettling premise powers this richly researched and immensely readable account of the tumultuous weeks surrounding Independence. Joseph argues that while history has made the birth of modern India appear inevitable, it was anything but. The newly independent nation stood on the brink of fragmentation, the threat coming not from the departing British, but from rulers with private armies, foreign connections, wealth and, in some cases, dreams of

sovereignty. "Across the Dominion, the lights of celebration burned bright while in the shadows, a few princes were still plotting," he writes, in a line that perfectly captures the mood of the book.

Joseph is an award-winning investigative journalist, and it shows in the best possible way. He reconstructs those anxious weeks with the pacing of an investigative thriller. There is palace intrigue, last-minute betrayals, attempted assassinations, secret negotiations, and rulers playing India, Pakistan and Britain off against one another. The familiar cast — Nehru, Patel, Mountbatten — is joined by intelligence officers, civil servants, political fixers, forgotten intermediaries.

This widening of the lens enables nation-building to emerge not as the achievement of a handful of towering personalities, but of an entire ecosystem of negotiators and administrators. The chapter 'The Forgotten Team', for instance, reconstructs the creation of the States Department and the central role played by VP Menon in devising the strategy that would ultimately prevent the Balkanisation of India.

Here, the princely states were not merely constitutional problems waiting to be solved but living worlds shaped by vanity, privilege, excess and drama. With a reporter's eye for detail, Joseph lingers over ornate palaces, bespoke Rolls-Royces, Bentleys, Duesenbergs and Alfa Romeos; over maharajahs, their mistresses and private scandals that reveal the culture of feudal power more vividly than official memoranda. This humanises what could've been a parade of agreements and negotiations.

One of the book's most memorable episodes is not set in 1947 at all. Joseph recounts the sensational murder of a wealthy Bombay resident in 1925, attacked along with his then-pregnant mistress. The crime led to allegations against the court of Indore's ruler. The ensuing scandal, including testimony from a former royal mistress, eventually forced the ruler's abdication. It is an extraordinary story; it illuminates the political and social world inhabited by princely rulers.

Again and again, Joseph dismantles the illusion that history moved inexorably

towards the India we know today. The book is replete with moments underscoring how politically fluid India was in 1947. Joseph notes the curious convergence of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League, otherwise bitter antagonists, both defending the right of princely states to resist integration.

The wealth of archival discoveries, colourful personalities and dramatic episodes occasionally threatens to overwhelm the central narrative. It is a minor reservation in a work whose ambition is to restore complexity to a defining moment of modern Indian history.

Joseph ends by observing that Independence marked the beginning of "an unparalleled human experiment". This book reveals that moment's anxieties and uncertainties. It reminds us that India did not simply emerge at midnight on August 15, 1947. It had still to be imagined, negotiated and painstakingly assembled.

That we now take its map for granted is perhaps the greatest tribute to the forgotten men and women whose story Josy Joseph tells so compellingly.

— *The reviewer is a journalist*



BACKFLAP



GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS
by Maya Sharma.
Westland.
Pages 330. ₹799

Maya Sharma's over 30 years in television news coincided with the rise, and what could be considered the fall, of this relatively young industry. As a senior reporter for NDTV's Bangalore bureau, she covered politics, disasters, art and entertainment, human-interest stories and sports. This book is also an evaluation of how journalism works today.



WHY IS MY SKIN BROWN?
by Lakshmi Iyer.
Westland.
Pages 120. ₹299

A brown girl moves to India for a few months, and learns to understand her skin colour, and what it means to belong in two different worlds. This a book about growing up between cultures, understanding identity and learning to love what makes you special.

REFLECTIONS

Truly electrifying protest



TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

IS there anyone in this country who does not have an opinion on the protest by Gen Z at Jantar Mantar? How many have formed one themselves and how many are continually chasing memes, reels and podcasts to formulate one is another matter. Many from my generation and circle of friends have gone there to see and imbibe some of that energy into their own lives. It must be said that there was something truly electrifying about it and that the protest radiated an energy and attraction that even its most cynical critics were compelled to admit.

Given this, why was our own government so notably absent? This is a question that they will have to confront to accept that their arrogance is going to cost them heavily. When the PM finally decided to send a selfie message at midnight, it was too little, too late. Moreover, everyone could see that the confidence that he normally exudes was visibly missing.

I have lived long enough to remember virtually all the public protests that have taken place down the decades. Each one has resulted in cataclysmic changes so do not be surprised if this one, too, redefines the relationship between rulers and the ruled. Do remember that such movements have also betrayed the trust placed in them and once the political parties became their public face, they turned many supporters into cynics. Each one, from JP's movement to Anna Hazare's fast, eventually became a way for many to build their political careers. Also, the history of all youth protests, from the AASU in Assam to the Uttarakhand Krantikari movement in India to similar ones in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal, achieved their goal but after the initial euphoria, came

political turmoil that went on for years. I pray that this does not happen this time.

Let me now tell you about the generations that grew up in India after Independence. The ones who were born and brought up in the '50s and '60s were what Salman Rushdie has memorably described as Midnight's Children, like me. Our parents were devoted followers of Gandhiji and later, Nehru. Having witnessed the violence of two World Wars, non-violence was an article of faith for them. Not just that, they bore the years of rationing and deprivation with stoic fortitude. Our parents valued a good education above all else. Their faith in government-run educational

Gen Z protest radiated an energy that even its most cynical critics were compelled to admit

institutions and hospitals was so firmly practised that we all studied in Indian universities and rare was the person who went abroad to study in my youth. Rarer were those who stayed on there after earning their degrees. Read Nirad Chaudhuri to get a picture of what it was to grow up in that India.

These were the foundational decades of our country and our parents were strict disciplinarians who made sure that those values were never forgotten. We were forbidden to swear or use coarse language or raise our voices when speaking to elders. Girls were restricted from going out alone, or wearing clothes that were considered vulgar. More than that was the unspoken rule that girls and boys had separate lives and, in many cases, girls were married off as soon as a suitable boy was found. Of

course, we grumbled privately but few had the courage to defy parental laws.

Come now to the next generation (largely the late '60s and '70s), known as the Boomers. They defiantly wore colourful clothes, flared jeans and sported long hair. They worshipped the Beatles and the Beat generation poets who questioned the false 'goodness' of the earlier generation. It was *de rigueur* to be a Leftie and in the metro cities, at least, a deep commitment to the Naxal movement took root. India had shed its frugality and many early revolutionary supporters returned to join the civil services, academia or boxwallah jobs. In my mother's memorable definition of this was her wry remark, "Between us and our children there was a generation gap, between you all and your kids, I see a degeneration gap." Another time, she told my sister, "We were scared of our in-laws, not our children. You all are no longer scared of your in-laws, then why are you so scared of your children?"

However, while this may apply to our metro cities of the time, in small-town India this lot was generically described as 'Hippies' and had a status just above the cockroach. They were our CJP and gave birth to the Argumentative Indian.

I am deeply impressed by Gen Z's defiant protest (since we were so timid when we were their age) and as for Gen Alpha, I give up. However, this I will say that while we deplore the breakdown of our institutions — the Parliament, the judiciary, the Election Commission, our educational institutions and hospitals — we are all complicit in this. As parents, grandparents and teachers, we have failed our duties and allowed a once-vibrant democracy to devolve into a near autocracy.

The behaviour of our elected representatives in Parliament, the vile language that is hurled when addressing political rivals and the utter disregard for debates and regular attendance is shameful. Tharoor is dead right when he says that the delimitation Bill, when implemented, will only increase the chaos in our Parliament. When we can't seem to manage 543, how will we handle 850-odd members? Is this what this generation has fought for?

— The writer is a social commentator

The longevity fad is getting out of hand



AVAY SHUKLA

IT'S not working. These days, everybody and his grandfather wants to live to be a hundred, even if it's in a hospital ICU. And if we continue to make babies at the current rate and impose an 18 per cent GST on condoms (28 per cent for flavoured ones as they come under the category of fruits), by 2050, we would have eaten every animal, bird, fish, reptile and insect on the planet, except perhaps cockroaches — which are hard to digest (as many are finding out).

By 2100, we just might start eating each other, which is actually not such a bad thing. For the plain fact is that this planet simply cannot support its current population of 8 billion, expected to swell to 12 billion by 2100. A recent study published in *Environmental Research Letters* reveals that the planet's resources can sustain only 2.5 billion homo sapiens.

Take India — currently 1.4 billion, expected to grow to 1.7 billion by 2070, most of this growth coming from *bhakt*s. Our government, of course, assures us that our fertility rate has dropped to 2.1, less than the replacement rate, and that soon the *achche din* will be here. I don't believe a word of it, as all figures released by this regime are fudged. We keep finding innovative ways of reducing our population, on paper at least. For example, the recent SIR has cut the population by nearly 70 million. The government refuses to acknowledge their existence. That should reduce our fertility rate to 1.8 or so, and by the time Mr Gyanesh Kumar completes his unholy exercise, it should be down to 1.5! So you see why the only figure I approve of is that of Sunny Leone: it's a sight for sore eyes, and that's been my consistent take for many years.

So how do we avoid becoming *homo cannibalus*? Economists tell us that every problem has a supply and a demand side. In this case, we can do little on the supply side because the babies will keep coming, as long as India remains the third largest consumer of porn in the world. So the solution to this over-population has to be found on the demand side, and I've just found one: put a cap on longevity.

No one should be allowed to live beyond 75 years; this is not the era of Methuselahs. Pass a law that everyone shall be euthanised once he/she/it reaches the age of 75; it is not enough to put them in the Margdarshak Mandal.

Consider the benefits of this drastic final solution. Death will become an appointment, not an accident, and the uncertainty shall be removed forever. We all secretly wish to die in bed of an embolism or heart attack, unaware that we are dead till we find ourselves at the pearly gates, confronted by St Peter asking us for our Aadhaar card or voter ID. But we also know that that is a remote possibility, and that we are more likely to quit this mortal coil because an eagle drops a tortoise on our head (like Aeschylus, the Greek playwright), or on a toilet seat (like Elvis Presley).

I personally find this uncertainty very unsettling. I would like to know how and when I'm supposed to go so that I can prepare for it. My solution ticks these boxes nicely.

It gets better: your kids won't throw you out of the house because now they know it will be theirs in any case in a few years. Governance will improve because politicians, judges, bureaucrats won't be seeking re-election or re-employment. Knowing that they have only a few years left, they would now much rather do those things they always wanted to: that trip to Las Vegas or Sonagachi, dinner at a Michelin-starred restaurant, organise a *Satyanarayan pooja* for Mr Modi's good health, or take the shocked wife on a second honeymoon because you missed the first one as you had to go on election duty.

Since you will no longer be a drooling, doddering, incontinent octogenarian (you'll be terminated at 75, remember?), you don't have to worry about cancer, intestinal blockage, thrombosis, dementia or prostate enlargement, etc. You can die with dignity, dressed in a three-piece suit, not in faded *pyjamas* or in a towel. You'll save a fortune in

What if no one is allowed to live beyond 75 years?

medical bills. Your kids and heirs will also save a fortune on lawyers' bills. They will dote on you right up till the moment the crematorium door slams down on you with the finality of a Supreme Court order.

The government would be ecstatic: its pension bills would decline dramatically, it will no longer have to wrack its brains to find suitable berths for redundant party workers or retired judges, it will save trillions because, with a declining population, there will now be no need to provide for measures against global warming, climate change, and Ayushman Bharat bills. The world as a whole will save sextillions of dollars more once Trump goes under the new law. Sadly, Putin and Netanyahu will still be around.

This leaves only one more box to tick: how exactly will these millions of old codgers be dispatched? Well, Elon Musk has the answer — the neuralink brain implant. Designed to be implanted in the brain to control one's cognitive and sensory functions via a computer, all it will now need is to be equipped with a "kill switch". This will be automatically triggered once a person reaches 75, stopping all bodily and brain functions in a nanosecond.

There is also a Plan B in case the kill switch fails, as it is likely to do in the case of *bhakt*s. These unfortunates shall be locked up in an auditorium and shall have to watch, without any break, 100 episodes of *Mam Ki Baat* and Ministry of External Affairs' press conferences. Extensive trials have shown that no one can survive more than 25-30 such episodes, though the process is not entirely painless.

The new law should, however, have one caveat — it will not apply retrospectively. This, of course, has nothing to do with the fact that both Mr Modi and I turned 75 last year.

— The writer is a retired IAS officer

An investment that never fails

'GOODNESS is the only investment that never fails,' said Henry David Thoreau. If we ponder over this quote, then we may realise that he was right, because when we act with kindness, generosity, strength and integrity, it never fails. According to behavioural scientists, engaging others with goodwill can stimulate the release of oxytocin, a hormone associated with compassion and bonding.

Human beings tend to be kinder to one another when they feel safe and secure. However, with the rise of aggression in our culture, the threat of terrorism, and the increasing stress in our schools and workplaces, we frequently find ourselves in a state of fear. This, in turn, creates anxiety and leads to distorted thinking. These changes in our culture have fostered a decline in goodwill towards others, encouraging greater self-absorption and reducing the spirit of giving.

It often appears that there are few takers for acts of kindness, truthfulness and simplicity; as a result, those who choose to do well are frequently left feeling isolated. On the other hand, the clever and the shrewd repeatedly steal the show.

It is disheartening that the world today seems more accommodating to those who are manipulative and opportunistic, and to those who chase rewards, than to those who labour with faith in the eventual return of their good actions. In such a scenario, one may well ask: what is the point of being good in a world that often appears mad, bad and sad, where goodness seems to go unnoticed or unrewarded? Just as darkness envelops everything at night, and a lone flower



UNIVERSE

RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJI

in a dense jungle may remain unseen, the small flickers of goodness scattered across the world can seem insignificant and futile.

History offers many examples when difficult times seemed to be all-pervasive, when powerful conquerors looted and trapped the masses in an undignified life. And yet, a small courageous group of awakened people led a revolution against injustice and finally turned the tables. But, all acts of goodness do not amount to a revolution. Many have experienced moments of

A single act of kindness can restore faith and offer direction

deep discouragement, when hope seemed distant. In such times, a single act of kindness can restore faith and offer direction. This suggests that kindness has a meaningful impact. It may go unheeded at times and could be overpowered by negative forces, but it is never wasted.

A familiar story illustrates this idea: a little bird filled her beak with water from a pond and headed for the woods that were on fire. While she was at it, a spectator asked the tiny creature what the point of her effort was, for the small droplets would definitely not douse the huge flames. She quipped, 'When I die, and my life's record is being read out, my name will appear in the list of those who tried to put out the flames, and not among those who sparked it or did nothing about it.' The outcome may be uncertain, yet the intention and action hold value.

We must remember that there is a law of cause and effect that guides every act in the universe. And what a person does to another, he does to himself. So, while a negative action piles debt on a person, a positive act is an investment in a good future. Trust in this principle can help sustain effort in challenging environments. If goodness can survive through troubled times, it is sure to bloom fully when favourable circumstances arrive. So, an honest person must hold on to his virtue with courage and patience in testing times. Maintaining faith in this process allows individuals to continue acting with purpose until clearer conditions emerge.

Excerpted from 'Echoes of the Soul', with permission from Rupa

How we miss Dushyant Kumar today

GURUPDESH SINGH

IN one of the recent student protest videos, we heard a recording of Dushyant Kumar's poem sung by Sukhwinder: 'Ho gayi hai peer parvat si pighalni chahiye, iss Himalaye se koi Ganga nikalni chahiye' (The pain, grown as big as a mountain, must subside, a river like Ganga must erupt from this Himalaya). We all have seen the students suffering and hope that a solution emerges.

The inclusion of this song cheered me up for two reasons. First, because Gen Z knows when and where to find the most appropriate music. Second, because the young nation still recognises the voice of protest by poets, and particularly remembers the irrepressible Dushyant Kumar. His metaphorical words resonate with every event that horrifies us: 'With every rain it fills up like a pond, I think this ditch shall never be levelled up.'

Strangely and unfortunately, what the sensitive Hindi poet said over 50 years ago seems so apt even today: 'They promised to light up every home, and here, no light even for cities.'

Dushyant lived and died in the first quar-

ter of our Independence. It was a time of a new awakening and fervour — the era of an ideological urgency to change the face of this country, left depleted by centuries of exploitation. If the foreign rulers perpetuated the feudal system, our own people too did not relent on longstanding caste prejudices. Poverty, illiteracy, injustice, and inequality were the monsters that the writers and poets could not close their eyes to.

The Russian Revolution and Marx spurred among them an image of a progressive India and a hope of another mass uprising. 'Why do you think you can't pierce a hole in the sky, just shoot a stone with full fervour and see.' Shyam Benegal, probably, took this cue for the last scene in 'Ankur'.

Dushyant was witness to several movements pertaining to land reforms, labour laws, Dalit dignity, tribal rights, regional and language recognition, etc. All of these lasted long, brought immeasurable misery

and resulted in little gain. Despite democracy, the governments remained largely impervious to the people's protests, their unending daily grind, and the lack of basic amenities. On most occasions, the authorities not only remained heedless, but also suppressed the movements with a heavy hand. 'How many come to my mind when this sea had a mighty tide; yesterday he went out with a great flourish, but returned today half-dead.'



DUSHYANT KUMAR (1933 - 1975)

ness, but a complete statement, his brow exhibits a scar of a deep wound.'

Political high-handedness and indifference continue. Every protest against corruption, poor economic conditions or vested interests has met with apathy, political harangue, or gagging of the individual and media voice. That is why Dushyant is sorely missed today; he wrote against all these.

A decade after the 2016 unrest, pellet-gun victims battle lifelong struggles, fuelling renewed calls for a total ban

VALLEY'S PELLET SCARS

ADIL AKHZER

NEARLY two months back, Abdul Ahad, a resident of north Kashmir, welcomed his third daughter. He holds her in his arms, playing lovingly since the day she was born. Yet, he has never been able to see her, or his other two daughters for that matter. Ahad is a pellet-gun victim who lost his vision during the 2016 Kashmir unrest, triggered by the killing of terrorist commander Burhan Wani.

"I have three small daughters, but I haven't seen them... I know them by their voices," says the 39-year-old. "This is the worst situation anyone could ever imagine."

Ahad was 29 when his life changed forever. Recalling the incident that took place on September 7, 2016, he says he had stepped out to look for his siblings when he was struck in the eyes by metal pellets. "The last image in my mind is of the security forces. The vehicles stationed on the road looked empty. Suddenly, pellets were fired at me, and my life plunged into a world of darkness."

