Opinion

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Every golfer needs a mulligan in life

FAIRWAY FILES

Rahil Gangjee

THEY SAY GOLF is like life. I'd argue it's exactly like life — only more expensive, more humiliating, and with more people pretending they didn't see you cheat.

If you've ever picked up a club, you know the quiet magic of the mulligan. For normal people, that's an unofficial second chance. You tee it up, take a mighty swing, and watch in horror as the ball dribbles six feet — or worse, rockets into your playing partner's parked golf buggy. Your buddies exchange awkward glances, sigh, and say, "Go on then, take another one." Congratulations, you've just been gifted a mulligan — golf's greatest mercy and mankind's laziest excuse for terrible shots.

No rulebook allows it. The PGA Tour definitely doesn't. Trust me, I've asked — politely, repeatedly, and once in a panic after my opening tee shot almost killed a duck. The answer is always no. But out here, where grown adults weep quietly over three-putts and lost balls, the mulligan is sacred. It's our collective nod to imperfection. It's also how weekend golfers survive without hurling themselves into the nearest water hazard. If you ask me, we should be handing out mulligans in real life too. The world would be far less grumpy if we all walked around with a pocketful of "do-overs." I've cashed in plenty myself. I'm not exactly built like your typical long-drive champion — I'm not the tallest guy on the block. Back when I was starting out, folks would take one look at me and assume I'd need a running start just to reach the fairway. Then I'd pull out my driver, swing like my life depended on it, and watch jaws drop as the ball sailed 300 yards. I lived for that look. That was my mulligan for every time someone mistook me for the caddie.

But don't get me wrong — I've hit more bad shots than I care to admit. I once topped my opening tee shot so pathetically it bounced, scuttled off the tee box, and almost took out a squirrel minding its own business. Some kind soul in my group offered me a mulligan. I refused, out of misplaced pro pride. Instead, I hacked the ball out sideways, spent 20 minutes in the jungle, and made a triple bogey anyway. Moral of the story? Sometimes your pride needs a mulligan more than your golf swing does.

Honestly, the best mulligans aren't even on the golf course. They're the tiny second chances people give you when you least deserve them. I've spent more days in airports and hotel rooms than I care to count. I forget birthdays. I miss anniversaries. I've shown up at family dinners on the wrong day — twice. And yet my parents still feed me, my friends still answer my calls at 1 am, and no one's disowned me yet. Mulligans.

My friends deserve medals. I'm that guy who promises to call you back "in five minutes" — and resurfaces six months later, asking if you want to grab a midnight biryani. And they do. No guilt trip. No emotional lecture. Just raita, good gossip, and a gentle reminder that I owe them a million calls back.

And relationships? If you think your golf swing is unpredictable, try dating a golfer who's away half the year. Every couple has their version of the shanked wedge: you forget an anniversary, you mess up a heartfelt apology, you think "It's just a date, I'll be back from practice in time" — and you're not. If you're lucky, your partner sighs, shakes their head, and hands you a mulligan. If you're smart, you learn to swing better the second time. If you're me, you promise dinner and biryani as insurance.

Let's not forget careers. Golf is glamorous for about 30 seconds — the moment you're lifting a trophy. The rest of the time, it's a series of quiet crises: missed cuts, sponsor anxiety, the occasional existential meltdown when your driver suddenly thinks it's a garden spade. One bad season can make you question every life choice since your first plastic golf club at age four. But sometimes you get lucky. A sponsor sticks by you. A coach tweaks something tiny in your swing. A three-week slump ends with a good round at just the right time. Mulligan.

And then there's biryani — because no column of mine is complete without it. Picture this: you're starving after 18 holes, your body is sore, your brain is fried. You order biryani from a new place. Big mistake. What arrives is stale rice, a single piece of suspicious chicken, and a boiled egg thrown in like an insult. That first bite tastes like heartbreak. But life gives you a mulligan: next weekend, you go to your tried-and-tested joint, ask the guy for extra masala and raita, and redemption is served piping hot on a steel plate.

The older I get, the more I realise that the secret isn't waiting for a mulligan — it's giving them. To yourself, first. Golf is merciless. It wants you to remember every fluffed chip, every lip-out putt, every lost bet to your smug buddy who thinks he's Ernie Els. If you drag that misery to the next hole, you're done. You have to stand up, shrug, and say, "Next shot's going straight, definitely probably maybe." That's golf. That's life.

> **The best mulligans aren't even on the golf course. They're the tiny second chances people give you when you least deserve them**

People screw up. So do we. That WhatsApp left on 'Read'? Mulligan. That birthday you forgot? Mulligan — plus cake. That friend who borrowed your putter three years ago and never returned it? Mulligan — but keep your driver locked up next time.

One of my favourite moments was at a driving contest once. I stood there surrounded by blokes who looked like they'd just stepped off a rugby field. No one gave the short guy a second glance. Then I smashed one straight down the middle, 300-plus. The big guys just stared. Sometimes, the best mulligan is the one you give to yourself when everyone underestimates you — then you prove them wrong just for fun.

So here's my free swing advice: take your mulligans. Give them too. Life's rough enough without us hoarding forgiveness like we're afraid it'll run out. When you mess up — on the course, in the kitchen, at work, in love — tee it up again, smile at your buddies, and let it rip. The best shots are always the next ones. And if you see me topping my tee shot into the trees, do what any good golfer would do: look the other way, pretend you didn't see a thing, and quietly whisper, "Mulligan, bro."

See you on the fairway — I'll be the guy with the short height, big drive, and a spare biryani recommendation if you need it.

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

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram

Electoral roll revision exercise afoot in Patna

EXPRESS PHOTO: RAHUL SHARMA

'Mischief thou art afoot'

The inevitable conclusion is that SIR is not an exercise to enable eligible citizens to enroll and vote. It is a dark, sinister plot to *disenfranchise* millions of poor, marginalised or migrant citizens. Over to the Supreme Court on July 28

IF A POPULAR vote had been taken between 1991 and 1996, the Election Commission of India (ECI) would have been certainly voted as the best and most effective institution of India — even higher than the Constitutional Courts. Thanks to T N Seshan, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), the ECI's independence, integrity and impartiality (the three 'I's) were universally acclaimed. After Seshan, the CECs who stoutly defended the three 'I's were M S Gill, Mr J M Lyngdoh, Mr T S Krishnamurthy, Navin Chawla and Mr S Y Quraishi. Other CECs drifted in and drifted out, sometimes bending and sometimes appearing to be unbending. CECs appointed in the last 12 years were, viewed through the prism of the Constitution, disasters.

Independence

ECI is an autonomous institution. In the early years, the conduct of elections was not considered a great challenge. People voted according to the wishes of local satraps, some sections were not allowed to vote but they were too poor and powerless to complain, and there was no political challenge to the Congress. Elections became challenging after 1967. The governments between 1965 and 2014 did not interfere with the functioning of the ECI, nor do I recall any *accusation* of interference. Some elections to the *state assemblies* were alleged to have been rigged but the allegation was not against the political party ruling at the Centre but against the incompetence of the ECI.

The Lok Sabha election of 2014 was a free and fair election. Since then, most of the elections to the Lok Sabha or the State Assemblies have been subject to widespread criticism of incompetence, rigging, fraud and worse. Since 2014, ECI has faced numerous challenges and it has emerged with its reputation severely scathed.

Apropos the election to the Maharashtra Assembly in November 2024, the electoral rolls became a subject of controversy. The allegations are that (i) an unusually large number of new —and perhaps ghost — names were added to the lists of voters and that (ii) an unusually large number of persons were allowed to vote long after polling hours had ended. ECI has attempted to defend itself against both charges but the jury is out.

Integrity

Another bitterly contested state election is in the offing — in Bihar — and, next year, more are due. Bihar is a test case. Barely four months before the state will go to the polls, ECI has started a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls. This is unusual and unprecedented. An electoral roll is usually updated on January 1 of the year and a summary revision is done on the eve of the polls. The summary revision will *include* names of new and unenrolled voters and *exclude* dead or permanently migrated voters from the *current* electoral rolls. The bulk of the *current* electoral rolls will be intact and untouched. Besides, the inclusion and exclusion will be done with the full knowledge and participation of the political parties. Each case for *inclusion* will be carefully scrutinised and each case for *exclusion* will be decided after a full contest and hearing.

SIR is different. It effectively *scraps* the current electoral rolls. Despite the claim that SIR is based on the 2003 electoral rolls, it effectively starts from a zero base and constructs *new* electoral rolls for each constituency. Besides, the onus is shifted to the voter: despite his/her name being in the current electoral rolls and despite having had a right to vote (and in most cases having voted) in the Bihar Assembly elections of 2020 or the Lok Sabha elections of 2024, he/she must apply for inclusion with documents to prove his/her *citizenship*. And all this is expected to be done between June 25 and July 26.

Impartiality

The fine print of the exercise is not to enable enrollment but to place insurmountable hurdles in the path to enroll and vote. The ECI has prescribed 11 documents as 'proof' of citizenship: four of them do not contain information on *place of birth* and two of them have not been issued to any person in Bihar. So, effectively, there are only five documents (including caste certificate issued by revenue officers) to prove one's citizenship. Passport, birth certificate or government employee ID are available to only 2.4 to 5% of the population of Bihar. Conspicuous by their absence are (1) Aadhaar, (2) EPIC or voter-identity card issued by the ECI and (3) ration card. When the Supreme Court asked ECI why the three missing documents cannot be included for the purpose of SIR, the ECI had no ready answer. The irony is residency and caste certificates are issued by revenue officers based on Aadhaar; while the residency or caste certificate is valid for SIR, the Aadhaar is invalid!

The only rational part of SIR is that dead persons and double-entry names must be removed. ECI has estimated that 17.5 lakh voters have migrated but that does not mean they are no longer domiciled in Bihar or will not return to vote. The CEO, Bihar uploaded a form for enrollment of out-of-state voters on July 15 and expects to complete the exercise by July 26!

The inevitable conclusion is that SIR is not an exercise to enable eligible citizens to enroll and vote. It is a dark, sinister plot to *disenfranchise* millions of poor, marginalised or migrant citizens. Over to the Supreme Court on July 28.

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FIFTH COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

Time to get beyond history books

LET ME BEGIN with an admission. I am not averse to school history books being revisited or revised by historians from the RSS school of history. For far too long, they were written by dogmatic leftists who chose in the name of secularism to exalt the 'great Moghuls', and diminish Hindu rulers and their often-magnificent achievements. The books they wrote were mostly so boring that people like me, who now read history books with fascination, ended up asleep in history class. In the moments that I was awake, I did notice that there were three periods of history that were taught: ancient India, Moghul and British.

What I learned about pre-Islamic India was so little that it was not until I was an adult that I heard of the mighty south Indian dynasties and discovered the wonders of Hindu civilisation. It was on holidays in Indonesia and Cambodia that I saw the extent to which India's civilisation had influenced language, culture and religion across the east. Angkor Wat and Borobudur left me stunned by their beauty and scale. So, if there is a bit of revisionist history being introduced into school textbooks, I have no problem at all. The Moghuls did tear down temples and impose taxes on us idol-worshippers, and the truth about these things should never have been concealed. Not from Hindu children or Muslim.

My problem is that I wish some of those leading this new history movement would spare time to examine the current state of our schools and the abysmal quality of teaching. I have said before in this column that when I travel to a village, almost the first thing I try to see is the local school. And the truth is that not the best of these schools would be considered a real school by modern international standards.

In the best government schools, there are at least classrooms with desks and teachers, but you need only spend 10 minutes in one of these classes to discover that teaching methods are primitive. Children are taught not to think or develop a love of learning, but to learn by rote. Just enough to pass their examinations. They usually leave school with basic literacy instead of a real education, so they cannot compete with children who go to good private schools. They are, nevertheless, the lucky ones.

In the worst schools, especially those that have been built for Dalit and Adivasi children, there are no classrooms, no desks, no textbooks and often only a token teacher who teaches all the subjects they are meant to study. These teachers are very well paid by rural standards, but they usually live outside the village and are rarely available after school hours. Children who might not have fully understood what they were taught can turn to nobody for help because often, their parents are illiterate.

My point is that instead of wallowing eternally in the glories of our glorious past, it is time to address the problems of today. What difference will the new history textbooks make, if most schoolchildren are unable to read them? Another problem I have with the current exercise in rewriting history books is that they seem mostly to draw attention to the evils perpetuated by the Moghuls and other Muslim rulers. Is this just another deliberate attempt to make Hindu children hate Muslims? The British Raj did many bad things that were whitewashed in school textbooks, why is this not also being reviewed?

We now have a new Nalanda University to remind us of the legendary Buddhist institution that once existed here and was destroyed by a barbaric Muslim invader. But why is it that nobody has noticed the decay that infects most other universities? Anyone who has visited the great universities in the West knows that we do not have a single great university in India. This is why some of our best teachers have become academic refugees in countries that have real universities. This is why Indian students who can afford it go abroad for higher studies. Why is it that in the higher echelons of the RSS nobody has noticed yet that instead of wallowing in our 'glorious past' we should be trying to create a glorious present?

When Narendra Modi put Smriti Irani in charge of education in his first term as prime minister, I was a loyal Modi Bhakt. So, although I was taken aback by this startling choice, I tried to go and talk to the minister to persuade her that one reason why higher education was in the doldrums was because of too much interference by politicians and high officials. I told her that a bold and important move would be to disband the University Grants Commission. She paid no attention, and this obsolete institution continues to micromanage the affairs of universities to their detriment. A Higher Education Commission of India is meant to replace it soon, but universities do not need more control but less. Why do we need officials poking their noses into the realms of academia at all?

Speaking of political interference in education, may I say that the Home Minister is completely wrong in trying to discourage Indians from learning English. It is the lingua franca of today and Indians must continue to learn it because the advantages that they have when they venture out into the world are beyond measure.

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India's millet standard gains recognition at Codex executive committee meet in Rome

The Committee, chaired by India and co-chaired by Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal, reviewed the progress of its work during a five-day meeting that concluded at the FAO Headquarters in Rome on Friday

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, 19 JULY

India's leadership in developing a group standard for whole millet grains, approved during the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC47) last year, was appreciated during the 88th Session of the Executive Committee of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CCEXEC88), held at the FAO Headquarters in Rome recently.

The Committee, which concluded its five-day meeting on Friday, reviewed the progress of this work, which is being chaired by India with Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal as co-chairs. The terms of reference for the same were finalised at the 11th Session of the Codex Committee on Cereals, Pulses and Legumes (CCCPL11) held in April 2025.

India, as an elected member of the Executive Committee of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CCEXEC), participated in the session, which was inaugurated by Mr. Godfrey Magwenzi, Deputy Director General and Director of Cabinet, FAO, and Dr. Jeremy Farrar, Assistant Director-General, Health Promotion and Disease Prevention and Control, WHO. The event was attended by Dr. Allan Azegele, Chairperson of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, Ms. Sarah Cahill, Secretary of the Commission, and other elected representatives from member countries.

CCEXEC88 critically reviewed the works chaired by India on the new standards of fresh dates as recommended by the 23rd session of the Codex Committee on Fresh Fruits and Vegetables (CCFFV23) held in February this year.

The Executive Committee appreciated the efforts of the CCFFV and India in finalising these standards and endorsed them for further approval at the 48th session of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC48) scheduled for November 2025. India will also serve as co-chair in new work proposals to develop standards for fresh turmeric and fresh broccoli.

India actively participated in discussions on the monitoring framework for the Codex Strategic Plan 2026–2031, where SMART Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were finalised for endorsement at CAC48.

India recommended that monitoring indicators should be outcome-based, measurable and considered. India also informed about its capacity-building programme for neighbouring countries like Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Timor Leste, etc., which has been recognised by the FAO. It is noteworthy that India has been chairing the Codex Committee on Spices and Culinary Herbs (CCSCH) since its inception in 2014.

India also encouraged less active Codex member countries to utilise the Codex Trust Fund (CTF) for mentorship and twinning programmes. Drawing from its successful CTF-supported training and capacity-building initiatives with Bhutan and Nepal, India proposed the inclusion of such training efforts as indicators toward achieving strategic goals.

BJP using agencies to suppress Oppn's voice: Priyanka Gandhi on ED arresting Bhupesh Baghel's son

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE
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Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra Saturday slammed the BJP government for allegedly using the Enforcement Directorate to silence opposition voices. Her supposition comes after the ED Friday arrested Chaitanya Baghel, son of former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel, in connection with a money laundering case linked to an alleged liquor scam.

Taking to platform X, Priyanka Gandhi alleged that the BJP government has "dedicated all the forests of Chhattisgarh to Adani ji," violating the PESA law and NGT directives. She claimed that the ED arrested Chaitanya Baghel to prevent Bhupesh Baghel from raising this issue in the state assembly.

"Over the past 11 years, the country has clearly understood that these are tactics to suppress the voice of the people and oppress the opposition. But it is impossible to suppress the truth or intimidate the opposition with such tactics. Every single Congress worker stands firmly with Baghel ji," Priyanka Gandhi claimed.

Meanwhile, Bhupesh Baghel has alleged that the central agencies were being misused to target opposition leaders but trusts the judiciary and will cooperate with the investigation.

MIB hosts startup meet in Hyderabad to boost AI-led language solutions

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, 19 JULY

Bridging the linguistic divides by adopting AI-based solutions, in order to ensure inclusive communication and last-mile information delivery in every language across the country, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting held a meeting with Incubators and Startups from across the country, in Hyderabad today.

The meeting chaired by MI&B Secretary Sanjay Jaju included the companies working on AI/ML-based technology solutions at the T-Hub. Those who were part of the meeting included the CEO of T-Hub and the Startups being incubated at T Hub, representatives of IIT Hyderabad, Centres of Excellence of NITs and Engineering institutions with active innovation cells.

Addressing the meeting Jaju said that, in line with the vision of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi to encourage creator economy of the country, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has set up the WaveX Startup Accelerator Platform.

He further informed that the platform has launched 'Kalaa Setu' and the 'Bhasha Setu' challenges which would be significant in building a future-ready digital ecosystem.

Jaju also urged India's leading AI startups to participate in the above challenges and develop indigenous, scalable solutions that reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the nation.

Startups can register and apply for the 'Kalaa Setu' and the 'Bhasha Setu' challenges through the WAVEX portal. The final shortlisted teams will present their solutions before a national jury in New Delhi, with the winner receiving an MoU for full-scale development, pilot support with AIR, DD, and PIB, and incubation under the WAVEX Innovation Platform.

A statement from the ministry stated that WaveX is the dedicated startup accelerator platform launched under the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting's WAVES initiative, aimed at nurturing innovation in the media, entertainment, and language technology sectors.

Karunanidhi's eldest son & yesteryear actor M K Muthu passes away

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE
CHENNAI, 19 JULY

With the rise of MGR in the ranks of the Dravidian movement and particularly in the DMK, Karunanidhi pushed Muthu into politics and films, grooming him as his heir. He acted in a few films opposite the reigning heroines of that time, sporting a hairstyle and mannerism akin to that of MGR. But the look-alike couldn't succeed.

M K Muthu, eldest son of late DMK patriarch M K Karunanidhi from his first wife, thrust into politics and filmdom by his ambitious father to counter his rival and iconic actor MG Ramachandran (MGR), passed away at his residence in Injambakkam in suburban Chennai on Saturday.

He was 77 and is survived by his wife, a son and a daughter. According to family sources, he was unwell for some years and passed away at around 8 a.m.

He was born in 1948 and after the untimely death of his mother, Padmavathi. He married Dayalu Ammal, the mother of M K Alagiri, Chief Minister M K Stalin, MK Tamilarasu, now deceased, Selvi. Kanimozhi, MP, is the daughter of Rajathi Ammal.

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Neither could he last in films nor in the 1970s politics, and fell out with his father, leaving Karunanidhi to opt for options from the sons of his second wife Dayalu, Alagiri and Stalin, with the latter emerging to head the political estate of the patriarch.

In an emotional post on 'X', condoling the death, Stalin wrote on X: "He always showered on me love and affection like that of a parent, considering my growth as his own and encouraged me. The news of his demise has struck me as a thunderbolt. Whenever we met, he used to share the evergreen memories of the past.

Though he had passed away due to old age, the eldest in the family of Kalaignar Karunanidhi, will continue to live in our hearts and in the hearts of the masses as an artist besides the movie songs he had immortalised."

"Named as Muthu after his grandfather, Muthuvelar, he acted in a double role in his very first film, 'Pillaiyo Pillai', after starting his career in theatre. Gifted with a majestic voice, his song on Nagore Dargah, is an evergreen one," the Chief Minister added.

He also paid floral tributes to Muthu's body at Injambakkam. The Chief Minister's engagements for the day stand cancelled. His ministerial colleagues and DMK leaders too paid homage to the departed soul.

The body of Muthu is being taken to the Gopalapuram residence of Karunanidhi, where it will be kept in state for the public to pay homage. The last rites will be held in the evening.

CDS emphasises tri-services synergy during visit to DSSC Wellington

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, 19 JULY

Emphasizing on the important aspects of Tri-Services synergy, Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan connected it with the successful operations undertaken by the Indian armed forces during Operation Sindoor.

Chauhan was addressing the student officers of the 81st Staff Course, Permanent staff of the College and station officers during his visit to the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington in Tamil Nadu, today.

The 45-week 81st Staff Course is presently underway at the College. The present course comprises 500 student officers, including 45 from 35 friendly countries.

While interacting with the faculty of the college, General Anil Chauhan laid stress on Integration and Jointness imperatives, Capability Development, Aatmanirbharta and an in-depth understanding of the transformative changes being pursued in the military.

The CDS was also briefed by the DSSC Commandant Lt Gen Virendra Vats on the ongoing training activities at the College, where emphasis is being laid on fostering jointness and inter-services awareness, specifically with the institutionalisation of the Deep Purple Division.

Will sell tickets and screen honey trap videos, says Maha Congress MLA Vijay Wadettiwar

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, 19 JULY

Congress MLA Vijay Wadettiwar said here on Saturday that his party has a compact disc (CD) containing alleged honey trap videos of senior Maharashtra government officials and politicians, which would be screened after selling tickets.

The matter came to light after the wife of one of the allegedly honey trapped and blackmailed officers lodged a complaint at the Mumbai Naka police station in Nashik district, submitting a video as evidence. As many as 72 senior government officials including IAS and IPS officials have been allegedly honey trapped. Names of these officials and some former ministers have been kept confidential by the government. Some of the ministers hail from North Maharashtra and their names have appeared in police complaints, sources said.

"We have a CD of the Nashik honey trap case. Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said that there is neither any honey nor any trap, but the opposition has a lot of information about it. This is such a big case. There are many big people in it. There is no need to say much about it. When we screen the CD, we will have to do so after selling each ticket for Rs 10,000 or Rs 20,000. There is such strong evidence in it that only invitees will have to be called for the screening," Congress MLA Vijay Wadettiwar said.

However, Congress leader Nana Patole said: "Important documents of the Maharashtra state government have fallen into the hands of anti-social elements due to this honey trap racket. Maharashtra will have to bear the consequences. We told the government about it in the Legislative Assembly. When I showed the pen drive in the assembly, the Speaker told me to keep it with me. We cannot show it publicly because many families will be ruined because of it. But why is the Chief Minister hiding this? Why is he causing damage to Maharashtra?"

Patole alleged that Thane, Nashik and Mantralaya (Maharashtra state secretariat building near the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly building) in Mumbai have become honey trap centres, but the government hasn't taken any note of it.

TG govt to resume work at ill-fated SLBC tunnel

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE
HYDERABAD, 19 JULY

Telangana government is all set to resume tunnelling operations in the Srisailam Left Bank Canal (SLBC), where a cave-in had resulted in the deaths of eight workers in February this year. Despite several attempts, bodies of only two out of eight workers buried alive could be retrieved after months. State irrigation minister N Uttam Kumar Reddy described the SLBC tunnel as a crucial lifeline for Telangana and directed officials to resume tunnelling operations for the remaining 10 km, saying it should be treated as a top priority.

Reddy held a review meeting on the SLBC tunnel in which noted tunnel engineering expert Colonel Parkshit Mehra, who joined the irrigation department on deputation, participated. He was also part of the rescue team that had worked for months to retrieve the bodies from the SLBC tunnel. General Harpal Singh, former engineer-in-chief of the Indian Army, will also soon join the department.

The two ex-military personnel have been roped in to complete the challenging SLBC tunnel project. Despite the technical challenge posed by the SLBC tunnel, the government is keen to complete the project, which will bring water from Srisailam Dam to Nalgonda and Khammam districts and irrigate four lakh acres. The irrigation minister said, "Its completion must be treated as a top priority and executed with agency." He iterated that the cost would not be a constraint, but quality and speed must be maintained at the highest standards.

The minister directed officials to resume tunnelling, drilling and blasting in the SLBC tunnel. The irrigation department is collaborating with the Geological Survey of India and the National Geophysical Research Institute (NGRI) to use the latest electromagnetic survey technology. The minister directed officials to expedite LIDAR Survey. The project was taken up during the tenure of YS Rajasekhar Reddy in the united Andhra Pradesh. After the formation of Telangana, the BRS did not proceed with the project, considering the challenges. It was resumed only after the Congress government assumed office but the tragedy in February again halted work.

TN cooperative dept now seeks NOC from nationalised banks for PACS crop loans

AGENCIES
CHENNAI, 19 JULY

After facing widespread criticism over the mandatory CIBIL verification for crop loans, the Tamil Nadu Cooperative Department has introduced another controversial requirement for farmers seeking credit through Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS).

According to a recent directive, farmers must now obtain a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from a nationalised bank to be eligible for loans under the cooperative system.

The new instruction, issued through a departmental circular, mandates that farmers secure a NOC from the branch manager of a nationalised bank located in their area or where they maintain an account.

This directive comes in the wake of an earlier order dated 26 May, which required all crop loans disbursed through Kisan Credit Cards to undergo CIBIL score verification.

That move had already triggered sharp backlash from various farmer associations across the state.

Esan Murugasamy, founder of the Tamilaga Vivasayigal Pathukappu Sangam, strongly criticised the department's decision, claiming it was yet another tactic to discourage farmers from approaching PACS.

"Whether it is a CIBIL score, a CIBIL report, or now a NOC, the burden on farmers is the same. These measures are driving them into the clutches of commercial banks and increasing their debt risk," he said.

Farmer groups argue that cooperative loans were originally designed to provide easy, affordable credit to small and marginal farmers, and these additional requirements defeat that purpose.

They fear that the mounting bureaucratic hurdles will erode trust in PACS and force more farmers to turn to commercial lending institutions with higher interest rates and stricter repayment terms.

BJP has no shame after copying our guarantees in Bihar: Karnataka CM

AGENCIES
MYSURU, 19 JULY

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has thrown a direct challenge to the BJP and JD-S, saying that the development work undertaken by his government is the best response to their false propaganda, adding that the BJP has no shame after copying our poll guarantees in Bihar to win the upcoming Assembly election.

"We have taken the government to the doorsteps of the people. I invite them (BJP and JD-S) for an open debate on this," the Chief Minister said.

He was speaking after inaugurating and laying foundation stones for various development works worth Rs 2,578 crore here as part of the state government's two-year performance outreach event named 'Saadhana Samavesha'.

The event was described as the show of strength of CM Siddaramaiah.

"Let BJP and JD-S leaders, who are misleading the public with a series of lies, come together on a single platform. Let us have an open debate on our government's development work - I will also participate," he said while challenging the BJP and JD-S.

"BJP has no shame after copying our guarantees in Bihar to win election," the Chief Minister chided the BJP and JD-S.

He criticised the BJP for spreading misinformation that the state government has no money for development.

"Today's inauguration of Rs 2,578 crore worth of development works is the answer. BJP and JD-S should not be so envious. Their intolerance towards our developmental efforts is evident."

He also said that the BJP has never come to power in Karnataka on its own strength.

"Every time, they've come to power through the backdoor using 'Operation Kamala'. Similarly, JD-S leader Kumaraswamy has never been able to form a government on his own. Those who have failed to earn the love, trust, and support of the people have no moral right to criticise our government," Siddaramaiah added.

"The BJP and JD-S do not stand for the interests of the state or its people. Every year, the state pays a huge amount in taxes to the Centre, but in return receives only a fraction. Leaders like Union Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy, Union Minister Pralhad Joshi, and BJP MP Basavaraj Bommai do not have the courage to raise this injustice before Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Their silence is a betrayal of the people of Karnataka."

US envoy says Syria and Israel agree to ceasefire

The announcement came as renewed clashes erupted between Druze groups and Bedouin clans

AGENCIES
MAZRAA, 19 JULY

US envoy to Syria Tom Barrack said early Saturday that Israel and Syria had agreed to a ceasefire following Israel's intervention this week in fighting between Syrian government forces and rival armed groups.

The announcement came as renewed clashes erupted between Druze groups and Bedouin clans and Syria's president said he would send troops back in to quell the fighting, which has left tens of thousands of people displaced in a worsening humanitarian crisis.

Barrack said in a statement posted on social platform X that the new ceasefire between Israel and Syria was supported by Turkey, Jordan and other neighbouring countries and called for "Druze, Bedouins, and Sunnis to put down their weapons and together with other minorities build a new and united Syrian identity in peace and prosperity with its neighbours."

He did not share any details on the agreement.

Clashes began Sunday between Druze militias and local Sunni Muslim Bedouin tribes in Syria's southern Sweida province. Government forces intervened, nominally to restore order, but ended up taking the Bedouins' side against the Druze.

Israel intervened in defence of the Druze, launching dozens of airstrikes on convoys of government fighters and even striking the Syrian Defence Ministry headquarters in central Damascus. The Druze form a substantial community in Israel, where they are seen as a loyal minority and often serve in the Israeli military.

The fighting killed hundreds of people over four days, with allegations that Syrian government-affiliated fighters executed Druze civilians and looted and burned homes.

On Wednesday, the Syrian government reached a truce with Druze groups, mediated by the USA, Turkey and Arab countries, and began withdrawing its forces from the province.

Under the accord, Druze factions and clerics were to maintain the internal security in Sweida as government forces pulled out, Syria's interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa said Thursday.

By late Thursday, clashes were flaring again between the Druze and Bedouin groups in parts of Sweida province, and on Friday al-Sharaa said that the government would send in a "specialised force to break up clashes and resolve the conflict on the ground."

Over 30 Palestinians killed trying to reach US group's food distribution sites

AGENCIES
DEIR AL BALAH, 19 JULY

Israeli troops opened fire Saturday toward crowds of Palestinians seeking food from distribution hubs run by a US-, Israeli-backed group in southern Gaza, killing at least 32 people, according to witnesses and hospital officials.

The two incidents occurred near hubs operated by the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation. In other violence, two Palestinians were killed in an Israeli airstrike in Gaza City, health officials said.

The GHF launched operations in late May with backing from the USA and Israel. The two governments are seeking to replace the traditional UN-led aid distribution system in Gaza, saying that Hamas militants siphon off supplies. The UN denies the allegation.

While the GHF says it has distributed millions of meals to hungry Palestinians, local health officials and witnesses say that hundreds of people have been killed by Israeli army fire as they try to reach the distribution hubs.

The army, which is not at the sites but secures them from a distance, says it only fires warning shots if crowds get too close to its forces.

The GHF, which employs private armed guards, says there have been no deadly shootings at its sites, though this week, 20 people were killed at one of its locations, most of them in a stampede. The group accused Hamas agitators of causing a panic, but gave no evidence to back the claim.

In a statement, the GHF said there were no incidents at or near its sites. It said the reported Israeli shootings occurred far from the sites and hours before they opened. "We have repeatedly warned aid seekers not to travel to our sites overnight and early morning hours," it said.

The Israeli military said it had fired "warning shots" near Rafah after a group of suspects approached troops and ignored calls to keep their distance.

Trump sues *Wall Street Journal* and media mogul Rupert Murdoch over reporting on Epstein ties

AGENCIES
WASHINGTON , 19 JULY

President Donald Trump filed a $10 billion lawsuit against *The Wall Street Journal* and media mogul Rupert Murdoch Friday, a day after the newspaper published a story reporting on his ties to wealthy financier Jeffrey Epstein.

The move came shortly after the Justice Department asked a federal court on Friday to unseal grand jury transcripts in Epstein's sex trafficking case, as the administration seeks to contain the firestorm that erupted after it announced that it would not be releasing additional files from the case, despite previously pledging to do so.

The controversy has created a major fissure between Trump and his loyal base, with some of his most vocal supporters slamming the White House for the way it has handled the case, and questioning why Trump would not want the documents made public.

Trump had promised to sue *The Wall Street Journal* almost immediately after the paper put a new spotlight on his well-documented relationship with Epstein by publishing an article that described a sexually suggestive letter that the newspaper says bore Trump's name and was included in a 2003 album compiled for Epstein's 50th birthday.

Trump denied writing the letter, calling the story "false, malicious, and defamatory."

The suit, filed in filed in federal court in Miami, accuses the paper and its reporters of having "knowingly and recklessly" published "numerous false, defamatory, and disparaging statements," which, it alleges, caused "overwhelming financial and reputational harm" to the president.

In a post on his Truth Social site, Trump cast the lawsuit as part of his efforts to punish news outlets, including *ABC* and *CBS*, which both reached multimillion-dollar settlement deals with the president after he took them to court.

Russia pounds Ukraine with over 300 drones, killing 1 in Odesa

AGENCIES
KYIV, 19 JULY

Russia launched a massive attack on Ukraine overnight into Saturday with hundreds of drones, killing at least one person, part of a stepped-up bombing campaign that has dashed hopes for a breakthrough in efforts to end the more than three-year-old war.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy posted on X, saying Russia fired over 300 drones, along with more than 30 cruise missiles.

One person died when Russian forces attacked the Black Sea port city of Odesa with more than 20 drones and a missile, the city's mayor, Hennadii Trukhanov, said Saturday on Telegram, while five people were rescued when a fire broke out in a residential high-rise building.

According to Zelenskyy, six other people were wounded in the attack on Odesa, including a child, and critical infrastructure was damaged in Ukraine's northeastern Sumy region.

The Ukrainian president also thanked international leaders "who understand how important it is to promptly implement our agreements" aimed at boosting Ukraine's defence capabilities, including joint weapons production, drone manufacturing, and the supply of air defence systems.

Russia has been intensifying its long-range attacks on Ukrainian cities. It now often batters Ukraine with more drones in a single night than it did during some entire months in 2024, and analysts say the barrages are likely to escalate. On 8 July, Russia unleashed more than 700 drones — a record.

Russia's Defence Ministry said it shot down 71 Ukrainian drones overnight into Saturday. Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said that 13 drones were shot down as they approached the Russian capital.

Trump's tariff threat pushes Lula's popularity & worsens legal troubles for Brazil's ex-leader

AGENCIES
SAO PAULO, 19 JULY

US President Donald Trump may have thought that pressuring Brazil with higher tariffs would help his ally, the country's former President Jair Bolsonaro, but the move apparently backfired.

Last week, Trump sent a letter to Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva threatening a 50 per cent import tax and directly linking the decision to Bolsonaro's trial, which he called a "witch hunt."

"This trial should end immediately!" Trump wrote Thursday evening in a second letter, this one addressed to Bolsonaro. He added that he had "strongly voiced" his disapproval through his tariff policy.

Rather than backing down, Brazil's Supreme Court escalated the case, worsening Bolsonaro's legal troubles. On Friday morning, federal police raided Bolsonaro's home and political office. The former president was ordered to wear an ankle monitor, banned from using social media, and hit with other restrictions.

Meanwhile, President Lula — who was facing higher unpopularity, growing opposition in Congress and increasing risks to his likely reelection bid — seems to have gained politically from the situation. Now the 79-year-old leftist Lula, in office for the third non-consecutive term of his long political career, is seeing renewed acceptance, congressional support against Trump and pleas to run one last time to defend Brazil's sovereignty.

Lula has appeared more energised in public since Trump's announcement. At a national students assembly Thursday, he wore a blue cap reading "Sovereign Brazil Unites Us" — a contrast to MAGA's red cap.

"A gringo will not give orders to this president," he told the crowd, and called the tariff hike "unacceptable blackmail."

Loss for Ishiba could worsen Japan's instability in face of high American tariffs and rising prices

AGENCIES
TOKYO, 19 JULY

Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba faces an increasingly uphill battle in Sunday's upper house election, and a loss could worsen political instability at a time of daunting challenges, such as rising prices and high American tariffs.

A poor performance would not immediately trigger a change of government but it would deepen uncertainty over his fate and Japan's future path.

The ruling Liberal Democratic Party suffered a humiliating loss in a lower house election in October as its usual supporters registered their unhappiness over past corruption scandals and high prices. Ishiba is struggling to regain voter confidence.

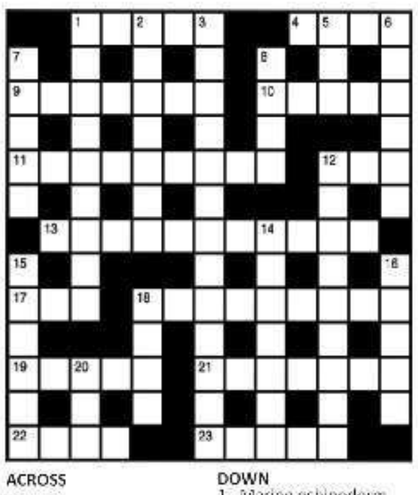
His minority government has since been forced into making concessions to the opposition to get legislation through the Diet, or parliament.

That has hindered its ability to quickly deliver effective measures to curb rising prices and win wage increases. On top of shortages and soaring prices for rice, a traditional staple, Ishiba has been stymied by President Donald Trump's tariff demands.

Frustrated voters are rapidly turning to emerging populist parties, including one that is promoting anti-foreign policies and backpedaling on gender equality and diversity.

LEISURE

10 MINUTE CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1 Adhered (5)
4 Was indebted to (4)
9 Communication and contact (7)
10 Majestic (5)
11 Predatory fish (9)
12 Habitual drunkard (3)
13 Saviour from hostile takeover (3,6)
17 Prohibition (3)
18 Not resolved (9)
19 Group of witches (5)
21 Curly lock of hair (7)
22 Of sound mind (4)
23 Surrender (5)

DOWN
1 Marine echinoderm (3,6)
2 Social climber (7)
3 American horse race (8,5)
5 Hairpiece (3)
6 Water clown (6)
7 Spherical map (5)
8 Operatic song (4)
12 Arranged in a timetable (9)
14 Make furious (7)
15 Counting frame (5)
16 Supplement (3,2)
18 Forearm bone (4)
20 Commercial vehicle (3)

SOLUTIONS TO YESTERDAY'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS
1 Pry,
3 Sin,
5 Decks (Price index),
8 Trace,
9 Tabloid,
10 Telephoto
lens,
11 En masse,
17 Toilet-trained,
19 Bird flu,
20 Iraqi,
21 Easel,
22 Ton,
23 Try.

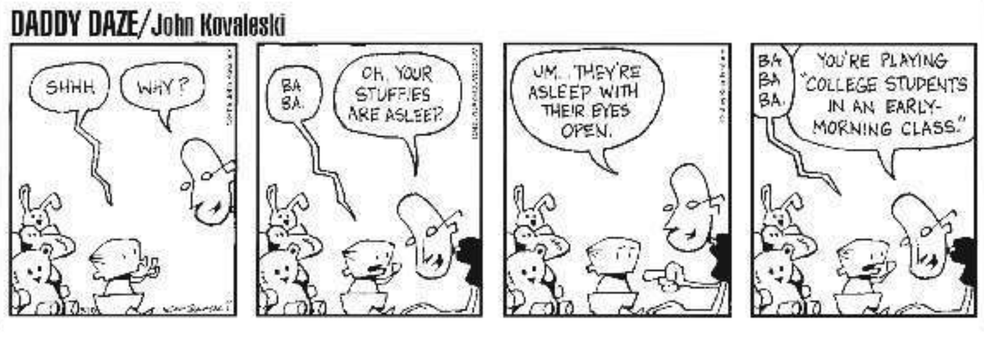
DOWN
1 Potato,
2 Yearly,
3 Steep,
4 National Trust,
5 Dubious,
6 Chosen,
7 Sadist,
12 Needful,
13 Stable,
14 Cirrus,
15 Infant,
16 Oddity,
18 Alien.

By arrangement with The Independent
Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required

BEETLE BAILEY/Mort Walker

RED EYE/Bill Yates & Mel Casson

DADDY DAZE/John Kovaleski



NEED TO KNOW

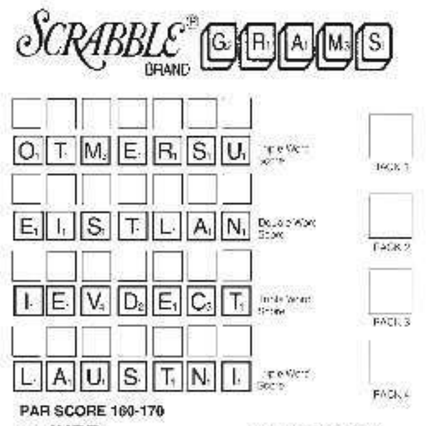
HOSPITALS
- AIIMS 26588500, 26588900
- Moolchand Medcity (formerly Hospital) 42000000 & 24-hour Chemist Shop 42000447
- Vidyasagar Institute for Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences 26924300, 26924304
- Batra Hospital & Medical Research Centre 29051280, 29958747
- Deen Dayal Upadhyay 25496320, 25494403
- Guru Tegh Bahadur 22586262, 22585007

RAILWAY INQUIRY
General Inquiry 139
- Toll Free Nos. 1800112511
- SMS Inquiry Nos. 57886, 54959, 5676747

ROADWAYS INQUIRY
- ISBT (General Inquiry): 23868836, 23865181
- Haryana Roadways 23861262
- Himachal Roadways 23717473, 23325320
- Punjab Roadways 23867842, 23860626
- Rajasthan Roadways 23864470
- U.P. Roadways 23868709

FLIGHT INQUIRY
- AIR INDIA Flight Inquiry and Reservation 18001801407
- INDIGO AIRLINES New Delhi City Office 43513185, Call Centre 09910383838, 18001803838, Reservation 43513186; Indigo Airlines Airport 011-25671580; Terminal I-B 25671576, Palam Road 25671579, 18001803838
- JET AIRWAYS Flight Inquiry and Reservation 39841111
- EMIRATES Flight Inquiry and Reservation 33773377
- Air Canada Flight Inquiry 25656421/25656431 Reservation 41528181
- Air France Flight Inquiry and Reservation 23466262 (City) 25652294 (Airport)
- Kuwait Airways Flight Inquiry and Reservation 23354373

SCRABBLE® GRAMS



SUDOKU
Conceptis Sudoku By Dave Green

		3			2	5		
	1		4		3			
		4				8		
		6	5			7		
	3						6	
		7			8	3		
	5					1		
			9		7		3	
		2	6			9		

Difficulty Level ★★★★

7/05

Sudoku is a number-placing puzzle based on a 9x9 grid with several given numbers. The object is to place the numbers 1 to 9 in the empty squares so that no row, no column and no 3x3 box contains the same number. The difficulty level increases through the week.

answer to previous puzzle

9	7	8	1	5	2	4	6	3
7	5	3	6	4	1	8	1	2
4	6	2	7	3	8	5	9	3
1	5	4	2	3	9	7	2	8
9	8	7	4	5	1	6	3	4
2	3	6	8	7	1	5	9	2
2	4	1	5	6	3	9	8	7
8	3	9	1	7	4	2	8	5
6	7	5	8	2	3	3	4	1

Sunday magazine
New Delhi, July 20, 2025

The Pioneer
AGENDA

"Digital India has not remained a mere government programme, it has become a people's movement"
— S Jaishankar

DigIndia

The world is mesmerised that India has achieved this in a highly diverse & complex social environment inspite of a massive demographic burden. It will also help India to establish its leadership across the Global South.

Riding the Tech wave

India's remarkable rise of becoming the fourth-largest economy in the world has drawn significant attention and acclaim, capturing headlines for all the right reasons globally. This inspite of the geo-political global headwinds. While this gigantic achievement speaks for itself, there is a need to analyse how this feat was achieved and what is in store for the future. A critical aspect that often goes unnoticed in discussions about India's economic ascent is its robust Digital Infrastructure today, developed over the last many years.

SANJAY KAW
Resident Editor

The advanced digital India framework, commonly known as Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) has served as a vital foundation, enabling the development of a new and innovative growth architecture for the Indian economy. The digital revolution in India has not only optimised existing sectors but also driven efficiency and entrepreneurship. As we look ahead, understanding the role of this digital backbone will be essential in formulating plans for the future.

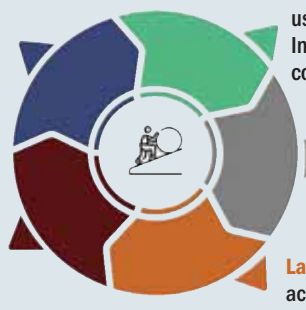
One of the earliest challenges in realising this vision was integrating millions of Indians who comprised the vast informal sector, many of whom lacked access to basic banking facilities. A breakthrough in addressing this issue was the introduction of Aadhaar cards in 2009. This initiative had a transformative, two-fold impact: it not only enabled individuals to open bank accounts but also facilitated the acquisition of mobile SIM cards. This sparked a digital revolution at the grassroots level, empowering people and fundamentally changing the landscape of connectivity and financial inclusion in India.

Built upon the foundation laid by Aadhaar is the framework of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), which has proven to be a significant game changer in governance. A shining example of this DPI bouquet is the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), which has democratised financial transactions by mainstreaming the last person standing in the queue. Through UPI, every Indian became a participant in the digital economy.

According to IMF numbers, India had over 800 million smart phones (as of December 2022) and more than 10 million active 5G users. It also had 646 million km of fibre optics laid.

The digital penetration has been supported by the rapid expansion of physical infrastructure, with the number of airports increasing from 74 in 2014 to 147 in 2022. No wonder, because of this impressive growth profile, the last 10 years are often described as India's techade.

KEY CHALLANGES TO DPI ADOPTIONS



Missing inter-connetivity among Govt. Ministry(s) hampers growth of DPIs

Real-Time data availability will help improve adoption of various DPIs

DPI's vision extends beyond Govt. for better user experience, Banks, Telecom companies, Insurance providers & Retail sector will collaborate for personalised digital services

Digital public eco-system will require robust data protection and cyber security infrastructure to safeguard against untoward data leakages

Language expantion will help users to access services in their preferred language

INDIA DPI EVOLUTION ROADMAP THROUGH INTEGRATION AND AI

- AI-powered grievance management system launched for better governance.
- Natural language processing technology.

- AI to improve fraud detection and prevention.
- Central Bank Digital Currency to reduce expences and enhance efficiency.

- Analyse transaction data, identify patterns and detect anomalies.
- Smart contracts, executed on a blockchain, to automate tax computation.

- AI will analyse patient data & medical history to offer personalised treatment plans.
- AI algos will forecast disease patterns & healthcare trends.
- Enhance on-ground procedures & build efficiency.

ADBM

- Machine learning algos will be used by entity(s) to build eCommerce.
- Digital experiences will become immersive as Metaverse adoption increases.

- AI to analyse student data, learning patterns & preferences to provide personalised recommendations & adaptive content.
- Blockchain to provide a tamper-proof system for issuing and verifying educational credentials.

NDEAR

SOURCE: ARTHUR D. LITTLE, NASSCOM ANALYSIS

The other key components of India's DPI stack, such as DigiLocker, FASTag, UMANG, and Ayushman Bharat, are shaping the future by incorporating advanced layers of Artificial Intelligence (AI), blockchain, and quantum-resistant security, thereby creating an intelligent ecosystem. IDEA (India Digital Ecosystem for Agriculture) is transforming the agriculture sector by creating a central database of farmers, land, and farm outputs.

It's great to see the incredible progress, but there are still some challenges needing urgent attention. Cybersecurity is super critical, so staying alert and adapting security measures is key. India is focused on closing the digital divide, ensuring that everyone has access to high-speed internet, and helping people from all backgrounds become digitally literate. Additionally, as AI and data usage continue to grow, we must address the ethical implications and establish robust regulations to ensure that technology remains centred around people.

The Nasscom-Arthur D Little report titled "Digital Public Infrastructure of India — Accelerating India's Digital Inclusion" states that by 2030, DPIs will have made life of the citizens more efficient with social and financial inclusion (only 78 per cent had a bank account in 2022).

The report has highlighted that being digital in nature, the solutions using DPIs are most affected by technological enhancements and disruptions. And to avoid the risk of becoming obsolete, the digital services will need to be upgraded to stay relevant and useful. For such forces of technological advances that can create a larger impact are AI and the new internet built on the principles of Web3 and immersion of Metaverse.

Now that the model of seamless service delivery through an efficient DPI is firmly established, India is poised to take it global. The Modi Government has already made a compelling case on the international stage, promoting its flagship Aadhaar and UPI initiatives as transformative tools for various countries.

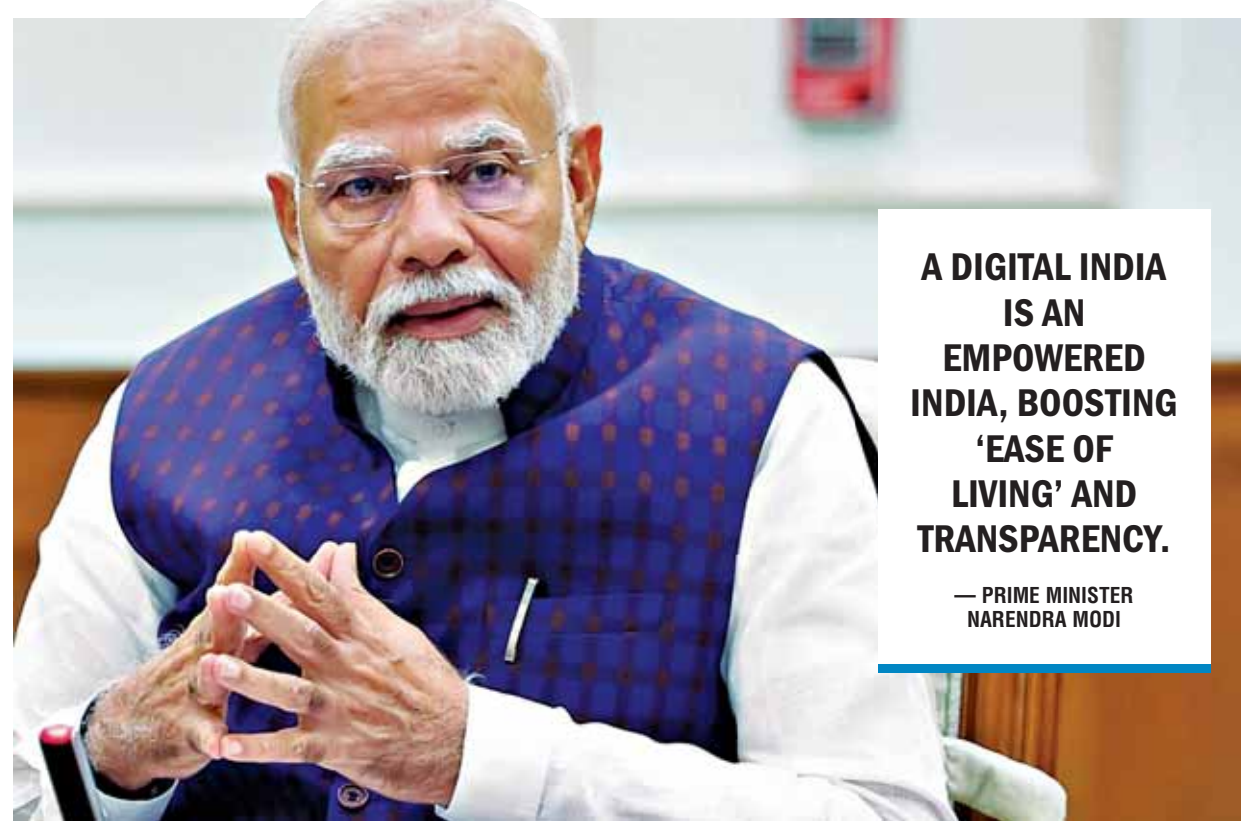
What distinguishes India's approach from its competitors is its cost-effectiveness. As many developing countries grapple with similar challenges in service delivery and digital access, India has the potential to lead in this area. The key here is that solutions to these complex issues must be affordable, and India has already showcased its capability to achieve this by significantly minimising costs without compromising on quality.

The world is also mesmerised that India could achieve this in a highly diverse environment and with a massive demographic burden. The Indian model is already serving a vast mass of humanity at home. It is a promising model for other nations to emulate, paving the way for a new era of global digital collaboration. It is also a geopolitical imperative for India to establish its leadership across the Global South.

NON-ECONOMIC VALUE ADD BY 2030 (EST)

While the mature DPIs have achieved exponential adoption by 2024, the next 6-7 years present an opportunity to scale up further and impacting the citizens even in the remotest parts of the country. By 2030, DPIs will make life of the citizens far more efficient with Social and Financial inclusion.

Financial inclusion	90%+ of the population above 15yrs to have access to a bank account.	760Mn beneficiaries of PMJDY	Government savings in direct benefit transfer of U$15.3Bn
Social inclusion	Equal access to opportunities, resources, and services empowering all citizens.	137Cr Aadhaar users with DBT of U$15.3Bn	70%+ of the population (106Cr) will be benefitting from digital services
Time saving	Digitalisation of services makes processes efficient saving time for all stakeholders	Annually a citizen will save 4.2 working days by using digital services	15-25% reduction in TAT per shipment (ULIP)
Cost savings	U$104Bn cost savings (est) through digitaisation and DPI integration	**Ecological impact**	U$7.6Bn worth paper saving & reduction in Carbon Emissions by 4Mn C-Ton



A DIGITAL INDIA IS AN EMPOWERED INDIA, BOOSTING 'EASE OF LIVING' AND TRANSPARENCY.

— PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI

Governance goes digital, calls it a 'Techade'

The world talked about and debated revolutions like Industrial Revolution, Green Revolution, Yellow Revolution, White Revolution for the welfare of mankind. But now it's time to talk about the Digital Revolution and Bharat has become a case study for the people across the globe.

Celebrating the Digital India initiative, Ashwini Vaishnaw, Minister of Electronics and Information Technology, said when the world questioned how a tea seller or a vegetable vendor could use digital payments, today that dream has come true — UPI payments have surpassed Visa transactions.

This is the strength of 1.4 billion Indians. India has been witness to the envoys of developed nations sharing images of their UPI payments to vendors and hawkers in a way to celebrate visionary Prime Minister Narendra Modi Ji's Viksit Bharat who once coined 'Techade' decade, Vaishnaw said.

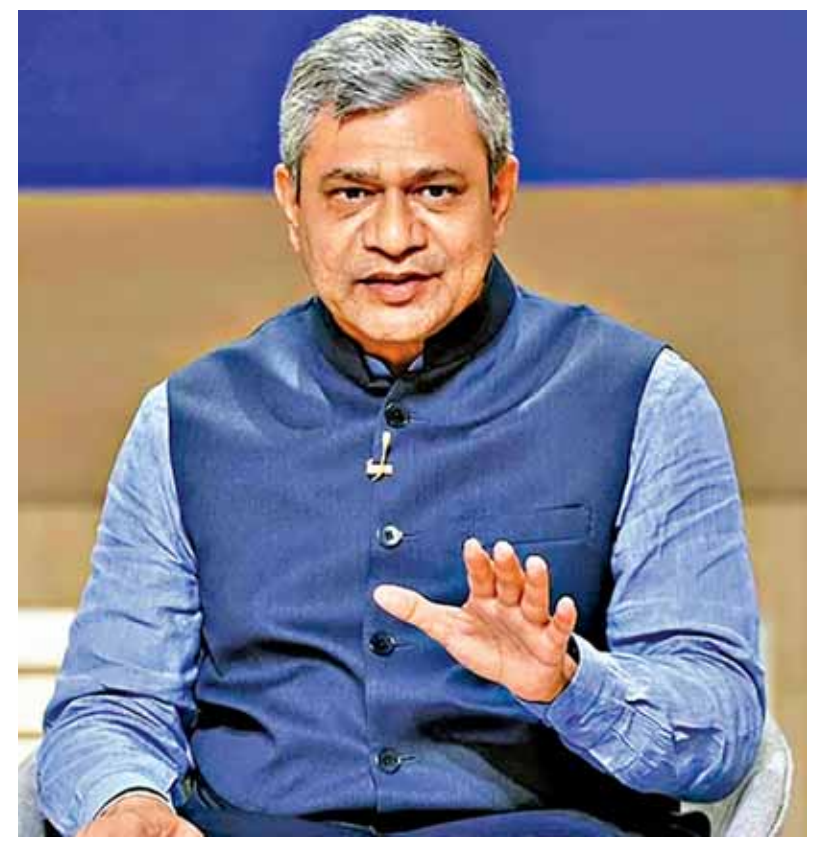
Over the decade (2015–2025), the initiative has bridged the digital divide and transformed governance, financial inclusion and internet accessibility, making India the world's third-largest digital economy. And all this has come through hard work of entire system. Yes, Modiji aptly remarked "Hard Work is more powerful than Harvard".

Today, youth in the remotest length and breadth of Bharat can submit any government or private employment applications, submit passport applications, get Aadhaar number, receive or send money and multiple government schemes benefit just at the doorstep.

Vaishnaw told *The Pioneer* that the Narendra Modi Government has taken the help desk and service kiosks to every nook and corner of the country as part of one of the Digital India programme popularly called CSC.

Today, CSC has reached nearly 90 percent of villages in the country and if there is any medium capable of reaching every village, it is CSC. Each CSC is operated by a Village Level Entrepreneur (VLE), a local change maker who provides citizen-centric services including Aadhaar enrollment and updates, PAN card and passport services, Banking and insurance, Telemedicine and education services, Skill development and legal aid through Tele-Law, Agriculture services, Grameen eStore (B2B), utility bill payments, and many more. Each such CSC centre, VLE, associates and engagement has translated into an occupation, including the job opportunity.

Over the last 16 years, CSC has become one of the world's largest digital service delivery networks, operating through more than 6.5 lakh functional centres in both rural and urban areas. Few days ago, the organisation celebrated its 16th Foundation Day which is a reaffirmation of Narendra Modi Ji government's mission to ensure inclusive development through digital means. As a model of public-private partnership, CSC has become the cornerstone of digital governance, citizen-centric delivery, and community transformation. In 2014, there were only 83,000 CSC centres, whereas today, their number has grown to nearly 5.50 lakh.



MODI GOVERNMENT HAS TAKEN THE HELP DESK AND SERVICE KIOSKS TO EVERY NOOK AND CORNER OF THE COUNTRY AS PART OF ONE OF THE DIGITAL INDIA PROGRAMME POPULARLY CALLED CSC

Vaishnaw also said with the advent of Artificial Intelligence and the Honorable Prime Minister Narendra Modi talking about the new age deliverable during his just concluded BRICS summit as well as few nation tours recently, government is committed for free AI training for 10 lakh individuals, with priority for all CSC VLEs. The Modi Government is committed to talk to Honourable Chief Ministers to integrate State IT agencies with CSC-SPV which will enhance the digital revolution in a lightning speed.

Recently, during the Foundation Day, Vaishnaw said he got to know inspiring stories of VLE Manjulata from Mayurbhanj district in Odisha and VLE Rose Angelina from Meghalaya. Despite challenging circumstances, both women acquired digital skills and empowered their communities. Amidst the scenic hills and remote villages of East West Khasi Hills in Meghalaya, woman VLE Rose Angelina M Kharsyntiew has scripted a digital revolution. Through her centre in the Mairang area, she is not only delivering services but also setting an example of transformation, empowerment and community service, the Union Minister who also holds the important portfolios of Railways and Information Broadcasting, said.

Launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015, the Digital India program aimed to make technology accessible to every Indian. CSCs have played a pivotal role in empowering citizens in rural India — particularly women, farmers and marginalised communities by offering them digital access, financial inclusion, healthcare and livelihood support at their doorstep.

The CSC ecosystem includes initiatives such as CSC Academy for digital education and skill training; CSC Grameen eStore to promote rural e-commerce; and programs for supporting Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), especially in agriculture and crafts.

In 2022, Minister of Home, Cooperation Amit Shahi, CSC signed an agreement with NABARD and the Ministry of Cooperation. Under this agreement, cooperative credit societies across the country have now started functioning as Common Services Centres (CSCs).

Following this partnership, Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) and LAMPS (Large Area Multi-Purpose Societies) were provided CSC IDs and were given comprehensive training. After completing the training, these societies began offering CSC services in the remote areas of their respective states.

The objective behind this collaboration is to empower a larger section of rural communities and financial empowerment of PACS. On average, each society has around 500 members. If one community progresses well, the benefits reach these 500 individuals or families first.

While a lot has been done, yet many things are to be done as part of the Viksit Bharat programme as there is a need to strengthen awareness, cyber security and capacity building, especially in agriculture, health, and education sectors.

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

The Meghalaya story: Realising aspirations

With government support and community spirit aligned, the state offers a blueprint for a vibrant, confident, and self-reliant India

Recently, on my tour to Meghalaya, I travelled by road from Guwahati to Shillong. The road was wide and traffic flowed smoothly. This was once an old, winding road, perilously narrow and choked with traffic, where smoke-emitting lorries made travel miserable. My first stop was at the backwaters of the scenic Umiam lake in Ri Bhoi district. The waters of the rivers, Wah Umkhrah and Wah Umshyrpi, were dammed in the 1960s to harness their hydel power. Today, the man-made lake has also become a hub of water sports and adventure activities. Tourism has given a year-long livelihood opportunity to those in the lake's vicinity, emblematic of the government and citizens' approach to places with potential for tourism. A project transforming the lake into a world-class tourism hub with a crafts village, cultural pavilion and botanical gardens is being funded under the Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI) scheme.

We reached Shillong by evening to attend the first North-East Roundtable on the Prime Minister Internship Scheme (PMIS). This gathering brimmed with the energy and determination of young interns who seek to realise their dreams through opportunities created by the PMIS, piloted to connect the youth with top companies across India. Nito S Kiho, a 22-year-old from Dimapur, Nagaland spoke to me, with the cool air befitting a lead guitarist in a band, about how he wished to start a clothing brand with his friends after the internship.

The strident ambition of another intern, Elisabeth Lalsim from Dima Hasao district of Assam shone as she explained how she has chosen to intern at the Power Grid Corporation in the East Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya in order to gain experience in electrical engineering. Her zeal echoed William Yeats's sentiment about education as not the filling of a pail but as the lighting of a fire. Speaking in Khasi, Khlainkupar Lynkhoi recounted how he is interning at the Rural Electrification Company Ltd. and is motivating households to register for the PM Suryaghar Muft Bijli Yojana. It was music to my ears when the interns listed common themes like team work, time management, goal-setting as skills they have picked up in the past few months. I saw the seeds of promising careers being sown and dreams taking shape. The youth of the North East are not thinking that their being far away is an impediment to their soaring aspirations.

Nirmala Sitharaman

The next day, at the LARITI Convention Center in Shillong, the Meghalaya CM and I flagged-off a consignment of pineapples to Dubai — sourced from a farmer producers organisation (FPO) from Jirang village, Ri Bhoi district. Several FPOs and SHGs converged to showcase their products here — the unique Lakadong turmeric, ginger, bamboo shoot pickles, exquisite jams and traditional silk fabrics. Meghalaya displayed the various stages that their farmers are on the path to becoming entrepreneurs. The Budget FY20 announcement on the formation of 10,000 new FPOs together with work on the ground has helped several farmers earn greater value for their produce. This was a live demonstration of farmers who have become entrepreneurs.