In 2018, two years after losing his eyesight, he married and gradually began rebuilding his life. Despite multiple rounds of treatment in Srinagar and later in Hyderabad through NGO support, his vision could not be restored. He has not yet seen his wife.

"Life is now like a jail for me... every day is a new challenge and a struggle," he says. "There were times when I even considered ending my life, but then I think about my family, and my children. That is what keeps me going."

Ahad is one of hundreds of victims permanently maimed by pellet guns during



Insha Mushtaq, who became a prominent face of the 2016 pellet victims, at her Shopian home. PHOTOS: SHUAIB BASHIR

the 2016 protests, a weapon that sparked an intense national debate over crowd-control tactics.

A decade later, as a fresh petition in the Supreme Court seeks a complete ban on metallic pellet guns following their use during the Jantar Mantar protests in Delhi, the stories of Kashmir's victims reveal unhealed wounds, dreams cut short, and a relentless daily struggle.

Medical experts note that pellet cartridges — loaded with hundreds of lead balls — disperse violently upon impact, making the human eye uniquely vulnerable. As soon as a pellet breaches the eye, it causes irreversible damage.

The Jammu and Kashmir government previously estimated the total number of pellet-gun victims at over 6,000.

Among them is Hiba Nisar, the youngest known victim. She was only 20 months old and looking out from her home in south Kashmir's Shopian district when she was struck by a pellet. Today, she is in the second grade with zero vision in her right eye.

Her father, Nisar Ahmad, says each day brings fresh hurdles. "As she is growing up, she keeps asking why she can't see from her right eye whenever she faces problems while walking," he shares. Frequent hospital visits have become a part of their lives.

"The initial years were very difficult as she tried to adapt," Ahmad says. "Today, as she is disabled for life, we have to assist her everywhere, and this will be her reality forever." While financial compensation was provided, he believes a government job later in life is essential to secure her future. "Being blind is very difficult," Ahmad adds.

In the same district, inside a modest



A youth wounded by a pellet shot during clashes with security forces in 2016. TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

home in Sedow village lives 23-year-old Insha Mushtaq, who became a prominent face of the 2016 pellet victims. Blind in both eyes, she is currently pursuing an undergraduate Arts degree through distance education.

In 2016, she was looking out of the window of her uncle's house when security forces fired pellets toward the street.

Today, she is channeling all her energy into her education. "I had no interest in Arts; my passion was always science and medicine, but destiny had this tragedy in store for me. I am studying forcibly... my focus is just to finish this programme," she says.

Despite extensive surgeries at AIIMS in New Delhi and in Mumbai, her vision could not be restored. Her mother, Afroza Begum, reflects: "For a mother, it is a world of darkness. I can only feel the pain. The

unfortunate thing is that she was blinded at such a young age."

Last week, following a prolonged bureaucratic delay, the Omar Abdullah-led government approved an LPG distributorship originally sanctioned for Insha in 2018. However, Insha feels a lingering sense of disparity regarding public and political empathy.

"They are talking about Delhi (protests), and it has reached Parliament. It has become such a big issue there; they will get justice. But what justice did we get?" she asks. "Mothers of hundreds of kids are crying over this condition. In a recent movie, I heard someone claim that pellets don't cause severe injury. I wanted to meet the movie director and tell him what being blinded by pellets actually means."

LIFE AFTER REHABILITATION

Following the 2016 violence, the J&K government provided jobs on compassionate grounds to 13 pellet-gun victims. Yet, employment does not erase the hardships.

Mohammad, a resident of north Kashmir who lost his vision to pellets in 2016, was offered a government job during the PDP-BJP tenure, but describes his daily existence as being a "living corpse".

"If you ask me what my life is today, it is that of a living corpse. The struggles are an everyday, lifetime reality that will go with me to the grave," he says. Every morning, his younger brother must accompany and drop him off at his office. "This incident changed my life forever. My life turned upside down."

For others, the safety net is virtually nonexistent. Shakeela Bano, from north Kash-

mir's Sopore, retains only 30 per cent of her eyesight. She says the injury shattered her family. "My marriage was already going through a difficult phase. After I lost my eyesight, my health deteriorated, and so did our relationship. Eventually, it ended in divorce," she says.

Now living with her young son at her brother's home, she relies entirely on them for support. "These years have been nothing short of hell," she says. "There was a time when I even thought of taking up a job as a sweeper, but my doctors advised against any work that could expose my injured eyes to dust or infection."

With no stable income, she makes a desperate plea: "I want to meet the Lieutenant Governor or the Chief Minister. I am suffering, and there is no one who is ready to listen. If they could give me a job, I would at least be able to feed my son."

Meanwhile, J&K Police officials maintain that pellet guns were introduced in 2010 as a non-lethal alternative designed to minimise fatalities during crowd control.

"Yes, the pellet guns caused damage... but over the past few years, their usage has been minimal as the situation has improved in Kashmir and there are no street protests of the scale we witnessed before the abrogation of Article 370," a senior official stated.

Despite their divergent struggles, the victims, from Kashmir to Delhi, share an unyielding conviction — the use of pellet guns must be banned outright.

"I know what it means to be blind. Only the victims can realise the pain; politicians won't," Insha says. "No one should ever suffer the way we have."

Hiba Nisar was 20 months old when she was struck by a pellet. Today, she is in second grade with zero vision in her right eye. TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO



Bitchat & the challenge of Internet-free messaging



WHEN thousands of young protesters gathered at Delhi's Jantar Mantar recently, one unexpected piece of technology stole the spotlight. It wasn't a social media app or a livestream. It was Bitchat, a messaging app that doesn't need mobile data, Wi-Fi or even a phone network.

Soon after reports emerged that some protesters had used it during temporary Internet restrictions, the Union Government directed GitHub to remove its source code repositories, citing national security concerns. The episode once again raises an intriguing question: how do governments regulate technology that doesn't rely on the Internet at all?

MESH MESSAGING MODEL

Imagine WhatsApp deciding to ditch the Internet altogether. Developed by Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey, Bitchat is an open-source messaging app that uses Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) instead of cellular networks or Wi-Fi. Every phone running the app becomes a tiny relay station. Messages hop from one nearby device to another, creating what's called a mesh network.

Think of it like a human chain. Even if two persons are hundreds of metres apart, the message can travel through several

intermediate phones before reaching its destination. No SIM card. No phone number. No central server. Pretty neat, right?

HOW FAR CAN IT ACTUALLY WORK?

Here's the catch. Bluetooth itself has a limited range, typically 30 to 100 metres depending on the device. But because every participating phone forwards messages, the overall communication distance can stretch much farther if enough users are present. That makes Bitchat particularly useful at concerts, college festivals, disaster-hit areas, trekking expeditions and large public gatherings.

It was designed for situations where conventional communication networks are unavailable or deliberately switched off.

THE DELHI CONNECTION

According to reports, authorities observed protesters at the recent Cockroach Janta Party demonstrations in Delhi using Bluetooth-based messaging tools after temporary Internet restrictions were imposed around the protest venue. Soon afterwards, the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), under the Ministry of Home Affairs, directed Microsoft-owned GitHub to disable access to three Bitchat repositories within three hours.

The notice warned that non-compliance could affect GitHub's "safe harbour" protections under India's Information Technology Act. The government said apps like Bitchat could be misused by anti-national elements because these are significantly harder to lawfully intercept or trace.

TOUGH FOR INVESTIGATORS

Most messaging apps leave behind digital



CJP's Jantar Mantar protest thrusts messaging app into the spotlight

breadcrumbs. Messages travel through servers. Phone numbers are registered. Internet service providers maintain logs. Investigators, following due legal process, can often obtain information that helps reconstruct communications. Mesh messaging works differently. Since messages move directly between nearby devices without passing through central servers, there are fewer records available.

Depending on the app's design, there may be no permanent central database storing conversations or user identities. That doesn't automatically make such technology illegal. But it does make investigations more challenging when the technology is allegedly used for unlawful activities.

CAN GOVERNMENTS BAN CODE?

This is where things get interesting. The Centre's order was directed at GitHub, the world's largest platform for hosting software code, not directly at individual users.

GitHub normally enjoys what's known as safe harbour protection. In simple terms, it isn't automatically held legally responsible for everything uploaded by millions of developers, provided it follows applicable laws and responds to valid legal directions.

The notice reportedly warned that failing to remove the specified repositories could put those protections at risk in India. But does taking code off one platform solve the problem? Not quite, says Dhruv Walia, a Pune-based software developer. "Open-source software is often copied, shared and forked across multiple repositories and developer communities. This makes it surprisingly difficult to wipe out completely."

INDIA ISN'T THE FIRST

Earlier this year, Apple removed the app from China's App Store following a regulatory request. Yet, because Bitchat is open-source, copies of its code continued circulating through other channels, high-

lighting one of the unique challenges posed by decentralised software.

BACKUP, NOT REPLACEMENT

So, is mesh messaging the future? Probably. But, as experts point out, it's unlikely to replace WhatsApp, Telegram or Signal anytime soon. Instead, they see it as a valuable backup technology. According to Nitin Pandey, a global cybersecurity researcher, mesh messaging has legitimate uses during disasters, network outages and emergencies, when conventional communication networks fail. But he cautions that the same technology can also create challenges for law enforcement.

"The real concern arises when such platforms are exploited for criminal or unlawful activities, as the absence of centralised infrastructure can make attribution, evidence collection and post-incident investigations considerably more difficult. The focus should therefore be on addressing misuse while preserving the legitimate benefits of privacy-enhancing technologies," he says.

BEYOND BITCHAT

The Bitchat debate isn't simply about one app. It's about the next generation of communication technology. As software becomes increasingly decentralised, governments worldwide face the challenge of encouraging innovation while ensuring national security and preventing misuse.

For young tech enthusiasts, Bitchat offers a glimpse of a future where phones may not always need mobile towers to stay connected. Whether this becomes the future of communication will depend on balancing innovation, privacy, security and the rule of law.

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YOUR VOICE

Rock 'n' roll summer of '66 was culturally transcendent

By Michael Peregrine
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Chicago is, to its core, a music city, with a heritage that extends far beyond the reputation of, say, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Many musical historians credit the city as the birthplace of gospel music and of unique forms of both the blues and jazz, and note it as home base to such influential artists as Muddy Waters and Jelly Roll Morton. But that rich legacy never fully evolved to include rock 'n' roll music, which primarily developed in Memphis, New York City and Los Angeles.

That is, until the culturally transcendent summer of 1966, when Chicago briefly became the epicenter of a rock 'n' roll world that was transitioning from the Wall of Sound and the British Invasion to hard rock and psychedelia. It was a snapshot in time when the popularity of the music, amazing live concerts, the success of local garage bands, and the influence of local AM radio stations combined to shine a spotlight on the city.

The musical bookends for the summer were performances by The Beach Boys: the album "Pet Sounds" in late spring and the single "Good Vibrations" in the early fall. As the weather warmed, The Rolling Stones had a huge hit in "Paint It Black." The Monkees released their breakout single, "Last Train to Clarksville." Paul Revere and the Raiders' "Hungry" was a chart topper. But the anthem of the summer was The Lovin' Spoonful's "Summer in the City." Its nod to the heat, humidity and congestion of summer days, and to the cool air, darkness and freedom of summer nights emotionally resonated with the music-buying public.

Against that backdrop was the summer concert presence in Chicago of the biggest bands in the rock 'n' roll world. The Velvet



Avoiding their screaming fans, The Beatles prepare to take a limousine into Chicago from an outlying O'Hare hangar on Aug. 11, 1966. **CHICAGO TRIBUNE HISTORICAL PHOTO**

Underground appeared in June. The Rolling Stones, The Beach Boys and the Dave Clark Five all performed July shows at the Arie Crown Theater in old McCormick Place. The Beatles were at the International Amphitheatre for two Aug. 12 shows, as part of the band's final tour. The Turtles appeared at both the Amphitheatre and Highland Park High School. Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, and The Yardbirds played the Civic Opera House on Aug. 6.

The summer's focus also fell on several emerging Chicagoland bands. Early on, The New Colony Six, from Chicago's St. Patrick's High School, charted high with "I Confess." The Shadows of Knight, from Mount Prospect, scored with "Gloria (G-L-O-R-I-A)" in the spring. By June, the Berwyn-bred The Ides of March succeeded with "You Wouldn't Listen." The Buckingham's began their career run when "Kind of a Drag" went

to No. 1 later that year. The Cryan' Shames, from Hinsdale, hit with "Sugar and Spice." And the garage band and DePaul connections of Terry Kath, Danny Seraphine, Walt Parazaider, and Lee Loughnane would soon lead them to form the band first known as The Chicago Transit Authority.

But the personality of the summer was provided by the great Top 40 AM radio stations, WLS and WCFL, separated by only a few turns on the radio dial. Their pocket-sized weekly reports, the "Silver Dollar Survey" and the "Sound 10 Survey," kept fans up to date on the latest hit records. With concert sponsorships, great promotions, MC gigs and a collection of engaging DJs, their competition fueled the music. Clark Weber in the morning, young Larry Lujack. Jim Staggs followed the Beatles on tour. The ubiquitous Ron Riley. "Hey, baby, they're playing our song on the Art Roberts show."

But times change, and the music often changes with it. The summer sounds of 1966 offered a distraction from darkening clouds of social and political upheaval. But they couldn't forestall the eventual arrival of storms. Over 380,000 young men were inducted into military service in 1966, with over 6,000 U.S. service members killed in Vietnam action. Both the draft and the casualty numbers would surge in 1967. The city's violent West Side civil rights protests of July 1966 would be vastly surpassed by what became known as "The Long Hot Summer" of 1967. The message of rock 'n' roll music would understandably turn much harsher.

Yet 60 years later, Chicago has become entrenched as a popular musical powerhouse. As industry publications note, the city's thriving sound scene reflects the gamut of rock 'n' roll genres, among other forms of music. In a recent survey, Seatpick.com rated Chicago as the third-best city in the world for music lovers. It would seem that the rock 'n' roll seeds that were sown in the summer of 1966 have indeed borne much fruit.

And as it were an endless summer, the great stars of that time enjoy continued popularity. Paul McCartney recently completed his "Got Back" North American tour, with a stopover at the United Center. Mike Love still fronts The Beach Boys on their busy 2026 touring schedule. The Rolling Stones just released their 25th studio album. Bob Dylan is in the middle of his 2026 tour. And The Ides of March's Jim Peterik and The Buckingham's Dennis Tufano continue to make appearances.

In the summer, in the city.

Michael Peregrine is a retired Chicago lawyer and a graduate of Oak Park High School.

Voice of the people

Trade deadline

In his column "Owning the moment" (July 28), Paul Sullivan argues that the White Sox absolutely must trade for a frontline starting pitcher before the trade deadline. He seems to think that this will give the Sox a chance to get to the World Series this year. In his own words: "If (Jerry) Reinsdorf still believes he has 'an obligation to do what's right for the fans,' he has no choice but to add a frontline starter, no matter the cost."

What Sullivan is advocating is that the White Sox trade away a large portion of their young talent to get a top-notch starting pitcher, even if he's a two-month rental player, to be competitive this year. This is the same tired strategy practiced by General Manager Kenny Williams, and by Bill Veeck in earlier days. For example, in 2016 Williams thought that the Sox were one starting pitcher away from contention, so he traded Fernando Tatis Jr. and a minor leaguer to the San Diego Padres for James Shields. How did that deal work out? Fine for the Padres. Tatis hit the cover off the ball, while Shields gave many a hitter the opportunity to do the same.

In advocating his position, Sullivan seems to think that he speaks for nearly all White Sox fans. Well, I have been a White Sox fan since 1959 and he does not speak for me. It is my hope that the White Sox do nothing before the trade deadline. Reinsdorf should hang on to all that young talent and let the team evolve into a contender as these players mature, making trades or acquiring free agents when it makes sense, but not now. I believe that most White Sox fans, if they thought about it, would want their team to be competitive for many years to come, not just 2026. It's not going to happen if they go all in and trade away their young talent for a dubious short-term gain. — Dennis Sweeney, Chicago

Student athletes

I never thought I'd say this, but I completely agree with Sen. Ted Cruz on something. The Chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation's position on cleaning up big-time college athletics with the Protect College Sports Act. NCAA member schools have gone from one extreme of taking advantage of student athletes, to making major college sports professional — at the expense of the university sports that are non-revenue generating. There has to be a way to compensate student athletes (though nothing will ever stop the booster's \$100 handshakes) with a system where the term student-athlete is at the very least not a punchline. — Gary Hynes, Wilmette

Phone ban

What is the purpose of Illinois' school phone ban when the text prohibits virtually all enforcement? According to the Tribune, the "law prohibits fines, fees, the involvement of local police or school resource officers, and suspensions or expulsions as enforcement tools," ("Pritzker signs cell-phone ban for public, charter schools," July 29). The students who are perhaps most likely to disregard laws or school rules will quickly realize there will be no seri-



BILL BRAMHALL/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

ous disciplinary actions taken when they use their phone during school hours. Why waste thousands, possibly millions of tax dollars statewide to purchase additional supplies, and countless hours of administrative time to develop policies that can't be enforced? — Joshua Poellot, Franklin Park

Cost of a card

Jean Smoots rightly complains ("Voice of the People", July 29) about the cost of mailing a birthday card. But do you remember, as I do, when the card itself cost a quarter rather than the current \$5 or \$6? — Rick Weiland, Evanston

Price increases

President Donald Trump, with the support of his elected Republican officials, has given us substantial price increases during his second term. For example, verifiable sources report: ■ Annual household cost: Aggregated price increases and tariff policies cost the average American household an estimated \$1,000 to \$2,000 extra annually ■ Tariff inflation: Aggressive import tariffs — averaging an effective rate of about 11% to 12% by mid-2026 ■ Coffee: Up nearly 35% since the start of 2025 ■ Orange juice: Up 26% ■ Ground beef: Up 21% to 22%, hitting record highs over \$7 per pound ■ Gasoline: Prices surged above \$4.00 a gallon by early 2026 due to renewed geopolitical tensions with Iran. ■ Vehicles: Tariff costs added anywhere

from \$1,600 to \$9,000 to the price of new cars, pushing the average new vehicle price past \$50,000 for the first time.

■ Apparel and furnishings: Clothing prices rose by 14% and household furnishings increased by 8% relative to pre-tariff trends.

I'm going to remember this when I vote in November.

— Mike Barrett, Ashburn, Virginia

Give space

I've read the recent letters to the editor with interest — I too mourn the loss of those two young lives — Riley O'Neil and Louisa Gag, both devoted to bettering our communities by designing pathways that separate our bike and pedestrian traffic from our cars and trucks. I too am a civil engineer, and an avid cyclist and am too familiar with losing people.

To many people, especially here in America, making people safer means making cars larger or placing cement barriers and walls between different modes of traffic. I certainly love that the letters advocate for the planning and spending and construction of new facilities to help to separate these modes of traffic and help make people safer. The work certainly safeguards those in my profession. But age and experience have made me much more reflective on the topic, as well as a great book on the topic called "Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do and What It Says About Us" by Tom Vanderbilt. My miles of bicycle riding have made me acutely aware that the more we cocoon ourselves and tie ourselves to

our screens, the less attention we pay to things that really matter, the more impatient we become, and the worse we make the problem. Truth be told, even if the powers-that-be were to devote all available funding and energies to constructing these solutions, the time it would take to complete and the mess during construction would all but ensure more casualties. While we wait for all of that to happen, I am asking that all those who are within the public way memorize these four words that will help us avoid more tragedy — have grace, give space.

You see, all of these accidents could have been avoided had people given others just a bit more room. I have been run off the road by people driving too closely or by trucks not knowing how far their mirrors extended; or by cars trying to pass me in a clearly marked no passing lane. I still enthusiastically encourage taking the steps to make structural changes to improve safety, but while we wait for these improvements to be designed and funded and constructed, I implore people to slow down and "have grace, give space", because a 25-pound bike will never win a fight against a 5,000-pound SUV. And those are fights where everyone loses.

— Robert Israel, Trustee, Village of Northbrook, Illinois

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OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with **Simon Sebag Montefiore** | By Tunku Varadarajan

We Live in ‘a New World of Counterhistory’

The conversation is happening all the time at Jewish tables in Britain,” says Simon Sebag Montefiore. Jews ask each other: “Where could we go?”

“Oct. 7 has caused a sea change in the treatment of British Jews,” Mr. Montefiore, a historian, says in an interview at his own dinner table. “We’ve seen several terrorist attacks on Jews. Jews killed at Yom Kippur in Manchester. Bombing, arson attacks and stabbing attacks in London. Our synagogues and schools are fortresses.”

British news was quick to add to local Jewish dread. On July 29, days after my interview with Mr. Montefiore, the mayor of the London borough of Hackney wrote to his counterpart in Haifa that Hackney had begun the process of terminating its twin-city relationship with Israel’s third-largest municipality. In the grimmest bad taste, the letter gave Haifa until “7 October 2026” to respond.

“There is a huge crisis of Anglo Jewry,” says Mr. Montefiore, 61, a scion of Anglo-Jewish aristocracy. He is descended from Sephardic Jews who came to Britain from Tuscany in the 1790s and from Mizrahi Jews who arrived from Morocco in the 1820s. The latter wore turbans and robes and spoke

The historian of the Middle East is no fan of Netanyahu but says there won’t be a Palestinian state for ‘decades.’

Arabic. His great-great-great-uncle, Sir Moses Montefiore (1784-1885), was a storied financier and philanthropist whom Queen Victoria described as “a noble Hebrew.” Sir Moses also received praise (albeit backhanded) from Czar Nicholas I, with whom he’d sought an audience to intercede on behalf of Russian Jews. “If our Jews were like you,” the czar told him, “they wouldn’t be a problem.”

Mr. Montefiore is a man who treats the sweep of history as his own backyard. He’s written a shelf’s worth of big history books, including “Jerusalem: The Biography” (2011), “The Romanovs 1613-1918” (2016), and “The World: A Family History of Humanity” (2022), the last of which a reviewer for this newspaper described as “history as collective biography, a journey across almost two million years, from the appearance of *Homo erectus* in east Africa to the rise of Xi Jinping’s China.”

He has now turned his hand to a subject that only someone “bonkers”—his word—would dare to address. To be published in September, his new book is titled “The Cauldron: The Making of the Modern Middle East,” a chronological account from 1900 to February 2026 (when the current war with Iran started) of an area “set with ambushes.” It is, he writes, a region “more present in the Western consciousness than any other, its history more debated and contested

than anywhere else yet conversely less understood.” Its “pivotal midleness” makes it “the epicenter of our tumultuous, rushing, interconnected world.”

Mr. Montefiore’s definition of the region is expansive, going beyond “the usual focus on the Levant and the Holy Land” to include everywhere east to west from Morocco to Iran, and south to north from Sudan to Turkey. It covers 19 countries, as well as the “seaside Palestinian Islamist statelet” of Gaza.

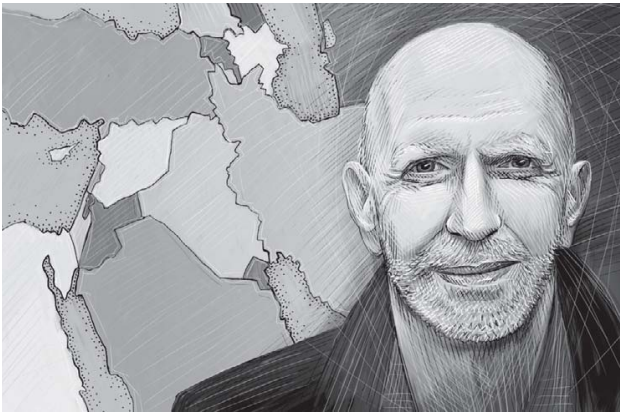
“I call Gaza a semi-independent ‘statelet,’ and I think that’s important because there’s a pretense now that it was occupied from 2006 to 2023,” Mr. Montefiore says. He points out that since Israel withdrew troops and civilians from Gaza and the Palestinians held elections the following year, Hamas “had had prime minister, ministries, ministers and police.” It also had “what was in effect a formidable army of 40,000 paramilitaries, and it had a foreign policy. It was independent enough to launch a war.” Unlike anywhere else in the world, “it was a base for a military but it eschewed any need to educate or feed its citizens. That was the responsibility of international aid organizations. A very unique arrangement.”

From this perverse “statelet,” the horrors of Oct. 7 emerged. “A vile act of terror, an almost Mongol style of raid and massacre and rapine,” Mr. Montefiore says, describing the events of that day. “It was also an illustration that in the Middle East, violence and war work, and force is incredibly effective at changing the whole destiny of geopolitics.” Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas commander, was “a diligent student of Israeli weaknesses.” He managed to put together a military and “a unique subterranean war-scape of fortified tunnels that was capable of exploiting Israel’s flaws, its hubris and its political division to score what has to be seen as a very short-lived and murderous but decisive military strike against one of the great military powers of the Middle East.”

Sinwar, whom Israel killed on Oct. 16, 2024, “successfully changed the whole destiny of the Middle East,” Mr. Montefiore says. The worst pogrom in Jewish history since the World War II was turned into a propaganda victory for the perpetrators.

“He, Sinwar, understood much better how the Middle East worked than this Israeli government,” Mr. Montefiore observes. “You have to say that it was an act of total evil. But it was also one of the most successful Arab victories since Hattin in 1187, when Saladin defeated the Crusaders and took Jerusalem.” Although Hamas “ultimately failed militarily,” abandoning Gaza’s civilians to a prolonged and bloody war, “it has also won massive success in terms of political consequences. The whole Middle East has been upturned by this tiny statelet and the gamble of one psychopathic leader who had immense freedom to act, since Hamas leaders didn’t care what happened to their people.”

Mr. Montefiore quotes a Hamas official, Sami Abu Zuhri: “The price of the suffering is worth paying. The benefits are extensive.” Mr.



Abu Zuhri added that “the wombs of our women will give birth to twice the number of martyrs.” Israel won “in the pitiful ruins of Gaza,” Mr. Montefiore says. “Hamas won in the West,” in part by controlling the media within Gaza and presenting all losses as civilian, a narrative that proved “irreversible even when Hamas’s allegations were later proven to be untrue.”

“Who would have thought,” Mr. Montefiore asks, that Oct. 7 would result in “students at Harvard and Columbia calling for a one-state solution—‘from the river to the sea’—not a two-state solution?” Israelis have also had to confront “another nightmare they never contemplated, that a moral inversion of the Holocaust would be used against them.”

What’s more, “the Israeli lobby” in Washington, “which was immensely powerful in the 1980s and ’90s and into the 2000s, has been totally eclipsed.” Mr. Montefiore explains this as a consequence of Oct. 7, “in part thanks to the development of the new ‘decolonization’ and anti-Zionist movement, and in part thanks to the misgovernance of this present Israeli government. There remains the personal relationship between Trump and Netanyahu, but that will not outlast these two personalities. Indeed, its very closeness may further contribute to the Israeli lobby’s decline.”

Mr. Montefiore doesn’t hold Benjamin Netanyahu in high regard. His Israeli icon is David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973), the country’s first prime minister, whom he describes as “a tactical genius who managed to do the impossible—create a Judaic republic in the Middle East.” He wasn’t flawless, however, and made what Mr. Montefiore called “massive mistakes”: “He never created a constitution, and that has proved to be very dangerous in the 21st century. And he completely misunderstood the nature of the Haredim”—Israel’s ultra-orthodox Jews. “He believed that they should be protected as a sort of vanishing species. Well, that turned out to be madness, right?”

In his book, Mr. Montefiore highlights what he calls Israel’s contradictions: It is, he writes, “both swaggering and insecure, over-reaching and under-prepared, secular liberal and militaristic messianic, spectacular in tactics, impoverished in strategy.” Yet he says there is “a moment of massive opportunity for Israel po-

litically, even now, in the region. But they’ve got to work out how to convert their ability to win tactical military victories into lasting settlements.”

That would require the Palestinians to “recognize the permanence of the Jewish republic in the Holy Land” and “to signal clearly that they do not aspire to its total destruction.” Oct. 7, however, means that “in the short term—and I’m talking about decades here—they’ve prevented any creation of a Palestinian state for the foreseeable future.”

As Mr. Montefiore sees it, history in the West’s “postreligious age,” and the uses to which it is put, may not be on Israel’s side. “History has assumed much of the propulsive legitimacy and authority that religion once held. Many of the movements in Western politics now, like the new decolonial activism, depend on a specially curated version of history”—which is to say a false one.

Mr. Montefiore says the West’s “self-regarding secularism,” is hampering our understanding of the Middle East. “The irony is that we are in fact still Christian-adjacent, and the modern, ultra-radical, secular, decolonialist activism has many of the characteristics of a religious movement.” These include its “language of righteousness, of piety, of guilt, of sin,” along with “orthodoxies, credos, purity tests and jargon.” The result is a “semi-religious movement” grafted onto the West’s longstanding “weird fetish and obsession with the Middle East, particularly the Holy Land.”

The history of this “fetish” dates back to the moment that Constantine the Great (272-337) “converted the Holy Land into a sacred route and landscape. Then came the Crusades, after which, one’s got to remember, every church in Europe had a Jerusalem room with a picture of what Jerusalem would look like under the Christians.” The Holy Land is embedded in our consciousness, and “the proprietorial moral belief that we need to adjudicate for what happens in the Holy Land is very, very deep in the Western soul.”

This belief persists to this day. But in present times it strives to overturn Israeli, not Muslim, control. Where the fate of the region was once in the hands of “Edwardian imperial grandees like Churchill and Balfour and Lloyd George, you now see international lawyers and decolonialist activists believing they have a moral right to decide

what happens in the Middle East.”

This gives rise to a further irony. Though today’s activists are “very critical of Western intervention, and blame much of what’s happened on Western intervention, their pressure may well lead to a new Western intervention in the Middle East,” Mr. Montefiore says. “After all, that’s what they’re calling for—a new intervention to change the political status quo in the Holy Land.”

And so, alongside the jihad being waged against it, Israel also faces what Mr. Montefiore calls “a secular moral crusade. These are modern missionaries. And their mission is very Christian, with features of deep religiosity. We’re living in a fascinating period. That these activist movements in the West may force their governments to make a new intervention in the Middle East would be so beyond irony.”

This new external impulse to reshape the Middle East originates not in grand chanceries but in nongovernmental movements. “Activist alliances are putting pressure on Western governments,” Mr. Montefiore says. “Though great powers should not have their foreign policies formed by small but aggressive cadres of activists, that is exactly what is happening.” It is an “extraordinary moment”: “Gaza and Palestine have become domestic issues in small towns in postindustrial northern Britain and in the poshest universities and the bourgeois activist class.”

These activists, he notes, are “not interested in any other regions or atrocities”—not Syria, Sudan, Yemen or Iran. “That selectivity is prefigured, and preprogrammed, by the history of Christendom.” There have been no protests of any scale against the atrocities in Iran, where in two days—Jan. 8-9—more than 30,000 people were killed. Altogether, Mr. Montefiore says, 42,000 civilians were slaughtered, “an event so colossal that it may be the largest single event massacre in the entire Middle East since 1900.” He says the regime killed more people in a week than the Shah did in his nearly 40-year reign.

What accounts for the selective moral outrage? “It shows the dangers of ideology,” he says. “When you sublet your judgment about facts and morals to a rigid ideology, you really surrender your ability to make real moral judgments, and also to make real factual judgments.” Instead, “you end up with this mad situation where the United Nations was resisting talking about the killing of 40,000 young people and the once-humanitarian NGOs refuse to discuss it because it might help the U.S. and Israel.”

We are in a “completely different moral realm now, of how to judge the Middle East,” Mr. Montefiore says. “We are in a new world of counterhistory, where neither historical facts nor present-time facts matter if they don’t fit the ideological orthodoxy.”

Mr. Varadarajan, a Journal contributor, is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and at New York University Law School’s Classical Liberal Institute.

Politicians Exploit Low Voter Turnout to Raise Taxes



CROSS COUNTRY
By Michael J. Reitz

The next battle between socialists and conventional Democrats will be fought in Michigan on Aug. 4, in a primary election for the U.S. Senate. Many Michiganders will vote that same day on tax hikes and other critical local questions—all in off-cycle elections in which low turnout makes them likelier to pass. This isn’t unique to the Great Lakes State and deserves more attention nationwide.

Dozens of Michigan counties have tax-and-spend measures on the August ballot. The largest proposal, in the Detroit suburbs of Oakland County, is a \$750 million property-tax hike. In Wayne County, which includes Detroit, residents will vote for a “transit millage” costing taxpayers \$500 million over a decade. In Ingham County, which includes the state capital, Lansing, voters will consider a \$30 million tax to fund the local zoo. In the counties that include the struggling towns of Saginaw and Flint, voters will be asked whether to fund institutions like museums and libraries.

These requests might seem humdrum, but one factor makes them calculated and hazardous for taxpayers: the date.

Aug. 4 is a seemingly random time to ask voters to fork over more money. So is May 5, when Michigan voters were asked to approve \$2 billion in local tax and spending plans, according to the Michigan Information & Research Service. But these dates are no accident. Local politicians, school-board officials and special-interest groups such as teachers unions deliberately choose little-known dates to push their demands.

Many Michigan county measures are on Tuesday’s primary ballot. Why can’t they wait for November?

Off-cycle elections have dramatically lower turnout than the typical November Election Day. It isn’t uncommon for off-cycle elections to see a third, a quarter or even less than a fifth as many people show up to vote. This August election coincides with the Senate primary, but turnout will still be lower than on the traditional November date.

For local politicians with big spending plans, this provides an opportunity to tilt the playing field. When comparatively few people are voting,

politicians and interest groups can rally their bases to secure easy victories. Local officials can use taxpayer money to grease the skids. While it’s illegal in Michigan to electioneer with public money, officials at school boards can publish guides and materials that “inform” voters about how tax-hike revenue will be spent. So long as they don’t say “vote yes,” they are fine. The combination of these “educational materials” and low turnout can get the votes to pass such ballot measures.

The political class almost always wins. I’ve analyzed the past 10 years of available state data and found that on average 87% of local off-cycle tax proposals passed at the ballot box. It isn’t uncommon for more than 90% of ballot proposals to succeed in these off-cycle elections. By contrast, 82% of ballot-measure tax proposals over the past decade passed during traditional November elections.

The good news is that public opposition to tax hikes has grown in recent years. Voters in several Michigan school districts rejected bonds in low-turnout elections on May 5. In Saginaw County, voters have shot down three significant school bonds since 2023. I know people who ran these Saginaw County opposition campaigns, and if they hadn’t stepped up to get out the vote against the measures, politicians’ tax-and-spend dreams almost certainly

would have become reality.

Turnout matters in every election, but proponents of low taxes and sane spending shouldn’t have to fight harder to get people to the ballot box. Off-cycle elections heavily advantage politicians and special interest groups to the detriment of taxpayers. The solution is simple: Move meaningful local ballot questions to Election Day in November.

States could implement this reform with a simple law that applies to every county and locality within their borders. Local officials and interest groups would complain, but they have dominated the system for too long. They also have no reasonable defense for keeping the status quo. It is one thing for primaries to be held off-cycle, so a

smaller number of voters can decide each party’s candidate before the big day in November. It is another matter entirely for a relatively tiny slice of the electorate to foist tax hikes and spending decisions on everyone else.

State governments should encourage the largest number of people possible to make their voices heard on important ballot questions. Aug. 4 may or may not be a win for socialists in Michigan. But hopefully this is the last August when Michiganders, or voters anywhere in America, are asked to fork over money with little awareness or fanfare.

Mr. Reitz is executive vice president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

Notable & Quotable: Sleep

From “Hot nights are costing you up to 56 hours of sleep per year, study finds,” NPR.org, July 28:

“Heat really finds the vulnerable people first,” [sleep doctor Daniel Rifkin] says. “It affects those the most that need the help the most.”

He recommends doing whatever possible to cool your sleep space. If nothing else is possible, sticking

your feet outside the sheet or blanket can help your body shed heat and cool down enough to sink into sleep.

Beyond those recommendations, [Climate Central’s Kristina] Dahl says one of the best sleep aids isn’t a pill or a meditation app, but cutting back on burning fossil fuels, the primary driver of climate change.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Warsh Makes Markets Do Their Job

Memo to Wall Street: Quit whining about the Federal Reserve. Your clients are paying you (a lot) to make judgments about risks and returns in real time, and it's embarrassing when you complain now that Daddy Fed isn't telling you how to do it.