Later that evening, I met Mark Laitflang Stone, an award-winning entrepreneur, speaker and youth mentor at the serene Ward's Lake in Shillong. Mark's self-made journey is a story of overcoming adversity to achieve success with several successful ventures. One such venture named Avenues has trained over a lakh youth in the North East.

The next day, on our way to a "vibrant" village on the border, a short visit was planned to the State-run Shitake Mushroom Development Centre in Upper Shillong. There, we witnessed the impact and promise of innovative agriculture. Meghalaya has leveraged its climatic advantage and is gaining expertise in niche products such as the shitake. For procuring the shitake, the state government has tied up with a firm in the Miyagi prefecture, Japan. The efforts taken to meet the productive and production standards to match the Japanese ideal are visible. It is no wonder that the Japanese source the Made in India shitake from here.

We then travelled to Laitkynsiew, a village located in the lush green interiors of the East Khasi. We witnessed a *lakhpati didi*, Lahun Mary Blah, detail her journey from homemaker to owner of a garment store, a flower boutique and a tea stall. A young officer gushed about how funds flow seamlessly to the accounts of SHGs through direct benefit transfer without any delay. The promise and dreams of the women SHGs are undeterred by sun or rain — this is a new Aatmanirbhar Bharat that not only provides the conditions for growth but also derives confidence from the success of every Indian — as the PM says, *sabka saath, sabka vikas.*

The Khasi principle of *Mei Ranew- Ki Ryngkew ki Basa* (reverence for Mother Nature) is manifested in Meghalaya's root bridges, their makers and caretakers — a lesson the world needs to put into practice urgently.

Later, we trekked downhill in the village of Siej where Bah Haly War, the village elder, explained about the root bridge he had built over decades to connect the village to their farmlands. After encouraging me to cross the living root bridge and amidst the reverberating sound of gushing water flowing under the bridge, the people of the village gathered to recount the incredible history of the bridge. Iora Dkhar, chairperson of the Syrwet U Barim Mariang Jingkieng Jri Cooperative Society Federation Ltd., walked up to me unassumingly and handed over a copy of the dossier being sent to the Unesco to recognise the living root bridges across Meghalaya as a world heritage site. Her team began the task of documenting living root bridges in Meghalaya through the various cooperatives and has been able to document 131 so far. It was also heartening to see a small sign board acknowledging that the 15th Finance Commission's untied grants have been used to fence and protect this living root bridge. The Khasi principle of "*Mei Ranew- Ki Ryngkew ki Basa*" (reverence for mother nature) is manifested in these bridges, their makers and caretakers. A lesson the world needs to put into practice urgently.

In the last leg of the tour, we reached the village of Sohbar, perched beside the turquoise blue waters of the Wahrew river that flows down to the plains of Bangladesh. The chief secretary of Meghalaya, Donald Wahlang, who accompanied us to this village, recounted how in 2005, as the then deputy commissioner of East Khasi Hills, he had to swim across this river to reach the village of Nongjri. Today, across the Wahrew stands an arched-steel bridge, completed in 2021, that is symbolic of PM Modi's steely resolve to surmount the challenges that areas at the peripheries face. Sohbar is now one of 92 villages included in the Vibrant Village Programme, which reframes India's peripheries not as margins, but as proud thresholds to the nation.

From Sohbar, we travelled to Cherrapunji, where we were to visit the Ramakrishna Ashram. As the dusk faded into night, with the foreground of the great gorge of Sohra that voraciously devoured the monsoon winds, the fenced international border with Bangladesh stood brightly lit. The original name of this town was Sohra (*soh* means fruit and *rah* means to carry in Khasi), which was mispronounced Cherra by the British. The Bengalis from nearby Sylhet who trailed the British added the word *punji*, a term to refer to a cluster of villages that was later suffixed to Cherra. Sohra, which is also the cultural capital of the Khasis, has now been given back its original name. The next day, Swami Anuraganand*aji* of the Ramakrishna Ashram spoke about the rich contribution of the ashram in educating the tribals for a century. That their alumni include two former chief ministers of Meghalaya, several civil servants, doctors and engineers is a testament to what an institution with *seva* (service) as its core can contribute to the society.

Throughout this journey, I was moved by the determination, optimism, and harmony with nature that define the people of Meghalaya. With government support and community spirit aligned, Meghalaya today offers a blueprint for a vibrant, confident, and self-reliant India. Till next time, *Khublei Shibun* (thank you, very much) and *Mithela* Meghalaya!

Nirmala Sitharaman is the Union finance minister. The views expressed are personal.

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar

Missing in the list of Bharat Ratna awardees

We all know the Bharat Ratna is India's highest award, and we all hope it is conferred after careful deliberation and close scrutiny. After all, you don't want to scatter the most vaunted accolade like confetti. The English call that casting pearls before swine, but I won't use that phrase.

Yet, that's what seems to be the case. Consider these facts.

Of the 53 people awarded the Bharat Ratna starting with the first in 1954, by my count, 31 are politicians. That's almost 60%. Doesn't this seem to suggest it's been strategically given for political reasons rather than as recognition of merit? Sometimes, it has been given to Congress leaders by their worshipful colleagues. Doesn't that cheapen the award? It certainly diminishes it.

The other disturbing fact is that 18 awardees got the Bharat Ratna posthumously. It may have been remiss not to recognise them in their lifetime but to make up for that decades later seems foolish if not risible. For instance, Vallabhbhai Patel got it 41 years after his death. In fact, he died before the Bharat Ratna was established. BR Ambedkar and Maulana Azad got it 34 years after their death. Karpoori Thakur 36 years after he passed away and Madan Mohan Malaviya was conferred the award an astonishing 69 years after he died. Actually, he died before India even became independent. So, if it was justified to give it to these worthies, why not Mahatma Gandhi?

Let's ask the question: How many of the 53 deserved India's highest award? Your answer will differ from mine, and it is possible we will all have our own divergent views. That said and done, by my estimation, at least 14 awardees did not deserve it. Should it really have been given to Govind Ballabh Pant, Zakir Husain, VV Giri, K Kamaraj, MG Ramachandran, Rajiv Gandhi, Morarji Desai, Gulzarilal Nanda, Gopinath Bordoloi, Pranab Mukherjee, Nanaji Deshmukh, Karpoori Thakur, LK Advani and Chaudhary Charan Singh? Today, many people may not even remember who they were, leave aside recall what they did.

However, there are also people who clearly should have been given the award but were not. I can think of at least two. The first is Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw. Without doubt, he was India's greatest military hero. He commanded the Army in the only war we have decisively and irrefutably won. I know he was given the rank of Field Marshal, but he should also have been given the Bharat Ratna. Today, if it is denied on the grounds he is dead, wouldn't that be hypocritical double-standards?

The other person can still be given the award. But does our government have the vision and the wisdom to do so? I'm referring to the Dalai Lama. The truth is the world has recognised his enormous contribution but we in India, where he lives and the country he considers himself a son of, have remained blind to his merit. Or, is it that we don't want to offend China?

He got the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. That means we are already 36 years too late. In fact, we should have awarded him before the Nobel Committee. After all, he lives amongst us. We should have been the first to recognise him. But now we have another opportunity. The Dalai Lama has just celebrated his 90th birthday. By all count, it is a landmark. Surely this is a moment to make up for our lapse? Don't you agree? Also conferring the Bharat Ratna on the Dalai Lama would add distinction to the award.

THE WORLD HAS RECOGNISED THE DALAI LAMA'S ENORMOUS CONTRIBUTION, BUT WE IN INDIA — WHERE HE LIVES AND THE COUNTRY HE CONSIDERS HIMSELF A SON OF — HAVE REMAINED BLIND TO HIS MERIT

But there is one other person we could consider — Amitabh Bachchan. I don't doubt there have been great actors and actresses before him but they died without this recognition. Bachchan is still alive. And he was — for many still is — a legend. As big as Satyajit Ray, who got it in 1992, or Lata Mangeshkar, who received it in 2001. So why not him? No one has got the award for their acting. Let him be the first.

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

Changing nature of neighbourly bonds

Earlier, neighbourly love was fuelled by scarcity — from power outages to sugar. There is no scarcity now. Each high rise is self-sufficient. HT PHOTO

Sometimes, it takes an earthquake in Gurugram to figure out who your neighbours are. The earth shakes, and people rush out in their pyjamas and assemble in an area where their WiFi can't reach — and see people who they sometimes spot in the lift. Reluctant smiles follow.

Abhishek Asthana

This is a completely unscheduled assembly. Some small talk emerges.

"It was really strong," says a middle-aged man, most likely a senior vice-president at an MNC — an open invitation for anyone to respond. I take the bait. "Yeah, the epicentre is somewhere in Haryana, 4.0 magnitude," I read from my phone.

He is not interested in more science. He spots the missus. A conversation follows.

"Oh, you are the couple who recently moved in?"

"Yeah, it's been two years."

"We are on the same floor. You guys should come over sometime!"

"Sure! Whenever."

"Whenever" is a great tool to dodge such societal curveballs. It doesn't commit a date, shows complete intent, and shifts the onus on to the inviting party to propose a time. So it ends there and we wait for the next earthquake.

This phenomenon is especially pronounced if you are a tenant. No neighbour wants to build a relationship with a temporary inhabitant; hence, the empty invitations at earthquake meetings. Unless the Zomato delivery person accidentally delivers their *tandoori* momos to you, there is no reason to knock on each others' doors. Nobody runs out of *chaipatti* (tea leaves) anymore. They get it in 10 minutes.

It is a city where many live in gate community high-rises, scammed by the concept of super built-up area. They work eight to nine hours in a designated cubicle, and then come back home to park their vehicles in a designated spot, sometimes to find someone else's car parked there. They post a picture on the society Whatsapp group, chastising the miscreant. They regret not investing in a higher income society, with people having better civic sense.

This income-to-civic sense correlation never holds, though. People keep spending money to chase peers with better civic sense, only to find the guy in the window seat standing up and asking them to give way as soon as the plane lands. Clearly, there is no correlation.

But, there are enough benefits of staying in such a society. Most of your needs are taken care of, everything is available at your doorstep. If your door-bell rings, it is most likely the domestic help or a delivery boy — seldom a neighbour.

Earlier, neighbourly love was fuelled by scarcity. A shared misery always leads to the best friendships. A few decades ago, my hometown would see a power-cut nearly every evening. As soon as the whirring ceiling fan suddenly lost speed, the immediate neighbours would be asked if their house had lost power too. After a collective misfortune was established, our Neelkamal-brand chairs would be laid out on the porch. There was no mobile, no internet to turn to — only Mr Tiwari who worked in a nationalised bank, in his vest, telling us how tough government jobs had become. "It's not like old times, *bhaisahab*. Now, you have to work", he would say, sipping tea made by my mother in candle-light.

Another scarcity fuelling neighbourly connections was lack of milk for tea, or the *chaipatti* itself. The doorbell rings, your mother answers — only to see a friend and his entire family at your doorstep, all decked up. "Namaste, *bhabhiji*, We were passing by and thought of dropping in."

"Oh, *haan*. Sure, sure!" Your mother lets them in pretending a pleasant shock, quickly clearing the nearest bed for them to sit while nervously talking non-stop. She takes stock of items in the kitchen — there is no milk, and Blinkit is 20 years away. You are sent to the neighbour's house, to borrow some. The neighbours understand this Code Red, having been in similar situations. You smuggle back the milk covertly. The day is saved. This sudden scarcity builds neighbourly love so strong that you still get invited to their family weddings decades later.

There is no scarcity now. Each high-rise is self sufficient. There is power back-up. There are quick delivery services. And, there are no uninvited guests. There is instead "privacy", a concept that was alien to many Indians like me just two decades ago.

But if you discount the nostalgic hangover, condominium life is one of the best examples of how a country should be run. You spot a pothole, you take a picture and send it to a WhatsApp group, shaming the residents' welfare association members. They get to work, and it is fixed. Shaming works in societies with super high self-esteem per sq feet. Even Mr Tiwari, who sold his old house to enjoy the amenities of a condominium post-retirement, knows this. Sometimes, he does miss that *chai* and that power cut, though.

Abhishek Asthana is a tech and media entrepreneur, and tweets as @gabbbarsingh. The views expressed are personal.

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker

The gains of curbing anaemia in women

Of the many health concerns of women that get overlooked, anaemia is one of the most dangerous. Earlier this month, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the government of Sri Lanka, Unicef, WHO, and other partners hosted the Nourishing South Asia — Reducing Anaemia in Adolescent Girls and Women regional conference in Colombo, which threw up alarming figures on anaemia in the region. If India is to realise both its demographic dividend and increase female labour force participation, anaemia has to be tackled as it goes far beyond being a health issue. It is a sign of poor nutrition, inequality, chronic infection, and with this comes poor health and lost opportunities for women.

In India, 57% of women of reproductive age (15-49 years), 52% of pregnant women, and 67% of children under five are anaemic. This represents not just a health crisis, but deep-rooted gender inequities. While women are biologically more vulnerable to anaemia during menstruation and pregnancy, their elevated risk is largely shaped by social and systemic disadvantages: Poor dietary diversity, repeated pregnancies with inadequate recovery time, limited autonomy in health decisions, and unequal food distribution within households. Women in many Indian households eat last and eat the least.

This is despite the fact that, today, many scalable, science-backed solutions are within reach, signalling a strategic investment in women's health and empowerment. Ensuring that these reach the last mile is key.

Recent advances in health technology and treatment protocols are beginning to shift outcomes. Digital screening tools such as point-of-care digital hemoglobinometers are being rolled out through the Anaemia Mukt Bharat programme. These enable frontline health workers to deliver immediate, reliable diagnostics — some models have demonstrated 80-86% accuracy. IV iron therapies can replenish iron stores much faster than oral tablets. A 2024 guidance note from the MoHFW now recommends this for moderate to severe anaemia from the second trimester onward. Evidence suggests it is not only more effective, but more cost-effective too. Anaemia prevention and treatment can be factored into India's fairly robust grassroots health delivery schemes. Hema Divakar, member, International Federation of Gynaecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) executive board, says, "Investing in maternal anaemia, particularly through rapid iron-repletion, is fundamentally an investment in community health, women's agency and our economy."

Addressing anaemia may begin with clinical tools, but the intent and impact go much further. Deployed equitably and at scale, these innovations can help build a foundation for broader gender justice by restoring health and strength during critical life stages like pregnancy and early motherhood — and generally enabling women to engage more fully in education, livelihoods, and community life. *The Economist* recently reported a decline in traditional preference for sons, with a growing aspiration for daughters in some countries. This evolving mindset, which will hopefully manifest itself in India sooner rather than later, must be matched by meaningful investment in women's health.

Tulika Seth, professor of haematology, AIIMS, Delhi, says, "Correcting maternal anaemia reduces complications like postpartum haemorrhage and boosts neonatal iron stores, breaking intergenerational cycles of malnutrition. India has both the responsibility and the capacity to implement these interventions at scale." Tackling anaemia will not only address a major health challenge but also help women access the tools, resources, and platforms they need to thrive.

The views expressed are personal.

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

No voter left behind

This is with reference to "ECI needs to course correct on Bihar SIR" by Karan Thapar (July 13). For Bihar, which has a large out-migrant population, low birth registration, and low literacy, ECI should heed the Supreme Court's advice to accept Aadhaar, ration and voter cards as proof for registration.

Gurnoor Grewal

Leaving abusive marriages

This is with reference to "Learning to say no to an abusive marriage" by Namita Bhandare (July 13). Parents should make their daughters financially, mentally, and emotionally strong. They must support them in abandoning troubled marriages, and emerge safely from the aftermath.

Abhilasha Gupta

Remembering Guru Dutt

This is with reference to "Guru Dutt's tragic affair with life, and Bollywood" by Pavan K Varma (July 13). As we mark the centenary of his birth, it is fitting to honour the visionary who forever transformed Indian cinema.

Sanjay Chopra

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Across THE AISLE

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'Mischief thou art afoot'

IF A popular vote had been taken between 1991 and 1996, the Election Commission of India (ECI) would have been certainly voted as the best and most effective institution of India — even higher than the Constitutional Courts. Thanks to T N Seshan, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), the ECI's independence, integrity and impartiality (the three 'I's) were universally acclaimed. After Seshan, the CECs who stoutly defended the three 'I's were M S Gill, Mr J M Lyngdoh, Mr T S Krishnamurthy, Navin Chawla and Mr S Y Quraishi. Other CECs drifted in and drifted out, sometimes bending and sometimes appearing to be unbending. CECs appointed in the last 12 years were, viewed through the prism of the Constitution, disasters.

INDEPENDENCE

ECI is an autonomous institution. In the early years, the conduct of elections was not considered a great challenge. People voted according to the wishes of local satraps, some sections were not allowed to vote but they were too poor and powerless to complain, and there was no political challenge to the Congress. Elections became challenging after 1967. The governments between 1965 and 2014 did not interfere with the functioning of the ECI, nor do I recall any *accusation* of interference. Some elections to the *state assemblies* were alleged to have been rigged but the allegation was not against the political party ruling at the Centre but against the incompetence of the ECI.

The Lok Sabha election of 2014 was a free and fair election. Since then, most of the elections to the Lok Sabha or the State Assemblies have been subject to widespread criticism of incompetence, rigging, fraud and worse. Since 2014, ECI has faced numerous challenges and it has emerged with its reputation severely scathed.

Apropos the election to the Maharashtra Assembly in November 2024, the electoral rolls became a subject of controversy. The allegations are that (i) an unusually large number of new —and perhaps ghost — names were added to the lists of voters and that (ii) an unusually large number of persons were allowed to vote long after polling hours had ended. ECI has attempted to defend itself against both charges but the jury is out.

INTEGRITY

Another bitterly contested state election is in the offing — in Bihar — and, next year, more are due. Bihar is a test case. Barely four months before the state will go to the polls, ECI has started a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls. This is unusual and unprecedented. An electoral roll is usually updated on January 1 of the year and a summary revision is done on the eve of the polls. The summary revision will *include* names of new and unenrolled voters and *exclude* dead or permanently migrated voters from the *current* electoral rolls. The bulk of the *current* electoral rolls will be intact and untouched. Besides, the inclusion and exclusion will be done with the full knowledge and participation of the political parties. Each case for *inclusion* will be carefully scrutinised and each case for *exclusion* will be decided after a full contest and hearing.

SIR is different. It effectively *scraps* the current electoral rolls. Despite the claim that SIR is based on the 2003 electoral rolls, it effectively starts from a zero base and constructs *new* electoral rolls for each constituency. Besides, the onus is shifted to the voter: despite his/her name being in the current electoral rolls and despite having had a right to vote (and in most cases having voted) in the Bihar Assembly elections of 2020 or the Lok Sabha elections of 2024, he/she must apply for inclusion with documents to prove his/her *citizenship*. And all this is expected to be done between June 25 and July 26.

IMPARTIALITY

The fine print of the exercise is not to enable enrollment but to place insurmountable hurdles in the path to enroll and vote. The ECI has prescribed 11 documents as 'proof' of citizenship: four of them do not contain information on *place of birth* and two of them have not been issued to any person in Bihar. So, effectively, there are only five documents (including caste certificate issued by revenue officers) to prove one's citizenship. Passport, birth certificate or government employee ID are available to only 2.4 to 5 per cent of the population of Bihar. Conspicuous by their absence are (1) Aadhaar, (2) EPIC or voter-identity card issued by the ECI and (3) ration card. When the Supreme Court asked ECI why the three missing documents cannot be included for the purpose of SIR, the ECI had no ready answer. The irony is residency and caste certificates are issued by revenue officers based on Aadhaar; while the residency or caste certificate is valid for SIR, the Aadhaar is invalid!

The only rational part of SIR is that dead persons and double-entry names must be removed. ECI has estimated that 17.5 lakh voters have migrated but that does not mean they are no longer domiciled in Bihar or will not return to vote. The CEO, Bihar uploaded a form for enrollment of out-of-state voters on July 15 and expects to complete the exercise by July 26!

The inevitable conclusion is that SIR is not an exercise to enable eligible citizens to enroll and vote. It is a dark, sinister plot to *disenfranchise* millions of poor, marginalized or migrant citizens. Over to the Supreme Court on July 28.

The inevitable conclusion is that SIR is not an exercise to enable eligible citizens to enroll and vote. It is a dark, sinister plot to *disenfranchise* millions of poor, marginalized or migrant citizens. Over to the Supreme Court on July 28

Fifth COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH
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Time to get beyond history books

LET ME begin with an admission. I am not averse to school history books being revisited or revised by historians from the RSS school of history. For far too long, they were written by dogmatic leftists who chose in the name of secularism to exalt the 'great Moghuls', and diminish Hindu rulers and their often-magnificent achievements. The books they wrote were mostly so boring that people like me, who now read history books with fascination, ended up asleep in history class. In the moments that I was awake, I did notice that there were three periods of history that were taught: ancient India, Moghul and British.

What I learned about pre-Islamic India was so little that it was not until I was an adult that I heard of the mighty south Indian dynasties and discovered the wonders of Hindu civilisation. It was on holidays in Indonesia and Cambodia that I saw the extent to which India's civilisation had influenced language, culture and religion across the east. Angkor Wat and Borobudur left me stunned by their beauty and scale. So, if there is a bit of revisionist history being introduced into school textbooks, I have no problem at all. The Moghuls did tear down temples and impose taxes on us idol-worshippers, and the truth about these things should never have been concealed. Not from Hindu children or Muslim.

My problem is that I wish some of those leading this new history movement would spare time to examine the current state of our schools and the abysmal quality of teaching. I have said before in this column that when I travel to a village, almost the first thing I try to see is the local school. And the truth is that not the best of these schools would be considered a real school by modern international standards.

In the best government schools, there are at least classrooms with desks and teachers, but you need only spend 10 minutes in one of these classes to discover that teaching methods are primitive. Children are taught not to think or develop a love of learning, but to learn by rote. Just enough to pass their examinations. They usually leave school with basic literacy instead of a real education, so they cannot compete with children who go to good private schools. They are, nevertheless, the lucky ones.

In the worst schools, especially those that have been built for Dalit and Adivasi children, there are no classrooms, no desks, no textbooks and often only a token teacher who teaches all the subjects they are meant to study. These teachers are very well paid by rural standards, but they usually live outside the village and are rarely available after school hours. Children who might not have fully understood what they were taught can turn to nobody for help because often, their parents are illiterate.

My point is that instead of wallowing eternally in the glories of our glorious past, it is time to address the problems of today. What difference will the new history textbooks make, if most schoolchildren are unable to read them? Another problem I have with the current exercise in rewriting history books is that they seem mostly to draw attention to the evils perpetuated by the Moghuls and other Muslim rulers. Is this just another deliberate attempt to make Hindu children hate Muslims? The British Raj did many bad things that were whitewashed in school textbooks, why is this not also being reviewed?

We now have a new Nalanda University to remind us of the legendary Buddhist institution that once existed here and was destroyed by a barbaric Muslim invader. But why is it that nobody has noticed the decay that infects most other universities? Anyone who has visited the great universities in the West knows that we do not have a single great university in India. This is why some of our best teachers have become academic refugees in countries that have real universities. This is why Indian students who can afford it go abroad for higher studies. Why is it that in the higher echelons of the RSS nobody has noticed yet that instead of wallowing in our 'glorious past' we should be trying to create a glorious present?

When Narendra Modi put Smriti Irani in charge of education in his first term as prime minister, I was a loyal Modi Bhakt. So, although I was taken aback by this startling choice, I tried to go and talk to the minister to persuade her that one reason why higher education was in the doldrums was because of too much interference by politicians and high officials. I told her that a bold and important move would be to disband the University Grants Commission. She paid no attention, and this obsolete institution continues to micromanage the affairs of universities to their detriment. A Higher Education Commission of India is meant to replace it soon, but universities do not need more control but less. Why do we need officials poking their noses into the realms of academia at all?

Speaking of political interference in education, may I say that the Home Minister is completely wrong in trying to discourage Indians from learning English. It is the lingua franca of today and Indians must continue to learn it because the advantages that they have when they venture out into the world are beyond measure.

As a single father, it took a community to raise my child

How to RAISE A BOY

R S NANDA

TWENTY YEARS ago, after an amicable separation, I became my son's legal custodian. Despite having primary custody, often when I would tell a stranger that I am a divorced father, the first question would be, "Oh, do you still (get to) see him?" That question captured, in a nutshell, the experience of being a single father in the 1990s. In cases of children of divorce, the assumption was always that they have an absentee father and a can't-help-but-be-nurturing mother.

In the two decades that have passed, I have become an empty nester, and society's notions of parenthood have evolved. So, this is a vintage tale that can perhaps help map the distance we have covered as a society.

At the time that I was raising my son, there were many "single mothers" meetings and groups around. Not so much for single fathers. It was an intimidating experience. Through it all, I had several pillars to lean on. For him, my and my ex-wife's philosophy followed that of Bob Dylan's: "Husband and wife failed, but mother and father didn't." That was the goal. His mother, her family and mine, all came together to give him a childhood where he was not left wanting for anything.

I had no structured parenting philosophy. The idea was simple: "Keep him honest and ensure he enjoys himself." A normal childhood, filled with adventure and love. In that spirit, growing up, I encouraged him to dabble in a bit of everything: He did drama, played sports, read books and fought me on the many ideas he found in them. For us, music and two cats, Thunder and Lightning, became the points of connection. I introduced him to songs of my generation and over the years, as he grew up, our conversations on music spanned far and wide. Today, as he teaches music in New York, our connection stretches over thousands of miles.

I always ensured that I was open with him — totally, completely honest. Hopefully, that encouraged him to strive to be an honest man himself. His mother and I had no strict legal guidelines on the number of visits; the rule was simple: He should have access to all members of his family, at all times. Through it all, what anchored him, and me, was community.

At eight, while figuring out a new, atypical family setup and his place in it, he was surrounded by a group of five-six friends who made sure love, joy and companionship were part of the equation. To this date, he keeps them close. For me, their parents were a saving grace. They never let my son or me feel out of place — the ways in which that allowed me to parent well and allowed my son to flourish are innumerable. They became, in a way, a shield against a world that could sometimes not be understanding or kind. This community — these friends and the family, both mine and my ex-wife's — ensured that my child was raised to become a well-rounded man.

In the last two decades, at least in upper-middle-class homes, the needle has moved. While my son was growing up, only parents were allowed at school functions. Recently, speaking to a school administrator about how crowds at these events have inflated, I was met with a joking, "*Arrey*, nowadays every child has two fathers, two mothers." The stigma around divorce and single fatherhood seems like it's abating. Opportunities for building community have expanded, as has the definition of "family".

In having raised my son as a single father, I do not have much to offer by way of lessons learnt. But a surefire way of ensuring healthier, happier children and families to me is to address the misogyny. Women still get blamed for divorces while having higher expectations of parenting placed on them and men are still, in many circles, expected to be the ones having washed their hands off of the duty. But ultimately, it was my wife and community's support and generosity that made sure my son and I stayed afloat.

The writer is a retired professor, University of Delhi
(How to Raise a Boy is a fortnightly column)

History HEADLINE

NIKHILA HENRY

Far from politics, journey of Hindi in southern states

ANDHRA PRADESH Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu recently waded into the language row, stating that former Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao, a scholar, knew 17 languages. Without mentioning any of the states that have been alleging Hindi imposition by the Centre, Naidu said on July 15 in Delhi, "Now we are asking — why should we learn Hindi?"

The governments of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala have in the past called the three-language formula proposed by the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, a covert move to impose Hindi on the southern states. They allege that the Centre's Hindi push goes against the idea of a federal polity.

While the debate goes on, with the southern states often pitted as anti-Hindi, away from the noise of political debates, the language and its speakers have had a long history in the region.

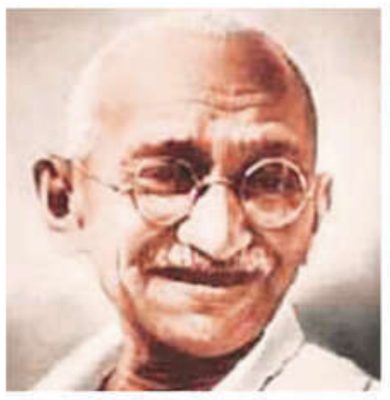
Scholars say Hindi actively began to make its presence felt in the South around the Independence movement, with Mahatma Gandhi establishing the first Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha in Madras (now Chennai) in 1918. The objective was to teach Hindi to a non-Hindi-speaking populace as a link language for the freedom movement.

"Learning Hindi was one way of feeling that one is participating in the Indian national freedom movement," says Prof J Atmaram of the University of Hyderabad's Hindi Department.

In 1922, the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha conducted its first preliminary exam to test basic Hindi proficiency. The first undergraduate examination, Rashtrabhasha Visharad, was conducted in 1931. In the other southern states where the Sabha had its regional centres — Hyderabad, Vijayawada, Kochi and Gulbarga — Hindi learning gained in popularity. "For example, Andhra Pradesh acted as a corridor between Hindi and other southern languages. The state welcomed Hindi learning, be it in Hyderabad or Vijayawada," says Atmaram.

In Karnataka and Kerala too, there wasn't much opposition to Hindi. "Tucked away in Ernakulam south stands the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha, active since the 1930s," he said.

Hindi grew more organically with the advent of mass media — radio and TV. "At radio stations in Madras and Trichy, Hindi programming, along with regional languages, continued in independent India," said Atmaram.



In 1918, Mahatma Gandhi (*left*) estabalished the first Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha in Madras in 1918; Tamil Nadu social reformer E V Ramasamy spearheaded the anti-Hindi agitations of the 1930s

By the 1970s, Doordarshan had reached homes in the South with its Satellite Instruction Television Experiment (SITE). The experiment, which began in 1975, focused on Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, where instructional programming with shows dedicated to agriculture and education would have one visual component and two language components. For instance, a person in Andhra watching one of these programmes could opt to do so in Telugu. "But while instructional programming had a language option, mass media programming, including news and entertainment which were aired through SITE, were mainly in Hindi," says Prof B P Sanjay, who worked on SITE and was former director of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication.

The popularity of Doordarshan's blockbuster TV shows — *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Chitrahaar*, etc — meant that while few homes spoke Hindi, the language wafted uninterrupted into their homes and hearts. In the 1970s and '80s, another phenomenon contributed to the spread of Hindi — magazines published in Hindi. For instance, Dakshinanchal Hindi Samiti translated Bhakti literature into southern languages and vice versa.

"Also, there were famous Hindi language magazines, *Kalpna* and *Golconda Darpan*, which were being published from Hyderabad. These magazines were popular even in the North," says Atmaram.

These magazines gave writing in Hindi a push. The focus was on schooling students in Hindi and the NEP of 1968 paved the way with its recommendation of a three-language policy which foregrounded Hindi and English along with the regional languages. Except for Tamil Nadu, which followed the two-language (English and Tamil) policy in government- and aided-schools, all other southern Indian states had adopted the three-language policy.

In recent times, with migration, the language and its dialects spread faster. In certain Kerala districts, there are bus boards displayed in Hindi to cater to migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal.

Operating out of Erode's Periyar Nagar — a neighbourhood named after Tamil Nadu's social reformer E V Ramasamy, who spearheaded the anti-Hindi agitations of the 1930s — is the Tamil Nadu Hindi Prachara Sabha, an NGO run by M Krishnamurthy, 60, which conducts spoken Hindi classes. "In Tamil Nadu, no one will stop you from teaching or learning Hindi. We have been running the institution from 2009 onwards," he said.

His institution caters not just to school students and civil service aspirants but also to Erode's turmeric traders. "They need to converse in Hindi for their business interests and we help them," he says.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Indian Express

Women lawyers, network and reach out

She SAID

PRIYANKA BORANA

IN THE legal profession, networking often decides who gets noticed and who gets left behind. It's not just about knowing the rules — it's about knowing the right people. But as a woman in this profession, I've seen how different the networking experience is for us. While male lawyers casually connect over late dinners, golf games, or firm events, women often find themselves on the outside, looking in. It's not just about being invited; it's about feeling like you truly belong.