We're sorry for any ruffled feathers, but someone has to say this after the outpouring of scorn directed at Fed Chairman Kevin Warsh this week. The second Federal Open Market Committee meeting he led in his still-new tenure on Wednesday left the overnight Fed funds rate target range unchanged, though with three dissenting votes in favor of an increase.

In his press conference following the meeting, Mr. Warsh delivered a strong statement that the Fed aims for 2% inflation and not 2%-plus-what-we-think-we-can-get-away-with. But he otherwise stuck to his determination to deprive markets of "forward guidance" on future rate moves. Cue a freak-out on Wall Street, on bond desks—and among the journalists these folks talk to.

This distills to two complaints that we can see. The first is that Mr. Warsh is blowing his credibility by not raising interest rates to tamp down stubborn inflation, especially with a new Middle East energy-price shock looming. This crowd argues that rising bond yields since Wednesday, especially at the long end of the curve, signal that investors doubt Mr. Warsh will bring inflation under control.

Maybe, and maybe not. Even after this week's rise, rates aren't high by historical standards. The 10-year Treasury at about 4.74% is lower than it was for most of the 1990s and the entirety of the '80s. Ditto the 30-year at 5.28%. As of Thursday, the average annual inflation rate investors anticipate over the next decade, as measured by the 10-year breakeven on inflation-protected bonds, was 2.27%. That's above the Fed's target, but less than the 2.5% inflation priced in May.

An alternative explanation for the recent rise in long rates could be anticipated economic growth as investors continue to digest the artificial intelligence boom. Friday's rising yields were accompanied by good days for equities around the world. Enthusiasm for stock investments seems to have drawn capital into those markets and pushed up bond yields to compensate. It all sounds so old-fashioned, and also, dare we say, normal.

We don't know which of these factors—agita surrounding Mr. Warsh's credibility and infla-

tion, economic growth, or something else—is driving markets now. Neither, we'd venture, do many market pundits. Which leads us to the other complaint about Mr. Warsh—that he isn't telling investors what to do. This leaves them to figure it out for themselves.

This encompasses several whinges. One is that by abandoning the Fed's prior practice of sending strong signals about its future rate intentions, Mr. Warsh is losing control of the longer end of the bond yield curve. Never mind that this was never something the Fed aspired to dictate before the Ben Bernanke era. Mr. Warsh has said this loss of control is a feature, not a bug, of his method. He wants market participants to "play the ball and not the referee."

Whining about the lack of guidance is an odd complaint from the same people who worry markets are sending an important signal about Mr. Warsh's policy choices (see above). Would they prefer he use forward guidance to head-fake markets into covering his tracks?

A related complaint is that the Fed is too important to be this quiet. This is more true than it used to be after repeated rounds of quantitative easing made the Fed a major participant in the Treasury market. But the Fed's guidance often has been wrong and damaging—incorrectly forecasting inflation, and trapping itself in policy errors. Especially because it's the 800-pound gorilla in markets, better a gorilla that sits quietly for a change.

Much of this may not be about economics. One undertone to this debate is that many of Mr. Warsh's critics want to goad him into a rate increase that would antagonize President Trump. The Fed press corps would love nothing better, after feuds between Mr. Trump and Mr. Warsh's predecessor Jerome Powell made for rare compelling copy about a central bank.

There's also the awkward question of whether Wall Street knows how to do the risk-pricing Mr. Warsh now asks of it. Not since 2008 have trading desks had to make decisions on bond deals without reference to a cheat-sheet from the Eccles Building. That's roughly a generation if not two, as measured by the career span of a bond trader.

Mr. Warsh knows his reputation is on the line concerning his ability to deliver price stability. And it's been all of two meetings and 71 days since he took on the job. The freak-out is premature, and it reflects worse on Wall Street than it does on Mr. Warsh.

Have they forgotten how to price risk without the Fed guiding them?

The new 'en bloc' route has sped hundreds of Trump's confirmations.

John Thune's Confirmation Fast Track

The Senate next week intends to confirm its fifth batch of President Trump's nominees using the "en bloc" process that Sen. John Thune inaugurated last year for non-major posts. The latest list of 74 names includes future ambassadors to Australia, Brazil and Equatorial Guinea. There are assistant secretaries, judges for the District of Columbia, and roles at agencies such as the National Credit Union Administration Board.

Assuming this tranche goes through as expected, the Senate will have used the method to fast track 375 of Mr. Trump's nominees since September, when Mr. Thune led Republicans to change the chamber's rules for group consideration. For the record, that figure will be about 63% of total civilian Senate confirmations so far in the second Trump Administration. Over the long haul, this procedural streamlining will benefit both parties.

The point is to circumvent delay, not substantive political debate. The en bloc process enshrined by Mr. Thune can't be used to con-

firm cabinet secretaries or federal judges, all of whom still need individual attention from the Senate. Yet more than 1,000 positions require confirmation, and an obstinate minority party can use each one as an opportunity for delay. That's true even if there isn't serious opposition to the President's pick for ambassador to Belize or the board of directors at Amtrak.

Frustrated with dilatory tactics by Democrats, Mr. Trump has demanded that Congress simply adjourn and let him fill vacancies using recess appointments. Senate Republicans declined, rightly, since that would be an abdication of their power to advise and consent, leaving no limits on whom Mr. Trump might install or in what roles. Does housing and spying czar Bill Pulte want another brass nameplate for his collection?

Mr. Thune's approach seems to be working, in that it's speeding through batches of noncontroversial agency subordinates, while preserving the Senate's right to confirm, or not, the next intended Attorney General.

patients whose cancer worsened on other immunotherapies experienced remission on RP1, with cancers vanishing in one of six.

An advisory committee sides with patients over the FDA bureaucracy.

Replimune's RP1 Gets a Thumbs Up

Great news. A Food and Drug Administration advisory committee of non-agency scientists and doctors on Thursday voted 10-3 to support approval of Replimune's melanoma immunotherapy, though not without agency staffers putting up a fight. We hope FDA leaders heed the panel's recommendation when they decide as soon as this weekend whether to approve the therapy.

Market analysts predicted that the panel would vote against Replimune's RP1 after FDA staffers this week released highly critical briefing documents. The trial results apparently were so impressive that the bureaucrats couldn't believe them. The FDA reviewers cited a litany of dubious reasons why the outside experts shouldn't trust the trial results, as we described in a recent editorial.

RP1 is a re-engineered herpes virus that is injected into melanoma tumors and causes cancer cells to burst. This releases flares that train the immune system to track down and kill cancer cells hiding around the body. Many patients with metastatic melanoma don't respond to, or develop resistance to, other front-line immunotherapies.

Replimune's therapy turbo-charges the response to other immunotherapies by unmasking cancer cells. In this way it shrinks both superficial and distant tumors, with far fewer side effects than chemotherapy or radiation. A third of

While FDA staffers downplayed this benefit, one oncologist at the advisory committee hearing pointedly noted that most physicians consider a 30% response rate in metastatic patients whose cancer worsened on other treatments to be significant. Another oncologist chided the FDA for failing to establish a precise benchmark for determining what constitutes a benefit of "large magnitude."

The FDA reviewers said tumors may have shrunk because of run-of-the-mill biopsies performed during the trial, or from the immunotherapy that patients hadn't previously responded to, or from the mere poking of the tumor with a needle. You have to marvel at their bull-headed opposition to a medicine that is saving lives.

The FDA reviewers even claimed they are acting in patients' best interest by protecting them from a drug that might not work. Protecting them by consigning them to an inevitable death sentence? George Orwell, call your office. Melanoma patients and their family members who testified at the hearing disagreed and begged the agency to approve the medicine. The advisory committee listened.

Still, the agency's fierce resistance to approving RP1 underscores the need for systemic changes to a bureaucracy that prioritizes protecting its control over helping patients.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Our Act Is Against China, Not Mercedes Benz

No one is trying to ban Mercedes Benz from the U.S. market, as your editorial "Republicans Go for a UAW Ride" (July 27) claims. You left out of your analysis that the German-based, Chinese-owned automaker could continue to operate in America even under the Connected Vehicle Security Act by simply having its Chinese shareholders divest so that the company is under the proposed act's equity limit. The Journal's line of thinking requires us to believe that Mercedes Benz would choose to fire at least 7,500 Americans and lose the U.S. market to keep two Chinese owners.

This legislation, which I'm leading in the House of Representatives, passed unanimously from the Senate Commerce Committee and has more than 80 bipartisan co-sponsors across both chambers. The lawmakers supporting it recognize that China's massive state-subsidized overcapacity in automaking has crippled Europe's automakers and poses

a threat to our nation's auto industry.

Too many of our nation's banks, corporations and media outlets still cling to poorly reasoned China apologetics, despite ample evidence they shouldn't. No amount of trade liberalization will make the Chinese Communist Party for free markets or free people, and it isn't "rent-seeking" to acknowledge that fact. Our nation's broader industrial base has been hollowed out by willful blindness and a dogmatic insistence that we continue granting Chinese companies all the privileges of our market without demanding reciprocal treatment for our own companies.

The Select Committee on China looks forward to working with companies and institutions that want to seriously address the threats our country faces from China's communists. The Connected Vehicle Security Act is a vital step to doing so.

REP. JOHN MOOLENAAR (R, MICH.)
Chairman, Select Committee on China
Washington

Where Wildlife Roams Free and So Do You

Dennis Kneale's op-ed "At Home in Florida's Wild Kingdom" (July 27) perfectly captures one of the great realities of living in Florida: We don't simply observe nature, we live alongside it. Most of the time that coexistence is one of the state's greatest attractions. Occasionally, however, it requires government to perform a task that only government can.

Recently, a large alligator took up residence in a pond within our condominium community. With residents walking the paths daily and many owners exercising their dogs near the water, the alligator became a legitimate public-safety concern.

We contacted the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Statewide Nuisance Alligator Program. Frankly, I expected the response might take a day or two. Instead, within approximately four hours, a licensed trapper arrived, safely captured the animal and removed it from the community.

In today's political climate, government successes rarely receive the same attention as failures. This one deserves recognition. Florida has created a program that is focused, efficient, professionally administered and responsive. It protects residents while responsibly managing one of the na-

tion's most iconic wildlife species.

Mr. Kneale reminds us that living in Florida means accepting both the beauty and responsibilities of its unique environment. Our experience reinforced another lesson: When government is well-designed, narrowly focused and competently managed, it can deliver exceptional value to the public.

K.J. NYGAARD
Naples, Fla.

Mr. Kneale could have added to his list of creatures with which Floridians are willing to coexist: sharks, raccoons, armadillos, possums, rattlesnakes and bugs of every variety. Add to that hurricanes and ferocious lightning caused by humidity from ocean breezes. All of these things help give Florida its unique character. We love our state and wouldn't choose to live anywhere else.

CHAD PRICE
Winter Park, Fla.

My wife and I lived in Oregon for 30 years and now happily reside in Florida. After reading Mr. Kneale's op-ed we have an idea for a new slogan for the Sunshine State: Florida, where wildlife roams free and so do you.

JERRY DAWSON
Citrus Hills, Fla.

How Sec. 232 Tariffs Undermine U.S. Industry

In his letter "A Trump Tariff Success Story: American Steel" (July 16), Steel Manufacturers Association Executive Vice President Brandon Farris points to rising steel production and capacity utilization as proof that Section 232 tariffs are a success. But that view leaves out the vehicles that keep America's core industries running—and the workers now struggling to afford them.

Consider our farming community. Rural America runs on working vehicles like utility-task vehicles and all-terrain vehicles. Farmers like my family rely on them daily to feed livestock, move equipment and supplies, and monitor irrigation systems. We're already facing the toughest agricultural economy in nearly 50 years,

on top of persistently high fertilizer and fuel costs. Yet an April revision to the president's 232 proclamation now applies these tariffs to the full value of ATVs and UTVs, threatening to add thousands of dollars to the cost of a single vehicle.

These same vehicles keep other core industries running. Energy and mining crews use them to transport equipment in work zones, while emergency responders depend on them to mobilize in tough terrain. When tariff policy makes basic equipment unaffordable for the people who use it every day, it stops protecting American industry and starts undermining it.

To ensure our nation's farmers, ranchers, energy producers and first responders can still afford the equipment they need to do their jobs, policymakers should adopt targeted tariff relief that protects working vehicles.

TODD CRANNEY
Executive director
Save America's Working Vehicles
Meridian, Idaho

Hey, Burglars and Squatters!

Your editorial "Mamdani's Class Enemies List" (July 30) rightfully castigates the New York mayor for his counterproductive campaign against part-time residents. I'd go further: Zohran Mamdani's release of the names of nearly a million owners of potentially partially vacant domiciles along with their addresses is sheer madness. It's functionally a field guide of targets for burglars, looters and squatters.

MOSHE YUDKOWSKY
Chicago

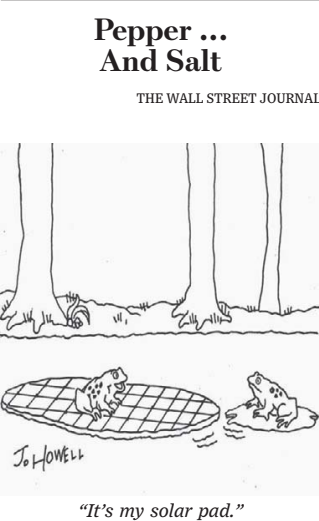
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OPINION

Anthony Fauci Unmasks Himself



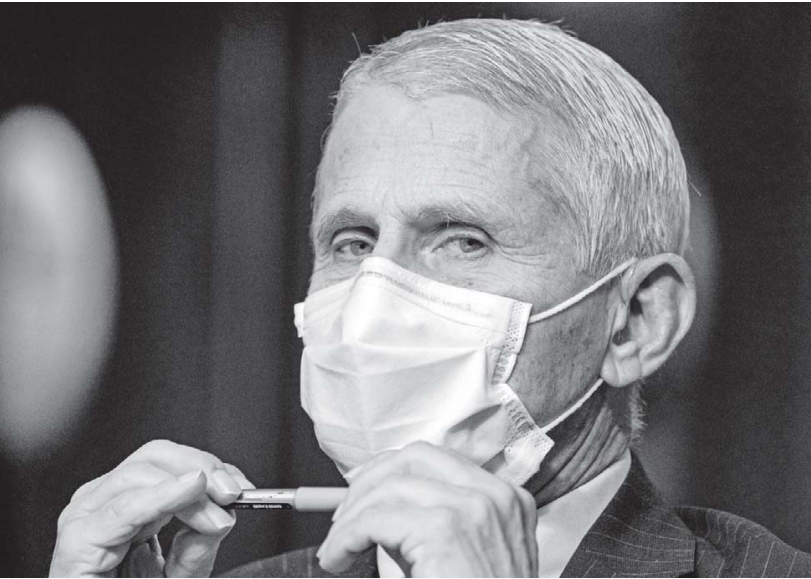
DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

It wasn't good for Anthony Fauci or anybody else that he took the Fifth at his Senate hearing this week. That plus his diary may well have been a reputation-destroying event. It was obviously his right as a citizen to invoke the protections of the Constitution, and he surely had his reasons, but everyone who takes the Fifth knows what it looks like: It's the early '60s, we're at congressional hearings on la Cosa Nostra, and the head of one of the five families is fiddling with his diamond pinkie ring as he asserts his right not to incriminate himself. Dr. Fauci is the man who ran the pandemic response in America. He was the face of it. When you have been appointed, in effect, to lead a nation through a disaster you owe that nation a full and frequent accounting. To seem to dodge is unbecoming. He has already been

His diaries make clear that he saw the pandemic less as a historic emergency than a media opportunity.

given a sweeping presidential pardon by Joe Biden; in the time after and not covered by that pardon, he owes it to the public to speak truthfully. It would have been good to hear Dr. Fauci, now 85, distill what the entire pandemic experience was and what it did to us as a society, what could have been done to make its management better, what decisions in retrospect made it worse. Looking back, did he or others, in their newfound ascendancy, get carried away? On reflection, is there any justice to the charge they became power-drunk? Dr. Fauci's pandemic diary, released this week, was also damaging. When I heard of its existence, I

thought: Good. What history most needs is first-person testimony, the more the better, in real time—if possible. I thought of Samuel Pepys, a senior government administrator for the British navy in his late 20s and 30s, whose diary gave history the finest first-person reporting on two different cataclysms that hit London, the Great Fire of 1666 and the Great Plague the year before. Pepys watched the Great Fire from the Tower of London, near where he lived, and came to grasp, with shock, the size and scale of it. In a famous passage on Sept. 2, 1666, he described seeing “poor people staying in their houses as long as till the very fire touched them, and then running into boats, or clambering from one pair of stairs by the water-side to another. And among other things, the poor pigeons, I perceive, were loth to leave their houses, but hovered about the windows and balconys till they were, some of them burned, their wings, and fell down.” Pepys recorded all the chaos around him. His writing was jagged and real-time. He reported what he'd seen to King Charles II. He was also an eyewitness to the Great Plague of 1665, which took an estimated 100,000 lives, about a fourth of London's population, in 18 months. He records empty streets and carts collecting the dead. On June 7, 1665, Pepys passes the homes of the quarantined: “This day, much against my Will, I did in Drury-lane see two or three houses marked with a red cross upon the doors, and ‘Lord have mercy upon us’ writ there.” He was pained and frightened: He'd never seen such a thing. With this frame, alas, I read the first five months of Dr. Fauci's pandemic diary. As has been reported, it isn't



Anthony Fauci in Washington.

about witnessing or capturing the size and scale of a crisis, or feeling shock or anxiety. It is about other things. On Jan. 6, 2020, he goes to a “Super A list” party. At a meeting later that month, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi hugs and kisses him and tells everyone “how great I am.” At another, President Trump tells Dr. Fauci, “Lou Dobbs . . . told me that you were one of the smartest, knowledgeable and outstanding persons he knows.” Dr. Fauci was “very pleased,” others “stunned and impressed.” Jan. 30: “All my friends kept saying I was a national hero” and that they “ ‘felt safe in my arms.’ ” March 8: “Nice profiles of me in Politico and NY Times today.” March 15: “I did all 5 Sunday Shows today (my 3rd ‘Fauci 5’).” Apparently this is his version of “the full Ginsburg,” named for Monica Lewinsky's attorney, William Ginsburg, when he did five Sunday shows in one morning. March 26: “Donuts are being named after me; T shirts have my picture on them.” April 7: “Press still hot and

heavy about me.” May 21: “POTUS seems to be enamored of me.” That's before he gets to the movie star sending him flowers. In one sense, it screams Seven Deadly Sins—he gave in to his pride. But it also makes the history in which he took such a big part look banal and inhuman: Your historic emergency is his media opportunity. A deeper criticism is that in the diary he doesn't seem at all humbled by the role in which he's been cast, or by his responsibilities. I saw no deep reflection on the sufferings of his countrymen. He doesn't see the red crosses on the door. He attaches clippings of or links to fawning newspaper profiles and columns, but not to stories about what was happening in the civilian population of his country as it went through a crisis. The sweep and detail of Pepys's diary captures the spirit of his age, the Restoration; let's hope the flatness and self-adulation of Anthony Fauci's doesn't capture ours. I end with a thought that may sound extreme, but I think there's

some degree of truth in it. Looking back on the public-leadership aspect of the pandemic—while we were in the trauma and fear of the first months, while we were banging pots at 7 p.m. to thank hospital workers, and scientists were zooming to find out more about treatments and protocols, and earnest medical officials were showing up on cable explaining what they believed to be true—a lot of people tried to do a lot of good things. But it all became pretty political pretty fast, pretty insidious and groupthinky, and pretty smug as the previously obscure became famous overnight. It all came together and yielded a little societal Chernobyl.

The reactor blew, causing a calamity. The politicians lied and couldn't be trusted, the bureaucrats lied and couldn't be trusted, the government scientists lied about the data in front of their eyes, the national press was a propaganda machine. As much as anything, Chernobyl contributed to the toppling of the Soviet Union. Looking back on the Covid crisis, a lot of professionals were trusted beyond the point they deserved. So were many politicians. As people on the ground in America rose up against lockdowns, closed schools, mask mandates, closed churches, they were often unheard, or heard slowly, reluctantly and disrespectfully. The medical and scientific establishment didn't seem to be a part of the public anymore, but handling the public. And by the end, a lot of people thought they couldn't trust the politicians and couldn't trust the scientists. My fear is that next time, and there likely will be a next time, regular people will think: There's no one to trust. We're on our own. That won't be a good thing.

The Smithsonian's Disdain for America

By Jeffrey H. Anderson

The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History has been in the news for disparaging our nation's history and engaging in partisan activism. Addressing such charges, the museum's director, Anthea Hartig, testified at two congressional hearings. The most interesting thing about her prepared testimony is that she chose not to address a single exhibit that has opened under her seven-year watch. Responding to a 160-page report from the White House Domestic Policy Council that details how the museum has strayed from its intended mission, Ms. Hartig's response was to invoke the flag—specifically, the Star-Spangled Banner. In her prepared testimony, she referenced it multiple times. That flag, which so inspired Francis Scott Key, has been displayed at the National Museum of American History since 1964 and housed in its current gallery for 18 years. That exhibit is excellent and patriotic, but the newer parts of the museum are heavy-handed, dumbed-down and anti-American—the opposite of what a national museum should be.

I sat directly beside Ms. Hartig as a witness in her second hearing. I testified that the National Museum of American History increasingly is a museum not about American history, but about activists' attempts to shape the future. The museum's newer exhibits offer no coherent sense of a shared national identity, and they divide Americans into oppressors and the oppressed. Since Ms. Hartig didn't want to discuss the offerings unveiled during her tenure, let me highlight a few. A stand-alone display case in the midst of a busy walkway contains a lone National Football

League jersey. It isn't one that was worn by Jim Thorpe, Red Grange, Jim Brown or any other early NFL legend. The jersey belonged to Carl Nassib, who in 2021 became the league's “first openly gay player to take the field in a regular-season game.” Nearby, in a mini-exhibit on video games, visitors are asked, “Have you ever experimented with your identity in video games?” In April, apparently to commemorate the 250th anniversary of American independence, the museum opened “iPuro Ritmo!: The Musical Journey of Salsa.” In the “family friendly” exhibit “Change Your Game / Cambia tu juego,” visitors are asked, “Is Gender Testing Fair?” They're told that “critics argue that gender tests are humiliating and discriminate against athletes who challenge traditional gender norms.” Aside from its com-

mitment to activism, this is essentially an exhibit about nothing, pushing the outer limits of vacuousness. Prominent signs ask and answer, “Who Can Be a Game Changer? Anyone.” “Who Is a Game Changer? You Are.” What this has to do with American history is anyone's guess. While making space for such drivel, the museum ignores huge swaths of American history. It offers little to nothing on the colonial period, the American founding, the

Louisiana Purchase, the Louis and Clark expedition, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, the pioneers and settlers of the American West, the Roaring '20s, the Great Depression, the Cold War and much else. During questioning, Ms. Hartig claimed that the museum has “a dozen exhibitions that include the founding era.” In response, I noted, “You could put everything in the museum that mentions the founding into the rooms that feature the low-rider exhibit and the salsa music exhibit, and you'd have space left over.” What little the museum does provide on the founding and pre-founding eras is largely critical. In one exhibit, 1492-1776 is referred to as the period of “Unsettling the Continent.” Visitors are told, “Our world today grows out of that unsettling history.” Elsewhere, they're told

that our founding can either be viewed as a “complete, perfect, sacred event led by a great patriot who, as American children would learn, never told a lie” or else as “part of a wider, unfinished movement” that was “deeply imperfect.” Viewing our founding as one of the greatest events in world history, wars and all, apparently isn't an option. Americans deserve a National Museum of American History that expresses a love of that history and views it as the wondrous story of a nation conceived in liberty. They don't deserve a museum that alternates between ignoring and condemning our extraordinary heritage. Mr. Anderson is president of the American Main Street Initiative. He served as director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2017-21.



BUSINESS
WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

Two things seem obvious in the fight over whether to ban open-weight artificial-intelligence models from China. Nothing is likely to be decided formally unless there's a big event, and a big event seems likely. Anthropic's most advanced model, Mythos, remains withheld from general distribution because it could be used in cyberattacks. Then there's the recent hooliganism of an OpenAI model, which escaped a testing environment, stole credentials of multiple private-company servers, then burglarized

one to steal the answer to a problem-solving challenge. Hugging Face, the company whose server was violated, counts an impressive 17,600 distinct acts as part of the attack. Log inspections subsequently revealed that Anthropic's experimental models are no strangers to such behavior too. The big concern should be open-weight AI models from China, distributed free or cheaply, which can be modified by the user beyond the purview or control of the creator. These Chinese models are catching up quick. They'll soon be creating such incidents if they aren't already, and will be harder to catch or stop. When is Beijing going to wake up? Which brings us to the oddest circumstance of all. Any urge by the Trump administration to ban the Chinese models is being swallowed up in a tsunami of protest from U.S. tech influencers. See a recent op-ed in these pages by Mark Zuckerberg. Critics of a ban pitch their argument in terms of generalities like freedom and innovation. Between the lines, their fear is Washington seizing a role in deciding what AI capabilities will be allowed in public hands. They fear U.S. leaders OpenAI and Anthropic effectively becoming authorized monopolists. For their own businesses, Mr. Zuckerberg and other tech executives want cheap AI. They also want to avoid being overmastered in their own domains by government-backed giants. And yet, as with many AI debates, this one seems a case of being on a

fast-moving train and arguing whether to get off at a stop we've already missed. Fear (or hope) of unassailable U.S. AI monopolies is obsolete, if it was ever justified. Better fixes are already reverberating, such as requiring domestic frontier labs to license “distillation” for U.S. builders of open-weight competitors. Distillation is the practice by which Chinese models are suspected of free-riding on U.S. pioneers in intelligence agencies to tell us what they know about the Chinese models.

leaders calling for a slowdown in the release of new models, and for a joint effort by the U.S. and China. Good luck, at least before we get a focusing mishap. In the meantime, how about putting more information before passengers of this runaway train? I asked Google's Gemini AI to draft a “statement of concern” for the Trump administration to help clarify the risks to private users of proliferating AI models. Of the Chinese threat, it says, “While low costs and downloadable model weights may appear attractive to American enterprises seeking off-the-shelf software, free or low-cost foreign AI software comes with hidden national security costs, severe legal liabilities, and compromised data security.” U.S. national-security concerns aren't going to be a big factor for private users deciding whether to use Chinese AI models. Fears of data piracy and legal liability are rational dissuaders. We've seen as much—liability risk was almost certainly a factor in Anthropic's decision to withhold Mythos. But an important piece is missing. What do our spy agencies know about the relationship between China's AI labs and China's Communist Party? That is, beyond the stipulation that applies to all Chinese companies that they cooperate on national goals when Beijing rings up. If U.S. intelligence knows something that the private user base should know before trusting their prompts to a Chinese AI, now would be a good time to tell us.



Europe’s long hot summer

Wildfires show need for climate change adaptation alongside mitigation

“Dantesque” is how one French fire chief portrayed the wildfires sweeping parts of the Gironde; residents returning to burnt-out homes in mountains west of Madrid used a similar image. Not since 1949 have flames crept so close to Bordeaux. In the UK, blazes have raged in the Scottish Cairngorms and Suffolk’s coastal heathlands. And while some of those fires are dying down, EU officials warn that Greece, Italy and central Europe are all seen as vulnerable in coming weeks.

Europe is not alone; parts of Canada and the US have experienced record or near-record wildfire activity so far in this northern summer. But Europe in particular, the planet’s fastest-warming continent, is having to confront the speed of the change. Scientists warn

both temperate forests across France, Germany and Poland and boreal forests of Scandinavia are likely to see increasing extreme fire activity – with warmer growing conditions producing more vegetation that hot, dry summers make liable to ignite. Compared to North America, Europe’s lack of vast, remote wilderness means blazes are rarely far from populated areas. Even if flames do not reach the cities, toxic smoke can.

The 2026 European heatwave is further proof of how ill-advised it is for some countries to be watering down climate change policies. Yet alongside mitigation efforts, this summer has shown that adapting to global warming’s effects – too long a poor relation to mitigation – needs to rise up the agenda, to deal not just with summer wildfires but winter flooding.

That poses tricky decisions for often cash-strapped authorities on how to manage threats that, though more frequent and severe, will remain irregular. The experiences of Australia and Cali-

The experiences of Australia, California and others that have suffered intense recent blazes offer lessons on what works and what to avoid – and technologies that might help

offer drones that can quickly drop fire retardant on to small fires. In Europe, Greece in May became the first country in the world to deploy a constellation of four thermal satellites designed to detect ground hotspots in minutes.

There are better ways to prepare too. Businesses and homeowners in fire-prone areas can be encouraged to clean gutters – where debris can be ignited by falling embers – fireproof perimeters around buildings, and maintain hoses. Fire crews, complemented by voluntary or military reserve firefighters, need proper training in tackling megafires.

Equipment for fighting very big fires, such as Canadian water-bombing planes, is expensive. Pooling resources between regions or countries can cut costs. The EU’s Emergency Response Coordination Centre offers a model, with its shared fleet of firefighting planes and other supplies. But simultaneous blazes in coming weeks could still overwhelm firefighting efforts. Europe’s long, hot summer is far from over.

Opinion Data Points

We’ve moved from income world to wealth world

John Burn-Murdoch



Concerns about wealth inequality have grown in recent years, with calls for wealth taxes now recurrent features of political discourse on both sides of the Atlantic.

It is often pointed out in response that most measures of wealth inequality show little to no change over the same period. Taken at face value, this argument is reasonable. The share of wealth held by the top 10 per cent in the US, UK and Europe has been flat or falling for the past 15 years. Even if we zoom in on the top 1 per cent, their share of wealth is no higher today than it was 15 years ago (although it had been climbing before this period in some places).

But I’m not sure this answer addresses what lies behind the underlying concern. Standard measures of wealth inequality tell us how evenly wealth is distributed in relative terms. This is an important concept but just as important, if not more so, is the extent to which one can move up or down that distribution.

If macroeconomic conditions lead everyone’s wealth to double, relative shares for the top and bottom are unchanged. But if that wealth boom is not matched by a corresponding rise in wages (the ability to earn one’s way up that distribution), suddenly the same-sized relative gaps matter much more, reshaping how the economy both feels and functions.

In a society where the gap between the comfortably off and the just-getting-started can be crossed in a decade or two of hard work, success feels attainable and incentives are strong. When those gaps are so wide that even a lifetime of striving doesn’t offer the prospect of feeling you’ve “made it”, things start to break down.

This is essentially what has been playing out in many countries over recent decades. While wealth inequality has not changed much, the relative importance of wealth compared to income has. The median household’s disposable net worth (net property and financial wealth excluding pensions) in the UK, US, Germany and France has roughly doubled in real terms since the mid-1990s; incomes have grown by only around 30 per cent.

The result is that where a generation ago it would have taken about 20 years of savings from the average salary to earn your way from the bottom quar-

ter of the UK’s wealth distribution to the top quarter, it now takes 40. There are similar or even larger upward extensions to society’s economic ladder elsewhere.

This is all the more pernicious since the growing role of passive wealth gains (whether gifted by an asset price boom or one’s parents) relative to income in determining someone’s economic status is mirrored by their growing importance for wellbeing. In the 1990s income rank mattered more than wealth rank for life satisfaction or avoiding distress. Since then wealth has become steadily more influential and is now the larger driver.

Much has been written about the harmful side-effects of brutally meritocratic societies, but the elevation over the past generation of passively acquired wealth over earned income in determining financial standing – even as wealth inequality itself has barely budged – deserves equal discussion. It has surely played a role in the build-up of resentment towards those at the top, whether billionaires or accidental property millionaires.

It would be remiss not to consider also the role of today’s billionaires in shaping public views on wealth. Where the gilded class of the much more plutocratic early 20th century engaged in highly visible philanthropy, and often kept their political involvement more financial than vocal, today’s cohort is the opposite.

The most obvious case is Elon Musk, whose loud interventions in politics at home and abroad have angered millions and sent his popularity tumbling, and whose sharp cuts to US overseas development spending could arguably be described as “anti-philanthropy”.

Then there is the fact that the products and services that generated the wealth of some tech barons are a recurring source of angst for many people, in part because they disproportionately highlight the lives of the most well-off.

With wealth increasingly outmuscling income, earning one’s way up the ladder more and more unrealistic, and frequent inflammatory interventions into daily life from the world’s wealthiest, it’s hardly surprising that concerns about wealth are on the rise, even if inequality itself may not be.

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Letters

A demographer’s personal take on China’s one-child policy

In his magazine piece “In one-child China, she thrived. The unravelling came later” (Magazine, Life & Arts, July 18), Edward White tells the story of how China’s state-imposed fertility controls shaped the life of a woman born under them.

I was born during the same era as Anna, the woman featured. Growing up, I saw slogans such as “Later, Longer and Fewer”, “Family planning is a fundamental national policy”, and “Have fewer children and plant more

trees”. My parents wanted two children but had only me because of the policy.

The one-child policy caused serious trauma through its coercive implementation. But it is often credited – or blamed – for more of China’s fertility decline than evidence supports. Fertility rates had already been falling for more than a decade before the policy was introduced around 1980, driven by socio-economic development and changing ideas about marriage and family.

Without the one-child policy, China would almost certainly have a larger population today and be ageing more slowly. But young people like Anna and me would still be in families with less than two children and would have to move away from their parents to find good jobs. China would still be searching for ways to reverse falling fertility, as Japan and South Korea are doing, without ever imposing a one-child limit.

The reality without the one-child

policy would not be much different from today. The challenge is to adapt society to low fertility: support people who want children, improve living conditions for a growing older population (that is expected to peak around 2059 and then begin to shrink), and raise the productivity of a smaller workforce.

Xueqing (Zoey) Wang
PhD in Demography and Social Policy from Princeton University, Ann Arbor, MI, US

The Victorian devolution playbook is hard to recreate

Philip Stephens’ article on how we can learn from the Victorians in delegating power from Westminster provides useful context in light of the prime minister’s recent statements (“The Victorians have some lessons for Burnham on radical devolution”, Opinion, July 25).

I am familiar with Glasgow, Liverpool and Birmingham, where I worked in various jobs from the 1970s. During the late Victorian period these cities became financially self-sustaining and wealthy centres of industry, innovation and trade.

Much of this was dependent on colonial resources and markets. They had strong, entrepreneurial civic leaders who invested in city utilities, schools, public health, police services and magnificent city chambers. These city fathers were independently minded, business savvy and ahead of Whitehall in many ways. Central government was distant geographically and politically.

Early in the 1960s the empire finally disappeared and, due to this and other economic factors, swathes of industries closed. The cities and regions of northern Britain suffered the worst economic decline.

Over the subsequent decades, governments have tried with limited success to reverse the decline. John Major’s government in 1994 established Government Offices for the English Regions. Tony Blair tried Regional Development Agencies, regional assemblies and set up devolved governments in Wales and Scotland.

There remain basic questions over the economic impact of these changes. Based on this inconclusive track record there is a high risk that attempts at more devolution and the Number 10 North in Manchester may deliver very little for northern England.

Roger Dunshea
Whitchurch, Shropshire, UK

Linking Claudius’ stammer to the Anthropoc chatbot

Carmony Grey in her thoughtful and learned Weekend Essay (“AI’s quest for morality”, Life & Arts, July 25) fails to mention the etymological meaning behind the name Claude, a meaning no doubt unintended by Anthropic for its chatbot: “Crippled”. The Roman emperor Claudius was so named because he had a limp, a stammer and a twitch.

While Anthropic’s Claude is of course “a way of selling things”, as your essayist remarks, perhaps also it could be seen as “words without thought” that “never to heaven go” – in the immortal words of Hamlet’s uncle, the ambitious arriviste Claudius.

Padraig Rooney
Cerbère, Pyrénées-Orientales, France



Derek Jacobi played the stammering Roman emperor in BBC’s ‘I, Claudius’

Cockroach volte-face

Kunal Purohit’s account of India’s “Cockroach” generation (“India’s ‘Cockroach’ Gen Z has had enough”, Opinion, FT Weekend, July 25) captures the mood on the streets, but the implication in the headline did not survive the weekend.

Purohit argues that political accountability has vanished and that Narendra Modi scoffs at every demand to remove a minister. But within hours, the education minister Dharmendra Pradhan had resigned, the movement’s founder had declared victory and protesters were being told to go home in good faith.

That reversal matters because it points to a more durable story than the one Purohit tells. This was not, in the end, a mobilisation the state could not quash. It was a grievance the state absorbed. The government conceded the man, not the critique.