I've been lucky to have seniors who supported me, gave me chances, and respected my work. Their trust helped me grow. But I also know many women who still feel like outsiders in this profession — not because they lack skills, but because the environment doesn't always feel open or welcoming.

Let's be honest, legal networking doesn't always happen on official platforms. Real connections are often built in informal settings — chamber talks, birthday parties, or weekend cricket matches. These moments might seem casual, but they often lead to case referrals, important insights, or strategic alliances. And yet, many women miss out — not by choice, but because they are not invited or don't feel comfortable being there.

The exclusion may not always be deliberate. Sometimes it's just old habits or comfort zones. But when women aren't present in these spaces, they are also missing out on key opportunities.

Then there's the unconscious bias. A male junior who chats freely with seniors might be called dynamic. A female junior doing the same? She might be labelled over-confident. Clients sometimes assume men are more aggressive or suited for tough cases. That's not always fair, and definitely not always true.

Women also walk a tightrope in terms of how they are perceived. If you speak too much, you are an attention seeker. Stay quiet and you lack initiative. It's a no-win. Juggling professional and family life adds another layer of difficulty. Late-night calls, weekend events — these are often not practical for women managing home responsibilities.

But here's the good news — things are changing, and we can help make that change faster. There are ways women lawyers can network on their own terms.

Start with women-centric groups — WhatsApp groups, book clubs, or just regular coffee catch-ups. These may seem small, but they create a space where you can talk freely, support each other, and even share referrals and advice.

Digital platforms are a great leveller. LinkedIn, Twitter/X, and online legal forums let you showcase your work, share your thoughts, and connect with professionals across geographies. When people see your voice and your insights, they begin to recognise your value — beyond your office or court presence.

Mentors also matter. A good mentor won't just guide you legally, they'll teach you how to hold your ground in court, how to talk to clients, and when to say no. We need to seek those mentors—and also be willing to mentor others when the time comes.

Join panels, committees, awareness drives — any platform that gives you visibility. Even if you feel hesitant, showing up consistently builds your presence and lets others know you are serious about your work.

Also, set your boundaries clearly. Being friendly and being firm can go hand in hand. A simple line like, "Let's discuss this during work hours" helps set the tone without being rude. It builds respect.

And let's not forget our male allies. There are many men in this profession who believe in fairness and genuinely support their women colleagues. When a senior male lawyer says, "She's the best person for this case," it sends a strong message. It's about collaboration, not competition.

Personally, I believe we are moving in the right direction. I have had the privilege of working with seniors who stood by me. But I also see talented women who hesitate to take that extra step — not because they doubt themselves, but because they are still navigating an uneven playing field.

Networking should not feel like a closed club. Let's make it more open, more inclusive, and truly merit-based. Because we are not asking for shortcuts — we are building our own way forward.

The writer is an advocate at the Rajasthan High Court, Jodhpur
National Editor Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column

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Ranjona Banerji

Off the beaten track

What reels may come (before I fall asleep...)

I cannot tell a lie and pretend to be superior. I do watch reels on that social media site. Obviously not the banned one: Gosh no, I would never do that. I don't even have a subscription to one of those virtual private… shh. But the other one owned by some evil tech billionaire or the other, the one which allows little clips from the banned site, I watch that. Every night before I sleep, I have to get my little dopamine fix. I now realise that every do-gooder well-wisher will tell me how bad this is for me. My fingers will fall off, my brain will decompose and I'll destroy my whole sleeping pattern. I've put those in no particular order because I'm not sure which is the worst. Although am sure someone will have a perfectly concocted theory on that as well.

I'm rooting for, in order of importance:

Sleep, fingers, brain. Or maybe brain, fingers, sleep. Or the random order that I chose. Anyone one of those can be fatal. Lethal. Deadly.

As anyone who "scrolls" knows however, there are reels for everything. Including how to stop scrolling, how to get your fingers back, how to blow smoke up your…, how to regrow your brain, how to sleep, how not to sleep, how to eat, what not to eat, what to wear, what not to wear. What to wear when you're 30, 70, 370. All of it.

How to exercise, how not to exercise. Who to believe. Who not to believe. What celebs look like. What they should look like. What you should look like. Who's trying to enter your life through our phone. How to save yourself. What suitcase to take to a foreign country. Don't laugh. This is big. Very important. I have even noticed a link to what I suspect is a whole article on what baggage to carry on holiday, probably inspired by the popularity of these little 30-second recordings.

As anyone who 'scrolls' knows however, there are reels for everything. Including how to stop scrolling, how to get your fingers back, how to regrow your brain, how to sleep, how not to sleep, how to eat, what not to eat, what to wear, what not to wear. What to wear when you're 30, 70, 370. All of it.

And then, since you're travelling: Where to go, how to go where you want to go, what to eat, how to eat what you want to eat, on and on and on. Then there's the backlash tourist reel: How to expect to be treated in my country, that country, some other country if you are a pesky unwelcome tourist.

Sometimes I find myself particularly drawn to videos of babies and infants being cute. This you can blame on my age. Long-nailed overly made-up little women tapping things to buy, which they've got for free, or using some expression-less — and yet at the same time breathless — voice to tell you how to make some horrible-looking healthy meal, these do not appeal. You know what I mean — "influencers". But then I wonder about the future of these little children, who do not know they are being made famous. And eventually, as you watch them, they start endorsing products. Which means another form of exploitation by greedy parents. And the massive commercial machine has managed to gobble everything in its path.

I fear the damage done will be far worse than whatever happens to my fingers. Because the collective brain of humanity is being fogged. And by us, willingly if unwittingly. And instructed, permanently instructed. Don't say this, do that, feel the other thing. The problem is that the directions contradict each other depending on who's issuing them. Wellness-conscious and health-filled people want us to be happy; regressive people want us to listen to them because they know how we should feel, aware people want us to listen to them because they know how we ought to feel. And free will people want to be how they want to be. Contrarian annoyances, clearly.

There's a coffee shop somewhere which won't let you in unless you're smiling. I hear the "positivity at any cost" brigade cheering. So wonderful. A smile is what this terrible world needs. So sweet and affirming, 'gratituding' and whatever else is the trendy word right now. So what if this constant need to be happy can have a deleterious effect on what you're actually feeling? The loss of a loved one for instance does not really lead to happiness in many people. But they may still want a cup of coffee. Do they deserve it, if they cannot paste a meaningless mouth-stretch on their sad faces on demand?

One of the bitter lessons of growing older is discovering that freedom gets increasingly restricted just when you thought it was heading your way. The reels are full of generational conflict, usually funny. Though I guess humour depends on which side of the camera you're on. From where I'm sitting, age makes things a lot funnier than they might seem to younger people. Can you see my smug smile? Good. I meant you too, as you wallow in your age-appropriate confusion. It is how it is.

However, to get back to where I started. There are some advantages to these reels. In order; music, science, history, art, political activism and comedy. Not all of these help you to sleep easy. And those pesky algorithms are ready to take you down any number of rabbit holes. So you learn to avoid the important "advice" about some green healthy "natural" gunk you have to eat, put on your face, apply to your walls or whatever the latest craze is. Don't take offence at the colour I chose, even though I respect your right to be permanently offended especially if you're a well-meaning younger person full of the milk of human sentimentality and sanctimonious. I respect that right as well. It's just that I could well have written yellow, orange, heliotrope.

Please don't worry too much about me. You may have gathered that I'm not a very sweet type of a person. Instead of offering any gratuitous advice which I will not take, you could just take bets on which finger will fall off first, how much wrist surgery will cost me and how soon my brain will atrophy. And most importantly, will I ever be able to fall asleep at whatever is the correct time these days to fall asleep. Do let me know.

Or rather, don't.

The writer is a senior journalist who writes on media affairs, politics and social trends. She tweets at @ranjona.

Subhani

As Bihar heads for polls, honour syncretic culture

Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya's View

In Lucknow, large numbers of Muslims work in the chikan/zardozi industry owned by Hindu traders. In nearby Sitapur and Mirzapur, Hindus and Muslim are partners in the lucrative carpet industry.

On Muharram this year in Bihar, there was, as elections approach, predictable religious violence between Hindus and Muslims. In fact, anywhere in India now, every joyous religious festival is increasingly prone to discord and acrimony.

The Turkic invasion of India in the 12th century was, as global historian Will Durant said, "one of the bloodiest chapters in world history", with destruction of Hindu temples, proselytisation, and plunder. The facts of history cannot be glossed over. But over the centuries, a syncretic *Ganga-Jamuni* culture has evolved in India, where Hindus and Muslims — notwithstanding the violence of Partition and occasional episodes of communal disharmony — learnt to coexist with each other and develop a symbiotic relationship of mutual interdependence and cordiality.

For instance, do people know that even today in Remanda, a village in Odisha, a Muslim family leads the annual Hindu festival of the Rath Yatra? Or, that during his trip to the Delhi suburb Mehrauli as part of the Phoolwalon Ki Sair, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal king, always first paid obeisance at the Jog Maya temple there, before going to the *mazaar* of Sufi saint Khwaja Bakhtiyar Kaki? Or that, for the millions of Hindus who annually trek to the Ayyappa temple in Kerala's Sabarimalai hills, the *dargah* of a Muslim saint on the way is a sacred site?

In Lucknow, large numbers of Muslims work in the chikan/zardozi industry owned by Hindu traders. In nearby Sitapur and Mirzapur, Hindus and Muslim are partners in the lucrative carpet industry. In Varanasi, Muslims weave the exquisite Banarasi sarees, the Hindus finance the trade. During Ganesh Chaturthi in Maharashtra, many Muslim artisans craft Ganesh idols; in Thrissur (Kerala), during the *Pooram* festival at the Vadakkunnathan temple, Muslims and Christians help with logistics; in West Bengal, during Durga Puja, Muslim artistes also create the pandals and idols.

As a child, I remember how Hindus and Muslims joyfully participated in each other's festivals, with Muslim families preparing *gujiyas* and *thandai* during Holi, and Hindu neighbours enjoying *sevaiyan* and *biryani* on Eid. In Bengal and parts of Bihar, Hindu artisans craft *taazias* for Muharram processions. In Bihar, within a 100 km radius of Patna, are located the most important sites of India's major religions: Pawapuri, where Mahavira took his mahanirvana, for Jains; Bodhgaya, the prime destination for Buddhists; Gaya, where devout Hindus pray for their ancestors; Bihar Sharif, second only to Ajmer Sharif for Muslims; and Patna Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Govind, for Sikhs. In Rajasthan's Tonk district — a former princely state founded by a Pathan ruler — Hindus and Muslims have for generations performed *qawwalis* and *bhajans* together at local Sufi shrines.

It is a fact that cynical politicians use ordinary Indians as puppets to reinforce religion-based vote banks. People suffer, politicians prosper. Self-styled evangelists — Hindus and Muslims — are used to whip up communal hatred. For such Hindus, Adi Shankaracharya (8th century) bluntly said: "*Jatilo mundi lunchitakeshaha kashayambarabahukrtavesh, pashyannapi ca na pashyati mudho udaranimitto bahukrtaveshah:* Many are those who mat their locks, shave their heads, wear robes of ochre, but do this only for their stomachs (that is, self-interest)."

The great intermingling of cultures was perhaps most poetically expressed through the Bhakti and Sufi movements. These were not mere religious reformations, but civilisational conversations — between the heart and the divine, bypassing orthodoxies and embracing universality. For centuries, Muslim Sufis, one of the most famous of whom was Amir Khusro, have sung devotional songs on Hindu themes. A Hindu Brahmin family is the hereditary custodian of the Haji Malang shrine in Mumbai. Hindu pilgrims throng the tomb of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer.

Kabir (15th century), among the most eclectic voices of the Bhakti movement, evocatively said: "*Poorabi disa Hari ka basa, pacchim Allah mukama; dil ki khoj dile bheetar, ihan Ram Rahimana*: In the east is Hari, in the west is Allah; look within your heart, here reside both Ram and Rahim." He, therefore, fearlessly proclaimed: "Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram: He is my Guru, He is my Pir." In the 18th century, Urdu legend Mir Taqi Mir could declare: "*Mir ke dino-mazhab ko ab poochate kya ho unne tau, kashka khencha dair main baitha kabka tarq Islam kiya:* What do you ask of Mir's religious beliefs? For long now, he has put on the sacred tilak, sat at the temple, and severed his relationship with Islam." Ghalib (18th century), openly poked fun at narrow-minded Islamic clerics: "*Kahan maikhane ka darwza Ghalib aur kahan vaayiz, Bas itna jante hain kal wo jata tha jab hum nikle*: The tavern's door, and the cleric, are poles apart; But all I know is that he was entering when I was ready to depart."

What has happened to this ancient land, that aspires to become the Vishwaguru, but is unable to demolish the walls of bigotry within its own people? People of all religious denominations are spread across the country. Muslims, which are the largest minority, account for some 30 per cent of the population of West Bengal and Assam, and one-fourth of Kerala, apart from a significant proportion in most states. Hindus and Muslims live cheek by jowl in lakhs of villages, and enduring hostility between them is a prescription of endemic instability. That is why, in a letter to chief ministers in 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru said that religious coexistence is not an option but a compulsion for India. Indeed, one of our calling cards in this troubled world is that India is one country where for centuries people of all faiths have lived together as an intrinsic part of the national fabric.

But Machiavellian politicians and illiterate religious bigots have tried to besmirch this calling card, especially when elections approach, because political parties wish to cash in on the dividends of communal vote banks. Indians should tell politicians who try to divide them on religion what Sahir Ludhianvi said in the 1959 film *Dhool Ka Phool: "Tu Hindu banega na Mussalman banega, insaan ki aulad hai insaan banega:* You will neither become only a Hindu or a Muslim; you are born a human being, and will be a humane being."

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

LETTERS

RAHUL CROSSING LIMITS

After becoming the leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi 's loose comments on BJP, Modi and Election Commission of India have exceeded all tolerable limits. He calls all of them thieves and cheats and by many other distasteful and unparliamentary epithets. He conveniently forgets that he and his family themselves are out on bail granted to them due to the benevolence and mercy of courts and the high fees charging advocates capable of making ropes out of sand and mountains out of molehills. His latest verbal cannonode against the ECI over preparation of voters' rolls for the ensuing Bihar Elections is an example of RaGa's high degree acerbic calumnies on the ECI which is a 100 per cent neutral body.

Marudamalaiyan
Coimbatore

INDIVIDUAL'S ACHIEVEMENT

Thank God the death sentence of a nurse Nimisha Priya of Kerala has been postponed in Yemen by the relentless efforts of A.P.Aboobacker Musliar, the Sunny leader and the general secretary of All India Jamiyathul Ulama of Kanthapuram Kerala through his close friend and respected Yemeni Sufi Scholar. This is highly appreciated as what the Indian government should have done, has been achieved by an individual. Further, this is the rarest of rare one as a Muslim leader has taken up the matter to save the life of Nimisha Priya at least as a temporary reprieve which is an excellent mix of faith and backchannel efforts. But sadly the family members of the victim seem to cling to the provision of Qisas, a retributive justice. Let us all pray that Nimisha Priya's life be spared by persistent negotiations.

M L . RAGHAVAN
Tirupur

Mail your letters to
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Anita Katyal

Political Gup-Shup

Will Shringla get Darjeeling ticket? Who's coming to Tharoor's party?

There appears to be no end to the Shashi Tharoor saga as the Thiruvananthapuram MP has a knack of being in the news. This time it is not his controversial statements which are the subject of animated discussion but his July 24 annual mango party, the first social get-together post Operation Sindoor. The invitees usually include a mix of leaders from the Congress as well as other Opposition parties like Mohua Moitra and Supriya Sule. Since Mr Tharoor is currently in the "disgruntled" category, speculation about the guest list is building up. Congress insiders are keeping a close watch to see if any BJP leader will be invited, given Mr Tharoor's growing proximity to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It is also to be seen whether party office bearers like K.C. Venugopal and Randeep Surjewala will be invited and if they are, will they put in an appearance as they do every year? Both Mr Venugopal and Mr Surjewala are known Rahul Gandhi loyalists and their presence or absence at Mr Tharoor's party will be a message in itself. Meanwhile, several Congress leaders who are unhappy with the party's top leadership have been sending feelers to Mr Tharoor that they would like to be invited to the party. They essentially want to make a point to the Congress high command about their unhappiness with the functioning of the party without saying anything which could get them into trouble.

Over the past few months, Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath has ordered the transfer of a large number of bureaucrats. The decision to replace Shishir Singh with Bhadohi deputy magistrate Vishal Singh as the new director, information and culture, had shocked everyone as the former was known to be close to the chief minister and held the position for five years. Political observers in UP point out that there has been a perceptible change in the news coverage of the Yogi government after Vishal Singh was designated information director. The local legacy media is no longer shying away from carrying occasional critical news reports about the UP government. Though there are no personal attacks against Yogi Adityanath, the stories generally focus on government policies, unheard of till a few months ago. It is not clear if this is the leadership's considered decision or a reflection on the new officer.

Though Congress members have accepted that Rahul Gandhi is the face of the party, there is growing resentment over his choice of office bearers in the organisation. Congress general secretary K.C. Venugopal, a Rahul Gandhi favourite, has been a target since his appointment and there is constant speculation about his removal. But Mr Venugopal remains well entrenched. Similarly, leaders are unhappy that Rahul Gandhi had ignored experienced leaders and instead picked Anil Jaihind as chairman of the party's OBC department and Rajendra Pal Gautam for the Scheduled Caste department as neither has had any strong connection with the Congress. Senior OBC leaders like Veerappa Moily and others are particularly upset as they have been championing the cause of backward classes in party fora for years now. Again, over 30 senior leaders of Jammu and Kashmir Congress have dashed off a letter to Rahul Gandhi expressing their unhappiness with Tariq Hameed Karra's appointment as the state party chief. The signatories to the letter maintain that since he took over, they have not been consulted in organisational matters despite the fact they have years of experience in the field. Mr Karra is also a Rahul Gandhi protégé.

There had been a strong buzz in the run-up to last year's Lok Sabha elections that former foreign secretary Harsh Shringla would be fielded for the Darjeeling seat. On his part, Mr Shringla had been positioning himself for such an eventuality as he participated in several programmes during his regular trips to Darjeeling. Mr Shringla failed to make a cut for the Lok Sabha but he has now been rewarded with a presidential nomination to the Rajya Sabha. The Capital's bureaucratic circles were quick to point out that the BJP wants to groom Mr Shringla for a bigger political role and that his entry to the Upper House is only the first step in that direction. There is one view that Mr Shringla's presence in the Upper House will serve as a constant reminder that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has other options other than external affairs minister S. Jaishankar. Others believe the BJP will project Mr Shringla as its future leader first in Sikkim to keep its focus on the Northeast.

The Capital's wedding season spares no one. Well before the beginning of the auspicious period in November, people rush to grab hotel rooms, guest houses and banquet halls for the "big, fat Indian wedding". Diplomats from the United States, Japan and Australia, who are preparing for the Quad Leaders' Summit being hosted by India in Delhi later this year, have had their first brush with this phenomenon. The embassies of the three countries are finding it hard to book rooms for the large number of officials who will be accompanying their leaders for the summit. Reason: Delhi's wedding season.

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Political leadership is all about respecting and honouring conscientious well-wishers

Leaders, who are consistently available, accessible, and possess the sacred capacity to listen to conscientious well-wishers, have become a rare breed

Vanam Jwala Narasimha Rao

LEADERSHIP is an enduring engagement, not an entitlement, continuous dialogue with people, place, and purpose. Indian democracy has lasted largely due to the collective consciousness and moral seriousness of previous and our generations. Over time, political leadership has become a fascination in transactional politics, drowned in noise, and distanced from true distinction. The political approach of large number of leaders is in gaining power and influence for indiscriminate personal gain or specific benefits. This decline of passion and spirit that once fueled ideology-driven movements, stems from erosion of values and weakening sense of accountability.

Leaders, who are consistently available, genuinely accessible, and possess the sacred capacity to sincerely listen to conscientious well-wishers have become a rare breed. Most political leaders, in power or not, surround themselves with 'yes-men' and isolate the wise, which is a grave, even suicidal, mistake. The soul of political leadership committed to democratic spirit, is found in the ability to touch minds, move emotions, and change lives. Vision, dedication, and relentless assurance to people-first approach is leadership.

Leaders define, design, and deliver meaningful thought courses. Leadership in its highest form is not flamboyant, but quiet, persistent, and purposeful. It stands tall when storms hit but knows when to bow in humility. It is not charisma but character, not slogans but service, not optics but outcomes. Leaders walk that extra mile to consult, to confront facts, and to transcend personal agendas.

As observed by the Supreme Court on July 14, 2025, that the 'Freedom of Expression' was being 'Abused,' most leaders commit 'Extreme Suicidal Mistake' by indiscriminately deploying 'Social Media Warriors' who forget that it is not color of the shirt but wisdom of the heart that matters, before abusing and snubbing meaningful critics, often with filthy language.

A real skill and challenge for a sincere leader is discipline and accountability, especially when party's broad agenda is disseminated to people. It must be 'Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound (SMART).' Evading execution after gaining power, or avoiding a responsive role in opposition, is betrayal of leadership.

A true leader need not always head the government, but must be capable of leading the shadow government, as in the case of United Kingdom. Leadership is not about impressing but about groundwork, and certainly not about hiding when circumstances demand. A good leader should stand steadfast, speak truthfully and act in a transparent manner.

Political decision-making is no longer a collective intellectual process or shaped by inner-party democracy and shared wisdom. The diktat of a single person is consensus these days. Dissent is branded as scrupulous disloyalty. Civility has been replaced with contempt, patience with provocation, and humility with hubris, a trait of 'Overconfident Pride combined with Arrogance.' The moral compass of leadership is without needles.

Only leaders who are 'available, accessible and open to consultation' can make a huge difference.

BJP State president Naraparaju Ramchander Rao has put it rightly, 'Intellectuals possess moral and analytical clarity needed to inform the public, raise awareness and counter misinformation.'

A great leader believes that failure is only a suspended success. Rudyard Kipling in his 'IF Poem' wrote 'Triumph and disaster the two impostors represent success and failure' and both can be deceptive'.

Though Alexandre Dumas said, 'Nothing succeeds like success', a visionary leader embraces failure as the crucible of growth. Leadership is not about convenience, but about consequence, conscience, and character.

Transformative frameworks and critical qualities that define true leadership, set forth by Jim Collins in his book 'Good to Great' are worth absorbing by any leader.

Such 'level five' Leaders embrace brutal facts, build teams based on 'first who, then what,' and drive transformation through discipline and vision. With such qualities they channel ambition into legacy. Such Leaders are desperately required. The journey from good to great does not occur overnight. It demands deliberate nurturing of strategic depth, consistent values, adaptability, and the courage to confront uncomfortable truths. It calls for visionary (political) leadership, cultivating a culture of discipline.

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An effective leader with vision, humility, passion, and people-driven clarity will be capable of inspiring change.

As my illustrious political science Professor late VS Murthy told me, 'Task accomplishment and Target Fulfilment' is more important to them, than conforming to orthodox rules. Only such a leader treats every individual with respect. Their words are not theatrics but repositories of evidence, reasoning, literary finesse, and multilingual richness, coupled with subtle humor. When they communicate it will be backed with intensive memory power. They are highly capable of multitasking, impromptu responses, and switch-tasking with strategic clarity.

Equally important for a true leader is the attitude of 'Treating politics as a task but not a game' as often put by Telangana's first chief minister K Chandrasekhar Rao. True leaders are also to be stewards of public trust, and should know when to be firm, to be flexible, and to say, 'Thus far, and no further' but unambiguously with a high degree of rationale. Fearlessly walking an extra mile, if that path ensures justice or secures progress, is what leadership is all about and not shying away from criticism or confrontation. Strategic political acumen enables leaders to convert vulnerabilities into strengths.

Leaders must embody statesmanship, while political leadership should serve as a living lesson, a daily example, and a moral compass for generations, rooted in principles, driven by people and dedicated to posterity.

The era of modest and principled political leaders who lived simply and thought greatly is a bygone memory. Such leaders became Chief Ministers, Speakers, Presidents, and Prime Ministers not because they sought power, but because power trusted them. Degeneration in politics is a typical phenomenon, a feeling of deep sadness, shock, and worry. Ultimately, political leadership is not about rising to power but about raising the people; not about winning elections but winning hearts even after losing. It is about the courage to be right, the humbleness to listen and the wisdom to act.

BABIES WITH THREE PEOPLE'S DNA HAILED AS BREAKTHROUGH; BUT QUESTIONS REMAIN

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Mitochondrial Donation) Regulations 2015 raised concerns about effectiveness and potential side-effects.

Cathy Herbrand

TEN years after the UK became the first country to legalise mitochondrial donation, the first results from the use of these high-profile reproductive technologies – designed to prevent passing on genetic disorders – have finally been published. So far, eight children have been born, all reportedly healthy, thanks to the long-term efforts of scientists and doctors in Newcastle, England.

Should this be a cause for excitement, disappointment or concern? Perhaps, I would suggest, it could be a bit of all three.

The New England Journal of Medicine has published two papers on a groundbreaking fertility treatment that could prevent devastating inherited diseases. The technique, called mitochondrial donation, was used to help 22 women who carry faulty genes that would otherwise pass serious genetic disorders – such as Leigh syndrome – to their children. These disorders affect the body's ability to produce energy at the cellular level and can cause severe disability or death in babies. The technique, developed by the Newcastle team, involves creating an embryo using DNA from three people: nuclear DNA from the intended mother and father, and healthy mitochondrial DNA from a donor egg.

During the parliamentary debates leading up to The Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Mitochondrial Donation) Regulations in 2015, there were concerns about the effectiveness of the procedure and its potential side-effects. The announcement that this technology has led to the birth of eight apparently healthy children therefore marks a major scientific achievement for the UK, which has been widely praised by numerous scientists and patient support groups. However, these results should not detract from some important questions they also raise.

First, why has it taken so long for any updates on the application of this technology, including its outcomes and its limitations, to be made public? Especially given the significant public financial investment made into its development. In a country positioning itself as a leader in the governance and practice of reproductive and genomic medicine, transparency should be a central principle. Transparency not only supports the progress of other research teams but also keeps the public and patients well informed. Second, what is the significance of these results? While eight babies were born using this technology, this figure contrasts starkly with the predicted number of 150 babies per year likely to be born using the technique.

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, the UK regulator in this area, has approved 32 applications since 2017 when the Newcastle team obtained its licence, but the technique was used with only 22 of them, resulting in eight babies. Does this constitute sufficiently robust data to prove the effectiveness of the technology and was it worth the considerable efforts and investments over almost two decades of campaigning, debate and research?

As I wrote when this law was passed, officials should have been more realistic about how many people this treatment could help. By overestimating the number of patients who might benefit, they risked giving false hope to families who wouldn't be eligible for the procedure.

The safety question:

Is it safe enough? In two of the eight cases, the babies showed higher levels of maternal mitochondrial DNA, meaning the risk of developing a mitochondrial disorder cannot be ruled out. This potential for a "reversal" – where the faulty mitochondria reassert themselves – was also highlighted in a recent study conducted in Greece involving patients who used the technique to treat infertility problems.

As a result, the technology is no longer framed by the Newcastle team to prevent the transmission of mitochondrial disorders, but rather to reduce the risk. But is the risk reduction enough to justify offering the technique to more patients? And what will the risk of reassertion mean for the children born through it and their parents, who may live with the continuing uncertainty that the condition could emerge later in life?

The announcement that this technology has led to the birth of eight apparently healthy children therefore marks a major scientific achievement for the UK, which has been widely praised by numerous scientists and patient support groups. However, these results should not detract from some important questions they also raise.

As some experts have suggested, it may be worth testing this technology on women who have fertility problems but don't carry mitochondrial diseases. This would help doctors better understand the risks of the faulty mitochondria coming back, before using the technique only on women who could pass these serious genetic conditions to their children. This leads to a fourth question.

What has been the patient experience with this technology? It would be valuable to know how many people applied for mitochondrial donation, why some were not approved, and, among those 32 approved cases, why only 22 proceeded with treatment. It also raises important questions about how patients who were either unable to access the technology, or for whom it was ultimately unsuccessful feel, particularly after investing significant time, effort and hope in the process.

How do they come to terms with not having the healthy biological child they had been offered? This is not to say we shouldn't celebrate these births and what they represent for the UK in terms of scientific achievement. The birth of eight healthy children represents a genuine scientific breakthrough that families affected by mitochondrial diseases have waited decades to see. However, some important questions remain unanswered, and more evidence is needed, and it should be communicated in a timely manner to make conclusions about the long-term use of the technology. Breakthroughs come with responsibilities.

If the UK wants to maintain its position as a leader in reproductive medicine, it must be more transparent about both the successes and limitations of this technology. The families still waiting to have the procedure – and those who may never receive it – deserve nothing less than complete honesty about what this treatment can and cannot deliver.

(The writer is associated with De Montfort University)

You say that you are in favour of life, well then you should be in favour of gender equality. And equality is only promoted through conscious education and discussion with our children

Marielle Franco

MONSOON SESSION: ANSWERS MPs MUST SEEK IN PARLIAMENT

IT'S that time of the year. On Monday, India's parliament will meet for the monsoon session. Theory says parliament is where the elected discuss, debate and legislate on issues. In reality, the elected simply represent the party instead of electors—in the 17th Lok Sabha, 11 of 15 sessions were adjourned early. We will know in the coming weeks whether the issues that matter are raised, or the session turns into an amphitheatre for partisan political rhetoric.

Hopefully, the MPs will not only raise the questions, but also question the answers! Here are a few issues that deserve attention and answers.

Operation Sindoor: The issue of national security and terrorism is expected to hold centre stage. The monsoon session is the first since the terror attack in Pahalgam in April. The government is expected to provide answers on intelligence failure, security lapse, if the terrorists were apprehended and, of course, the four day face-off. There is much attention on the ceasefire and whether it was imposed, as claimed repeatedly, by US President Donald J Trump, despite denials by India. The timing of the ceasefire is important but beyond when, how and who brokered it, there is the question of why the US pivoted to intervene. Was it the BrahMos hit on Nur Khan airbase? Is the Pakistani nuclear site and systems at Nur Khan airbase under US control, as claimed by Pakistan experts and, if so, what does this mean for India's security?

Air India 171 crash: The crash of the Air India flight from Ahmedabad to London that claimed 260 lives is the worst in recent aviation history. The how and why of the crash is critical both for Air India and beleaguered Boeing. The Air Accident Investigation Bureau of India, which investigated the cause, released a preliminary report that seemed to park the blame on the pilots by excerpting a cockpit conversation. Why not release the whole conversation, as was done in the case of Captain 'Sully' Sullenberger's US Airways flight 1549 report? Is it normal to release a preliminary report with an inference about fault—particularly when tradition requires explicit avoidance of blame—and then issue clarifications? Was the report leaked to US media, and by who? What explains the Directorate General of Civil Aviation's directive to airlines to check fuel switches? Over 350 million Indians fly every year and they deserve clarity and accountability.

THE THIRD EYE

SHANKKAR AIYAR
Author of *The Gated Republic, Aadhaar: A Biometric History of India's 12 Digit Revolution*, and *Accidental India*
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Inflation optics: Earlier this week, the ministry of statistics released the retail inflation rate for June—2.1 percent—stating in bold letters, "It is the lowest year-on-year inflation after January, 2019." Beyond the devilish details, it begs the question why it doesn't feel so! Indeed, the RBI's Households' Inflation Expectations Survey reveals that 80 percent of respondents believe inflation will go up and, over 54 percent think it will go up faster. The fact is the cost of services is rising and the slide in the Consumer Price Index is largely due to lower prices of vegetables and pulses; at the same time, prices of oils are up 17.7 percent, fruits up 12.5 percent and personal care products up 14.7 percent. Yes, the headline number is low, but as the Brits say, let's not praise the day before the evening. Ergo, MPs must ask specifically what the government did to bring down inflation and what they plan to do to keep it lower unless, of course, this was all a serendipity of statistics.