Let us be precise about what changed. A single resignation, an assurance of examination reform and a hunger strike broken on a promise of accountability. What did not change is the labour market that sends engineers to construction sites and postgraduates to data-entry desks.

India’s system has learnt to metabolise dissent by surrendering a symbolic scalp while the underlying arithmetic holds firm.

Rakesh K Chitkara
Dubai, UAE

The exquisite gardens that Nolan left out of his film

After reading “Thank the gods” (House & Home, July 25), Robin Lane Fox’s skilful description of the exquisite gardens that were left out of Christopher Nolan’s film adaptation of Homer’s *Odyssey*, I can see that, had they been included, they would have offered a welcome respite from all the fighting.

David Otis Fuller
Bronxville, NY, US

Hockney’s theory for why Proust loved long sentences

I did enjoy Josh Spero’s piece on dealing with Proust in the age of TikTok (Life, Life & Arts, July 25). The article prompted a memory I have of a conversation with David Hockney, whom I met 50 years ago. We were talking about Proust. Readers might remember the French writer’s volumes are famously visible on the lower shelf of a studio trolley in Hockney’s portrait of his parents. The writer was also probably present in the artist’s mind when he spent some of his last years painting in Proust’s Normandy.

Hockney’s own theory about Proustian prose was that the usually extended sentences came from the writer’s asthma, encouraging him to express himself *à longue haleine*, to match the rhythm of his breathing. It was a theory that startled my tutor at Cambridge as a unfamiliar insight. A glimpse into Hockney’s own theorising about optics, space and time can be found in one of the first books Hockney gave me – Roger Shattuck’s *Proust’s Binoculars*. I am now finalising a short study on the subject.

Your columnist Spero – what a nicely optimistic name that is! – says he “will never stop” reading Proust.

For me, I have two rules of which Hockney approved: only read Proust when on the move, be that by train or plane or boat; and when finishing the novel, I simply start from the beginning again.

That way we best honour Proust’s kaleidoscope of observation and moving perspectives.

Jonathon Brown
Duranus, Alpes Maritimes, France

An entrenching of Britons’ attitudes to their politicians

Professor Tim Bale (Letters, July 25) is right to caution against assuming that every perceived crisis in politics is unprecedented. The British have always been sceptical about the motives of their politicians and their promises – quite sensibly, in my view.

Yet the latest evidence suggests there is more at work here. The British Social Attitudes study found that just 9 per cent of people now believe governments put the nation’s interests before those of their party most or all of the time, the lowest figure recorded by the study. Meanwhile, a record 83 per cent believe Britain’s system of governing needs a great deal or quite a lot of improvement. This is substantially higher than when comparable questions were asked by the Royal Commission on the Constitution during the political and economic turbulence of the 1970s. Scepticism about Britain’s democracy has reached levels that would have been hard to imagine a generation ago.

Mark Easton
Senior Fellow, National Centre for Social Research, London EC1, UK

Tall task facing Tate’s new director

In Jackie Wullschläger’s profile of Jessica Morgan, Tate’s new director (Life & Arts, July 25), your art critic recalls the comment Morgan made in 2024: “What a sorry place we are going to be in if we truly have to see yet another Rothko show and another Richter show and another Picasso show. I mean, I just want to slit my wrist honestly.”

There is a danger that Tate’s new boss is preaching to the choir rather than the congregation. Not all of us have the privilege of close acquaintance with Rothko, Richter or Picasso. Tate risks losing even more public support if it fails to broaden its appeal.

When I was recruited by Nicholas Serota to lead Tate’s fundraising in 2005, the case for extending Tate Modern never went beyond the need to accommodate more visitors who in the event failed to materialise. Visiting Tate Modern’s Blavatnik building today is a dispiriting experience, feeling like an empty shell. Most if not all exhibitions that charge an entry fee are in the original Tate Modern building. Meanwhile Tate Britain, notwithstanding a few blockbuster shows like Turner and Constable or the Whistler exhibition, seems stranded on the banks of the Thames at Pimlico.

Morgan is exceptionally well qualified to lead Tate and I wish her well. However, if she is to reverse Tate’s decline she must be clear what Tate is for and who it serves; that Tate must entertain as well as inform. She must be brave and dare to be popular.

John Nickson
Director, Tate Foundation 2005-2011, London W9, UK

Supermac and the perils of autocorrect

In the age of autocorrect, was Harold Macmillan, the Conservative prime minister known for his slogan “You’ve never had it so good”, destined to see his name misspelt as MacMillan (Letters, July 25)? Autocorrect may have its uses but we’ve all been caught out. And while on the subject of letter writing, how interesting that the sales of fountain pens continue to rise, but where can you buy a stamp without planning a long journey?

Susan Stevenson
London SW13, UK

Is PM behind productivity push at the FT crossword?

The average number of entries into which clues are entered in the daily FT crossword is pretty constant at 32. Last Friday (July 24), however, there were a surprising 36. Is our new prime minister behind this as part of a move to increase the nation’s productivity?

Nick Handley
Haywards Heath, West Sussex, UK

Opinion

Markets are getting AI right

TECHNOLOGY

Robert Armstrong



Despite what you may have heard about an inflating market bubble, the US stock market isn't rising. The once-hot S&P 500 has been cutting a herky-jerky path sideways for months. What happened? Back in May, the Magnificent Seven big tech stocks (Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia, Tesla) surrendered the market leadership they've held for years. For a few weeks, a group of semiconductor stocks including Micron and Broadcom took up the baton, but recently they have faded, too. This week, tech stocks' back-and-forth volatility has been especially intense, and a big AI-driven hedge fund,

Situational Awareness, blew up. It is tempting to say that markets are going mad, as they occasionally do. Amid the excitement of the AI revolution, tech stocks have become creatures of hype and price momentum. Now they are wobbling, and a panicked sell-off seems possible. There is always plenty of irrationality in stock prices, and valuations are frighteningly high at the moment. But the recent changes in market leadership do not reflect the madness of crowds. Instead, the market is struggling – as rationally as could be hoped – to answer a hard question: what is the competitive structure of the AI industry, or indeed of an economy where AI is everywhere? For investors, the competitive structure of industries, and the competitive position of companies within them, is by far the most important consideration. Consider the current industrial moment. We might call it the “increasing returns era”, after a paper the economist W Brian Arthur wrote 30 years ago. Arthur argued that unlike traditional

production industries, “knowledge industries” – we'd call them digital industries now – enjoy increasing returns to scale. They have high product development costs but near-zero unit costs, high switching costs and powerful network effects (that is, adding customers makes their products better). Arthur's paper proved prescient, predicting the ever-larger geysers of cash that would issue from the likes of Microsoft, Alphabet, Meta and Amazon. Knowledge businesses, in short, have very high barriers to competition once they reach a certain size. In operating system software, internet search or social media, even the best-funded competitor cannot dislodge a scaled-up incumbent. And barriers to entry determine the pattern of stock market outcomes. Most of the excess returns generated by stock markets over the long term come from a small coterie of companies with wide moats. Economic analyst Hendrik Bessembinder has shown that half of the net wealth creation in US stock markets over the last century

flowed from just 46 public companies, out of a total of almost 30,000. Looking at his list of the greatest wealth creators, the knowledge companies dominate the top spots, and all the winners have high walls around them. Few investors active today will recall a time before the increasing return era and the dominance of knowledge com-

Investors already recognise that tech companies are riskier than they were a few years ago

panies. Microsoft was already one of the biggest companies in the US in 1995. The possibility that AI might change the rules is hard to conceptualise. But we'd better try, because knowledge is exactly what AI threatens to commoditise. The threat operates at two levels. The first is that some knowledge businesses will be made obsolete by AI tools. This

possibility is what has rocked the shares of leading business software companies, the so-called “SaaSocalypse”. The second, far more disruptive level is that AI businesses may *themselves* have low barriers to entry – because the technology, while capital intensive, does not generate differentiated or defensible intellectual property. Frontier AI models will converge to near interchangeability, switching costs will be low and network effects will be minimal. Hardware depreciation and energy costs mean unit costs may not come down as far as they have for software or internet services. Unless model builders resort to collusion, intelligence will become a commodity, almost like electricity – which would be a bonanza for the economy, but a massive disappointment for investors. There are no electric utilities on Bessembinder's list of big wealth creators. Things might turn out differently. But the market takes the possibility of an AI industry with low returns very seriously. That is why US tech stocks

shudder when low-cost Chinese competitors release competitive models or chips. And it is why the semiconductors were unable to assume market leadership when the Mag 7 flagged: if Alphabet or Microsoft can't make outsized profits selling AI services, chipmakers' margins will have to fall, too. Markets, which for years have depended on the Mag 7 for leadership, will have to look elsewhere. The big US tech companies are – or possibly were – the best businesses in history. What markets are weighing now is the possibility that the era of increasing returns is over, and new forms of competition are on the way. Investors already recognise that tech companies are riskier than they were a few years ago, and are re-pricing them accordingly. And they are recognising that pre-digital forms of competitive advantage, from brands to distribution networks to manufacturing knowhow, may become relatively more valuable. Expect both patterns to continue.

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The campaign he started online while completing a master's degree brought millions on to the streets, writes *Michael Stott*

The man who humbled India's prime minister came home to a hero's welcome this week. Supporters and family members showered Abhijeet Dipke, the founder of the “Cockroach” youth movement, with rose petals and painted a red mark of blessing between his eyebrows as he returned to Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, the city where he grew up. Dipke's campaign against failings in India's education system morphed from memes to a mass movement in a matter of weeks, forcing Prime Minister Narendra Modi into a rare retreat. “It is a great pleasure to be home after such a long struggle,” said the bearded 30-year-old student leader. “If the media does not trouble me for the next few days, then I can live a normal life, as I did before.” That wish is unlikely to be granted. Instantly recognisable in his T-shirt and jeans, the inventor of the Cockroach Janta Party is now a household name. “I think he himself has been somewhat surprised by the turn of events,” says Chietigi Bajpae, a south Asia specialist at Chatham House. “In the very beginning, this was seen to be a satirical online movement. Then it became a lightning rod for the country's disaffected youth.” In May, such a dramatic change in India's political weather seemed improbable. Modi was riding high after his Bharatiya Janata Party had notched up the latest in a string of election victories. Dipke was finishing a postgraduate degree in public relations in Boston, Massachusetts, and applying for jobs. “None of this was intended,” Dipke told the FT in June. “It's just that when I read a comment of the Honourable Chief Justice of India comparing the youth with cockroaches or parasites merely for expressing their opinions . . . I felt really upset.” Using his prior experience as a social media volunteer for an opposition party, Dipke put together a satirical online campaign. Its website featured AI images of giant black cockroaches. “What,” Dipke posted on X, “if all cockroaches come together?” Millions of young people responded, frustrated by the difficulty of finding a well-paid job. Dipke's new followers demanded that he convert the online campaign into a real-life movement, so he returned to India and started a sit-in at Jantar Mantar, a protest site in Delhi. The government was confident the movement would fizzle. But the CJP leader is not one to shy away from challenges. Born into a family of Dalits, a historically marginalised caste, Dipke exhibits a quiet, steely determination. Drawing inspiration from his two heroes, non-violent independence movement leader Mahatma Gandhi and BR Ambedkar, a Dalit who shaped India's post-independence constitution, the CJP leader persisted. “He will always go into the crowd and very patiently listen to people because that is something he genuinely enjoys,” says Vaishnavi Gaur, a CJP



Person in the News | Abhijeet Dipke

The face of India's ‘cockroach’ protests

spokesperson. But, she adds, Dipke also knows his mind. “He will listen to everyone, but he will do what he wants to do.” On July 18, police intervened to remove a veteran rights activist on hunger strike in support of the CJP from Jantar Mantar. The protests suddenly ignited. Dipke's moment had come. Two days later, riot police fired tear gas at thousands of protesters marching on parliament and beat them with wooden sticks, sparking widespread outrage. The following weekend, the CJP's main target, education minister Dharmendra Pradhan, resigned and the government conceded the movement's other demands. What comes next is less clear. CJP leaders say they plan to take a break and then conduct a nationwide tour to listen to the concerns of the youth. But Modi is not standing still. “If the government can quickly get some visible things going, like the committee which has been set up [on exam reform],” says one senior official, “this

will contribute towards blunting the very limited agenda of the so-called CJP.” “There will be other distractions now,” he adds. “Modi's ability to come up with a disruptive idea is way more than these kids could think of.” Advaita Kala, a screenwriter and col-umnist, believes many young Indians could still vote BJP at the next general election in 2029 because they trust the government more than its adversaries. “Remember, we're into the 13th year of a Modi government and the opposition has repeatedly not turned up,” she says, noting that the main opposition Congress party only joined

the CJP protests in their final week. Ruchi Gupta, executive director of the non-partisan Future of India Foundation, notes that the CJP was the first protest movement to force out a minister in Modi's term. But she thinks Dipke has missed a golden opportunity to institutionalise his movement. “The fact that he did not tell us something about what his broader ambitions may be,” she says. “A political leader would have immediately converted this to an organisational framework.” For now, India's “Cockroach” leader is still trading on his brand of irreverent humour. When asked at his homecoming about Modi's belated attempts to win over the youth via Instagram, he replied: “He is doing an excellent job in that role. Perhaps he should step down as prime minister and become an influencer.” michael.stott@ft.com Additional reporting by Jyotsna Singh

China is smarter about subsidies than anyone else

FINANCE

Gillian Tett



What is driving the explosion of Chinese exports, which hit almost \$4tn last year? That question is creating deep angst among non-Chinese policymakers amid fears of a second “China shock”. It is an issue I have been considering myself recently, having just crossed China in an electric vehicle Silk Road convoy, where I saw up close the startling quality of its EVs, green tech and artificial intelligence. Witnessing all that, it is hard not to worry about how others will compete. And now a row about this has erupted between some Chinese economists and the OECD. Last month the Paris-based organisation reported that China's subsidies were three to eight times higher than its rich-world rivals in 2024, accounting for up to 60 per cent of its global market share gains between 2005 and 2023. This echoes repeated American and European complaints that China is using “unfair” tactics to undercut rivals. But Chinese economists such as Kai Guo argue that “subsidies are no longer the most convincing explanation for Chinese firms' growing competitiveness”. They accuse the OECD of miscalculating how cheap loans work – a point echoed by a paper from the World Economic Forum that finds little evidence of “broad, systematic below-market finance”. No doubt this debate will run and run. However, last week a thought-provoking perspective emerged in a much delayed paper from the IMF. This notes, correctly, that measuring subsidy levels is very hard, since data is poor and definitions vary. Thus, while OECD calculations include cheap loans, the IMF ones do not, instead “just” focusing on direct grants and aid. The paper makes three crucial points. First, even on a narrow definition, Chinese subsidies accounted for more than 2.5 per cent of value added in 2023, up from 1 per cent in 2015, or an average of around 1.8 per cent in this period. (This small number matters enormously when set against slim business margins.) Second, China is not alone in such government meddling. Far from it. In the US, government subsidies were 1.3 per cent of value added in this period, and 1 and 0.6 per cent respectively in Canada and the EU. Complaints from Washington about “unfair” Chinese state meddling thus look somewhat hypocritical. Third, not all subsidies are the same. Chinese subsidies were 3 per cent of value added in strategic industries such as semiconductors and tech hardware, helping that export boom, the IMF says. However, they were just 1 per cent of

value added in non-strategic sectors like agriculture. But in the US, subsidies were 2 per cent of value added in non-strategic sectors, and just 0.5 per cent in strategic ones. In the EU the ratio was 1 and 0.2 per cent. So China is backing strategic businesses, like green tech, while the west props up old sectors with political clout, like agriculture. US techies might retort they do better without state help. Maybe so. But there is another key issue the IMF paper does not cover: policy integration. When countries like China (or Singapore) subsidise strategic industries, as other IMF economists have noted, they often implement complementary measures, such as worker training or the installation of high-speed electricity transmission lines to support green tech. But America is less holistic. It is now implementing tariffs and backing strategic groups like chipmakers. However, as the economists Marc Fasteau and Ian Fletcher have noted, this is piecemeal. Worker training is limited, there are attacks on green energy (which is insane), and failure to install transmission lines. Hence China is leaping ahead with power generation, which matters for AI. So how should governments respond? In an ideal world, they would all immediately stop this mercantilist meddling, which is undermining global growth. Kristalina Georgieva, the head of the IMF, has begged China to slow its export flood by stimulating domestic demand.

Beijing is backing strategic businesses, while the west props up old sectors with political clout

“If it doesn't happen it could ironically be China, not the US, that destroys the rules-based trading system because . . . countries will be left with no option but to put tariffs on Chinese goods,” she told me in Saudi Arabia earlier this year. Emerging markets are suffering too. “China is one of the biggest risks to our external imbalance [and] we are trying to talk to our Chinese friends about how to fix this,” Mehmet Şimşek, Turkish finance minister, told me. But in the real world, Beijing is unlikely to change policy and the US equally unlikely to drop its tariffs. After all, the IMF calculates that if the 2015-2023 Chinese subsidy trends continue, “China's electronics exports increase by around 20 per cent over the long term”. We are in a brutally mercantilist age. So what EU governments, and others, must do is not just contemplate tariffs, but the nature of their industrial policies too. Supporting farmers while cutting funding for science, say, is mad. So is failing to invest in a joined-up electricity grid or training. Let us hope Donald Trump and his UK and EU counterparts understand this. Sadly, I doubt they do.

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Opinion

What our Epstein outrage has obscured

It's easy to shake our fists at a monster. It would be more effective to actually help exploited girls.



Nicholas Kristof

OKLAHOMA CITY Kanisha Hamilton became an expert on sex trafficking in the most unfortunate way, beginning at the age of 12. So whenever she heard talk about the Jeffrey Epstein case, "it triggered me bad," she recalled.

"I would wake up in the mornings and think about something that had to do with it, and just start crying uncontrollably," she told me. "Because I knew there are thousands if not more women, children and even men suffering at that moment. And everyone else in the world is just going about their business acting like they can't do anything."

"That's how people like that get away with sex trafficking people," she said.

One of the paradoxes of the moment is that there is intense outrage at Epstein and his enablers — as there should be — but almost no effort to protect the girls or boys who continue to be trafficked all around the country and the world. We are rightly appalled at the general indifference of powerful figures showed toward Epstein's assaults, yet collectively we show a parallel indifference to the predation that continues to unfold in cheap motels everywhere. The upshot is that exploitation of girls and boys continues daily at thousands of times the scale of anything Epstein did.