Budget 2025 promises: In February, the government announced an Udhyam credit card—suggested by this column—to ease credit flow to micro enterprises. The Budget speech said, "We will introduce customised credit cards with ₹5 lakh limit for micro enterprises registered on Udyam portal," and that 10 lakh cards would be issued in the first year. Three are over 27 million micro enterprises registered on Udhyam. Micro, small and medium enterprises account for 30 percent of GDP, 45 percent of manufacturing, and 48 percent of exports. Can MPs ask how many cards have been issued between April and June?

While MSMEs struggle, state-owned MTNL is racking up defaults—the latest number is ₹8,585 crore owed to seven state-owned banks. Between them, MTNL and BSNL have accumulated losses of over ₹72,000 crore. Budget 2025 set a target of ₹47,000 crore for disinvestment. What is the progress?

Bridges and potholes: Rarely ever has a nation been so aghast and yet riveted by the state of its bridges and highways. Earlier this month, a bridge collapse in Vadodara killed 21 persons. Newly-constructed national highways are washed out and city roads and expressways are pock-marked with potholes. Almost every city sets aside hundreds of crores of rupees to fill potholes every year. The magnitude of the problem has spurred a blitzkrieg of posts and citizen activism. A crowd-sourced tracker called IndianPotholes.com allows users to upload geotagged pictures of potholes in real time. To start, MPs must ask for a status report on bridge collapses—what happened to the ministry's 2016 promise to assess the condition of bridges and assign expiry dates? India needs a white paper on how much money is spent on potholes across the country and a technical committee to identify the causes of poor road construction. The magnitude of structural flaws haunting bridges, airports and roads is a national embarrassment.

The old maxim of development simply states what is measured can be improved. The aspiration for developed nation status requires India to first address the chinks in the architecture of governance and delivery of basic services.

SAMOSA & JALEBI FACE BABUS' BETRAYAL

POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA
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IN a nation where the crunch of a samosa and the syrupy swirl of a jalebi are as much a part of life as monsoon rains and cricket fever, the Union health ministry lobbed a culinary grenade into the heart of India's street food culture. A directive, cloaked in the guise of health consciousness, has sparked a firestorm of outrage, memes and defiance, threatening to tarnish the golden glow of our beloved snacks.

Last month, Union Health Secretary Punya Salila Srivastava unleashed a culinary calamity through his letter to all ministries and departments urging them to put up "oil and sugar boards" in public spaces like cafeterias and lobbies, spotlighting the hidden fats and sugars in snacks like samosas, jalebis, vada pav, kachoris, and even pizzas and burgers. Later on, the ministry denied that the directive was meant to target any specific products. However, the damage was done.

What were the compulsions for the government to get into the controversy? The justification given was combating India's rising tide of obesity and non-communicable diseases—with The Lancet forecasting a grim 44.9 crore overweight Indians by 2050. But this vaguely-worded edict, dripping with Western wellness dogma, has misfired spectacularly and ignited a debate that has pitted bureaucratic overreach against cultural pride.

Samosas and jalebis aren't just food; they're the heartbeat of Indian celebrations, from Diwali feasts to wedding banquets, and no government memo should dare meddle with that sacred bond. The health ministry's directive, ostensibly a 'behavioural nudge', reeks of a deeper agenda, one that seems to begrudge the global rise of Indian cuisine. Why else single out samosas and jalebis, when the real culprits like ultra-processed chips, colas and cookies lurk in every supermarket aisle?

The advisory also lists other Indian dishes drowning in oil and sugar: pakoras, gulab jamuns, and banana chips, all flagged as dietary villains alongside their Western counterparts. But Indian food isn't just about calories. Take dal bati churma, a Rajasthani marvel of lentils, baked dough, and sweet crumbled wheat, or Bengali delicacies like luchi and aloor dum, rasgulla and sandesh, or the opulent Mughlai biryanis and kormas. These aren't mere meals. They are cultural heirlooms woven into festivals, family gatherings, and the very fabric of India's identity. Each dish carries an in-built health corrective system—spices like turmeric and cumin aid digestion, while the community-led act of sharing food fosters mental well-being. To slap a warning on these is to spit in the face of centuries-old wisdom and erase India's rich food heritage.

SOURAV ROY

The world has seen governments meddle with food habits before with the same sanctimonious zeal. In Mexico, warning labels on high-sugar, high-fat foods like sodas and chips have been mandatory since 2020, aiming to curb obesity rates that rival India's. The UK has toyed with taxing sugary drinks, while Singapore's Health Promotion Board nudges citizens away from high-calorie hawker dishes like Char kway teow, a stir-fried noodle dish swimming in oil. These global precedents share a common thread. All of them target processed junk like sodas, fries, doughnuts. These are beautifully packaged foods engineered for addiction by corporate giants.

In India, though, the health ministry's focus on street food feels like a betrayal—as if samosas, lovingly hand-folded by a roadside vendor, are as sinister as a Big Mac. Western snacks like burgers (1,377 kcal for a 471-g pizza, per the Food Safety and Standards Authority), French fries (342 kcal for 117 g), and chocolate pastries (loaded with 32g sugar per gulab jamun-sized serving) are no health saints. Yet, they have escaped the cultural crosshairs. Why? Perhaps because Indian dishes like curry, dosa, idli, paratha and biryani have conquered global palates from London's curry houses to New York's dosa carts, and someone, somewhere isn't thrilled about it.

Social media has erupted in a glorious rebellion, with X posts capturing the public's scorn and wit. "Samosas & jalebis get cigarette-style health alerts in India," screamed one user, mocking the absurdity of equating a samosa to tobacco. Another post marvelled at the irony: "Samosa and jalebi were getting popular in Western [sic]," only to be slapped with warnings at home. Yet another said: "You don't eat jalebis and samosas for health. You indulge for delight."

The backlash grew so fierce that the ministry issued a clarification on July 15, insisting no warning labels were planned for samosas or jalebis, just "educational boards" to promote moderation. Too late; the damage was done. This isn't just about food; it's about identity. Samosas and jalebis aren't mere snacks. They're the crackle of Diwali evenings, the sweetness of Eid celebrations, the warmth of a rainy day's chai break. To target them is to target India's soul.

The government's directive, piloted from AIIMS Nagpur, smacks of a Western narrative that fetishises kale and quinoa while sneering at the spiced, fried glory of Indian cuisine. A credible food expert nailed it on Instagram: "Ultra-processed food products are the real problem… Samosa and jalebi ne aapka kya bigada hai?" She's right. Colas, chips and cookies, churned out by multinational corporations, deserve clearer warning labels, not the street vendor's labour. The ministry's failure to distinguish between cultural treasures and corporate junk exposes a troubling disconnect, as if foreign educated policymakers in Delhi's ivory towers can't fathom the lives of ordinary Indians.

The initiative's timing is particularly galling when one considers India's health strides. The average life expectancy has climbed to over 76 years in 2024, up from 63.7 in 2000, according to reports. Compare that to other developing nations like Nigeria (54.7 years), or even developed ones like the US (77.5 years), where the number is stagnating due to obesity and opioid crises. India's progress owes less to government meddling and more to its people's intuitive balance. Indians are now making yoga and other exercises part of their wellness regime and mostly sticking to home-cooked meals. The Fit India and Healthy India campaigns are fine slogans, but they ring hollow when paired with misinformation that vilifies cultural staples.

Spreading fear about samosas hasn't just misfired. It has eroded trust, stoked division, and handed ammunition to political adversaries like West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who gleefully rejected the advisory as "unnecessary interference". She wrote on X: "Some media have reported that apparently samosas/ jalebis cannot be consumed from now on, based on instructions from the health ministry. This is not a notification from the government of West Bengal. We are not interfering in every matter. We shall not implement this."

It's evident that it was a bad initiative, plain and simple. The government has no business dictating what Indians eat, especially when its directive reeks of cultural ignorance and Western bias. Indians know when to savour a jalebi or share a samosa. The ministry's clumsy attempt at health reform has done more harm than good, sowing confusion and alienating the very people it claims to protect. It's time to ditch the warning boards and focus on the real threats: regulate ultra-processed foods, educate without preaching, and let Indians eat their traditional foods in peace. Anything less is a betrayal of the nation's palate, plate and pride.

RETURN OF THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH

OPINION

SHYAM BHATIA
Former Diplomatic Editor, *The Observer*
and author of *Bullets and Bylines*

FRESH scrutiny is falling on convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein as new court filings and investigative reports revive disturbing speculation about his web of trafficking, surveillance and elite privilege. While Donald Trump has not been charged in connection with Epstein's crimes, but like Bill Clinton's, his name keeps coming up in connection with the disgraced financier. The scandal is once again casting a shadow over some of the most powerful institutions in the Western world.

It's a scandal that refuses to die—not just because of its lurid particulars, but because the story continues to implicate major institutions and individuals. From Buckingham Palace to Langley, from Palm Beach to Tel Aviv, the saga is not simply one of criminal depravity. It's a study in the machinery of secrecy, influence and impunity.

Epstein, a convicted sex offender and financier of unclear means, was not just a man with expensive tastes and dangerous appetites. He was also a man with extraordinary access. His contacts included billionaires, royals, presidents and spies. He hosted figures ranging from Bill Clinton to Donald Trump, from Ehud Barak to Prince Andrew. His Upper East Side mansion in New York was rigged with hidden cameras, coded entryways, and surrealist art. The question that lingers: who was watching whom?

Central to the saga is Ghislaine Maxwell, British socialite and daughter of media tycoon Robert Maxwell—himself rumoured to have had dealings with both Mossad and MI6. Her role in grooming and trafficking underage girls has now been confirmed by a US court. Yet, it is her connections that raise questions. Was Ghislaine merely Epstein's enabler? Or was she, like her father, acting on behalf of interests larger than herself?

Robert Maxwell's mysterious death at sea in 1991—with his body found floating near the Canary Islands—and later revelations of his cooperation with Israeli intelligence are part of the legacy Ghislaine inherited. That she embedded herself so deeply into the Anglo-American elite without scrutiny for so long speaks not only to privilege, but to protection.

Prince Andrew's entanglement is no longer a matter of speculation. His now-settled civil case with Virginia Giuffre, who accused him of abusing her as a minor, came with a multi-million-dollar payout and a permanently-damaged reputation. The photograph of him with Giuffre, Maxwell in the background, remains iconic—not just for what it shows, but for how it was denied.

Numerous observers, including former intelligence professionals, have long speculated that Epstein was a facilitator—creating honeypots, filming the powerful, and quietly handing over the results to interested parties. Former Israeli officer Ari Ben-Menashe and American whistleblowers have suggested Epstein's operation bore the hallmarks of classic *compromat* used for control. Why else would such a man be funded, protected, and even after conviction be welcomed by the world's most influential?

The Epstein saga refuses to die not just for its lurid details, but because it shows how secrecy and influence can shield the rich and powerful with impunity. Recent sparks in the US has lit the fire of global interest again

Epstein's death in a high-security New York prison in 2019, officially ruled a suicide, though surveillance footage vanished and the guards reportedly slept through it, only deepened suspicions. It was the perfect ending for a man who knew too much.

At first glance, Trump appears as just another name in Epstein's contact list who famously called Epstein "a terrific guy" in 2002. But since Epstein's death, many within Trump's base have seized on the scandal as proof of a global elite network rotten to its core—a real-world echo of what the QAnon, the far-right conspiracy movement, claims about a secret cabal of child-abusing elites that Trump was chosen to expose.

Steve Bannon, Trump's on-again, off-again ideologue, reportedly had access to hours of private interviews with Ghislaine—some filmed while she was in hiding in New Hampshire. Was it for a documentary, a counter-narrative, or something more coercive? The answers remain buried for now.

Despite trials and exposés, much of the Epstein archive remains sealed. Flight logs are redacted. Visitor logs disappeared. Surveillance tapes from his homes have never surfaced. His private Caribbean island, with its odd blue-and-white temple and underground rooms, remains a monument to unanswered questions. If Epstein was indeed an asset of intelligence services, we may never know the full truth.

But what is already known is damning enough. A global trafficking operation catered to the powerful, protected by the system, and buried before too many questions could be asked. The Epstein story is no longer about one man. It is about the infrastructure of impunity—secretive, elite and shameless. *(Views are personal)*

QUOTE CORNER

CBS's billionaire owners pay Trump $16 million to settle a bogus lawsuit while trying to sell the network to Skydance. Stephen Colbert, an extraordinary talent and the most popular late night host, slams the deal. Days later, he's fired. Do I think this is a coincidence? NO.

Bernie Sanders, US senator, after CBS announced closure of the Late Night talk show after 32 years, 10 of them hosted by Colbert

Mothers are telling me how they're trying to have kids not play, so that they don't draw more energy.

Carl Skau, deputy director at World Food Programme, on Gaza food crisis

It's a very worrying situation, because there are so many people involved in the ISL. So many players, livelihoods.

Prithiijit Das, president of Inter Kashi Football Club, on Indian Super League's uncertain future after his club was belatedly declared winners of I-League

MAILBAG WRITE TO letters@newindianexpress.com

China's motivation

Ref: *Cue music for a Himalayan pas de deux* (Jul 19). Two points come my mind: how much can we trust China and why this sudden invocation of '2,000 years of friendly exchanges' along with their president being gracious enough to grant our foreign minister an audience? Has this got anything to do with Operation Sindoor, which displayed the failure of Chinese electronic air defence systems supplied to Pakistan? It is possible that they may have thought that, thanks to the irrational Mr Trump, in case of a conflict with AUKUS, America may induce us, a Quad member, to open a second front along their southern borders. After all, despite all the acrimony faced by the USSR, Stalin joined hands with the Allies when Hitler invaded Russia.

Rajan Ugra, Bengaluru

Pivot caution

Business deals are not relationships. Refer to the deals demanded by the current US president. On the other hand, isn't his 'relationship' with Elon Musk revealing? So we do not know when China will change tack. Even though we as a people have a relationship for ages, China's leadership has relinquished its core ethos and seem not to mean what they say. Anyways, it is appreciable that the author still has high hopes, like Panditji had. I would argue for negotiating with the utmost caution.

Rajakumar Armugaperumal, email

Policy potholes

Ref: *Tesla rolls in, but bumps stay on EV growth path* (Jul 19). Tesla's entry into India is like bringing a spaceship to a bullock cart race—futuristic, but out of place. With sky-high duties, a skeletal charging network and policy potholes, Elon Musk might need more than autopilot to navigate our market. First build the road, then dream of the drive.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Blame game

Ref: *Govt blames RCB, organisers* (Jul 18). While the Royal Challengers won IPL 2025, they couldn't win over everyone afterwards. The 'Indian Political League' shifted the blame for the stampede on to the state cricket administrators and the event management company, and disowned responsibilities for their own failure to secure lives on that day. By passing the blame, the government has made another display of bureaucratic escapism.

A P Thiruvadi, Chennai

Manuscript access

Ref: *Culture ministry mulls app to make ancient manuscripts available online* (Jul 19). A move to make digitised versions of ancient manuscripts available on Android and iOS platforms would be absolutely welcome. Access to such treasure troves should spur more research, especially for scholars who have to depend on secondary texts today. It will help the study of linguistics, too.

Krishnaprasad S, Palakkad

Bigger conflagration

Ref: *Judge files petition in SC challenging inquiry panel report in cash-stash row* (Jul 19). Notwithstanding Justice Yashwant Varma moving the Supreme Court, the case has propelled India into uncharted constitutional waters. It has transcended the alleged misconduct of one judge to become a moment of reckoning for the entire judicial system. The fire that broke out at his house has ignited a much larger blaze, and its embers continue to burn at the heart of the system.

R Sivakumar, Chennai

Cleanse judiciary

Ref: *Justice Varma impeachment motion to be fast-tracked* (Jul 19). This case has indeed portrayed judges in a dubious image, because the massive amount of cash shown begs questions of possible bias in the judge's orders. As seems to be the mood of the powers that be, there should not be any attempt from politicians or other high offices like the Supreme Court to protect Varma. Corrupt judges can sabotage the entire judiciary and erode the public's trust in this essential institution.

Iqbal Vavad, Kozhikode

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The Sunday Tribune

SPECTRUM

CHANDIGARH | 20 JULY 2025

After six glorious decades, the NSD Repertory finds itself at a crossroads

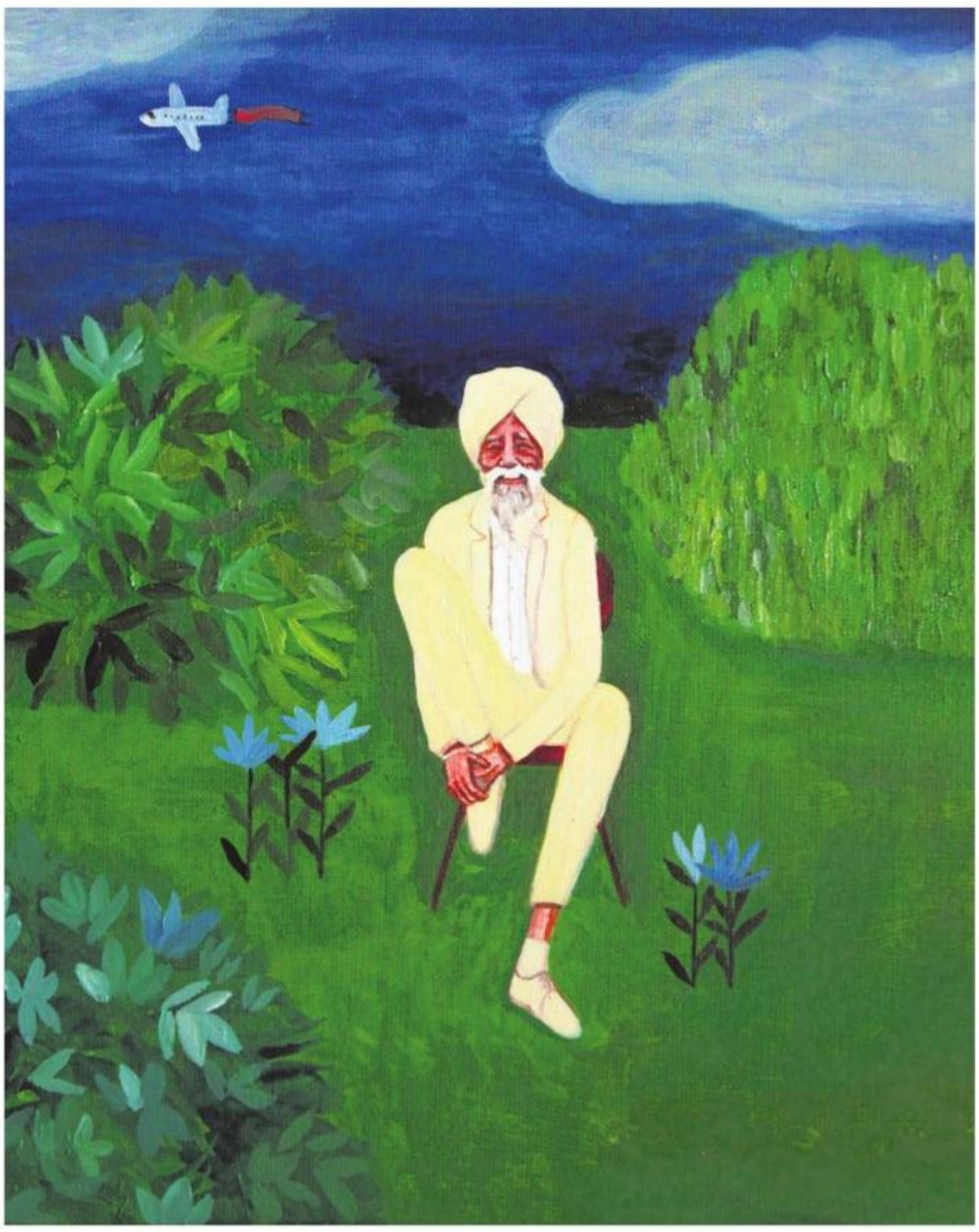
ARTS PAGE 3

'Spies, Lies and Allies' tells the story of the magnificent imagination, failure of two men

BOOKS PAGE 4

An elegant turban sat on his head like a sculpted crown. With his slim and graceful frame, Fauja Singh channelled his grief into running at the age of 89 — and the world looked in awe every step of the way

HE CHOSE LIFE



A portrait of Fauja Singh in the UK by Jatinder Singh Durhailay — notice the *pagri*, the smile, the gait and, of course, the trademark attire.

JATINDER SINGH DURHAILAY

I KNEW Fauja Singh — just like everyone else did. He was a well-known figure, a timeless presence, with a face etched in deep lines like the bark of an old tree. An elegant turban, wrapped in his signature style, sat on his head like a sculpted crown. His slim, graceful frame was usually dressed in a handsome brown suit that matched his turban perfectly — everything had to match, of course. That was Fauja Singh.

I used to greet him at the local gurdwara in Ilford — a beautiful temple of pink handcrafted marble that my father, Bhupinder Singh, helped build: Karamsar Gurdwara, Ilford. Fauja Singh could be found there almost every day.

I remember a typical Tuesday afternoon. My wife and I would stroll the gentle 15-minute walk from our home to the gurdwara. The sun was shining — a rare gift in the UK — its soft warmth brushing the air. Birds were chirping, blossoms just beginning to open. A true spring day.

We entered the gurdwara, removed our shoes, and placed them on the racks. I washed my hands, dried them, and turned around — and there he was. Fauja Singh. He greeted me with folded hands and a soft "*Sat Sri Akal*", a warm smile lighting his face, his teeth white as snow, his long white beard flowing freely. I returned the greeting and bent to touch his feet in respect. He was already wearing his brown shoes — likely about to leave — but he stopped me and pulled me up into a gentle hug.

He was always happy to see us, especially my wife, Johanna. He called us the "arty couple". I had known Fauja Singh for many years — since the Lisbon Marathon in 2007, where I had the honour of running alongside him. Every time we met, we laughed. We shared many joyful memories. One such moment was at a gurdwara in Portugal.

I had brought my *dilruba*, and together we sang Gurbani in *Raag Kalyan*. Whenever I opened my eyes while playing, there he sat — slim, upright, hands folded, listening with full attention.

Fauja Singh was a remarkable man. A friend to many, he embodied resilience and courage. After the devastating loss of his son and beloved wife, he didn't turn to alcohol or drugs. Instead, he rose from the depths of grief and began running — step by step, back into the light. He moved. He jogged. He ran. Each stride a kind of healing, each race a quiet defiance against despair. He chose life.

Wherever he went, people lit up. He was the people's champion. Youngsters admired him — a centenarian outpacing teenagers. Elders saw him and felt hope stir within them. His age — over 100 and still running — seemed to bend the rules of time. He credited his vitality to the simple diet of *daal* and *roti*. But I believe his true strength came from his unwavering positivity. He didn't just endure life, he elevated it.

To him, running was meditation. "Running took over my time and thoughts," he once said. "It was God's way of keeping me alive and making me what I am today, and I'm grateful for that."

I still believe he could live on — perhaps even break another record as the longest-living human.

He is about to leave Karamsar Gurdwara, Ilford, and as always, he would walk home alone. I see him walk towards the light, out the door.

"Goodbye, Fauja Singh," I whisper to myself.

— The writer is a UK-based artist

THE FAUJA WAY

MAJ DP SINGH (RETD)

IT was on December 1 last year that I saw the frail, tall centenarian for the last time — he actually was beautifully young at heart.

Fauja Singh fooled not just old age but even the Almighty, because at the age of 114 years, he was fit enough to run, and live without any ailment.

The superman literally enjoyed the glory, the glamour, the attention and the food — yes, the food. He was a frugal eater and owed his fitness to eating the bare minimum. But ask Gurpreet, the organiser of 'One Race' marathons, where he and I would often meet. If Bapuji (as we called him) used to ask for anything, it just had to be arranged. Of course, there was a discipline about the quantity (minimum with increasing age), quality (no junk) and timing (no late evenings) of food.

Ironically, as a kid, he was rather weak, and started walking only at the age of five. He was treated to improve the strength of his legs. In his own words, perhaps that strength was saved by the Almighty for the later years of life. He started running marathons at the age of 89.

When Doaba region of Punjab saw mass migration, his family also shifted to the United Kingdom. He was never interested in going abroad but then destiny has its own powerful ways to put you in a place that defines your purpose in life. When he lost his wife, son and daughter in quick succession, he felt alone and was taken by his family to the UK.

It was difficult for him to adjust there and he seemed unhappy, till a friend suggested taking part in a charity run. It was a 20-km run but he felt that he ran 20 miles. He thought that just 6 more miles and it will be marathon distance, 26 miles (42 km). He soon realised the mistake that for a marathon, he would need to run double the distance. The spirited Khalsa didn't give up.

It was decided to hire a coach and try even harder. On the first day of his coaching lessons, he turned up in a three-piece suit. He got attuned to the running attire, but refused to give up on his *pagri*. The marathon organisers had to relent, and thus was born the Turbaned Tornado. Fauja Singh, at 89, finished the London Marathon in 2000, his first.

On other days, such was his love for colours that the suit, tie and *pagri* used to be a perfect match.

As a fit centenarian, he used to feel sad at the fitness level of Indian oldies, especially females. *'Aithey di buddiyaan vekho, unfit, jama ni apna khyal nakhdiyaan. Aa soniyaan memaan nu dekho, kinni fit hondiyaan ne* (Indian elderly ladies don't care about fitness and figure. Look at the English ladies, how fit and beautiful they are)," he would say.

Once, an octogenarian runner was invited for an event, but he didn't stand with her for a picture. "*Main ni khada hona buddi kol* (I will not stand next to this old lady)," he muttered. But he was always ready for selfies with fit young ladies.

He inspired millions around the world but could not save himself in a hit-and-run case — an abrupt end to a beautiful journey. Whatever begins does come to an end but his life encourages us to live it fully. The Fauja way.

— Known as the 'Blade Runner', the writer is a Kargil veteran

Fitness, good health, longevity, and simplicity — Fauja Singh symbolised all this and more. ANI

INSPIRING RUN

SAURABH DUGGAL

BY the time he turned 100, Fauja Singh held several world records in long-distance running, had become a global icon, and appeared alongside football legend David Beckham and boxing great Muhammad Ali in an Adidas advertisement. In 2010, he even replaced Beckham as Adidas' new poster boy. He was one of the most celebrated Sikhs in the United Kingdom, his adopted homeland. Back home in India, his story was known and admired across the country.

Our first interaction was a few days before his 100th birthday. It was a telephonic interview, and Fauja Singh obliged in the most generous manner. The first meeting in person happened during the 2013 Mumbai Marathon, where he was the celebrity guest. He was accompanied by his coach, Harmander Singh — who had transformed Fauja Singh from a commoner into the world's oldest marathoner.

I met him several times, including at his native village, Beas Pind in Jalandhar. Our last interaction was a month and a half before he breathed his last on July 14. Even in his last days, he was doing what he loved most — walking miles in and around his village.

He knew that running had brought him fame, yet without any hesitation, as always, he gave full credit to Harmander Singh. "Had I not met him, I wouldn't have been the Fauja Singh you know," he said. Global recognition changed little; he remained simple, unassuming.

He never knew his exact running achievements, nor the time he clocked to become the world's oldest marathoner. But what made him feel truly proud of his journey was having met Queen Elizabeth "three times".

For him, the most meaningful contribution he made to running was earning the right to wear his turban during the 2000 London Marathon. "Event officials told me that Sikh runners were only permitted to wear a *patka* (head wrap). I refused to run without my turban. People were saying, *'Fauja ne pagri manzoor karva lai'* (Fauja got the turban approved), but I always say it was Babaji (the Almighty) who got it approved," he would say.

Somehow, our interaction stretched to over 90 minutes. Considering his age, the family wanted me to wrap up. But Fauja Singh, true to his nature, said he was enjoying the conversation and that I could continue. We concluded the meeting by sharing *alsi* (flaxseeds) *pinnis* — the "secret" to his longevity.

A British passport holder, Fauja Singh had hoped to travel to London later this year to meet his family and coach. "I am in the last leg of my life, so nothing is certain," he said. One thing is — Fauja Singh's lasting iconic status.

— The writer is a sports journalist

Fauja Singh at his village in May-end. His running shoes hold the pride of place.
PHOTO: SAURABH DUGGAL

How to lock *kiya jaye* for a safe *ghar wapsi*

#techtonic

GAGANDEEP ARORA

From keys to codes, bells to cams, home security has got smarter, sleeker, stress-free

ISTOCK

REMEMBER when home security meant a heavy-duty lock, a loud dog and that one nosy neighbour who doubled up as the unofficial watchman? The kind you would request, "*Bhaisaab, zara nazar rakhna*", before heading out on vacation? Well, those days are long gone. The dogs are now sleepy pugs, the neighbours are scrolling Instagram and that big lock? It's still there, just transformed into a smarter, sleeker version of itself and equipped with WiFi.

Welcome to the age of smart homes. Your doorbell now takes videos, your locks recognise your touch (read fingerprints) and your phone basically moonlights as your home's bodyguard. Whether you live in a high-rise in Gurugram or a quiet lane in Chandigarh, smart security gadgets are no longer luxury items, they are essentials and pretty cool ones too.

So, if you've ever found yourself wondering, "Is it time to upgrade from '*jugaad*' to legit security?", the answer is a resounding YES.

Here's a quick, no-fuss guide to the most popular home security options...

SMART LOCKS: NO MORE KEY DRAMA

Gone are the days when you would hide a spare key under the doormat or a flower pot. Now, your phone is your key, your code and your gatekeeper. Smart locks are increasingly being adopted by urban households, especially those in apartments and gated societies. Here are some top picks:

Godrej Catus Connect/Advantis: These are the favourites. With fingerprint access, PIN, RFID and mechanical override, these are perfect for families that still worry: "*Agar battery khatam ho gayi toh?*" Starts at ₹8,999.

Yale YDME 50/100: Yale's digital locks offer a sleek, minimalist design with robust features. You can control access remotely and even generate one-time codes for guests or house help. Priced from ₹9,999.

Qubo Smart: Backed by Hero Group, this one's for the budget-conscious. App-controlled, multi-access and suitable for tech beginners. Costs ₹10,990 onwards.

There's a reason why people love these: no more fumbling with keys in the dark, no duplicate key confusion or worrying if you left the door unlocked. Your phone's got it covered.

'KAUN HAI' IS PASSE

The humble doorbell has had a glow-up. Now it comes with a camera, two-way talk, motion detection and app alerts. Whether you're lazing around watching your favourite TV show or chilling in Bangkok, you'll know who's at your door.

The top brands include...

Qubo smart video doorbell: The most popular brand, it records HD video, supports two-way talk and sends alerts to your phone. Features intruder and anti-theft alarms. Price: ₹5,990 to ₹7,990.

Godrej SeeThru: As the name suggests, it lets you see who's outside in real-time. Sturdy and built for the Indian weather. Range: ₹5,499 to ₹20,999.

Yale Smart: It offers crisp HD video, motion alerts and app control. Stylish, secure and smartphone-ready. Comes with 154-degree wide-angle coverage. Priced at ₹13,499.

TP-Link: Tapo wireless doorbell offers 2K and 160-degree live view and colour night vision. It comes with a rechargeable battery, smart AI detection and notification. Costs ₹7,999.

The bonus is that many of these doorbells also double up as CCTV cameras with night vision.

CCTV SYSTEMS: EYES THAT NEVER MISS

Trust is great but a little backup never hurts. CCTV cameras don't just boost security, they offer everyday peace of mind. Whether it's keeping tabs on deliveries, spying (lovingly) on your pet or confirming if the maid really showed up at 11, these eagle-eyed gadgets have your back and your blind spots. The best among the lot include...

CP Plus and Hikvision: These brands dominate the traditional CCTV segment. They are affordable, reliable and are often bundled with 4-8 camera setups with DVR storage. Price ranges between ₹6,000 and ₹25,000.

Mi 360° Home Security Camera: Budget-friendly and user-friendly. Offers 360-degree rotation, motion detection and real-time monitoring. DIY installation with single camera costing just about ₹1,500-₹2,999.