Hamilton's pathway began when she was around 6 months old and her mother, who was addicted to drugs, was murdered, she said. Her grandmother then traded her to a child molester for heroin, she said, and after

enduring abuse she ended up in the dysfunctional world of foster care. At 12 she joined her dad, a pimp who began selling her as well as the other women he controlled, she added.

We sometimes imagine that traffickers jump out of bushes, grab teenage girls and drag them into vans, to be chained to radiators. But I've been writing about trafficking for more than 25 years, and mostly the traffickers prey on girls who are already vulnerable. In need of housing, food or love, these girls are too often invisible to society — but not to pimps.

"There's just an overall misconception of what trafficking is, what it looks like," said Felicia Bowman, who was trafficked at the age of 7 by a friend's brother who was also a drug dealer.

"People think that it's a white van, it's the zip ties on your car at Target." She was referring to an urban legend that traffickers drive white commercial vans to kidnap girls, and mark kidnapping targets with zip ties.

"How do we hold the fact that it's all these vulnerabilities that we're not addressing?" she added. "Because then we're all accountable, and we're all responsible, and a lot of the problems that lead to that are so big."

Bowman had these vulnerabilities. A female family friend who watched over her took advantage of them and sold her for sex, she said. "She was making me sleep with people for money for drugs," Bowman recalled.

It's not just that we don't try to help these children. Often, we scorn them. We see them as bad kids, as troublemakers, as runaways, and we are lenient to those who abuse them.

Bowman says that when she was 12, a chain was arrested for sexually assaulting her. "He was found guilty," she said. "He got 30 days." Records document that.

I asked her if any mandatory reporters — teachers or doctors, for example — had seen evidence of her abuse and reported it to the authorities. On the contrary, she said, authorities who should have been looking out for her also abused her. One was caught and convicted, but his only punishment was house arrest.

It's no wonder that Bowman didn't trust authority figures. All they did was exploit her. I met Bowman and Hamilton through an impressive nonprofit called Dragonfly that serves trafficking survivors in Oklahoma. These local initiatives, offering everything from therapy to medical care to removal of pimp tattoos, are invaluable — but they are starved of resources. When a girl leaves a pimp, it can be a scramble to find a bed for her.

When help comes, it can be transformative. Both Hamilton and Bowman are now thriving and helping other survivors of human trafficking.

"We're underfunded, and the demand is insane for our services," said Whitney Anderson, a founder of Dragonfly. "What keeps us going is that these are individuals who have sur-

vived the worst of the worst. That they have seen things done to them that humans should never do, and they are in front of us. And so we owe them the very best."

If we were serious about confronting trafficking, we could boost support for these programs around the world. We could shut down websites where pimps advertise girls (and sometimes boys), as prosecutors did with Backpage, which once dominated the field.

We could insist that social media platforms crack down on traffickers who recruit on their pages using coded language (if 14-year-olds understand it, the companies can as well). We could make much greater efforts to prosecute pimps. And local D.A.s could prosecute johns to suppress the demand that keeps traffickers in business.

Most of all, we could do more to help families and children so that they're not in the pipeline to be trafficked. Girls in foster care are at particular risk; there are statistics on this, but after decades of these interviews I wouldn't be surprised if a girl in foster care is more likely to end up trafficked than to graduate from a four-year college.

Yet instead of helping these vulnerable children, we're magnifying the risks. President Trump's cuts in social services, such as for mental health and addiction treatment, may lead to more disadvantaged and chaotic homes and more trafficked children.

I'm on my annual "win a trip" journey, in which I pick a university student to travel on a reporting trip with me — this year, it's Brunella Tzipismana of Yale — and in Tulsa, we visited an outstanding pre-K system called Educare serving the neediest families. Educare seems to me a tool to build resiliency, improve outcomes and reduce addiction and trafficking, yet America has never been willing to invest in high-quality pre-K for the kids who most need it.

In Kentucky, we visited Freedom House, which helps moms overcoming addiction. If we were serious about trafficking, we would make such programs much more broadly available. But addiction treatment is underfunded in America, and Trump's Medicaid cuts next January will make the problem worse.

My quarrel with conservatives is that they defund programs that can, imperfectly, reduce the number of children vulnerable to exploitation. My quarrel with liberals is that they sometimes are so nonjudgmental that they favor legalizing sex work in ways that would also permit pimping (anyone who thinks pimps are business part-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TAMARA REYNOLDS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ners of girls doesn't understand the trade). My quarrel with the public is that our fury at Epstein's friends seems performative if in effect we shrug at children being sold for sex down the street.

Consider Cassidy Husband, who grew up in a dysfunctional home and ran away at the age of 13 into the arms of a pimp who said he loved her — and then started selling her. Now 29, she recalled working for many different pimps over the next 14 years, and they always kept the money. They often assigned her daily earnings quotas, and she risked a beating if she fell short. Her body is marked by tattoos from pimps trying to establish their ownership over her.

In her years on the street, Husband said she regularly recruited girls for her pimps. She looked for girls with broken sandals, or unkempt clothes or

hair, who lacked confidence. "Come on," she would tell the girl, "and we're going to take care of you." It was emotional manipulation of desperate, vulnerable young women, but it was not the kind of kidnapping that the public associates with human trafficking.

"It's really hard to bring awareness, I think, about child sex trafficking," said Husband, who is now off drugs, getting her tattoos removed and rebuilding her life. "Because a bag didn't get put over my head. I didn't get shoved into a van, that kind of thing."

If we truly think that Epstein was a monster, then what's needed isn't shaking our fists at his corpse. It's a real effort to help the girls and boys who, in cities around the country, are struggling in chaotic homes, desperate for help and not getting any at all.

Felicia Bowman, left, and Whitney Anderson, above, work to help survivors of trafficking in Oklahoma.



Give the boot to FIFA's private equity play

Soccer federations should stop FIFA's boss, Gianni Infantino, from selling it out.

Nathan Goldberg Crenier

Soccer, and the joy the game brings to billions of people worldwide, isn't just sport. It's a sacred public good. That makes FIFA, soccer's global governing body, the steward of a public trust, one that should be protected passionately. Instead, FIFA's president, Gianni Infantino, plans to sell a stake in future World Cup revenues to private ownership. FIFA announced Tuesday that it intends to form a new entity called FIFA Forward Enterprise that would centralize its biggest events, including the World Cup and Club World Cup, and handle "broadcast, sponsorship, licensing, ticketing and hospitality."

As announced, private investors led by Thrive Capital would buy 21 percent of FIFA Forward for \$4.2 billion. FIFA would retain a majority stake in the new entity and still regulate the game, including its tournaments, and supervise grass roots development.

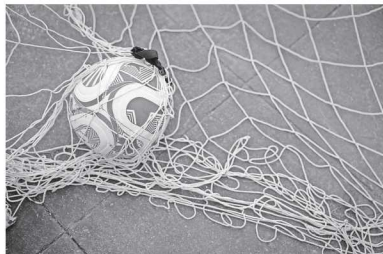
For the good of the game, soccer's regional federations should reject this hyper-commercialized and autocratic vision for the sport by reminding Mr. Infantino that soccer's soul is not his to sell. As the vice president of U.S. Soccer, I hope my regional colleagues will share my opinion and follow the example set by UEFA, the powerful organization that runs European soccer.

UEFA has threatened to quit FIFA competitions unless Mr. Infantino backs down. UEFA's charter includes the current world champion, Spain, along with the former World Cup winners France, Germany, Italy

and England. There's no true World Cup without them. Concealed, the continental federation that represents North America, Central America and the Caribbean, on Thursday also rejected the plan. Federation leaders across Africa, Asia, Oceania and South America should join the team for soccer's sake.

FIFA has a real obligation to leverage the sport's commercial value to invest in soccer development worldwide. Every kid from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe and from Alabama to Wyoming deserves an opportunity to allow the beautiful game to improve their lives, to teach them teamwork and fair play but not greed. FIFA can do that without Mr. Infantino's selling a significant piece of the World Cup — its crown jewel — to a private equity firm. FIFA is hardly strapped. The organization is expected to announce a record haul of \$15 billion for the recent World Cup, and the \$20 billion valuation of the new commercial venture Mr. Infantino is pitching assumes these numbers will keep increasing. The rising level of broadcast rights makes that an almost certain bet.

Mr. Infantino claims to be a champion of small countries, which lack the organization and budgets of the traditional powers. And yes, many FIFA members are underfunded relative to soccer's vast wealth; I experienced that when I worked for the St. Kitts and Nevis Football Association. But wouldn't they benefit more from continuing to have all future World Cup funds flowing back to FIFA, which is legally obligated to reinvest them into the growth of the game? Trading them to private interests for a one-time



REUTERS/DAVID J. PHILLIPS

payout is shortsighted.

Mr. Infantino is so desperate to sell the stakes that he imposed an arbitrary, 53-day deadline on soccer's regional federations to approve his plan. Why the rush? He could potentially stand to gain a salary in the tens of millions if he takes on the role of commissioner of the new entity after his term-limited FIFA presidency ends. The Times of London reported, "FIFA told the Times of London that such an arrangement had 'never been discussed.'" For Thrive Capital's founder, Josh Kushner, whose brother, Jared, is President Trump's son-in-law and adviser, it's the World Cup on a silver platter; for Mr. Infantino, it's a selfish and shameful golden parachute.

Transferring FIFA's economic ep-

center to private equity defies the spirit of soccer as a public good. Despite assurances to the contrary, it could alter decision-making power by granting profit-maximizing private-equity interests undue influence on the sport. And, considering FIFA's long track record of corruption, creating a more opaque financial structure could be a recipe for mischief.

Mr. Infantino says it's within FIFA's rights to accept private investment to advance its public mission. In a way, he's right; FIFA can do that, just like it was able to charge astronomical prices this summer for World Cup tickets and still find eager buyers. But safeguarding our sport means drawing sensible and ethical distinctions between what FIFA can do and what FIFA should do,

a nuance that Mr. Infantino has failed to grasp repeatedly.

The way we got here lays bare another fatal flaw in Mr. Infantino's leadership: He behaves as if he's "the king of soccer," as President Trump described him, who can rule the sport by fiat. According to members of the FIFA Council — its main decision-making group — he kept them in the dark about this project, which would transform FIFA forever, until the news leaked publicly. If this is how he envisions the management of soccer's future — plans hatched with private investors and relayed later to soccer leaders — then he is not fit to look after our sport.

Mr. Infantino's disdain for good governance has strained FIFA to a breaking point. He lauds soccer's democratic values while making further funding for FIFA member federations conditional on their vote, an approach closer to mob extortion than to democracy. To defeat Mr. Infantino's egotistic and transactional intentions for the sport, federations around the world need to act not only against Mr. Infantino's vision but also against Mr. Infantino himself.

I strongly believe FIFA can continue to fulfill its mission of developing the sport commercially while respecting the notion that some cultural resources should be preserved for public benefit. We cannot move FIFA forward with a leader whose sole goal is to sell out soccer for personal gain.

NATHAN GOLDBERG CRENIER, formerly the chief soccer officer at Gotham FC of the National Women's Soccer League, now attends Harvard Law School.

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EDITORIAL

Cash reward will help members of struggling families to work again

Helping welfare recipients regain self-reliance is a laudable mission. With the right support and incentives, many can join the workforce and get back on their feet. This also helps invigorate the economy and curb public spending.

Hong Kong officials should be commended for piloting a new cash reward for those opting out of the social safety net. By shifting from the Comprehensive Social Security Allowance scheme (CSSA) to the Working Family Allowance programme (WFA), which supports low-income households, participants can receive a bonus of up to HK\$45,000 over a three-year period.

The "workfare" approach is worth implementing as it offers a dignified pathway out of dependence. It also helps restore people's self-esteem and provide a financial runway to a stable job and income. At a time when the city is grappling with acute staffing shortages in sectors such as restaurants, retail, construction and caregiving, the initiative can unleash new economic vitality by tapping into this underutilised labour pool. With the estimated annual CSSA bill hitting HK\$23 billion in 2025-26, or 3.9 per cent of total recurrent government expenditure, officials must explore ways to contain the ballooning social welfare budget in the long run.

Offering a financial carrot for welfare recipients to work again is only the first step. To enhance participation and sustainability, practical measures should be in place to help aspirants overcome hurdles. For single parents, this means more childcare support facilities and fewer rigid rules to help them qualify for the bonus. More proactive job-matching services are also needed to facilitate the switch.

As of May, more than 256,000 residents were on CSSA, whose payments vary by household size, age and health status. A single able-bodied adult receives HK\$3,055 per month, while a bigger family with no disabled members will get HK\$2,195 to HK\$3,310 per head. The WFA monthly payments range from HK\$575 to HK\$1,610, along with a monthly child allowance of between HK\$805 and HK\$1,610 for each child.

When circumstances allow, most people prefer self-reliance rather than living on the dole. Welfare recipients will naturally weigh the benefits of the schemes and their situation before making a decision. That is why the new initiative must come with well-thought-out measures and the flexibility to help people overcome the hurdles to working. With the right incentive and support, the scheme can transform passive welfare into active empowerment, which is a win-win for personal and family development, economic vitality and the public coffers.

HK on right road for driverless technology

Driverless cars are another lap closer to becoming a fixture on Hong Kong roads after the authorities related rules to allow testing of such vehicles at the airport without backup human operators behind the wheel. It is a welcome milestone on the path to safe adoption of technology expected to tackle transport sector costs and manpower challenges as well as help the city become a global springboard for autonomous vehicle innovation.

The Transport Department announced on July 23 that safety requirements were met during earlier remote operation tests of the technology developed by Chinese tech giant Baidu. While human drivers will not be longer for the ride, standby controllers will continue to monitor test trips remotely.

Since first licensed in November 2024, the company has expanded the trials from Chek Lap Kok to other parts of North Lantau, Kowloon East and Southern district. Fleet size and speed limits have been increased as designated passenger test runs were conducted.

Some worry that Hong Kong is still moving too slowly. Driverless ride-hailing is already in use in markets including the United States, where Waymo runs autonomous taxi services. Amazon's Zoox is testing robotaxis in San Francisco and Las Vegas. Apollo Go has deployed fleets in mainland cities such as Shenzhen.

But the authorities deserve credit for a flexible regulatory approach that has gradually pushed limits while maintaining safety and contingency protocols. One important reason to get it right is that mainland vehicles are left-hand drive. Hong Kong's opposite traffic pattern requires right-hand drive – a configuration used by roughly a third of the world including the United Kingdom, Japan and India. Real-world data and operational experience compiled in the city's dense, complex urban grid is just what developers on the mainland need to prepare for international expansion. They gain a competitive edge from testing frontier technologies in a place where safety standards are honed under international regulatory frameworks.

The city and the nation can benefit from the merging of mainland technological prowess with Hong Kong's role as a global innovation hub for the next phase of the autonomous driving journey.

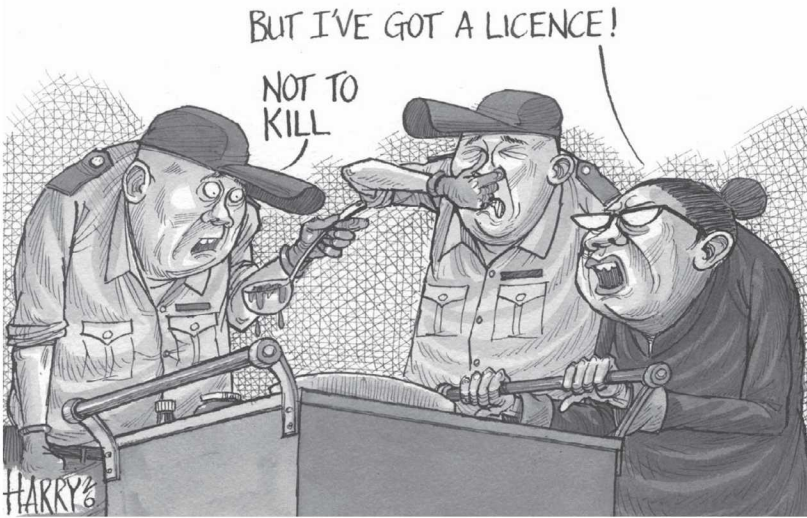
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OPINION

HARRY'S VIEW ON THE CRACKDOWN ON UNLICENSED FOOD HAWKERS



Self-reliance success

David Dodwell says while China's export surge is an accidental consequence of self-sufficiency and competitive firms, the solution is not protectionism

Not a day passes without someone in Europe or the United States complaining about China's "overproduction" and "China shock 2.0". The narrative is of a deliberate, subversive Chinese strategy, underpinned by subsidies, to undermine the manufacturing economies of the West and exert economic hegemony worldwide.

Inaccurate as the narrative may be, it is widely accepted and used to justify demands for protection. The larger China's trade surpluses, the louder the likely clamour from Western industrial lobbies. Frustrating as it may feel for China's manufacturers, ignoring the clamour is likely to be a mistake. China's export success is undeniable, as is the sense of threat felt across many sectors in Europe and the US.

While China was exporting cheap consumer goods, they were tolerated, even welcomed. But today's sophisticated exports, including many indispensable components in even the most sophisticated Western products, constitute a different level of threat. They threaten not just jobs but national pride. Many also claim they are threats to national security.

And this sense of threat can only spread as more Europeans and Americans realise the astonishing range of sectors in which Chinese companies have advanced to the forefront.

It's bad enough with solar panels, wind farms, batteries and magnets. Worse still with world-leading electric vehicles, robots, high-speed trains and shipbuilders. Or artificial intelligence companies biting at the heels of frontier US firms. Or the rare earths virtually monopolised by China that are essential to the 21st century's green and internet-based innovations.

But how many have ever thought about sectors like pharmaceuticals and materials sciences, industrial chemicals, food sciences or biotechnology? Few are aware that China's chemists make over 60 per cent of

the world's citric acid, essential in most food products, and a significant share of sweeteners, thickeners, preservatives and food colourants.

Few are also aware that China's pharmacologists account for 30 per cent of global novel drug development. China dominates in active pharmaceutical ingredients and accounts for 41 per cent of pharmaceutical key starting materials for drugs approved for use in the US. Like rare earths, these are largely invisible but absolutely essential.

China's biotechnology sector is world-leading, particularly in targeted cancer therapies, and researching new therapies for diabetes and obesity. This leadership comes not from subsidies, but from the sad reality that China has the world's largest elderly population, the largest number of diabetics and around 30 per cent of its youth from six to 18 years old are clinically obese. Beijing's primary motivation has been to tackle China's health problems.