Qubo AI 360 Camera: Another one from Hero, this one's AI-powered and ideal for indoor use. Tracks human movement and even has baby-cry detection. ₹2,790 onwards.

For storage, some people prefer SD cards, while others use cloud plans which come with monthly subscriptions (more common for remote access and video backup).

Then there are motion sensors for the extra-cautious (or slightly paranoid). If you're someone who wants to know if even a curtain flutters too hard, motion sensors and alarms are your friends.

SO, DO YOU REALLY NEED ALL THIS?

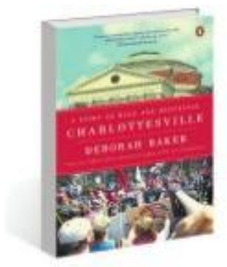
Maybe not everything. Security expert GP Singh says the demand for smart home systems in North India has surged, driven by urbanisation and rising safety concerns. Just a smart lock and a video doorbell can significantly amp up home security, he adds, noting the increased adoption in cities like Delhi, Chandigarh and Gurugram.

With prices more affordable and setups much easier, there's really no excuse not to smarten up.

Clash of histories

Deborah Baker's new book explores the deep-rooted racial divide in America, and the complexities of Trumpian times

MANDIRA NAYAR



CHARLOTTESVILLE: A STORY OF RAGE AND RESISTANCE
by Deborah Baker.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 464.
₹1,299

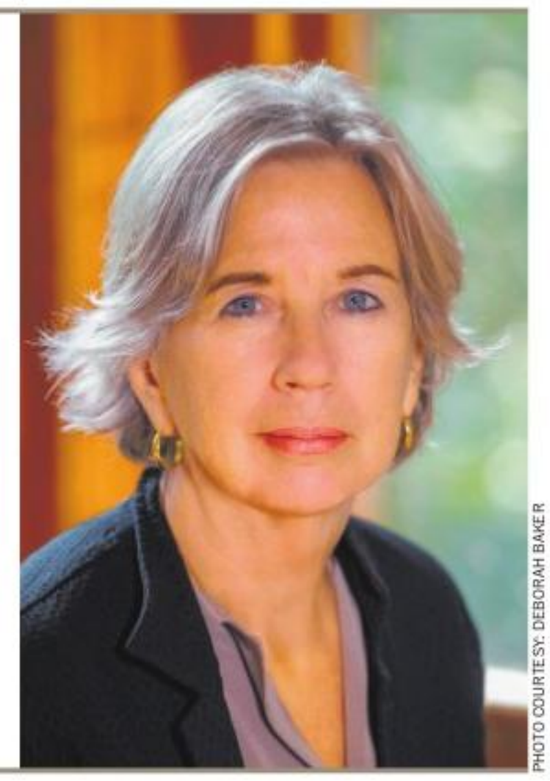


PHOTO COURTESY: DEBORAH BAKER

IT was the perfect Mother's Day weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia (USA), on August 12, 2017. The sun was out and the parks were filled when a white supremacist mob, holding torches, went on a rampage. Protesting the decision to remove the statue of Confederate hero General Robert Lee, the men shouted, "They will not replace us," and ran amok, killing a young woman and injuring many.

Award-winning author Deborah Baker's newest book, '*Charlottesville: A Story of Rage and Resistance*', revisits this dark chapter in American history in a bid to find a way forward. The administration failed to act and the racial divide that the town had lived with for centuries was laid bare. "There were not, as President Trump said, 'very fine people on both sides'," she writes.

"I couldn't stop thinking about it," she says in the introduction. "Watching the footage of the August rally and the torch march that preceded it, I was spooked by how gleeful these men looked, and alarmed at how young they were. Were they, like the election of Trump, a harbinger of some future I was too old or ill-equipped to grasp?"

A young woman marching against them was mowed down by a car that rammed into the crowd. The boy who drove into them had a picture of Adolf Hitler by his bedside.

Cataclysmic events don't come out of the blue, writes Baker, the ground needs to be prepared. The only way forward is to look back. Her journey makes the book compelling, poignant and, in Trumpian times, vital reading. She does it intellectually, with precision and passion. It is political, and also personal.

In making sense of the incident, it also maps a world that has changed. "I say at the end of the book, maybe this isn't my world to make sense of any longer," she says in a Zoom conversation from New York. "Maybe I have to look to younger people with more fight in them than I have, to make sense of it."

Baker pieces together the present by refracting it through Virginia's past. Charlottesville is the heart of conservative America. It also has a deep association with Thomas Jefferson, America's founding father who drafted the Declaration of Independence. He lived in Monticello near Charlottesville.

In finding answers, she re-examines the legacy of the men with "mythical" narratives. Jefferson fought for freedom, but also had a relationship with Sally Hemming whom he held in bondage. General Lee fought to keep people enslaved.

Baker explores the history of racism — and why the decision to remove the statues triggered such a violent reaction. "The statues' white defenders were willing to allow black people their history, so their own could remain untouched," she writes. "They imagined these two histories might peacefully coexist, one ugly and painful, the other framed by flowers."

Unlike her earlier books, this meant rambling through Twitter threads of alt-right followers, listening to council debates. She tells the story through activists who fought and witnessed their city being torn apart. The feisty Zyahna Bryant, a student, kicked off the debate with a petition to remove Lee's statue. Emily Gorcenski, a data scientist, is anti-fascist. "What was hardest for me was just gaining their trust," Baker says.

She juxtaposes their story for setting history right with Richard Spencer, the father of the phrase 'alt right', and the man who led the mob. Stark, vivid, fast-paced, Baker keeps you hooked. She found that this was not the first time that Charlottesville had been the ground to begin a race riot. Poet Ezra Pound — with his fascination for Mussolini — had the same idea as alt-right Spencer. Pound tried to stoke the fires after the Supreme Court ruled for integration of schools in 1954. He was opposed to it and his protege John Kasper, a graduate from Columbia University, went to Charlottesville to "give fascism an all-American face".

"A lot of the ideas that Spencer was spreading we now have coming from mainstream media — white ethnostate, the destruction of all the policies designed to equal the playing field," she says. "We are resegregating ourselves, asking people to self-deport."

Three years after Charlottesville, another mob, this time chanting "Stop the steal", stormed Capitol Hill to try to prevent the Congress from ratifying Joe Biden's win. There is a direct link, believes Baker. Democracy, a resident told her, is a delicate thing. "If you lose your vigilance, if you don't tend it, the world can turn on you. Just like that," she quotes the resident.

"I don't know another way of saying it," another resident confided. "We're in the shit. America is Charlottesville now. Everywhere is Charlottesville."

The rise of majoritarianism and the mainstreaming of the fringe are real fears in America, and at home.

It is this idea that makes the book important. It is not easy reading — especially as it doesn't offer neat answers or a way forward. But there is hope, believes Baker. "I live in New York. It's hard not to take a kind of disproportionate joy in Zohran Mamdani's campaign."

Not his usual demographic, Deborah Baker was one of the many who volunteered for his campaign. Her husband, author Amitav Ghosh, posted a picture of them celebrating Mamdani winning the Democratic ticket to run for the mayor of New York.

But this is just the beginning.

— The writer is a literary critic

CAPTION CONTEST 1519

RAVI KUMAR

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, along with your address.

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1518

SPECTRUM JULY 13 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

Monsoon wading — Sanjeev Kumar Arora via epaper, Patiala

Memory and memorial — JS Shergill, Mohali

Cloud commuting — Ajay Kumar Khosla via epaper, Mohali

Walk out in monsoon session — Surendra Miglani via epaper, Kaithal

Water resistant shots — Gurdev Singh via epaper, Mohali

Instead of frying staple monsoon snacks like *pakoda, tikki* or *samosa,* bake, steam or use an air fryer

SAVOURING *KACHORIS* GUILT-FREE

FOOD TALK

PUSHPESH PANT

THERE was a time when the advent of monsoon was eagerly awaited, and not only because the parched earth would be rejuvenated by the showers falling from heavens. For those of us who have insatiable pangs of hunger, this was the inauguration of the season of deep-fried snacks, savoury as well as sweet — *pakoda, samosa, tikki, jalebi* — to be downed with steaming cups of *masala chai*. Alas, times have changed and the mere thought of such fried stuff gives us a severe guilty conscience and we shudder at the thought of invisible arteries choking.

Despair not, dear readers! The steam rising from that mug of tea still gives us hope. As a matter of fact, what the heart pines for in this season is not really the deep-fried stuff but something *teekha* and *chatpata* — spicy with a sour tang, maybe with a hint of astringent and sweet. This is the contribution made by chutneys and sauces that enlivens the unmentionable deep-fried stuff.

There is also a long tradition of steamed mouth-watering snacks that are relished when it pours. *Pataur* or *patrode* (steamed *arbi* leaves dumplings) tastes as good when steamed (or boiled) as when fried. The *idli* converted into a healthy *chaat*, *bhel puri* or *jhal murhi* reinforced with chips of roasted *papad* and boiled peanuts are equally drool-worthy. What has been tempting us more than anything else nowadays is the new gadget called air fryer. Truth be told, it had appeared on the scene some six-seven years ago, but at that time it was expensive, not available in different sizes, or very user-friendly. But now, we are convinced that this gadget will soon find a place in most Indian kitchens just like a pressure cooker, microwave or mixers. You can use it throughout the year even after the monsoon has receded. Those who are yet to experience the health-friendly joys of this gadget can steam and bake, and banish deep-fried snacks from their kitchen and welcome back healthy *samosas, pakodas* and *kachoris* in their baked avatar.

BAKED KACHORIS

INGREDIENTS

Moong dal (soaked and drained)	1/2 cup
Coriander powder	1 tsp
Cumin powder	1/2 tsp
Red chilli powder	1 tsp
Coriander seeds	1/2 tsp
Chat masala	1/2 tsp
Amchur powder	1/2 tsp
Garam masala	1/2 tsp
Fresh coriander	1 small sprig
Fennel powder	1/2 tsp
Besan	1 tsp
Maida	2 cups
Ajwain seeds	1 tsp
Baking powder	1/4tsp
Ghee	6 tsp
Salt	To taste

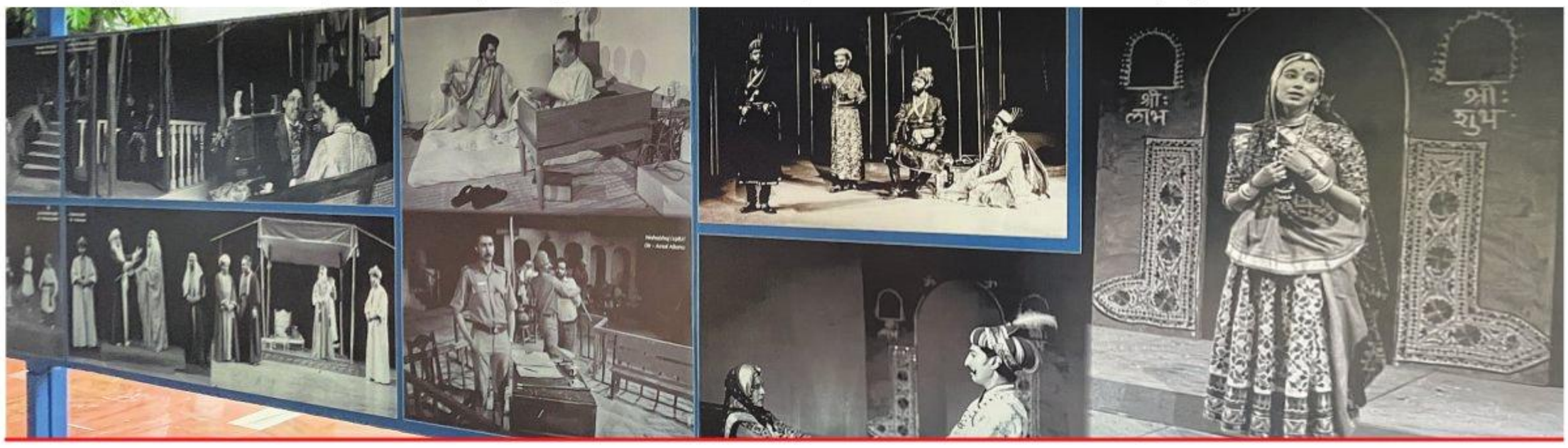
FOR FILLING

Heat 1 tsp oil in a non-stick pan, then add coriander seeds, coriander, cumin, red chili and fennel powders and *garam masala*, along with salt, and blend well. Stir-fry for 2 minutes, sprinkling a little water to avoid scorching the spices. Now add *moong daal*, half a cup of water, *amchur* powder, *besan* and *chaat masala*. Mix well and cook till *moong daal* is fully cooked. Remove from flame and allow to cool.

METHOD

- Preheat the oven to 180° C or the air fryer for 3 minutes.
- Put *maida* in a bowl, add salt, baking powder, *ghee* and *ajwain* seeds, mix well. Add a little water and knead to obtain a stiff dough. Cover the bowl with a cloth and rest the dough for 20 minutes.
- Divide the dough into equal portions and shape it into balls. Apply a little *ghee* to each ball, press them slightly and roll out into small *puris*. Place some of the *daal* mixtures in the centre, bring the edges together and press to seal. Roll again these small *puris* to ensure that the *daal* filling is evenly spread.
- Lightly grease a baking tray, place the *kachoris* on it, brush them with a little *ghee*, and bake in the preheated oven at 200° C for about 15 minutes or at same temperature in air fryer for 10 minutes till the *kachoris* are baked golden. Finally, arrange them on a serving plate and serve hot with tamarind chutney and chopped onions.

After six glorious decades, the NSD Repertory — a cauldron of experimentation and artistic inquiry — finds itself at a crossroads



The photo gallery at the NSD Repertory; (below) Surekha Sikri and Manohar Singh in *'Aadhe Adhure'*, directed by Amal Allana. PHOTOS COURTESY: RAJESH SINGH, DIRECTOR OF NSD REPERTORY

The learning stage

NEELAM MANSINGH CHOWDHRY

BACK in September 2024, I found myself walking once again through the corridors of the National School of Drama. The air was electric. Buntings fluttered, old photographs were being dusted off and pinned to the walls. There was a celebratory atmosphere, as the Repertory Company was turning 60 — and the space pulsed with something more than nostalgia. It was alive.

In a country where theatre speaks in a thousand tongues and tradition and modernity move unevenly across its cultural landscapes, the notion of a singular 'national theatre' is, at best, a contradiction. And yet, for 60 years, the NSD Repertory Company has carved out a space that defies singularity. A cauldron of experimentation, rigour and artistic inquiry, it has endured, not as a monument, but as a living organism.

Since its inception in 1964, the Repertory was never meant to be a museum of mothballed classics. It was — and remains — a laboratory. A space of analysis, risk, failure and creative combustion. A space where artistes ask — What does form mean? Who is the audience? Why this play, now? Six decades later, while silently gazing at the photograph gallery, I wondered if these questions still haunt the actors and the institution.

The spirit that birthed this institution traces back to Ebrahim Alkazi — visionary, taskmaster, modernist. Under his stewardship, the Repertory began with just four actors: Ramamurthy, Meena Williams, Sudha Shivpuri and Om Shivpuri. It was conceived as a launchpad for NSD graduates to take their three years of intense training beyond the classroom — into the risky terrain of professional theatre. Initially, the Repertory was an adjunct to the school, but slowly, as the Repertory grew, it became an independent company, with its own infrastructure, identity and a director at the helm.

The Repertory would go on to become one of Indian theatre's most important staging grounds. Over 120 productions. More than 70 playwrights. Some 50 directors. Its performance spaces have reverberated with voices of playwrights as varied as Bhasa and Brecht, Lorca and Elkunchwar. The plays performed have been as wide-ranging. From *'Look Back in Anger'* to *'Ghasiram Kotwal'*, from *Andha Yug'* to *'Begum Ka Takiya'*, the Repertory has staged the contradictions of a complex nation.

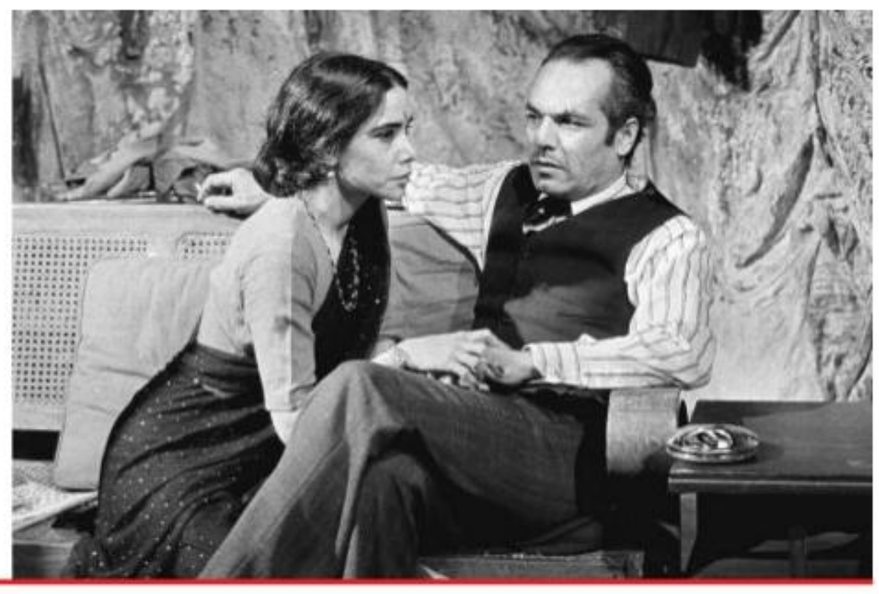
Plays like *'Mukhyamantri'*, a biting political satire, forced Delhi to confront uncomfortable truths. Its crisp realism lit a fire amid an apathetic middle class. *'Begum Ka Takiya'*, in contrast, offered a gentle, Sufi-tinged poeticism. It was a story about faith, belonging, and the invisible histories of Muslim India. Both were directed by the maverick director Ranjit Kapoor.

And then there was the firebrand spirit of Satyadev Dubey, whose production with the Repertory on Mahesh Elkunchwar's *'Virasat'* refused to offer comfort. It agitated, fractured, unsettled. Dubey's presence loomed — always pushing the envelope, never letting the Repertory rest on its pedigree.

And as I walked through those memory-soaked corridors, I paused before a photograph of *'Look Back in Anger'*, Alkazi's landmark production of John Osborne's modern classic. I remember sneaking into late-night rehearsals under the great banyan tree at Meghdoot Theatre, where the stalwarts of the Repertory were practising their craft through voice exercises and character analysis. I was a first-year student then, awestruck and clueless, knowing abstractly that we were in the presence of something seismic.

That play clung to me: Manohar Singh as Jimmy Porter, raging with elegant violence; Uttara Baokar, as Helena, turned an ironing press into a weapon — her sarcasm dripping like acid; Surekha Sikri, brittle and devastating as Alison — her silences louder than any line. Delhi audiences queued up for hours to watch this play in the intimate, 80-seater theatre at Rabindra Bhavan. This highly volatile play with charged emotional content had the audience weep quietly into handkerchiefs. I watched them with the same focus as I watched the play. It felt like two performances were happening simultaneously. Ten shows in, I still wanted more.

A poster of Mohan Maharishi's *'Einstein'*.



I think that's when my real training as a director began. Watching night after night. Understanding composition, rhythm, the spaces between words, the inner arc of the characters. That production, for me, was a masterclass in craft and emotional integrity.

The rehearsal room was sacred. Conversations weren't casual. They were intellectual battles: about emotional memory, units and objectives, how to choreograph a pause, when breath should drop. Stanislavski and the *'Natya Shastra'* lived together — conflicting and coexisting. I remember Sikri explaining the poetics of stillness to me over *chai* in the Rabindra Bhavan canteen. I was stunned by my ignorance and her generosity in sharing nuances of acting to a complete ignoramus. Manohar Singh coached me on Urdu diction, warning me not to gobble up my *nuktas*. These weren't 'sessions'. These were rituals.

What made the Repertory magical wasn't just what we saw on stage. It was the camaraderie. The humour. The intensity. The sweat. No starry tantrums, no hierarchies. Just love of theatre. The Repertory became something deeper than a performance space. It became a place to ask — what does it mean to belong, to be an artist in India?

I believe that the ethic still pulses in the floorboards of Bahawalpur House — its studio theatres, with their bare black walls and spartan light, not compromising or pandering to meaningless spectacle. The work that one experienced in the Repertory was raw, honest. Not meant to please, but to provoke.

I recall how rehearsals under the banyan tree would spill into late-night debates about whether a character's tears came from guilt or grief. The Repertory's legacy is as much philosophical as it is artistic. It insists that theatre must matter — not just as art, but as inquiry. I must take a deep breath here and not let sentimental romanticism get the better of me. The Repertory has weathered storms. Shrinking contracts have undermined ensemble culture. Pedagogy is often traded for pizzazz. Government funding waxes and wanes. There's critique — that NSD has prioritised international circuits over grassroots relevance. That critique matters. Because relevance demands friction. When no one asks questions, it means the work has stopped mattering.

Today, the question is no longer whether the Repertory is relevant. The question is: can it still surprise us? Can it continue to evolve? Has there been an ideological shift in training, in content and sensibility?

Moving slightly away from that are other serious inquires. At the heart of Indian theatre lies a deeper conundrum: what does 'national' even mean? Does national theatre belong only to Hindi? To Hindu mythology? Or can Tamil, Manipuri, Punjabi, Bengali, and tribal voices share that stage?

The Repertory's history has swayed between Sanskrit classics and urban satires. But the 60th anniversary celebrations showed that this debate is far from settled. The 17-day theatre festival this past August-September was a chaotic, layered, polyphonic affair. Traditional forms jostled with post-modern aesthetics. Mahasweta Devi's rage echoed beside Bharata's restraint.

But many alumni and current students used the platform to ask: where are the Dalit and tribal voices? Where is the linguistic diversity? Where is the regional pulse beyond Delhi's echo chamber?

These aren't peripheral questions. These are vital. If the Repertory is to remain a national institution, it must reflect the full scope of India's theatrical imagination.

The truth is that no institution, however luminous, is immune to stagnation. And yet, the very fact that the NSD Repertory remains contested is proof of its vitality. When artists still care enough to argue, grieve and demand more from an institution, it means that the institution still breathes.

As I walked past the photographs, the voices returned. Om Puri's gravel. Surekha Sikri's crackling intelligence. Uttara Baokar's fierce grace. Naseeruddin Shah's intellectual and emotional fire. They weren't just icons. They were the scaffolding on which generations of theatre-makers stood.

— The writer is a Chandigarh-based theatre director

Fantastical tales and transformative journeys

MALVIKA KAUL

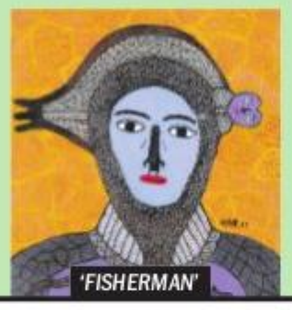
AT 83, Madhvi Parekh shows no signs of slowing. Her ongoing exhibition, *'Madhvi Parekh: Remembered Tales'*, at the DAG, New Delhi, reaffirms her status as one of the country's significant artists. The show, on till August 23, displays her magic with bright colours and deep shades, her free expanse in engaging multi-layered themes and her 'cool quotient' in mixing eras as time lapse. Her dots, chevrons, little flowers, circles, crosses and other patterns assemble with rigour and cast a spell on you. There is no ageing for Madhvi in art.

For several decades, she played her role as the wife of Manu Parekh, the successful Modernist, and mother of two daughters, negotiating the ordinary yet necessary struggles of the cities she and her family lived in — Kolkata, Mumbai and New Delhi. In between the banality of household chores, she sketched mythical figures, the charmed life of her childhood village of Sanjaya in Gujarat, visualised silent conversations between humans and animals, and emerged as a confident voice telling her own stories. The show's title is tied to the stories her sketchbooks have gathered. With pencil and crayons, she wades through everyday life — shopping lists, phone numbers, notes to her husband — along with remarkable creatures and wondrous compositions. *'Remembered Tales'* takes us on a journey to Madhvi's heart and mind, presented through her fantastical landscapes and anthropomorphic creatures.

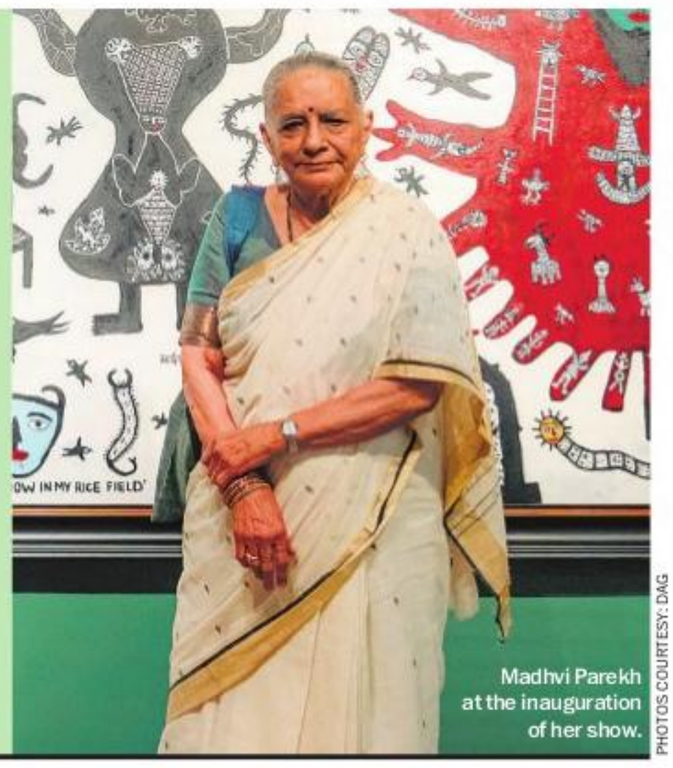
Often folksy, at times feminist, Madhvi's art is rooted both in the past and the present. Her village appears idyllic, not just because of its simplicity, or the memory of her doting father, but also due to the close bonds humans share with animals. She carries the sights and sounds everywhere and on her canvas, some parts are scattered in the blur of city life. "I spent some wonderful childhood years in my village." The memory stays, as a muse and motif.

'FLOWER VASE IN MY FAMILY'

Often folksy, at times feminist, Madhvi Parekh's art is rooted both in the past and the present



'FISHERMAN'



Madhvi Parekh at the inauguration of her show.

PHOTOS COURTESY: DAG

Though her husband both inspired and guided her in the initial years, Madhvi is self-taught. Brief travels abroad and fellowships (to France and USA) exposed her to world masters and diverse art forms. But her not being trained in art has proved to be an advantage as it gives her a certain kind of liberation from forms and techniques.

As a woman and an artist, drawing is a dialogue with herself and the world around. "I kept drawing, and kept learning," says the rather shy and soft-spoken artist.

In her art, the village lives along with the city. Her triptych, *'Travelling Circus in My Village'*, and another large canvas, *'Two Scarecrow in My Rice Field'*, tell stories in fantasy form. Several beasts and birds fuse to form new species that appear like creatures in a circus. Though Madhvi is drawing from her memory of the village circus, she also appears to be evoking the *tamasha*-like world of the cities. Looking at her canvas, one understands how much of a circus we are in ourselves. In another canvas, the scarecrows are filled with miniature figures, attractive and engaging, informing of our deep connections with nature. Many of Madhvi's canvases capture the slow life of the village but shake you with the realisation of how fast so much has disappeared — entertainers like *behrupiyas*, the ponds and trees that circled many homes, the traditional *'Ram-Leela'*, where men played women characters.

Madhvi's works are now housed in several museums of repute, including the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York. In recent times, she has received a lot of appreciation for her large dramatic compositions and the effortless ease in placing the female form at the centre. However, it is her portraits at the exhibition, like that of a fisherman, a family, a man with a tattoo, that display her skill to see beyond faces and people. Take the *'Fisherman'*, whose struggle shows on his face, his survival connected to the beings of the ocean as a serpent coils around his head and even morphs into a stingray. It is the portrait of a hardworking labourer, a person of stoical grace and dignity.

While her early works were inspired by masters like Paul Klee, Joan Miro and Henri Matisse, Madhvi's independent pictorial vocabulary has grown with time. The various notebooks and sketchbooks on display give a rare peep into her evolution. Here you see how beasts grow heads at both ends of their bodies, how men transform into messianic figures and women into fierce deities, how landscapes and eras merge…

For Madhvi, this show is another beginning in her life-long journey of art.

— The writer is a Delhi-based contributor

Chatto & Roy's grand ambitions, and failure

SUJAN DUTTA

THERE is always a cynic in a Bengali *adda* who will lament that though his people have spawned thousands of revolutionaries, none could aim accurately, shoot straight or light a prairie fire. The cynic will then hurl his emptied earthen clay cup of tea — an act called *peekay phut* — for the minor explosion it makes and startle the dog peeing at the streetside lamppost. That is how little frustrations are exorcised.

Virendranath Chattopadhyay and MN Roy — Chatto and Roy in Kavitha Rao's 'Spies, Lies and Allies: The Extraordinary Lives of Chatto and Roy' — would rank high in that legion of 'magnificent failures' in the land that launched a thousand aborted revolutions.

But that is precisely why their romanticism endures. Their insurrections may have failed but the scale of their imagination, their globalism or internationalism, their travels around the world, their trained or self-taught education, their meetings with world leaders from China and Japan through Russia, Germany, Sweden to Mexico, their multiple affairs of the heart and the loins is the stuff that ignites possibilities across households in stories passed down from grandparent to grandchild.

Virendranath Chattopadhyay (1880-1937) was a brother of Sarojini Naidu, who once disowned his anarchism. Born and educated in an illustrious family in Nizam's Hyderabad, he was sent to London to prepare for the Indian Civil Service, then at being a bar-at-law. He failed and became a revolutionary. But his failure in the examinations was not the reason he turned to militant nationalism. He was killed in Stalin's purge in a gulag in Soviet Russia in 1937, but his death was not known till 1991 when the KGB's archives were opened.

The tall, dark and handsome MN (Manabendranath) Roy was born Narendra Nath Bhattacharya (1887-1954) in a humble family in a village north of Calcutta where his father was a Brahmin priest. He traversed the gamut of ideologies, helped establish the communist parties in Mexico and India, met Lenin and Sun Yat-sen, drove the global communist project Comintern, the Communist International, flirted with Gandhi and the Congress, which he found too soft because they were at one time agreeing to

SPIES, LIES AND ALLIES: THE EXTRAORDINARY LIVES OF CHATTO AND ROY
by Kavitha Rao.
Westland.
Pages 272.
₹499

Dominion Status, short of full Independence, founded a new ideology called Radical Humanism, and died a recluse in Dehradun. He is survived by a nightclub after his name in Mexico City.

Their lives ran in parallel, though it is not known if they met and coordinated. They had mutual acquaintances, the girlfriend of one had a fallout with the other, and were deeply influenced by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. At the core of their ideology was the question of what kind of Independence did India seek: merely an overthrow of the British, that would replace the white rulers with the brown businessmen and *zamindars* as the ruling class, or a genuine socialist revolution that would make Independence more substantive for the emaciated Indian peasant?

In her research, carried out mainly at the British Library, Rao found material that gives evidence of Hindutva founder Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's influence over, and interaction with, Chatto in London. This was the Savarkar before being sentenced to the Andamans' *kalapani*, from where he wrote repeated mercy petitions to the British. (Not one of the hundreds of Bengali revolutionaries, who were also sentenced to the Cellular Jail in Port Blair, wrote mercy petitions, preferring isolated death by torture instead).

There are two things that stand out in the profiles of the two main characters — and hundreds of others — in Kavitha Rao's exploration of their lives. First, their dares. They were constantly hounded by the British police and were moving from place to place, were caught, had narrow escapes but returned to their efforts to garner international support for Indian Independence. This also sheds light on one of the many aspects of the Indian Independence struggle — violent revolution was an option that was not always anathema even if it has been obscured by flat histories dominated by Gandhi-Nehru and the Congress.