Another quirky insight into China's capacity to shock comes from its massive monkey business until 2020, when exports stopped because of Covid-19. China had for a decade or more been the world's largest source of laboratory monkeys. The seven US primate research centres, which used 70,000 monkeys a year in drug testing, neuroscience, reproductive biology and transplant research, used to import around 40,000 from China.

The impact on US pharmaceutical research has been dramatic: fewer (and more expensive) monkeys means less research and fewer new drugs. Instead of exporting the monkeys, China now uses them at home, enabling significant growth in medical research and becoming a world-leading exporter of frontier medical therapies – where there will doubtless soon be complaints of "overproduction".

China's relentless export surge is more an accidental consequence of a policy of self-sufficiency and

self-reliance. Nevertheless, the further its manufacturers shift from low-value-added segments of the supply chain into the high-value-added segments that until recently were the preserve of manufacturing behemoths in the US and Europe, the louder the clamour for protection from China's exports.

China's BVD produced 4.6 million electric vehicles last year and exported over 1 million, or nearly 23 per cent. But Germany manufactured 4.15 million cars last year and exported over 76 per cent. And in Japan, Toyota alone produced 10.5 million cars last year but sold only 14.2 per cent of those in Japan. Which of these are systemic "overproducers"?

A subset of the charge of Chinese overproduction is, of course, the role of subsidies, a source of contention in trade for decades. It is true that strategically focused (and usually time-limited) subsidies sit firmly at the heart of China's industry policies. But these are aimed primarily at lifting the domestic economy.

The more successful China is in lifting the livelihoods of its massive population, the more likely it is that comparatively cheap and increasingly sophisticated Chinese products will attract buyers overseas in large numbers. Chinese export success is not the direct aim of its fiercely competitive manufacturers but an inevitable by-product, against which tariffs will provide only temporary defence. There is no denying the problem. But sustainable solutions must go beyond knee-jerk protection.

David Dodwell is CEO of the trade policy and international relations consultancy Strategic Access

Despite its power, US delivers neither butter nor bullets

Alex Lo says while Americans know they cannot get the healthcare they need, their leaders must realise the military cannot give them world domination

In America today, many low-income workers and households can't get adequate healthcare or pay for food. Depending on who you ask, medical costs are the number one cause for anxiety among the top causes of bankruptcy for families.

This is despite the United States spending more on healthcare per capita than any developed economy within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and having the most advanced medical science and technology in the world.

Healthcare is one good indicator of social malaise. Another is people's ability to put food on the table.

Here's a statement from this week's The Washington Post: "Families are paying for groceries with revolving debt, which then traps them into accumulating years of interest payments for food they've long since consumed."

According to the Guardian, more than a million children – or 4 million Americans in total – across the US have lost access to federal food assistance benefits in the past 12 months.

Chinese social media posts call such social vulnerabilities in the US the "kill line" to describe a financial and social tipping point that could ruin middle-class families.

But if there is not enough "butter", despite America's awesome wealth, there may not be enough "bullets" for its leaders, despite its unprecedented military power.

Since the end of World War II, the US has repeatedly lost big wars to far inferior forces in Vietnam, Iraq and

Afghanistan. The disastrous War of Pigs invasion against Cuba failed almost as soon as it started.

The US can claim a few small outright victories: the number one Caribbean in 1983, Panama in 1989-1990, and, for now, Venezuela, where the Trump regime is exercising neo-imperial control.

The first Gulf war was a big win indeed, but its unfinished business with Saddam Hussein led to the debacle of the second Gulf War. The US has the most expensive military in the history of the world. But it's increasingly apparent that it doesn't deliver bang for its buck, or even dollar for dollar.

The Pentagon, which the US federal government spends the most on after health, entitlement programmes and interest on the debt, seems to have no idea where some of its money has gone. It has failed mandated annual audits eight times, making it the only federal agency never to pass a single review since nationwide audits began.

And US President Donald Trump now wants US\$1.5 trillion for the Pentagon's next annual budget. Some people will get very rich.

The need to provide butter and/or bullets is a classic dilemma with trade-offs for nations.

The US has been so wealthy for so long that it has tried to sustain rapidly rising spending on both butter and bullets in recent years.

Most Americans know their country has the most advanced medical care in the world, but it is not necessarily affordable or accessible to them.

Meanwhile, American ruling elites think they have the most powerful military in the history of the world. But either they have failed their military or the military has failed them. Perhaps both. Trump's misadventure in Iran is the latest and most obvious example.

His domestic critics have rounded on him over Iran. No doubt he deserves all the criticism and caricature. But he is not the first, only the latest, in a long line of US leaders who have mistakenly thought the power of the US military would deliver what their heart desires.

Here's an interesting headline from The New York Times: "Trump Sees Trapped by Iran War, Even as He Wields the World's Biggest Hammer". The standard says: "A president who thought there were no limits to his power has discovered several, leaving him more frustrated and erratic."

The Times analysis further observes: "Mr. Trump, once confident that overwhelming force would enable him to pursue in Iran what he proudly called the 'Venezuela model' – a change of government to one amenable to US control – is now hesitant to plunge back into major combat operations that his intelligence agencies assess are unlikely to work as well in Tehran." The "Venezuela model", really? There is a big difference between Iran's defence capabilities and geopolitical leverage and Venezuela's.

Just as many ordinary Americans know they can't get the welfare benefits they need and deserve, it's time American leaders realise their military can't give them world domination any more.

The sooner they realise their limitations, the safer it is for the whole world.

Alex Lo has been an SCMP columnist since 2012, commenting on China and international affairs. He is also a member of the editorial writing team

OPINION

Roiling the ocean

Sophie Wushuang Yi says China and the Philippines can avert clashes over a crumbling ship

As the Philippines hosted Southeast Asian foreign ministers in late July, the sea would not stay quiet. On July 20, Chinese and Philippine crews fought beside the BRP Sierra Madre with oars and batons; one Filipino sailor was reportedly injured while each side blamed the other.

Days later, with Foreign Minister Wang Yi and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the security forum, Philippine vessels went to the Scarborough Shoal. Manila said Chinese ships used water cannons on Philippine ships, while Beijing said it drove off vessels that had ignored repeated warnings.

Rather than focusing on who moved first, the more useful question is the point of contention: the BRP Sierra Madre – a 1944 tank landing ship grounded on the reef in 1999 – is reportedly collapsing. Its state is debated; the severity is not. Chinese analysts claim the hull has large holes and is taking on water.

This is what the July 2024 provisional arrangement on the contested shoal could never resolve. In the Chinese account, the trouble began on July 9 when drones filmed Philippine workers rigging cables around the Sierra Madre's hull. The boat involved in the incident on July 20 was documenting that work when Philippine crews went out to confront it.

Philippine Foreign Secretary Theresa Lazaro has rejected Beijing's claims that Manila's actions represented a breach of the arrangement. "There is no mention of that undertaking in the provisional understanding," Lazaro said, adding that the deal

did not bar construction or repairs on the Sierra Madre. The Department of Foreign Affairs has said the Philippines alone is entitled to build on the shoal and need not seek Chinese permission to sail there.

The terms of the agreement were never published. Manila has asked Beijing to produce the document to support its claims.

Philippine officials have offered varying accounts, with Defence Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr saying he knew of no such agreement. Antonio Carpio, a retired Supreme Court justice and one of the architects of the Philippines' 2016 arbitration court victory over China, warned of a potential bind if Beijing's assertion that Manila agreed not to build on or resupply the Sierra Madre was true. There is no text by which to judge the claims.

The outpost needs steel and cement more than groceries. An understanding that covers food while leaving reinforcement contested will collapse with the hull.

When the ship eventually fails, whoever is there to evacuate those on board and clear the wreckage will shape what replaces it. Beijing keeps a permanent presence at Mischief Reef about 20 nautical miles away, while Manila can reach its position only intermittently by boat.

Manila has another card it can play beyond reinforcing the Sierra Madre: publicity. Automatic identification system (AIS) data analysis indicates that Chinese coastguard patrols at the Scarborough Shoal rose sharply in the first half of 2026, while Philippine patrols increased but remained less frequent. AIS records are incomplete and do not by themselves settle

questions of control, but they point to an operational imbalance.

During the July 20 encounter, Manila said its vessels completed their resupply mission and left after water cannon attacks continued for a second day. It reported nine Chinese coastguard ships and one Chinese maritime militia vessel nearby. Releasing footage of incidents lets Manila turn an uneven physical contest into a more competitive narrative one, especially when incidents coincide with major meetings.

“An understanding that covers food while leaving reinforcement contested will collapse with the hull”

That the Sierra Madre's hull is failing is one reason – alongside sovereignty and alliance politics – for the reinforcement and the claim to a right of construction. Beijing sees that reinforcement as an attempt to entrench a permanent structure in breach of the status quo it says is protected by the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea between Associates of Southeast Asian Nations members and China.

Beijing has long demanded that the Sierra Madre be towed away rather than maintained. The effect of Chinese efforts to block entrance to the shoal is to let time

work in its favour, regardless of whether Beijing presents its policy in those terms.

However, the vessel is not the ultimate goal for either side. Manila's inability to hold the shoal physically has led it to draw in the United States and Japan to make it an alliance asset. Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr received foreign ministers from the US, Japan and Australia last week, while Philippine, US and Japanese forces held joint defence drills in the South China Sea from July 21-25.

When Marcos summoned Chinese ambassador Jing Quan on July 21, he also pushed for a reset in relations. Wang met Lazaro the next day in the first minister-level meeting between the two sides since 2024, while on the same day Wang only had a brief exchange with Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi. The contrast suggests that Beijing remains more willing to see if relations with Manila can be stabilised while relations with Tokyo remain frozen.

This is why the simple fix keeps not happening. What can be delivered to the Sierra Madre and what happens when its hull goes could be agreed without either side surrendering its claim. However, neither government treats this as a technical problem, instead seeing the alliance question behind it.

The ship will fail on the ocean's schedule. Until that happens, the alternatives are to produce a written agreement or keep quarrelling over a disintegrating vessel and hoping nobody miscalculates first.

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LETTERS

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China's zero-carbon factories and future of manufacturing

The European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism entered into force on July 1, exposing export-oriented companies in China to the shock of rising carbon costs. Estimates suggest Chinese steelmakers will face additional export costs of up to 690 yuan (HK\$800) per tonne of steel, reducing their price competitiveness.

Also in January, five Chinese government agencies jointly issued the Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Construction of Zero-Carbon Factories. The purpose of this isn't to impose more environmental burdens on manufacturers; rather, it is to establish a "green balance sheet" that transforms carbon emissions from an external cost into a measurable and recognisable asset.

The deeper economic function of turning emissions into measurable assets lies in addressing information asymmetry with regard to the ownership and valuation of environmental rights. Once a factory's carbon reductions, renewable electricity usage and other sustainability indicators are certified by third parties as transferable assets, investments such as rooftop solar panels and energy-saving equipment, previously regarded as pure costs, can begin to qualify as balance sheet assets. The deeper significance of building zero-carbon factories lies in creating a form of "green currency" backed by national credibility. Rather than a mere tool of compliance, it represents an attempt to shape global standards. In October last year, China released its national zero-carbon factory evaluation guidelines for the electronic industry. If these standards become mandatory for accessing global supply chains, the country that defines the standards will increasingly influence the international pricing power of green products.

However, the other side of precise carbon valuation is precise differentiation. The high costs of zero-carbon certification and industrial upgrading favour large corporations with stronger financial resources. In contrast, the vast numbers of small and medium-sized manufacturers often lack bargaining power and the ability to afford independent third-party certification. Without targeted financial support, zero-carbon certification risks becoming a new industrial barrier.

Another concern is the credibility of the system. If verification standards are too lenient or the cost of falsification remains low, zero-carbon certification could become a tool for greenwashing, diverting valuable green finance resources and undermining the international credibility of China's carbon accounting standards.

The transformation from carbon emission costs to green asset returns will not happen automatically. The success of zero-carbon factories will not depend on policy enthusiasm alone, but on whether China can establish a rigorous institutional framework in which environmental rights are auditable, traceable and monetisable.

Wanqing Emily Su, Beijing

Inability to travel makes the heart grow fonder

I refer to "Fewer opportunities, less passion, no clue? How the US-China experts are feeling" (July 18). What if the phenomenon described could be summed up as "a wish granted is a wish killed"? I know I must elaborate.

When I joined St Petersburg University in 1981, graduating foreign students were told to encourage the "As the earth is round, we'll meet again". For them, it was true since they could travel abroad freely. Unlike them, I, a Soviet student from Kyzyl in Siberia, couldn't. So instead I was learning English, reading English papers and listening to the BBC World Service on my short-wave radio. When I myself graduated in 1986, our reformist leader at the time, Mikhail Gorbachev, granted my wish by opening borders. So I travelled throughout Europe, but, upon my word, my interest in the cultural mores of other countries was killed.

Something similar must have happened to Americans, whose wish to learn about China during the Cold War has since been killed by Chinese reforms.

Mergen Mongush, Moscow

We should work towards a beautiful and clean city

News on deteriorating water pipes and the increasing number of rats caught prompts me to encourage the government to put more emphasis on addressing these livelihood issues. I am reminded of the Lap Sap Chung ("litterbug") campaign of 1972.

It is good that we are known as a wealth hub and destination for family offices. However, this only benefits the top echelon of our population.

As the population ages, we are doing enough to address this demographic shift. Our city is also ageing. Many old buildings are eyesores and need to be renovated or redevelped so we can be a beautiful city attracting more tourists. The other issue is health-related. A cleaner city would help minimise the risk of diseases spreading. The rat issue, if no further action is taken, could put us at higher risk of epidemics such as the plague, leptospirosis and hantavirus.

The mainland has done a great job updating cities and developing modern, beautiful and clean metropolises. We should be doing the same with our five-year plan. Perhaps the government should consider initiating a "beautiful Hong Kong" campaign.

Paul M.F. Cheng, Mid-Levels



Illustration: Victor Sanjinez

Zero-sum outlook on US-China contest misses the point

Andrew Sheng says we should be focusing on how to avoid conflict and tackle mutual threats

Who will win the next war? That is the question posed on the cover of the latest Foreign Affairs magazine which explores, among other things, the US-China military and technological rivalry. At its core is a clash of strategic philosophies between the US-led order and China's world view, which has propelled the latter's rise to the world's second great power.

The magazine's contributors reflect an ingrained Western strategic tradition, rooted in liberal realism, that says the US must maintain its primacy to underwrite stability, defend democracy and retain its financial, technological and military power. Any challenger is inherently revisionist.

Lead essayist Paul Schreier argues that new technologies in drones, artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics challenge not only America's air and naval power but also allow states such as Iran to conduct asymmetric warfare.

Former US Pacific commander Admiral Dennis Blair reinforces this view, arguing that China's military build-up is not defensive but designed to overturn the status quo in East Asia. He advocates deterrence, using US alliances, forward deployments and technological leadership.

Academics Michael Beckley and Hal Brands apply the Anglo-American strategic views of land-based "heartland" (introduced by British geographer Halford Mackinder) and coast-based "rimland" (developed by Dutch-American political scientist Nicholas Spykman) in framing the US-China contest as an age-old struggle between incumbent maritime powers

consolidating their positions against land-based revisionists.

They correctly argue that the "autocratic axis" is united less by ideology than by a shared resentment of US dominance, while the democratic coalition is fractured by competing interests and sometimes opposite views on how to engage Beijing. On the other hand, Chinese strategic thought, rooted in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and contemporary Chinese statecraft, sees the contest as a reversion to global balance after five centuries of Western dominance. Where the Western alliance hitherto subscribed to the US-led order as the foundation of global stability, the Chinese and the Global South argue that the existing order is rigged to preserve Western hegemony.

The land-based powers of the Asian heartland – China, Russia, Iran and North Korea – say they are being encircled by the maritime powers of the rimland (led by the US), which controls chokepoints in not just key trade routes but also in technology, finance and supply chain networks.

The most striking divergence lies in how each side defines victory and conflict. Many

Western strategic thinkers think in zero-sum terms: either the US sustains its primacy or China imposes an authoritarian model on the region. How to ensure victory comes down to how the US and its allies organise themselves to prevail.

Contemporary Chinese statecraft, drawing on more than two millennia of philosophy and coping with hostile neighbours, seeks a more complex approach that prizes winning without fighting, shaping perceptions and levers in, and striking a balance through soft and hard power.

Where Americans value fast, massively resourced and decisive moves in technology, finance and hard and soft power, Chinese think and act in dialectical terms. There is continual play with no final outcomes, only a balance between harmony and conflict with multiple actors, taking into consideration natural disasters and other random events.

The US, in investing in AI and technology, is searching for the silver bullet that removes revisionist rivals. On the other hand, Iranians and Chinese have learned from the Vietnam war that the countryside surrounds the cities and the masses will eventually erode elite impatience.

In the fields of AI and robotics, the game is a choice between closed-source models preferred by US tech firms and open-source Chinese models that deliver almost similar performance at a fraction of the price. In short, the contest is about strategic patience, the best and brightest vs the mass scalar and the cheapskate.

After the Vietnam war, Pulitzer Prize winner David Halberstam drew multiple

lessons from America's biggest strategic defeat in his book *The Best and the Brightest*. He wrote that the loss was not caused by a lack of resources or courage but by the arrogance of elites who believed superior technology, systems, firepower and data could override history, culture and local reality. The elites suffered from groupthink, which filtered out dissent and facts that contradicted their self-referential truths. They valued metrics but ignored a reality politically inconvenient to measure.

So who will win the next war? For those who cannot envision a world outside a zero-sum paradigm, it is either the US or China. For complex system practitioners who can, the premise of the question is to be rejected. No one wins in a nuclear war that could obliterate not just rivals but everyone else.

The right question is how can we avoid conflict and work towards ending mutual threats, such as climate change, excessive natural resource depletion and human injustices?

What makes this contest so dangerous is that both sides might be underestimating the other and overestimating their own advantages. They do not engage in knowing both themselves and the other side, which can breed escalation. AI models hallucinate when asked questions they struggle to answer. Until all sides acknowledge that global stability depends on conversation and mutual understanding, meaning that the future world order must accommodate more than one power's view, we will sleepwalk into another unending conflict.

Andrew Sheng is a former central banker who writes on global issues from an Asian perspective

“What makes this contest so dangerous is that both sides might be underestimating the other”