Second, the fallibilities of the men in their personal lives. Chattopadhyay and Roy consorted with American and European women. The story that stands out is of Agnes Smedley, a journalist-activist who lived with Chatto; they fell out and she later went to China to report on Mao Tse Tung's Long March and the Communist Revolution. Both men expected the women in their lives to feed and support them. Rao says somewhat charmingly that "they were revolutionaries on the streets and reactionaries between the sheets".

The story that Kavitha Rao has woven is not really an easy one for the modern Indian, shaped as the mindset is with textbook histories that tamp down on imagining internationalist projects in the first half of the 20th century. And that is why it is an important read. The monopoly of the narratives of modern Indian history does not lie with any single ideology. We contain multitudes.

— The reviewer is a senior journalist

Hidden gems of music

NARENDRA KUSNUR

MANY musicians have interesting stories to tell. These could be about their approach, the challenges they encountered or the dilemma faced between tradition and change. In 'The Call of Music: 8 Stories of Hindustani Musicians', Priya Purushothaman focuses on eight artistes who have dedicated their lives to music. Through their stories, she also describes the way the Hindustani music system functions. What's noteworthy is that she hasn't opted for the predictable star names.

THE CALL OF MUSIC: 8 STORIES OF HINDUSTANI MUSICIANS
by Priya Purushothaman.
Hachette.
Pages 276. ₹699

Yet, all the musicians are respected within the music community and admired by connoisseurs.

The book begins with *sarod* exponent Alam Khan. The son of legendary *sarod* maestro Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Alam grew up in Marin County, California, in the 1980s. He thus inhabited two worlds: "the musical world at home and at the Ali Akbar College of Music, and starkly American culture at school, and virtually anywhere else."

Purushothaman slowly transitions this background into a detailed description of the senior Khan's style of teaching, whether on how to play *alaap*, the importance of listening or preparing for a concert.

From California, Purushothaman moves to Dombivli and Badlapur near Mumbai to vocalist Shubhada Paradkar, whose life juggles between *riyaaz*, children and household chores. She first learnt from Pandit Gajananbua Joshi, a master of Gwalior, Jaipur and Agra *gharanas*. After his death, she went to Agra *gharana* vocalist Pandit Babanrao Haldankar, and later to Jaipur *gharana* stalwart Padmavati Shaligram. The chapter compares their teaching styles in granular detail.

A classical vocalist, Purushothaman has been trained in the Agra *gharana* by Aditi Kaikini Upadhya, daughter of vocalist Pandit Dinkar Kaikini, and Pandit Sudhindra Bhaumik. In all stories, she maintains a remarkable balance between human interest storytelling and technical elaboration.

One may wonder why Bhaumik's story has been divided into two chapters, but it's such an inspiring tale that it grips the reader. In her introduction, the author says, "His story was one of the first that motivated me to create the collection, because I believe that so many people can take inspiration from his radical approach to life."

The book maintains a good balance between vocalists and instrumentalists. The chapter on Bengaluru-based trans-man and gender rights activist Rumi Harish talks of how he had to re-train his voice after hormone treatment, and how the vocal uncertainty caused distress. Singer Shubha Joshi faced resistance at home because she wanted to learn *thumri*, a style associated with courtesans. But she persevered and became one of the disciples of Shobha Gurtu.

Violinist Kala Ramnath took a major decision after *tabla* maestro Ustad Zakir Hussain advised her on finding her own style, instead of copying her aunt, the brilliant N Rajam. *Sarangi* player Suhail Yusuf Khan had to face huge expectations from elders from a very young age. Finally, *tabla* exponent Yogesh Samsi talks about his association with his *guru*, Ustad Allarakha, the salient features of the Punjab tabla *gharana*, how he observed Zakir Hussain's concerts closely and how he met someone with a musical treasure at a chance encounter in Ludhiana.

With her fluid writing style and attention to detail, Purushothaman captures the lives of these musicians in an engaging manner. These stories needed to be told, and though the focus is on Hindustani musicians, they would fascinate readers with a taste for any form of Indian music.

— The reviewer is a Mumbai-based music journalist

Muted desires, histories

ARADHIKA SHARMA

DUTCH writer Yael van der Wouden's debut novel, 'The Safekeep', winner of the 2025 Women's Prize for Fiction, is a complex saga set in the Netherlands in 1961. This multi-layered narrative delves deeply into both personal and collective histories.

The story follows 28-year-old Isabel as she struggles to come to terms with her sexual identity. Simultaneously, it explores the harsh reality of a nation that failed to deliver justice to its Jewish community after the German occupation during World War II.

Isabel lives alone in the family home in rural Overijssel, isolated since her mother's death and her brothers' departure. Her only interactions are rare visits from her brothers, and a suitor she finds more repellent than appealing. The house, more than a dwelling, is a shrine to her mother's memory.

Obsessed with preserving it, Isabel meticulously monitors every detail — counting cutlery and eyeing the timid maid with growing suspicion. While her younger brother Hendrik has no claim, the house will pass to their older brother Louis once he marries.

This fragile order shatters when Louis brings home Eva, his brash new girlfriend. With her loud presence, messy habits, and disregard for boundaries, Eva invades Isabel's space, even taking over their mother's room. As tensions rise and items go missing, a quiet but fierce power struggle unfolds between the two women.

In the isolation of the house, with the hot summer humidity making the walls feel claustrophobic, the tension intensifies. The author skillfully builds this tautness into a sexually-charged atmosphere as Eva's presence forces Isabel to confront her suppressed feelings of sexuality and admit to a burning desire for the young woman she detests. Isabel is consumed by longing, and this pulsating sensual urgency leads to an unwilling emotional and sexual awakening.

THE SAFEKEEP
by Yael van der Wouden.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 258. ₹599

With the realisation comes total surrender, a release from all the pent-up desires and emotions she has kept hidden for so long.

Displacement is another powerful theme, with each character marked by loss and dislocation. Hendrik's boyfriend, Sebastian, a Frenchman of Algerian descent, faces systemic and recurring prejudice. Isabel and her brothers, uprooted by war and famine in 1944, are forced to flee their home in the western Netherlands and resettle in Overijssel. Eva's story is perhaps the most harrowing: a violent tragedy in her early years leaves her adrift.

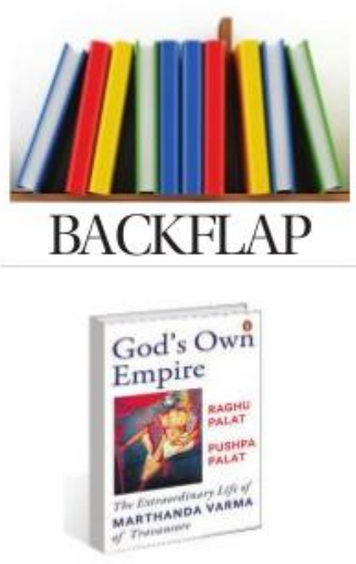
These shared yet distinct experiences of being unmoored from place and belonging deepen the emotional texture.

There's an air of inevitability that permeates the narrative. Early in the book, subtle cues suggest that something deeper is at play — beyond mere human emotions and interactions. A quiet, unsettling tension builds steadily, layer by layer, until it culminates in a haunting, gut-wrenching denouement that redefines everything that came before.

In its final act, the book delivers a powerful emotional punch, grounding personal loss in the weight of the aftermath of war and giving the story political and social significance.

— The reviewer is a Chandigarh-based freelancer

BACKFLAP

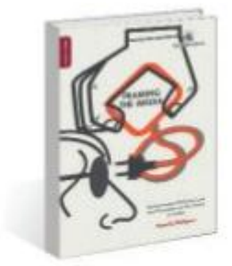


GOD'S OWN EMPIRE
by Raghu Palat and Pushpa Palat.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 241. ₹499

When Marthanda Varma ascended to the throne at the age of 23, his kingdom was ensnared in financial bankruptcy and engulfed by anarchy. To strengthen his empire, he created a formidable army, and began consolidating his kingdom's boundaries, defeating the Dutch in the Battle of Colachel in 1741 and ending Dutch colonial aspirations in India. A remarkable story of a remarkable man.

WHEN BRITAIN IS INDIA'S 30TH STATE
by Alan Gemmell.
Bloomsbury.
Pages 297. ₹499

In this satirical thriller, Alan Gemmell imagines a broken Britain desperately taking life-saving assistance from its former colony. The Indian Prime Minister makes Bradford-born Karan Puri the leader of her first overseas territory. His political soulmate, Oliver, meets his match in Arun, a young politician sent to repatriate the riches of India's new empire. Assets are grabbed. Freedoms diminished. People killed. The lives of the four become as dangerously entangled as the fatal relationship between India and its imperial jewel.



FRAMING THE MEDIA
by Pamela Philipose.
Orient BlackSwan.
Pages 165. ₹635

A part of Orient BlackSwan's 'Policy Studies' series, this book assesses the impact of legislation and public policy on press freedom in India. Moving from the colonial era to the present day, the book covers critical developments: the Press Commissions; the Emergency; economic liberalisation and the consolidation of media monopolies; and legislation on Internet-based media, including the IT Rules, 2021.

June 7, 1999: The unease... and the confirmation

SREEMATI SEN & NK KALIA

THE rustle of the newspaper hitting the porch had become the most important sound in the Kalia household. The aroma of brewing tea was no longer the first sign of morning. The ink on the newsprint was the first sight they beheld. Until they had scanned every column, their unease refused to subside.

That day, Vaibhav's eyes raced across the front page. Suddenly his hands shook, spilling the hot tea all over his shirt. The burning liquid made him wince.

Mrs Kalia jumped up. 'Stay there,' she said, rushing to get a cloth. 'I will get some water.'

Vaibhav gripped the chair, his knuckles white. 'Mummy, I am fine,' he managed, though his voice betrayed his turmoil.

The shift in Vaibhav's mood hadn't escaped his parents' notice.

''Tony?' Robo prompted, her eyes searching his face.

Vaibhav hesitated. How could he tell his mother? Her health was fragile. What if the news sent her into a decline? But he also knew he couldn't keep it from her. She would definitely see through any pretence.

Vaibhav met his father's gaze, then turned to his mother. He took a breath, his hands trembling slightly. 'Mummy... Papa...' he began. 'In *The Indian Express*... there is an article... about a missing army patrol...' He paused, unable to continue. Robo's hand flew to her mouth, her eyes widening in fear. 'They have... they have mentioned Bhaiya's name.'

Dr Kalia straightened, his face marked with worry. Robo carefully placed her teacup on the table, her hands surprisingly steady despite the inner chaos that threatened to wreak havoc. 'But,' she said, her voice calm but strained, 'there has been no official word from the army!" We need to contact them, Tony,' Dr Kalia said, rising abruptly. His tea sat untouched on the table, a witness to the interrupted morning.

The sudden shrill of the phone shattered the silence of the room. Vaibhav snatched it up. Dr Kalia and Mrs Kalia sat still, their expressions — a mixture of hope and fear. It could be anyone...!

Vaibhav hung up the phone and turned to face his parents. Their eyes were fixed on him. 'That was Vibha Didi,' he said. 'Skardu radio has also reported a missing patrol. She... she was calling for news about Bhaiya.' He paused to look at his father. ' Papa, we have to go to the cantonment.'

Dr Kalia and Vaibhav hurried to the local Cantonment Office in Holta, Palampur, desperate for answers. The SSO on duty informed them that no official confirmation had come from Army HQ regarding the missing patrol. Seeing their distressed look, he offered a well-worn army adage— 'Remember sir, in the army, no news is always good news.' But that did little to assuage the fears of the family. The SSO promised to contact them immediately if any news arrived, but the fear in their hearts had only grown.

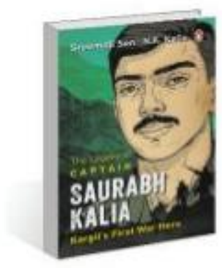
The Kalias returned home, the silence intensifying their fear.

Dr Kalia suddenly turned to Vaibhav. 'Ashok,' he said, 'Call him. He might get us information.' Vaibhav immediately dialled his father's cousin, the assistant editor at *The Tribune*. Mr Sharma's assurance that he would investigate offered some hope, but uncertainty loomed large.

The wait was excruciating. Each tick of the clock was a test of endurance. An hour seemed like an eternity. When the phone finally rang, their hearts leapt. But the news was devastating. Mr Sharma's voice, heavy with sadness and regret, confirmed what they already feared. 'Lieutenant Kalia and his patrol... missing. Confirmed.'

They collapsed into the sofa, drained of all strength. After a long, heavy moment, Mrs Kalia rose and left the room. She headed for the *puja* room, her sanctuary, her place of prayer, a place where she could find solace and some hope.

— Excerpted with permission from Penguin Random House



THE LEGACY OF CAPTAIN SAURABH KALIA: KARGIL'S FIRST WAR HERO
by Sreemati Sen and NK Kalia.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 268.
₹399

A bust of Capt Saurabh Kalia at Palampur.
FILE PHOTO: THE TRIBUNE

Names matter, and why not

TOUCHSTONES

IRA PANDE

WHAT'S in a name, you may ask. After all, as the Bard observed, a rose would still smell as sweet by any other name. While that may well be true, names fascinate me because they may be an apt description of the person or a complete antonym. One of my favourite poems is by the redoubtable Kaka Hathrasi: *'Naam bade aur darshan chhote'*. Kaka then goes through a list of ill-named characters whose nature is the opposite of what their names suggest. Do please Google it and laugh as you hear of a Nainsukh who has only one eye or a Munshi Chandalal who is as black as tar, while Gyanchand has failed six times in the 10th class.

Jokes apart, names in my little community of Kumaoni Brahmins from Almora were often chosen from the vast pantheon of our gods. Generally, women were named after revered goddesses, while names of rivers were considered unlucky for girls. So, I had a few aunts named Ganga, Jamuna or Godavari but nearly every clan had a daughter called Laxmi, Parvati or Gaura. Other unlucky names were Sita and Rahul, because Sita was banished and Rahul abandoned by his father Gautam Buddha soon after he was born.

Given this tradition of choosing names, there were many called Ramesh, Jiwan or Govind in the Kumaon of my childhood. This could lead to confusion (and often did), so the wicked wits of the town gave them nicknames that were like identity markers and descriptions that made for some really funny stuff. Thus, we had an uncle called Ramesh Convent (perhaps because he spoke in English after he was educated in a missionary school), a Jiwan Jaundice to set him apart from other Jiwans, a Girish Holdall (no idea where that came from) but another Girish was called Girish Chocolate. And one merry tippler was aptly named Bhuwan Botal. I could go on but there's more to follow.

When I got married and landed in Punjab, what threw me off were the unisex names. Gurinder, Satinder, Harinder could be either man or woman, and once when behind a bus carrying a *baraat* to Patiala with 'Harinder weds Narinder' pasted on its rear, we spent the entire drive trying to figure out who was the bride and who the groom. Later, when I started teaching at Panjab University, each year brought a fresh selection of Harvinders, Navjots and such confusing names to befuddle my poor brain. I am convinced that my inability to remember names now is only partly due to a failing memory: it has everything to do with that chip in my brain that was burned out by this yearly onslaught of similar names. Again, there were also the Sweetys, Happys and Lovelys to contend with.

Names fascinate me, for there's a story connected to each one — surely, probably

Outside Punjab, don't ask how many were named Rajiv and Sanjay after Mrs Gandhi's handsome boys in the next generation. Just as there are many Priyankas in this one. Other repeater names are Ananya or names such as Maya and Anita that sit comfortably here or abroad. Up to this point, I am cognisant of the lineage and history of names that parents choose for their babies. Come now to Gen X and new parents whose children are called after characters from unknown histories and mythologies. There are many websites that give them a list of exotic names to choose from, nudging aside Maneka Gandhi's pioneering book on baby names from another time.

How can I not mention the South Indian names that have a logic of their own? Most South Indian Brahmins have at least three capital letters before we encounter the name they are known by. The three alphabets stand for clan, village and father's names, such as VKRV Rao or PV Narasimha Rao. There's a large clan of foreign affairs worthies and another clan of journalists who always confuse me with their introductory names. This tradition was probably adopted so that when you said I am so-and-so, your host knew exactly who you have descended from and where your natal family lived. As a wicked friend once quipped: 'All they now need to add is their post-code to make it a complete identity card, better than an Aadhaar!'

The pioneers here were our dear Parsi community, who helpfully adopted their trade name to make their identity clear to an alien community. Soda Bottle Openerwala, Bandookwala, Poonawala, Taraporewala and so on. The late Keki Daruwalla, one of the most lovable and sober poets, once met the legendary Firaq Gorakhpuri at a *mushaira* and was so impressed with his poetry that he went up to ask whether he could visit him when he was next in Allahabad. 'Zaroor,' Firaq Sa'ab replied. 'But what is your address, sir?' Keki Daruwalla asked. 'Just give your name to the *rickshawala* and he'll bring you to me,' drawled Firaq. This apocryphal story was probably created by someone else because when I asked Keki if it was true, he just twinkled his eyes and shook his head.

My own mother, a formidable Sanskrit scholar and writer, named my older sister 'Mrinal', as she was a great admirer of Mrinalini Sarabhai, her senior at Santiniketan. One day, when her *guru*, Acharya Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, had come to visit us, he asked my mother, 'Did I never tell you that Mrinal is not a feminine noun? Mrinalini is.' How we pulled her leg after that!

— The writer is a social commentator

Allow patience to complete its course

UNIVERSE

ASHISH ALEXANDER

IN our Internet-powered digital world, patience has outlived its utility — like money order. It's a word that seems to belong to another, bygone era. It still has some charm associated with it, but is largely superfluous in our day and age when digital transactions take less than two seconds to process, as our payment apps mandatorily testify to us.

Is patience still a virtue to be cultivated? Isn't this entire AI-driven technological revolution aimed at making information and groceries ever so readily available to us, and thus override the necessary human condition to be patient? And that's where the rub is. Patience is a natural and necessary precondition to be human. A man's — or a woman's — life doesn't consist in the abundance of things or information he may possess, but in his willingness to be patient with his fellow beings.

One needs to activate his "patient mode" for only a fraction of a second to be able to avoid a road accident or an instance of road rage — the unfortunate events that tend to extract a huge human cost. Do this experiment next time you are behind the wheels, and see if you can drive past another vehicle without swearing at its driver, even in your heart. This experiment is necessary because the kind of patience we have with strangers is often a reflection of the measure of patience we have with our colleagues, friends and family.

We are often more patient with the outsiders than with the people in our own homes, or organisations; in fact, it is our own who bear the brunt of our impatience most severely. We want quick — and favourable — responses from our loved ones, without wanting to give them the time to prepare for an appropriate one. We forget the simple truth that those close to us are not machines; they are humans and not our AI companions.

Patience is a natural and necessary precondition to be human, to get along with life itself

Revolutions often fail not because of stronger adversaries, but because friends within the same camp fail to develop the virtue of patience towards each another. Revolutionaries tend to become worse than what or whom they sought to replace because at the last and decisive step, they are shaped by impatience and distrust.

Patience must be allowed to complete its course. Be more patient with a friend or a spouse than with a stranger.

Above all, the virtue of patience must be developed not merely because we want to get along with strangers, and friends, and our spouses, but primarily because we want to get along with life itself, which is often unrelentingly cruel and unjust.

'God Sees the Truth, But Waits' by Leo Tolstoy must now be considered a story most offensive to our postmodern sensibilities: how can a man suffer for decades for a crime he never committed, and then die without any apparent resolution? But it is, in fact, the seeming absurdity of the story that restores our faith in the human spirit. Patience perfected the character in isolation and suffering. We may have escaped the fate of Ivan Dmitrich, but all of us at some point in our lives would have found ourselves caught in an inscrutable and implacable bureaucratic maze, a kind that would force one to the depths of despair.

Patience, which can't be downloaded as an app, is the only thing that keeps you afloat. Patience, which is the divine outpouring of the conviction that God sees but waits.

— The writer teaches in Prayagraj

How the Empire never left us

SHYAM BHATIA

I WAS just a boy when I realised the British Empire had no intention of letting us go — not really.

My father, a decorated officer in the British Indian Army, served under General Slim in Burma. He was sharp, disciplined, and loyal to the idea of honour — a post-Macaulay man who wore his medals with pride. But his loyalties were never as simple as his uniform suggested.

He grew up in Lahore, on Lodge Road. As a boy, he was taken to school on the back of a bicycle — not by a servant or a relative, but by Bhagat Singh.

Yes, *that* Bhagat Singh.

The revolutionary who hurled bombs and insults at British rule, and was hanged for it.

The boy on the bicycle and the freedom fighter were one and the same. As a boy, he rode to school gripping the waist of Bhagat Singh. His fingers pressed into the ribs of a man who would soon walk smiling to the gallows. How could he have known? How could any of them? That the same hands steering the bicycle would later shake the foundations of the Empire, and then vanish into legend — leaving only silence behind.

That ride — between colonial schoolbooks and whispered rebellion — shaped him in ways I only began to understand much later. In private, he spoke of Bhagat Singh with the intimacy of a friend, not the reverence of a martyr.

I was raised in that same paradox: loyalty to a system that promised justice, and the memory of a man who died proving it couldn't be trusted.

One story captured that contradiction perfectly.

In 1945 or early 1946, my father was assigned as ADC to Lady Edwina Mountbatten during one of her visits to India. At the time, her husband, Lord Louis Mountbatten, was based in Singapore, still awaiting his appointment as the last Viceroy of British India.

Clad in full regimental finery, father accompanied her to the gates of an exclusive Calcutta club. The doorman took one look at him and said: "*Kala aadmi mana.*" Black men not allowed.

He'd fought in the jungle, stood beside Generals, protected a Viscountess — but one glance from a doorman undid it all. "*Kala aadmi mana.*" Not here. Not ever. Edwina Mountbatten took his arm with fury. But she could not take the shame. He never spoke of that day again. But I saw it — lodged behind his eyes, like shrapnel.

My own education began in that shadow. At a boarding school in Dehradun — India's imitation of Eton — I quickly learned that we weren't being educated. We were being trained. Designed by pro-British Indians to create *brown sahibs*, our headmasters were white men imported from England, and a bit too fond of their Scotch.

They taught us discipline, mannerisms, and silence.

English was everything. Hindi was shame. To speak it was to be called a *dehati* — a provincial. Or worse: "bloody *kaalu*".

I still remember the slang. *'Toye time'* meant homework. *'Toe jam'* was a slang word for congealed sweat. *'Lenders'* were boys who submitted sexually in exchange for food or protection.

We admired Biggles, Bertie Wooster, the Famous Five, and even Churchill, who called Indians "a beastly people with a beastly religion" and let three million Bengalis starve.

From there, I was sent to an English boarding school in the city of Reading and it was a revelation. The boys at school were indifferent, the food was awful and the racism was unmistakable.

One boy would lead the others in singing *'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas'* when I walked by. Standing there in my blue shorts and stockings, I thought they were singing my favourite song. My shocked mother explained: "Don't be stupid. They're mocking you." And in that moment, my childhood ended.

Even my failures were signposted. In the pub, celebrating the end of our exams, a group of us ordered one of every drink. We staggered out and vomited. The manager looked at us, but muttered only one thing when he saw me: "Bloody foreigners."

Fortunately, there were a few bright spots. My mother's old English teacher from Lahore once whisked me away to Norfolk for two weeks of calm and kindness. It wasn't enough to prevent me from ruminating about how the Empire didn't end. It just rebranded.

There was worse to come.

When I joined the staff of a leading British newspaper, a colleague confided, not unkindly, that others sometimes referred to me as "just another WOG" — the colonial slur that stood for Westernised Oriental Gentleman.

When a celebrated columnist invited me to her home for dinner, she had only one question: "How did a village boy like you end up on the staff of a newspaper like this?"

But nothing compared to my reporting assignment in Belfast. A group of hostile marchers noticed my face and shouted: "Grab the coon!" I ran for my life, bursting into a nearby corner shop and hiding under the till until the shouting died down.

All part of the legacy to disappear in a land where your presence itself was the provocation. After all, colonisation was also about emasculation.

Like Native Americans in the United States, we too were stripped of dignity and taught to rebrand as the Hindustani equivalents of Tonto and Hiawatha.

A few do manage to slip the net by becoming more royal than the king, more conservative than the conservatives. Yet there are countless others liable to be slapped down the moment they appear too "uppity".

The system hasn't disappeared. It has simply learned to smile while doing the slapping.

To this day in 2025, Indian diplomats posted to London are reminded of their place. Near the Foreign Office, they walk past the celebrated 'Clive Steps' — named after Robert Clive, the man who looted Bengal and laid the foundations of a hated Empire.

He embodies the eternal question: can we ever escape the Empire, if it still lives in our minds?

— The writer is the London correspondent of The Tribune

Taller fences, but borders can't stop flow of language, memory

BINDU MENON

THE other day, while surfing the Internet, I came across a talk by the philosopher and spiritual teacher Sri M. He was offering a lucid explanation of the *'Isha Upanishad'*, and in the process, shared a curious little story from his younger days.

Back then, still early in his spiritual journey, Sri M's *guru* had advised him to spend time with different sects. One such congregation he joined was of the Iskcon monks in then Bombay. Accompanying a group of them on a fund drive for a temple, he happened to meet Haji Mastan, the underworld don. Mastan was generous with his donation, and the conversation soon veered towards his smuggling activity. When asked why he wouldn't give up his illegal profession, the don offered a sort of philosophical counter. "Does this world belong to God?" he asked. Everyone nodded. "And is everything in it created by God?" Again, everyone agreed. Mastan then expounded that it was man who had created barriers, borders, countries in God's world. And all that he did was transport goods from one part of God's world to another. "That doesn't make me a smuggler, but a businessman," Mastan smugly said.

Sri M shared this story not to glorify Mastan, of course, but to illustrate, with a touch of humour, the central idea of the *'Isha Upanishad'* — the indivisible, seamless unity between the self and the supreme. While the deeper philosophy is beyond my remit, the idea of borders struck. Especially at a time when wars, displacements and rising nationalism dominate global discourse.

In a physical sense, what does the border of a nation or a territory mean: is it just a line on the map? Is it a mark of inclusion and, therefore, of exclusion too? Is a border one to be crossed, or one to be feared? Or one that's imaginary and permeable? Borders evoke images of barbed wire, immigration checkpoints, and long walls slicing through landscapes. In the current climate — thick with fear, identity politics, and suspicion of the 'other' — we hear louder and louder calls for stricter borders, taller fences, and yes, "big beautiful walls". Which makes one wonder about the lines on the map, in the first place.

Exactly 140 years ago, following what is known as the Scramble for Africa for its rich resources, colonial powers sought to parcel out their territories by drawing arbitrary lines on the map of the continent. Quite similar to the Radcliffe Line, which was drawn up by a British lawyer who had never been to India and never even knew how to draw maps. In merely five weeks, Cyril Radcliffe presided over the division of the sub-continent on religious lines. Did that hasty line trigger the horrors of Partition, or was it just a final act in a tragedy already unfolding — one where mental and emotional borders had long since been drawn?

Is a border one to be crossed, or feared? Or one that's imaginary and permeable?

In this context, one line lingers from the book *'Land of Lost Borders'* by Kate Harris, which recounts her cycling journey along the Silk Road. She writes: "What if borders at their most basic are just desires written onto lands and lives, trying to foist permanence on the fact of flux?" A beautiful short film, *'Wagah'*, by Supriyo Sen, captures an innocent perspective of such divisions. It follows children in a border village, who sell DVDs of the theatrical parade at Wagah border. One boy says, "I looked through binoculars once and saw someone so close that I told him to move aside — only to realise he was standing far way in Pakistan." Another boy wishes kids from the other side could come and play with them.

For all their arbitrary origins, borderlands are incredibly vibrant spaces. They're not just where cultures meet — they're where cultures intertwine. I remember chatting with a cabdriver from Kasargod, a district in Kerala that borders Karnataka. Over the next one hour of the journey, I was treated to an impromptu masterclass in local linguistics: a complex, living mosaic of Malayalam, Kannada, Tulu, Konkani, Beary Bhashe, Marathi, and more. He even rang up a friend mid-ride to demonstrate the subtle differences in dialects. It made me wonder about all the other border regions in India — each with its own kaleidoscope of cultural expressions, often overlooked in the noise of parochial language and border politics.

Maybe this is what Jean-Jacques Rousseau was warning us about when he wrote, "The first man who, having fenced in a piece of land, said 'this is mine', and found people naïve enough to believe him — that man was the true founder of civil society." Borders may serve a purpose and the lines on the map might divide us, but what flows across them — language, memory, story, song — remind us that we were never really separate to begin with.

— The writer is a Bengaluru-based contributor

Once among the most remote and underdeveloped areas in Mandi district, Seraj block saw a massive infrastructure push in the past decade. Now, it is confronting the perils of prosperity and fiddling with nature — large-scale destruction caused by extreme weather events, as the development-ecology imbalance wreaks havoc in Himachal Pradesh

THAT SINKING FEELING

MANSHI ASHER

In Bung Rail Chowk area of Thunag, farmlands have vanished, many houses are buried under flood debris or are now unsafe for living.

JUNE 30 was a typical rainy day in the monsoons at Seraj valley in Mandi district. After working hard on their farms and daily chores, people in the villages had retired for the day. But two hours before midnight, a thunderous downpour transformed virtually every gurgling *nullah* in the region into jarring landslips and flash floods, bringing down giant boulders. People ran out of their homes, while some remained huddled in their houses, or on the roadside, or in any safe shelter they could find. The elderly and differently-abled were carried on backs to safety. Some brave souls picked up spades and shovelled relentlessly through the night, digging drainage paths to salvage a field here, a cowshed there — to save their cattle.

Till around 11:30 pm, people were communicating on phones, sending out warnings and checking in on their kith and kin — before both the network and power went out. "We waited all night, listening to outbursts from the skies and eruptions from the ground, hoping the deluge would halt. At around 3 or 4 am, the rain stopped, the floods began to recede, and by dawn the landscape had transformed beyond recognition," narrates Mahendra Kumar from Pakhrair panchayat, where 11 persons were washed away. His 7 *bighas* of land were completely wiped out.

Such was the horror that students from the horticulture university at Thunag, who barely managed to flee their hostel building, left the region en masse, unable to cope with the trauma.

While several parts of Mandi district in Himachal Pradesh suffered damage due to a reported 1,900 per cent excess rainfall in the 24 hours between June 30 and July 1, Seraj valley — especially Thunag sub-division — appears to have been the worst-hit. Official data on people missing and damage to homes and farms is still being compiled, but nearly 80 per cent of 36 panchayats, covering about 200 villages, seem to have been adversely affected, with massive destruction of public infrastructure, habitation and farms.

Reports that multiple cloudbursts occurred across a 30-40 km stretch would need to be verified with more localised rainfall data. In Bung Rail Chowk, where farmlands have vanished, 16 houses are untraceable, 45 have been buried under flood debris and 15 marked as unsafe for living.

Women poured their hearts out about how their thriving horticulture and vegetable economy now feels short-lived. 'Just two-three decades ago, we had few income sources. And when we began progressing, sending our children out to study, the changing climate is hitting us," laments Phoolan Devi. She adds that for the women, the dairy which they sold milk to was their main source of daily income — now the roads are blocked, cattle injured or dead and the dairy structure lies damaged.

"Last winter brought barely a few inches of snow, summer saw more rain than sun, and then came the torrential monsoon," she recalls, taking stock of the erratic weather patterns.

Yet, she and other women also reflect on what elders in the village have been saying post-disaster — that the streams were only reclaiming their original course, which had been occupied by new habitations. "*Paapi ke pichhe pichhe dharmi bhi chalein hain* (The decent folk are also following in the footsteps of the corrupt)!" they say, referring to the unchecked greed that has led people to disregard both each other and their ecology.

For village elders, the spate of destruction in recent years is a result of unchecked greed and growth. PHOTOS BY THE WRITER

Bhagat Ram, a local resident and NGO worker, points to patches of fallen-off terraces across the valley and suggests that the role of Glyphosate herbicide usage in eroding soils must also be probed.

In another village, a group of young men speak of how development has outpaced the region's geographical limits and sensitivities. "Believers may say that Shikari Mata (the local deity) is unhappy but amongst the youth, there is dialogue on how in less than 10 years, hundreds of roads have been built here due to political pressure, compromising scientific principles. Drainage has been disrupted, muck dumped in the wrong places." This was a reference to the road-building surge that began after the long-standing local MLA, Jai Ram Thakur, became Chief Minister in 2017. A new PWD division was created and an unusually high amount of funds sanctioned to build roads at a record pace.

As per the 2011 indices, Seraj block was among the most remote and underdeveloped in Mandi. Only 23 per cent of its villages had access to *pucca* roads then. The region's population — nearly 30 per cent of which belongs to the Scheduled Caste communities — often walked several kilometres to get to basic services. Compared to other parts of Himachal, Seraj lagged in welfare infrastructure and was in genuine need of it.

Ironically, it is the vulnerable communities — those with the smallest holdings and least social capital — who now bear the brunt of disasters disproportionately.

For them, recovery takes longer, sometimes generations, pushing them further to the margins. Khila, a young shopowner from the SC community, shares how the new village road had enabled her to set up a shop in Thunag. But the structure was hit by floods in 2022, 2023 and again most severely in 2025. Back in her village, her family's 2-3 *bighas* of land have been lost. Only their house remains — though even that feels only ephemerally safe.

Market residents recall a similar flood in 2009 in Thunag. "But back then, there were fewer shops and homes along the *nullahs*, and no roads had been built upstream." The 2023 flood brought media outrage, especially due to the volume of wooden debris that surged through waterways. Leeladhar Chauhan, a local human rights defender, does not mince words: "Unnecessary and mindless construction from the ridges of the mountains is responsible. Even the 2009 Thunag market flood was because of the road built to connect Tandi to the market."

What were the factors that led to the historically lopsided development in Seraj? And how much has the sudden, rapid infrastructure push amplified disaster risk and vulnerability? Why haven't past red flags triggered better preparedness and planning? These are questions that demand deeper examination.

Only an urgent, multi-disciplinary inquiry that assesses not just biophysical risks but also socio-economic vulnerabilities, developmental trajectories and governance failures can help unpack these protracted and compounding disasters to make ground for any meaningful disaster response.

While the state government has assured compensation, the rehabilitation of disaster-displaced families remains the most pressing need. This demands not just intent, but action — from both the state and Central governments — ensuring special attention to the most marginalised. Transfer of land for resettlement needs to be speedy, invoking the relevant legal provisions.

There is the larger, more daunting challenge: how will communities centre sustainable catchment-level land use and development planning, given the push and pull of market forces and political patronage?

— The writer is a Himachal-based researcher and activist

Researchers cite justifications, while environmentalists as well as farm unions list concerns as Centre, Punjab push for testing new tech

Why GM maize trials at PAU have sparked a row

MANAV MANDER

PAU claims the trials of two GM maize varieties are non-commercial and intended only for research. TRIBUNE PHOTO

THERE'S an air of anticipation and apprehension in equal measure, as the Punjab Agricultural University (PAU) is set to begin field trials of two types of genetically modified (GM) maize after recent approval from the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) and the Punjab government.

While scientists have described the trials as a necessary step toward innovation and informed decision-making, environmentalists and farmer groups have voiced strong concerns over potential ecological risks and socio-economic implications.

GM crops are cultivated in over 30 countries, including agricultural powerhouses like the United States and Canada, and the upcoming trials at PAU could shape the future of maize cultivation in India.

The trials at PAU will focus on two types of GM maize varieties — herbicide-tolerant (HT) and insect-resistant (IR). These crops, it is claimed, have been developed using advanced biotechnology to address two major challenges in maize cultivation: weed management and pest control.

HT maize is engineered to tolerate applications of Glyphosate-K salt, a commonly used herbicide, allowing for more effective weed control without harming the crop. IR maize is designed to resist lepidopteran pests such as the stem borer and fall armyworm, which are known to cause significant yield losses.

The technology for these transgenic maize hybrids is being provided by Bayer Crop Science Limited. The trials fall under BRL-I and BRL-II phases, Biosafety Research Level Trials, which evaluate the safety and performance of GM crops under controlled conditions.

Being conducted during the current kharif season at PAU's Ludhiana campus, the trials are being supervised by the Department of Biotechnology (DBT), Government of India, and are strictly regulated under national biosafety guidelines. The primary goal, PAU researchers say, is to assess the agronomic performance and environmental biosafety of GM maize hybrids. The trials are non-commercial and intended solely for research, they stress, with no market release or distribution involved.

Conducted in a confined setting, the trials combine both Bt *(Bacillus thuringiensis)* and HT traits, offering dual protection against pests and weeds. Protocols have been approved by expert panels at both the state and national levels. PAU has prior experience of Bt cotton trials, which laid the foundation for India's first commercial GM crop.

Despite the scientific rigour, environmental groups and farmer organisations have raised serious concerns. Critics argue that the approval process lacked adequate public consultation and transparency. Fears include biosafety risks, cross-pollination with non-GM crops, and overuse of herbicides like Glyphosate, which could harm soil health and biodiversity. These groups have called for the immediate cancellation of trial permissions in Punjab, advocating a more cautious and inclusive approach.

Amid the debate, PAU Vice-Chancellor Dr Satbir Singh Gosal has defended the university's role, emphasising that the trials are strictly for research and not linked to commercial release. "The field trials will begin soon as this is the right time for sowing maize," he said, clarifying that PAU's mandate is limited to scientific evaluation.

Dr Gosal reiterated that PAU has the infrastructure, expertise, and regulatory clearance to conduct the trials. "Unless we study the matter, we will not know whether it's good or bad," he said. "We are not going to recommend that GM maize should be grown commercially or not. That decision lies with the Central government."

He stressed that the trials follow DBT guidelines and standard operating procedures. "We are not releasing this crop. That is the job of the government. PAU is only carrying out scientific research," he said. He added that trials are permitted only after clearance from the DBT and state-level committees, which include officials from agriculture, science and technology, health departments, and PAU scientists.

He defended GM technology, noting its adoption in over 30 countries and the success of Bt cotton in India. "There were stories that animals died after eating Bt cotton leaves. But none of those were proven scientifically," he said. "We must let data speak."

Dr Baldev Singh Dhillon, former PAU Vice-Chancellor and a member of the review and appraisal committee, echoed support for the trials. "For policy approval, we need to conduct research, otherwise years will be wasted in speculation and delay," he said.

Dr Dhillon emphasised that not all GM crops are harmful, citing Bt cotton, Bt brinjal and GM mustard as examples of successful innovation. He highlighted biotechnology's role in developing maize enriched with Vitamin A and called for a nuanced understanding of genetic engineering. "Where GM is coming from and where it is affected is most important," he said.

He drew parallels with historical resistance to the steam engine in the UK, where people feared hens would stop laying eggs — underscoring how fear often precedes acceptance. "Insect resistance is not naturally present in crops, we have to develop it through research," he said, warning that without trials, India could lose three to four years in testing and validation.

Farmer organisations remain sceptical. Bhartiya Kisan Union (Lakhowal) president Harinder Singh Lakhowal says the GM trials could lead to corporate dominance. "They will recommend their own sprays and pesticides and develop monopoly. Where will the farmers go?" he asks. Farmers also fear dependency on proprietary seeds and inputs controlled by multinational companies, which could erode autonomy and increase costs. Concerns include soil health, seed sovereignty, and market access. They demand transparency, public consultation, and safeguards to ensure innovation doesn't come at the expense of farmer welfare.

The Coalition for a GM-Free India has strongly opposed the trials. In a letter to Punjab Agriculture Minister Gurmeet Singh Khudian, co-convenor Kavitha Kuruganti urged withdrawal of the no-objection certificate, citing Glyphosate's health and environmental risks. The herbicide has been banned in Punjab since 2018.

Kuruganti questioned how Glyphosate-resistant maize could be tested when the chemical itself is prohibited under India's pesticide regulatory regime. The coalition warned that the trials contradict existing state orders and could worsen Punjab's environmental health crisis, pointing to rising cancer rates and agrochemical dependency.

It has also criticised the lack of transparency in the approval process, noting that Punjab was the only state among the 11 approached by Bayer to grant permission. Bayer, it says, had sought approval for penultimate-stage trials in 11 states, including Haryana, Gujarat, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, MP, Bihar and Tamil Nadu, "but PAU was the only institution to respond positively". Describing the move as "anti-people and anti-nature", the coalition warned that even confined trials pose risks of genetic contamination and long-term ecological damage.

The debate continues.

This Summer of '25, London is Peak Instagram Theatre, Starring New-Age Desi Babalogs

Visiting rich Indians have ditched Madame Tussauds for Wimbledon, and very soon may turn it into a Manikchand Zee Cine Awards style spectacle—with some tennis balls for effect

FUNNY BUSINESS

ANUVAB PAL

London, it appears, is more than a place to get your phone stolen and your watch robbed at knifepoint. It's a city of 1,000 years of history, culture, museums, charming green spaces, and Bollywood shoots. And a new breed of Indian traveller has decided to put all this newfound information on Instagram.

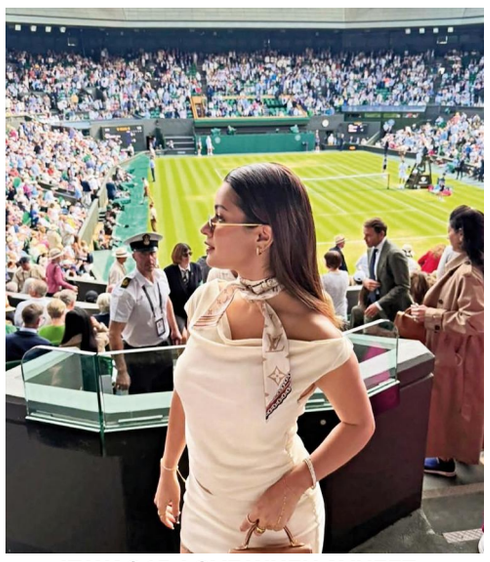
Earlier, the Indian elite would visit Madame Tussauds and photograph themselves in front of an odd-looking waxed version of Amitabh Bachchan, shop on Oxford Street, eat at a Bangladeshi curry house, complain it wasn't authentic, and return.

By the summer of 2025, the game has changed. It is a social media London game. Well-heeled urban Indians show up on Instagram drinking aperitifs by canals, ladies wearing ridiculous hats, 50+ men in red trousers having boozy brunches in outdoor garden pubs, looking like unemployed magicians, writing #ChillingLondonsummer.

Now, I'll admit this is written partly from petty jealousy, given I've spent the same summer, in the same city, often in underground basements, doing stand-up comedy to semi-conscious people, far away from where the glitterati pose with the Indian Michelin chef who is the flavour of the season – this year, Surinder Mohan of Jamavar.

Next to the photo with the chef, there's a customary pani poori fusion dish on a bed of some award-winning tamarind sauce that looks like cough syrup. #MichelinPoori

On the less posh end, there are young people singing Bollywood songs on Oxford Street and at Piccadilly Circus, with Indian street performers, and backpackers in Southall, complaining they are seeing only Indian shops and food stalls, under the umbrella theme of Indians having taken over London in the summer. That's not entirely true.



IT WAS 15-LOVE WHEN AVNEET SPOTTED VIRAT AT CENTRE COURT

Although it might be true that middle-class English people fleeing London in July for the country or Europe, three postcodes selling jalebi, and one man in a beard belting out Arijit Singh covers at the corner of Tottenham Court Road don't exactly make for a modern-day sociocultural mutiny of sipahis.

At Wimbledon, it's less about tennis, more about outfits and #Strawberriesandcreamanyone?

I must also mention reelmakers who replicate famous Bollywood scenes at London landmarks – like an SRK signature move under a statue of Nelson. Something that would drive any postcolonial professor to seek mental help.

Then there are Bollywood celebrities, billionaires in hiding, and the swish set, who naturally don't want to (but secretly want to) be photographed by their fans, and cannot be seen dining or walking the same streets as small clusters of Gurgaon wealthy stalking them.

Sadly, there are only so many London streets, thanks to Rani Victoria and Raja Edward, and given Bobby Deol is no Tom Cruise (the latter being glided in and out by secret service-level security), the former sadly has to eat ice cream and pose for selfies grumpily in the same place as his rich fans.

London, as Karl Marx said, is truly socialist. Billionaires in hiding, fortunately, have their wealthy dens surrounded by greenery, where a Lalit Modi in a white suit can serenade Vijay Mallya in a white suit, drinking champagne while awaiting court judgments – and their visiting Mumbai/Delhi friends make sure to stay out of the Instagram post, lest it lead to raids when they get back home.

This summer, however, rich Indians found a new Cannes Film Festival, or Met Gala. Perhaps, they discovered it themselves. Perhaps, their publicists found the opportunity – an untapped paparazzi playground: Wimbledon.

Just like at Cannes, where some films happen that our photographed set make sure not to watch, apparently there's some tennis that happens at Wimbledon – immaterial to their purpose – which is pristine green surroundings to wear flowing dresses and write things like #Strawberriesandcreamanyone?

This year, lots of celebrities and film people posted watching games wearing sunglasses that cost GDP of Guam – from Jacqueline Fernandez to Aravind Srinivas, founder of Perplexity. It could also be an AI version of Fernandez, created by Perplexity. But we'll never know. Won't be long before the Indian elite turn Wimbledon into a Manikchand Zee Cine Awards sort of environment – with some tennis balls around.

RED HERRING

INDRAJIT HAZRA

The Anti-Woke Can Be as Woke As the Woke

Reimaginings and revisionisms need not be seen only along DEI or PC lines

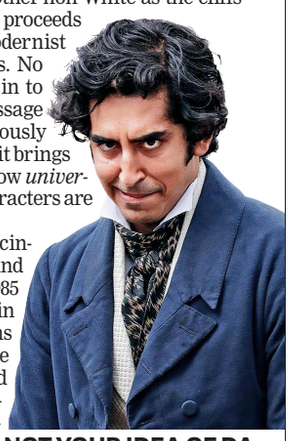
I consider myself to be slept, not woke. Each time I learn about some school in Britain pulling some book out of their library on account of it being 'regressive' – or, not 'progressive *enough*' – I chuckle and eyeroll at the same time like a gay John Wayne, thinking of the books they pull out of American school libraries for being 'progressive' – or, '*too* progressive,' as my grandma would like to call people who 'live in sin' (unmarried cohabiting couples).

But let's just say there are sins far graver than excessive or performative activism – that is, being woke. Sure, finding 'narcissistic behaviour' or 'cultural appropriation' lurking under every lamp post can make a chic virtue out of virtue-signalling. But what was considered woke yesterday (without the word being invented then) – whether it be demanding a 'benign' colonial power to bugger off, or being against 'disciplinary' corporal punishment, or finding 'tough love' domestic violence to be abhorrent – can become SOP good sense today.

But being anti-woke has also emerged as a new form of intelligence-signalling. There are people who can now make a living (read: dinner party conversations and columns) by woke-hunting. This is especially evident whenever traditional depictions in pop culture are stitched to PC culture. Like, say, Disney's depiction of a Black actress as The Little Mermaid in the eponymous 2023 film. 'This is the limit!' scream the anti-wokemeisters.

I recently watched Armando Iannucci's The Personal History of David Copperfield, a cinematic adaptation of Charles Dickens' 1850 novel. True, meeting the Victorian hero-narrator and finding him being played by Dev Patel was unexpected, especially for us honed on our Occidentalism via Dickens, Enid Blyton, James Bond, Jeeves, and Britannia biscuit diet.

But after the initial 'What the Dickens!' surprise of a Brown Copperfield – and other non-White-as-the-cliffs-of-Dover actors – the film proceeds wonderfully with its modernist wit, charm, and freshness. No shred of DEI-ness creeps in to provide any diversity message on the sly beyond the obviously visual. In fact, very subtly, it brings a new layer of depicting how *universal* Dickens' Victorian characters are to this day, in any society.



NOT YOUR IDEA OF DAVID COPPERFIELD, EH?

When I saw Peter Brook's cinematic version of his and Jean-Claude Carrière's 1985 stage play, Mahabharata, in Kolkata in 1989, the terms 'DEI' and 'woke' would have sounded Jesuit Latin and wrong English, respectively. Almost all the characters were played by (non-Hindu) non-Indians, with only Malika Sarabhai as Draupadi. Senegalese-French actor Mamadou Dioumé's performance as Bhima left me with goosebumps all over my nominally Hindu, Bengali brown skin.

Brook's superb treatment, part-Shakespeare, part-Kurosawa, was far-removed from the opulent kitschof BR Chopra's immensely more popular 1988-1990 TV series on Doordarshan. It gave out no smoke of woke. Instead, it was 'just' a powerful reinterpretation, the 'visual' deviation from standard ethnic depiction adding to its universal power.

A new stage production of Ramayana has been making waves in Karachi this month. Directed by Yogeshwar Karera and produced by Rana Kazmi of Mauj Theatre Group, it's incidental that barring the director and two actors who are (Pakistani) Hindu, all other members of the production team are (Pakistani) Muslim. What holds the Karachi Ramayana's appeal is its interpretation not of a religious epic done with a secular mission, but of a human classic staged for thoughtful entertainment.

A particular kind of anti-woke brigade rails out against any form of deviation from the original 'purity' of Western-White-gendered tropes – 'Black James Bond!' 'Woman Hamlet!' 'Chinese woman Dr Watson!' Which is as dogmatic as shouting one's head off about Alauddin Khilji being depicted as a 'depraved Muslim' in a Bollywood movie. And as silly as removing golliwogs from Enid Blyton's Noddy books, or changing language deemed offensive from Roald Dahl's children's books.

While the public may never take to a Chinese Superman – after all, immigrants from Planet Krypton *have* to be White as created by Jerry Siegel (Praise Be Upon Him) – a wok Clark Kent needn't be woke. In the head of a clever writer-director, it could be what Shakespeare in his play, Vishal Bhardwaj in Maqbool, and, more recently, Anirban Bhattacharya in Mandaar, superbly did to Holinshed's Macbeth.

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The Argument Continues: Dessert or Pudding?

Don't ask for a 'D'-lish sweet dish if you walk into a poncy British establishment – you're bound to get a stareful of sweet nothings

SUNDAY ROAST

RESHOM MAJUMDAR

London: Just as you're basking in the afterglow of your main course, and before you surrender to the gentle embrace of a final tea, or seductive froth of a cappuccino, there arrives a moment – delicate, delicious, and, dare I say, inevitable. This is the course that conjures up words like sugar, honey, and, if you're feeling particularly daring, saccharine. But here's the delicious dilemma: do we call it dessert? Or is it, more properly, pudding?

This is the sort of predicament that sneaks up on us when we're trying – perhaps, a little too hard – to be posh. What would those deportment and etiquette classes, so beloved of our grandmothers back home in India, have to say about it, I wonder?

Some might say, with a dismissive wave of the hand, that dessert is American, and pudding is British. But that feels a little too neat, a little too tidy for the glorious messiness of real life.

Here's the thing: a dessert is *always* sweet. Think fruit, sorbet, or a feather-light mousse. But pudding, oh pudding, is a broader church entirely. Sure, it can be sweet, yes. But it can also be savoury.

Consider the Yorkshire pudding, that golden, puffed-up cloud, perfect for soaking up the gravy of a Sunday roast. Or the steak and kidney pudding – more pie than pudding, really, but all the better for it.

A dessert might be something you approach with a fork and knife, perhaps a perfectly poised slice of pear. But pudding – pudding is always best eaten with a spoon. There's something deeply comforting about that, don't you think?

The great British puddings – spotted dick, sticky toffee pudding with its gloriously unctuous sauce, or the ever-popular chocolate pudding – are often steamed, rustic, and redolent of home and hearth. They call to mind the pages of Women and Home magazines, full of recipes and reminiscence.

Across the pond, pudding means something else entirely – a wobbly, creamy, custardy confection, often moulded and always sweet. Dessert, for our American cousins, is light, sophisticated, a little bit continental – airy, mousse-like, and, perhaps, just a touch coquettish, less Victorian.

A dessert is always sweet. Think fruit, or sorbet. But pudding, oh pudding, is a broader church entirely

WHEN A (YORKSHIRE) PUDDING IS NOT A DESSERT

But tread carefully. No matter how Americanised you may feel whether in Gurgaon, Guangzhou, or Grand Rapids, do not, under any circumstances, stride into a poncy, upper-class Nigella-meets-Rees-Mogg Brit restaurant, a venerable boarding school, or a private member's club full of Rumpoles, and ask for dessert. You'll be met with a chill that not even the iciest sorbet could rival.

In these self-hallowed halls, it's pudding, *always* pudding. According to former royal chef Darren McGrady – chef for Elizabeth, Philip, Diana, William, and Harry, from 1982 to 1997, actually – the Brit royals don't do dessert. They have pudding.

But let's not be too doctrinaire, shall we? Dessert is perfectly acceptable the world over, even here in Britain.

And what of Indian etiquette, with its dazzling array of mithai, barfi, kheer, firni, and sandesh? Relief, as ever, comes with modern manners. Both words are now equally at home on the menu, though dessert has become the more common choice.

And really, in a country where 'We are like this only' is a motto, and 'Mera mithai mahan' could well be a regional brand slogan, does it truly matter what you call it? Like the Indian thali or butter chicken, this glorious category is surely destined for its own place in the dictionary, nestled somewhere between 'nabob' and 'rizz'.

So, whether you call it dessert or pudding, let's agree on one thing: it's the sweetest way to end a meal. And that's all that really matters.

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

SWAN UPPING

That sounds a bit rude, no?!
No, no! Swan upping is a 5-day annual event on Britain's Thames. It's a mix of royal tradition and wildlife conservation.

Ah. Very Prince Charles then – a bit of nabobing, a bit of conserving.
You mean, King Charles. Well, swan upping was once a way to count swans for royal banquets. Today it's a census, checking on the health of the country's mute swan population.

Poor things. They can't speak?
Who? Oh, you mean mute swans? They can 'speak'. It's just the name of their species of swan – Cygnus olor.

So, who takes part?
Led by the king's Swan Marker – a kind of swan census general – teams of oarsmen known as 'Swan Uppers' row in full regalia. When a swan family is spotted, they shout, 'All up!' – not rudely – and gently gather the birds to examine and tag them, checking for injuries or illness, with a vet on hand.

When did this all begin?
The tradition goes all the way back to the 12th c. By the 15th c., two London trade guilds – vintners (wine merchants) and dyers – were granted shared swan ownership. Their teams still come together today, wearing red, white, and blue uniforms to honour the legacy.

Sounds like the American flag! Where does the ritual take place?
The route starts at Sunbury, just outside London, to Abingdon, about 130 km upstream. For five days, a confluence of history, pageantry, and conservation come together within the Thames.

Counting the lot of them must be tough!
Swan numbers have declined, mainly due to avian flu. Last year, only 86 young swans were found, a 45% drop. But this year's first day recorded 16 cygnets, offering hope for a rebound.

So, this has anything to do with Swan Lake?
You mean Tchaikovsky's ballet? No!
Text: Team Sunday ET

Don't Throw Chappals, Direct Your Outrage

To take on Western misappropriation, use the 'free' market to your advantage

SOFT LAUNCH

KANIKA GAHLAUT

Mirror-work tunic at Tory Burch. Kolhapuri-inspired sandals at Prada. Mukaish at Dior. As the West keeps offering us a lesson in our own luxury and high-end couture, Indians seemed to have had enough after Prada had Kolhapuris – it preferred calling them 'toe-ring sandals' – trotted out in their Spring-Summer 2026 collection in Milan last month. No credit or acknowledgement was given by the fashion house to their 'inspiration'.

A PIL argued that Prada being 'inspired' amounted to cultural misappropriation, and violated the rights of artisan communities historically associated with the footwear. But on Wednesday, Bombay High Court rejected the charge, citing it lacked legal basis. Instead, a Prada team landed up last week in Kolhapur's famous Chappal Galli, interacting with makers and shopkeepers, exploring options of 'tie-ups' with local artisans of the GI-tagged sandals. 'Ethics,' of course, have no legal basis.

What the outrage against this 'misappropriation' and others is, is a symptom of a wound: that the West never really stopped looting us. Once by territorial domination. Now, through the seduction of the free (sic) market. It's just another point in a long cycle of taking what is not yours and passing it off as yours.

'India-inspired' trended some 20 years ago. Prada centred its campaign on the peacock feather. Armani sent down silk jodhpuris. Donna Karan used dirndl skirts with Indian appliqué.

At the time, we still held fresh hopes of a genuine global exchange. Indian designers, with the launch of India Fashion Week in 2000, offered their version of a global look rooted in Indian techniques and philosophies.

But Indian designers are still nowhere on the world ramp. Western brands continue to hand our own craft and textiles back to us, much like machine-made textiles from Manchester made from raw cotton from India being sold back to India

The free market is rigged in favour of the West. So, even on the fashion runway, the ground remains woefully unequal. A Western label sends down trousers and kameez tunics. An Indian designer does the same. Effectively, it *looks* equal. Except it isn't. Everyone buys both from the first. Purchases are made from the second only selectively.

The Western designer is seen as 'referencing' global culture. The Indian is still trapped in the 'ethnic' box. This isn't just about perception. It's about infrastructure, capital, power.

The Western designer is seen as 'referencing' global culture

BHAI-SAAB, CAN YOU SHOW US SOMETHING WITH A PRADA FEEL?

Outrage leads back to only one answer: a return to self-definition. Not just about reclaiming of technique, but of narrative.

Online fashion and culture magazine The Cut asked about this new burst of 'India-inspired' luxury: What's the line between appreciation and appropriation? The answer: assimilation. And assimilation requires intent. The West could learn that from India, where every fabric and technique has been integrated, both socially and economically.

Muslim artisans weave Banarasi saris for Hindu brides. Chikankari, once Persian, is stitched in Muslim lanes and worn in Hindu weddings. Ajrakh began in Sindh and now prints in modern Delhi. Phulkari, Ikat, sari, and salwar kameez are fully assimilated – both in form and technique – into economy and culture.

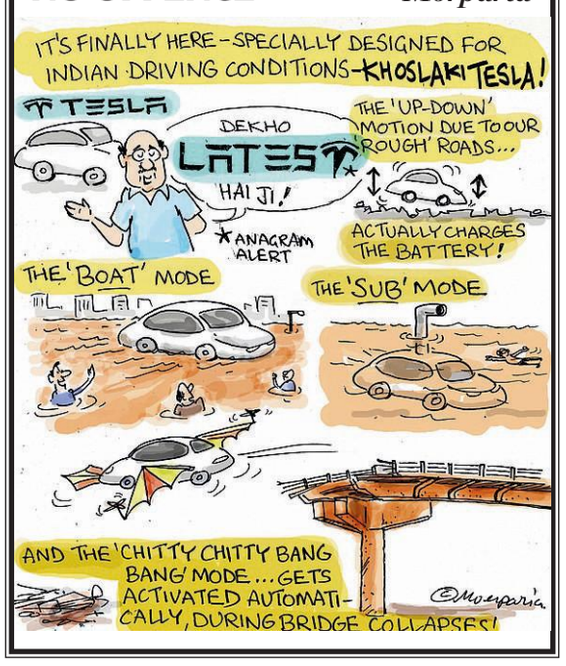
Indians can protest all they want. But the protest lacks teeth. IPR laws are complicated and strengthening them for South Asia is a slow and long process. You can't police inspiration, because that's hypocritical, especially when IPR works 'both ways'.

So, what's the way out for us? Economic nationalism. Call it Swadeshi 2.0. You don't want them to have mukaish – that embroidery technique which involves embellishing fabrics with thin, flattened metallic strips, typically gold or silver? You can't stop that while you're wearing *their* metallic dresses.

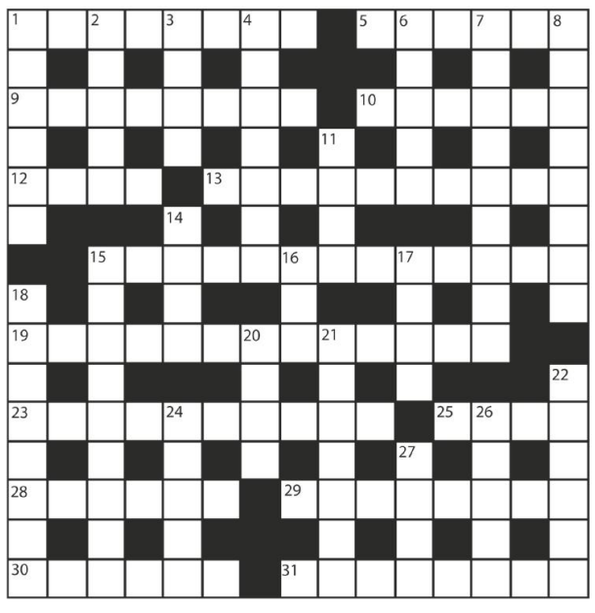
But here's what you can do: stop buying 'their' tweeds and trench coats. Buy mukaish, khadi, Kolhapuris. Buy tweed and denim made in India. Not just designed by Indians, but *manufactured* in India.

It will take collective discipline. But it's not that difficult. In a world where everything is now everywhere, it requires only a slight change in gaze. Just as you read the price tag before making a buy, read the 'make' before you take it home. It's the only way to deliver the logic of the global market back to itself. That would be directed outrage.

NO OFFENCE — *Morparia*



ET Sunday Crossword 0125



ACROSS
1 Short skirts go in government department (8)
5 Mike's unwisely beginning to tempt fate (6)
9 Teenaged solver gets the flu maybe, losing energy (8)
10 Water nymph almost lures sailors in Lewis's world (6)
12 Final trumpet blow needs no introduction (4)
13 These days Ms Dench and Ms Blanchett pick winners (10)
15 What magistrate has, adjudicating noise complaint? (5,8)
19 No minor routes confine radical people in wetlands (7,6)
23 Ladybird flies over heart of Deal getting basic diet (5,5)
25 Loafer in Head Office in Sussex perhaps? (4)
28 Attempt to hold 16 ounces in hat (6)
29 Film boss cried uncontrollably recalling rubbish (8)
30 Doctor reversed Conservative's fungal problem (3,3)
31 Omit 25 mixing drink (8)

DOWN
1 Short-lived insect might take to the air (6)
2 Some of them are proper sisters owning nothing (5)
3 Note nothing in area of central London (4)
4 Full editor supports drinks bought in pub (7)
6 Someone from Baghdad put Republicans on TV quiz (5)
7 Mothers guard northeastern area tigers, typically (3-6)
8 Vary test, turning it into a parody (8)
11 Expert turned up in Uruguay (4)
14 In France the road back has no money (4)
15 Condition of slaves? It's very bad round Illinois (9)
16 Sail starts in Jamaica in middle of Caribbean (3)
17 Seize Greek sailor (4)
18 It's in Dundee, damaged but as originally written (8)
20 Where to park in stockbroker belt (4)
21 Natural style is protected by kingdom (7)
22 e.g. caviar government sent up for king (6)
24 Lout upended old boy carrying book (5)
26 Where does rabbit live? In shed at church (5)
27 Some provide money for public meeting (4)

SOLUTION TO No 0125:
ACROSS: 1 Ministry. 5 Kismet. 9 Youthful. 10 Narnia. 12 Last. 13 Adjudicate. 15 Sound judgment. 19 Norfolk Broads. 23 Daily bread. 25 Shoe. 28 Trilby. 29 Director. 30 Dry rot. 31 Smoothie.
DOWN: 1 Mayfly. 2 Nouns. 3 Soho. 4 Rounded. 6 Iraqi. 7 Man-eaters. 8 Travesty. 11 Guru. 14 Euro. 15 Servility. 16 Jib. 17 Grab. 18 Undefiled. 20 Kerb. 21 Realism. 22 George. 24 Yobbo. 26 Hutch. 27 Demo.

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